Chapter 4
Battlefields to Borderlands. Rohingyas between Global War and Decolonisation

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Abstract
This chapter studies the transformation of borderlands to bordered lands in Arakan, mediated by the spectacular violence of the Second World War and partitions. The Arakanese Muslims, or Rohingyas, as they are known today, thus were made minorities in their own lands. First courted by the Japanese, and later trained and armed by the British Military Administration of Arakan, Rohingyas emerged out of the war with new dreams of political futures that had no place in the formal decolonisation and partition(s) of South Asia. Designated as smugglers and insurgents, they responded. albeit unsuccessfully, to the carceral regimes of borders and checkpoints with scriptal politics as their strategies of belonging.

Omra Meah was a schoolteacher in his early 30s in Maungdaw, a township and district on the banks of the Naf River that separated Arakan from Chittagong, and Burma from Bengal. In May 1942, Meah gave up teaching to establish the Maungdaw Central Peace Committee.[1] Together with Nur Ahmed and Munif Khan, fellow Arakanese Muslims (or Rohingyas, as they are known today), Meah established a court, a police station, and even a rent collection agency, countering Japanese-backed wartime governance of Northern Arakan. His peace committee collected rent from abandoned properties of Arakanese Buddhists, who sought refuge south of Cox's Bazaar in the Chittagong district of Bengal after being driven out by the Muslims.[2] Six years later, Omra Meah would re-emerge as one of the militant leaders of the separatist Arakan Mujahed Party, rising in armed rebellion against the independent Burmese state. Hardened by the Second World War, not least by guerrilla training from the British military, and with access to ammunition dumps of departing Allied forces, the *mujaheds*, or freedom fighters, such as Meah would become a force to contend with. The Burmese government, in response, would arm the Arakanese Buddhists against Muslims as early as 1948, only months after its independence.

The Arakan frontier where Burma ended, and India began was a menacing place during the War. Its deltaic topography and inland hills made its terrain difficult to travel without local knowledge. Watercrafts such as the flat-bottomed wooden *sampans* were the main mode of transportation through the intricate web of rivers and canals. Monsoon rains on the soft soil made the watery landscape even harder to traverse. But the frontier was geopolitically significant for both British and Japanese militaries. The British wanted to prevent any further Japanese incursion into India, while the Japanese wanted to push ahead from Arakan into Bengal and Assam. As geopolitical ambitions and military tactics collided in Northern Arakan, serious consequences for Muslim-Buddhist communal relations and post-war state-making ensued against the backdrop of the formal decolonisation of South Asia.

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[1] British Military Administration of North Arakan, 1942-43: Note by Peter Murray, Deputy Military Administrator of North Arakan, 1942-44, 1/11/1971, https://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/peter-murray-1980.pdf (last accessed July 12, 2022).

[2] National Archives of India, Delhi (NAI), File 21/19/42-Poll(I): "Subject: Raising of Guerilla Organisation in Arakan Hill Tracts and the Country Generally South of Chittagong" by Maj. Gen. T.G.G. Heighwood, 2 July 1942.

The story of northern Arakan in this chapter is one of transformation of "borderlands to bordered lands," to quote historians Adelman and Aron.[3] It was a metamorphosis mediated by the spectacular violence of war and decolonization. Arakanese Muslims remade the Second World War, formal decolonization, and the 1947 partition nearly as much as those global and extraneous processes redefined them. As India and Burma's porous, dynamic frontiers became battlefields, then borderlands, and finally bordered lands, the Muslims of Northern Arakan found themselves at a turning point in history. Powerful actors courted them during the war: first, the Japanese and then the British. The Muslim League's anticolonial politics influenced their political visions for a Pakistan and their potential place within it. When negotiations for Indian and Burmese independence went against their goals, they sought out prominent leaders such as Mohammad Ali Jinnah to advocate for territorial inclusion into East Pakistan. Their efforts did not bear fruit. Neither settlers nor natives, Arakanese Muslims or Rohingyas did not even become permanent minorities in the body politic of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh).[4] Excluded from a Burmese body politic that framed them as perpetual migrants, the Arakanese Muslims remained suspended in forced transience.

Following recent scholarship on the brutalizing legacies of the Second World War and the imposition of the model of the nation-state in the India-Burma-Bangladesh borderlands, this essay takes it further by examining multifarious strategies that local populations such as the Arakanese Muslims resorted to under perilous circumstances of global war.[5] As such, it examines South Asian internationalism from the ground up. It decentres the processes of formal decolonization and partition by viewing the world away from the political and cultural metropoles of New Delhi, Karachi, Rangoon, Dhaka, and Calcutta. It adopts new spatial and scalar imaginations by peering out into the world from an interstitial space between South and

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[3] Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between North American History," *American Historical Review* 14 (1999), 814-841.

[4] Rohingya Muslims in Arakan/Rakhine and Indian-origin Tamils in Ceylon/Sri Lanka have a similar trajectory of not even becoming permanent minorities in the nation-state of their belonging. Conceptually speaking, this is at odds with Mamdani's framework of the co-constitution of the nation-state with the construction of an ethnic majority and minorities, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

[5] Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002), 647-668; Rajashree Mazumdar, "Illegal Border Crossers and Unruly Citizens: Burma-Pakistan-Indian borderlands from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries", *Modern Asian Studies* 53 (2019), 1144–1182; Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, "Tangled Lands: Burma and India's Unfinished Separation, 1937–1948", *Journal of Asian Studies* 80 (2020), 293-315; Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border* (University of Pennsylvania, 2021).

Southeast Asia— the connected peripheries of southern Chittagong and northern Arakan.[6] It draws the readers' attention to the dreams of a "Pakistan in Arakan" in wartime, its effects, and afterlives. It further explores local Muslim identity in the broader historical context of the Indian Ocean world through foregrounding complex linguistic and scriptal strategies of belonging of the Arakanese Muslims, thereby expanding our understanding of the international in South Asia and its processes of entanglement and disruption.

The rest of the article proceeds thematically, in a roughly chronological order. First, it discusses the Muslim-led wartime governance in Northern Arakan amidst the refugee crises arising from Muslim-Buddhist communal violence. Second, it broaches the Japanese offer for a Pakistan in Arakan to court local Muslims, spurring the British into action, who recruited them as guerrilla fighters for the "V" force under direct British military control. Third and finally, it probes the post-war rearmament of Arakanese Muslims, their territorial demands, and how these intersected with complex linguistic politics. The essay concludes with observations on the effects of the Arakanese Muslims' malleable and pluralistic identities on their claims-making in the mid-twentieth century.

Wartime Governance

Northern Arakan and southern Chittagong were part of a common cultural and linguistic universe whose inhabitants' intertwined social and economic lives were disrupted by the key mid-twentieth-century global events of war, decolonization, and partitions. Cosmopolitan connectedness competed with boundedness and unfreedom.[7] Arakan had played host to Arab traders since the 9th century CE, leading to a sizeable Muslim population centring around the region named after its famed entrepôt, Chittagong.[8] The Buddhist kingdom of Mrauk-U

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[6] Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance"; Jonathan Saha, "Is it in India? Colonial Burma as a 'problem' in South Asian history", *South Asian History and Culture* 7 (2016), 23-29.

[7] Sujit Sivasundaram's critique of connected histories of another entrepôt, Colombo, often hailed as "the most connected place on earth", helps conceptualize the concurrent connectedness and boundedness of the Chittagong region. Sujit Sivasundaram, "Towards a Critical History of Connection: The Port of Colombo, the Geographical "Circuit," and the Visual Politics of New Imperialism, ca. 1880-1914", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59 (2017), 346-384.

[8] Chittagong's prominence as an entrepôt resulted from its position between "two grand commodity circuits— the seaborne Eastern Indian Ocean network and the river-borne Brahmaputra-and-mountains network." Willem van Schendel, "Spatial Moments: Chittagong in Four Scenes", *Asia Inside Out: Changing Times* ed. by Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu, and Peter C. Perdue (Harvard University Press, 2015), 101-02.

emerged in Arakan in the fifteenth century, concurrent to and rivalling the Bengal Sultanate. Portuguese traders and the Dutch East India Company consolidated their trading settlements in the area in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. Slave trade led by Mrauk-U with European involvement on the one hand, and Mughal-Mrauk U political rivalry on the other, contributed to the pejorative term *moger muluk* (literally, the land of Mrauk-U) as an idiom for lawlessness in the Bengali language.[9]

The British East India Company established territorial control over Arakan after the first Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26. Racialized understandings of loyalty influenced British colonial policy on non-European mobility. Colonial administrators considered Muslims and Hindus of Bengal more reliable and loyal than Buddhists of Arakan, encouraging migration of the former into the region, thereby increasing the local Muslim population. The British also gifted land to loyalists who had fought in the first Anglo-Burmese War, creating new Muslim landowners in Northern Arakan.[10] After the third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, when Burma officially became part of British India, migration from Bengal presidency and southern India to Burma further increased.

Economic crisis fuelled racial tensions during the 1930s, taking the forms of race riots in Rangoon and the Saya San rebellion in the countryside.[11] Burmese anticolonialism had a strong Buddhist underpinning and an anti-Indian sentiment. To most Burmese, the "Indians" jointly benefited with the British from Burma's colonial rule. The "Indian" in the Burmese imagination was a racial category that was not Buddhist, not Burmese-speaking, and not indigenous to Burma. George Orwell's first novel, *Burmese Days*, which revolved around magistrate U Po Kyin's rivalry with Dr. Veraswami over the latter's social proximity to British timber merchant John Flory, had the hindsight of the 1930 Rangoon race riots.[12] Orwell himself had witnessed firsthand the racial

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[9] Ishrat Alam, "Indian Ocean Slave Trade: The Dutch Entreprise", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* Vol. 68, Part II (2007), 1178-1190; D. Mitra Barua, "Arakanese Chittagong Became Mughal Islamabad: Buddhist–Muslim Relationship in Chittagong (Chottrogram), Bangladesh", *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World* ed. by I. Frydenlund and M. Jerryson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 227-260; on slavery in the Indian Ocean world, see Nira Wickramsinghe, *Slave in a Palanquin: Colonial Servitude and Resistance in Sri Lanka* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

[10] In May 1942, Amir Ali Mir and his son Faruq Ahmed led another peace committee in Northern Arakan at Bawli Bazaar 20 miles north of Maungdaw. Mir was a wealthy landlord, whose family had received a land grant from the British East India Company after the First Anglo-Burmese war.

[11] On the Saya San rebellion, see Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King: History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma* (Ohio University Press, 2010); Robert L. Solomon, "Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion", *Modern Asian Studies* 3 (1969), 209-223.

[12] George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (Harper & Brothers, 1934).

tensions between Burmese and Indians during his posting in Burma as part of the Imperial Police. The 1937 partition of British Burma from British India created new borders and immigration controls between the two Crown colonies. As historian Guyot-Réchard has shown, India and Burma's separation remained largely unfinished, however.[13] The fluid topography and history of Northern Arakan and south Chittagong were such that circular migration of labour and commodities continued, leading to the transformation of the inhabitants into illegal migrants, rice smugglers, and disobedient subjects.

During the Second World War, Northern Arakan witnessed a refugee crisis within a refugee crisis and a "war within a war".[14] The Japanese established the nominally independent state of Burma in May 1942. As they drove out British forces, communal violence caused a large-scale exodus of Indians from various parts of Burma, who embarked on a precarious journey north, often on foot with few supplies.[15] The first wave of refugee crisis in Northern Arakan, which resulted from Muslim-Buddhist tensions, became intertwined with the plight of Indian refugees fleeing from across Burma and heading to Chittagong in hopes of safe passage to India through Bengal. When Arakanese Buddhists assaulted Indian refugees passing through Arakan, there were "serious communal reprisals by Moslems in ARAKAN against the Arakanese [Maughs], 10,000 of whom fled to the TEKNAF PENINSULA" in the southern part of Chittagong district of the neighboring Bengal province.[16] British authorities feared further reprisals against Buddhists refugees by Muslims in Chittagong, to avenge the plight of their co-religionists in Northern Arakan. The Bengal government even posted 300 personnel of the Eastern Frontier Rifles in Cox's Bazaar and Dohazari to protect the Arakanese Buddhists refugees.

Communal tensions were triangular in Arakan: they involved the Arakanese Buddhists (referred to as "Maughs" in British colonial documents), Arakanese Muslims in Northern Arakan located predominantly in places such as Akyab, Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung, and

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[13] Guyot-Réchard, "Tangled Lands". On how boundary-making as a result of the 1937 partition affected migration in the Bengal delta, see Sur, *Jungle Passports*; Mazumdar, "Illegal Border Crossers and Unruly Citizens".

[14] A war within a war would resurface in the Bengal delta three decades later during the 1971 war with the involvement of "borderlanders" fighting on Indian and Pakistani sides. Willem van Schendel, "A War Within a War: Mizo Rebels and the Bangladesh Liberation Struggle", *Modern Asian Studies* 50 (2016), 75–11.

[15] Hugh Tinker, "A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 6 (1975), 1-15.

[16] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): "Subject: Raising of Guerilla Organisation in Arakan Hill Tracts and the Country Generally South of Chittagong", 2 July 1942.

the "Thakins" in charge of the Japanese-supported wartime government of Burma. Thakins literally meant "master," originating in the 1930s anticolonial movement. In wartime Burma, "Thakins" denoted members of the Burma Independence Army, whom the Japanese had appointed in its administration.

Northern Arakan witnessed violent Muslim resistance to Japanese-backed Buddhist-led governance.[17] Local Muslims responded to the power vacuum caused by the initial British exit by forming peace committees to maintain law and order at local levels. This solidified Muslim opposition to pro-Japanese Thakin governance, as well as allowing group leaders to consolidate their hold on different townships and areas. During 1942-3, Muslim control was confined mostly to coastal Maungdaw and its surrounding area. Buthidaung, which was inland, was controlled by the Japanese, with Thakins at times supported by Arakanese Buddhists.

Muslim leadership was prominent but deeply fragmented. Several Muslim peace committees emerged in and around Maungdaw, which served to mobilize Muslims against the Japanese and Thakins. Powerful landowners such as Abdul Majid Chowdhury of Buthidaung, meanwhile, offered cash, rice, and men in support of the Muslim resistance against the Japanese. School teacher Omra Meah led the Maungdaw Central Peace Committee, along with Munif Khan, a former assistant township officer, and Nur Ahmed, former clerk at the Akyab district court. Amir Ali Mir and his son Faruq Ahmed, whose family had received a land grant from the British East India Company after the First Anglo-Burmese war, led the peace committee at Bawli Bazaar, twenty miles north of Maungdaw. Two other peace committees were located further north in Shahib Bazaar and Faquira Bazaar.[18] Buthidaung also had a Muslim peace committee led by Zahruddin but was under greater Thakin and Japanese influence. Not every Arakanese Muslim opposed the Japanese. For instance, Sultan Ahmed, the former parliamentary secretary to the government of Burma, established himself as the leader of Muslims in Akyab district by forging close ties with the Japanese.

Meah's main competitor, Esmail Dawood Shah (E.D.S.) Maracan, ran a peace committee, Majlis-i-Shura, covering the area south of Maungdaw.[19] Maracan was a wealthy landowner of

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[17] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Report of conditions and situation in Cox's Bazar Subdivision (Chittagong) and Bhutidaung-Maungdaw area of Arakan by Capt. E.J. Calvert, 26 June 1942.

[18] British Military Administration of North Arakan, 1942-43: Note by Peter Murray, 1/11/1971, https://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/peter-murray-1980.pdf (last accessed July 12, 2022).

[19] Ibid.

Chulia heritage, whose family had lived in Arakan for several generations while retaining ties to the French Indian territory of Karikal on the Coromandel coast.[20] Maracan had been a member of the legislative council of Akyab, prior to the war. From Lambaguna, his peace committee maintained a police force and court. His people were believed to be responsible for the murder of Thakin leader and former Akyab officer, U Chaw Khine, and the capture of a herd of nearly five hundred cattle from abandoned Buddhists villages.[21] Maracan even tipped off British military administrators about the Thakin and Japanese presence in Buthidaung, leading to the successful bombing of the Buthidaung Court House in mid-1942.[22]

While the Muslim peace committees maintained the vestiges of a ground-up civil administration in Northern Arakan, infighting and political intrigue were commonplace. Political rivals Meah and Maracan disputed the borders of jurisdiction of each other's peace committees. The robber Faruq and his gang terrorized river traffic and local villagers on the east bank of the Mayu River, between Buthidaung and Rathedaung. He was reportedly shot by British military personnel after refusing to join forces with the British Indian Army.[23] Maracan, after close cooperation with the British, became "politically undesirable" because of his rising political ambitions, which caused colonial officials to question his loyalty. Maracan and his family of about twenty people relocated to Karikal in French India in April 1943, at the height of the first Arakan offensive, after which British authorities attempted to move him to Madras Presidency to keep him under British surveillance.[24] He "certainly cannot be trusted and is ready to work for either side [British and Japanese], according to circumstances and his own appreciation of

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[20] The Chulias were Tamil Muslims who, like the Arakanese Muslims and the Ceylonese Moors, claimed seafaring Arab heritage as part of the maritime cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean world. On Islam in the Indian Ocean world, see: Fahad Ahmad Bishara, *Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Scott S. Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839-1937* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (ed.), *Oceanic Worlds: Muslim Universalism and European Imperialism* (Bloomsbury, 2020); Anthony Reid, "Islam in South-East Asia and the Indian Ocean Littoral, 1500–1800: Expansion, Polarisation, Synthesis", in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. III, ed. by David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 427-69.

[21] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Letter from T.B. Jameson, District Magistrate Chittagong, to J.R. Blair, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 6 June 1942.

[22] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Note prepared by T.B. Jameson, 5 June 1942.

[23] Ibid.

[24] On wartime legal and political ambiguities in French India, see: Akila Yechury, ''La République continue, comme par le passé'': The myths and realities of the Resistance in French India," *Outre-Mers, Revue d'histoire*, vol. 103, no. 388-389 (2015): 99-117.

the situation," wrote Major General Pearce of the British Indian Army, requesting a "close watching lest he engages in subversive activities in India itself."[25]

The Arakan offensive from December 1942 to May 1943 led by Allied forces ended in failure. The Japanese were back in Maungdaw and Buthidaung by mid-May 1943. Although they were disadvantaged by the monsoon's downpour, Japanese troops successfully held onto inland Buthidaung, while the British were able to gain control of coastal Maungdaw. British artist Anthony Gross, who was stationed in Burma in 1943, created several sketches of the battlefields of Arakan. One such sketch shows a Muslim *lascar* (colonial term for a sailor) rowing a *sampan* on the Mayu River with British troops on board (Figure 1). A vast number of Arakanese Muslims provided intelligence, supplies, and labor to Allied troops during the war. They were armed and trained in guerilla warfare by the British Indian Army from the summer of 1942 onward.

Figure 1. Battle of Arakan, 1943: A Sampan Convoy on the Mayu River, by Anthony Gross, Imperial War Museum, London, Art.IWM ART LD 3340.

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[25] Delhi, NAI, File 46/3/43-Poll(9): Arrival from Arakan of Mr E.D.S.. Maracan in Karikal and Proposal to Secure his Ejection from there Into British India and Keep Him Under Surveillance, 22 April 1943.

As Arakanese Muslims returned to their villages, crossing the Naf River supported by Allied troops, they faced retributive violence from the Buddhists. Violence was not one-sided: there was a "a large number of Mohamedans bent on loot and revenge" as troops re-entered Buddhist villages. Rule 24(A)1 of the Defence of Burma Rules forbade "prohibiting entry to British Burma of British subjects previously domiciled in Burma." However, communal violence between Muslims and Buddhists was such that British military administrators marked Akyab as a "protected area" under Rule 8 of the Defence of Burma Rules; immigration in Northern Arakan was "stopped for so long as expedient, and thereafter strictly controlled, and limited to strictly those refugees who had valid reasons or return."[26] The British Military Administration of North Arakan wanted to have a whole Burma Army battalion "stationed as soon as possible in the said area, to keep peace between MUSLIM and MUGH, to prevent a disorderly Muslim influx, to suppress violent crime, and to keep a watch on the KALADAN line." Establishing a civil administration in the area was considered "premature" until "a strong security force of Burma Army personnel was firmly established there."[27]

The border between Arakan and Bengal only hardened as military personnel managed refugee flows to prevent Muslim-Buddhist communal violence. By 1945, as the war shifted in favor of the Allies, the Burma Independence Army expressed allegiance to the British, who armed them to fight the Japanese. This had serious implications for postwar governance. The British, eager to reestablish control over Arakan and the rest of Burma, needed the Thakins of the Burma Independence Army and the Arakanese Buddhists. From the point of view of Muslims of Northern Arakan, they, and their enemies— Thakins and Arakanese Buddhists— were now fighting on the same side, all armed by the British.

The sympathy of British military personnel who had served in Northern Arakan often lay with the Muslims, just as it did for the Karens in eastern Burma.[28] The deputy administrator of the Military Administration of North Arakan wrote in 1949 that the Arakanese Muslims were "much more hard-working and prolific than the Arakanese [Buddhists]." Some were "great

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[26] Kew, UK National Archives (UKNA), File WO 203/309: Most Secret D.O Letter R/ 43-2182 from D.C.C.O. A.B. Eastern Army to Col. K.J. Lindop, 16 July 1943.

[27] Kew, UKNA, File WO 203/309: Office of the Military Administration, Arakan, No. 416, C.C.2/43, Maungdaw, February 1943.

[28] Matthew Foley, *The Cold War and National Assertion in Southeast Asia: Britain, the United States and Burma, 1948–1962* (Routledge, 2009).

seamen" who "manned about 20% of the British merchant navy during the war." Despite Japanese military successes in Arakan, wrote Murray, the "fact that at no time did the Japanese succeed in overrunning the entire area was in great measure due to the staunch loyalty to the Allies of the Moslems."[29] Thus the internationalism of the Second World War, the creation of battlefields, and the forced migration of civilians caught in the crossfire complicated local identities and exacerbated tensions. Ethnic and communal identities, in turn, became intertwined with Allied and Axis alliances and counter-alliances, creating questions about locals' loyalties, whether to their homelands, Burma, or the British or Japanese empires.

Japanese offers for a Pakistan

Arakan's wartime story fits into broader trends in the India-Burma borderlands, where the Second World War "acted as an agent of ethnicization and of transnationalization – revivifying and expanding the region's ties to the wider world beyond India [and Burma]".[30] With the Muslims resisting Thakin-led governance, the Japanese began to court the community's leaders in June 1942 with promises of "complete Moslim independence in Aracan," stirring up local calls for a Pakistan.[31] The borders of this "free state" were kept deliberately ambiguous. The Japanese encouraged various spatial imaginaries— land west of Mayu river or west of Kaladan river— the latter being a more substantial part of territory than the former (see Figure 2). The offer of a potential (though contested) Muslim nation-state in Arakan stoked colonial anxieties, leading the British not only to arm local Muslims against the Japanese but to remain intentionally vague about Northern Arakan's potential political futures.

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[29] Kew, UKNA, File DO142/453: F1323/1015/79, Peter Murray, Foreign Office to Robert W.D. Fowler, Commonwealth Relations Office, 26 January 1949.

[30] Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, "When legions Thunder Past: The Second World War and India's Northeastern Frontier", *War in History*, 25 (2018), 328-60.

[31] NAI, File No. 21/19/42-Poll(I): Report of conditions and situation in Cox's Bazar Subdivision (Chittagong) and Bhutidaung-Maungdaw area of Arakan.
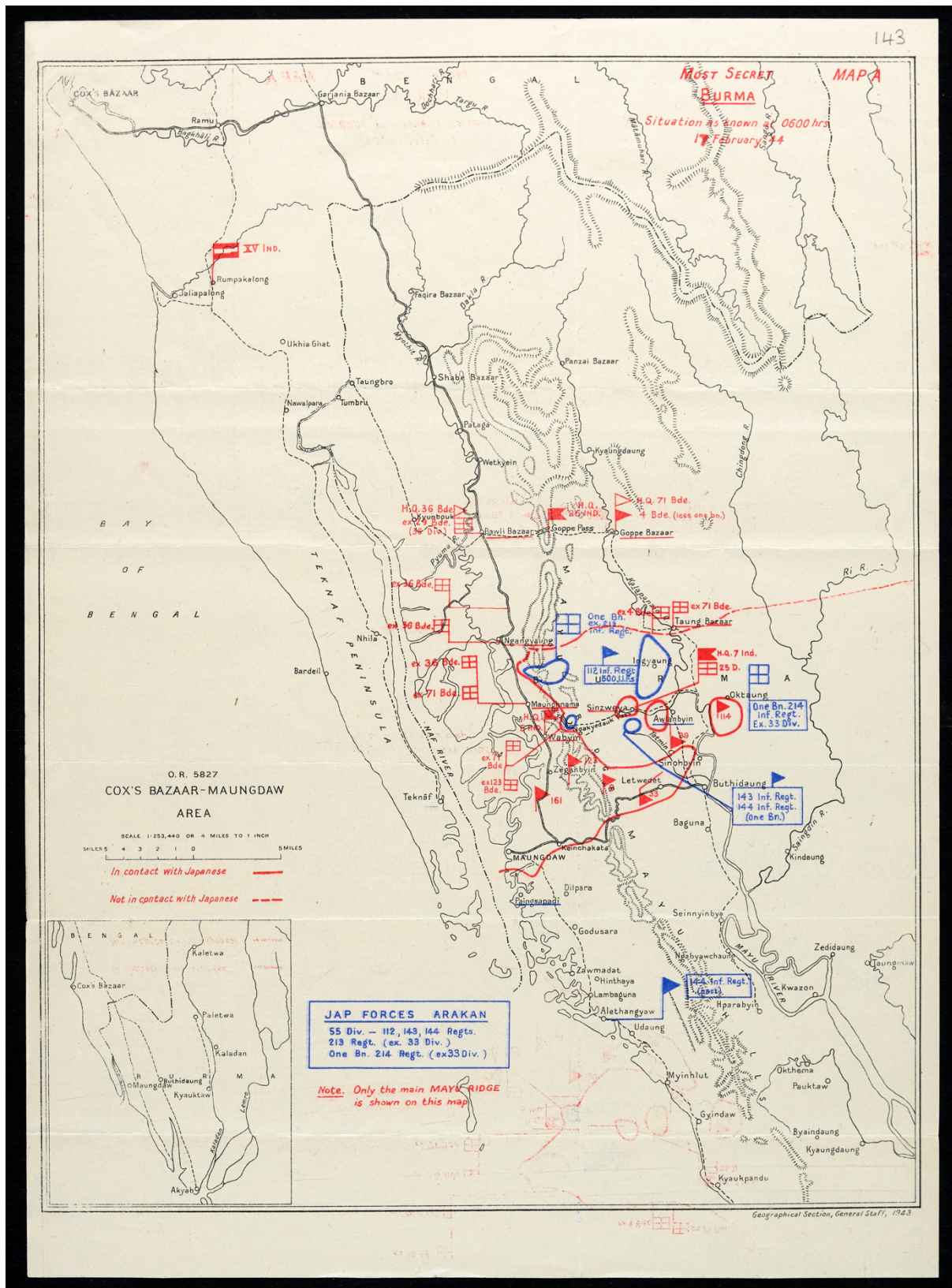
Figure 2. Map of British and Japanese forces in Cox's Bazaar-Maungdaw area, 17 February 1944. Source: "Summary of Operations– the Far East", PREM 3/148/3, UKNA.

Arakanese Muslims' interest in a Japanese offer for a Pakistan in Northern Arakan was in alignment with anticolonial politics of the time. In British India, politicians openly discussed multiple political and spatial imaginaries for South Asia's decolonized futures. Public calls for a separate Muslim-majority state of Pakistan since the 1930s had resonated with many in Bengal, as well as in Northern Arakan. Between 1940 and 1943, Fazlul Haq, Bengal's premier (1937-43) floated a territorial option distinct from both Jawaharlal Nehru's secular India as Mohammad Ali Jinnah's communal Pakistan that prioritized religion.[32] Haq's third option, although unsuccessful, combined religion with region, addressing the pluralism of Islam in Bengal and its regional identity.

The Japanese offer shook British military officers. One of them wrote with great alarm:

> With this situation in view it appears that if the Bhutidaung-Maungdaw Moslims are to be retained as pro-British immediate contact must be established with them and every promise of support and aid should be made. Had such contact been made a month ago the assurance of cooperation would have been easy to come by, now it may take some considerable time and it may not be possible to contact leaders direct[ly] and gain over their assurance and active support.[33]

The Muslims of Northern Arakan were already armed. They had 75 rifles, twelve light machine guns, five Thompson submachine guns, shot guns, a mortar, and about 20,000 rounds of .303 ammunition for rifles. Swaying them away from Japanese influence was urgent.

Chittagong's district magistrate Colonel G.F. White pressed military authorities for the "speedy delivery of arms and ammunitions" because the "enemy [Japan] is negotiating with the Mohammedans." Mere counterpropaganda was not going to be enough. "[S]uch an attractive bribe by the enemy [promise of 'Pakistan' beginning in Arakan] must be countered by something more tangible than mere promises by us," he recommended. Thus began active British recruitment of the Muslims of Northern Arakan to form a guerilla force to fight the Japanese. White instructed Chittagong headquarters to "raise, organize, arm, and train a force of approx. 1,000 (One thousand) Mohammedans," allocating one lakh (or 100,000) rupees from the Chittagong Treasury for that purpose, which was a considerable allocation.[34] He allocated a salary

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[32] Sana Aiyar, "Fazlul Huq, Region and Religion in Bengal: The Forgotten Alternative of 1940–43", *Modern Asian Studies*, 42 (2008): 1213-1249.

[33] NAI, File No. 21/19/42-Poll(I): Report of conditions and situation in Cox's Bazar Subdivision (Chittagong) and Bhutidaung-Maungdaw area of Arakan.

[34] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Letter from Col. G.F. White, Chittagong, Headquarters V. Force, "Organisation of Mohammedan Resistance in Arakan," to H.Q., 15 Corps, 26 June 1942.

for headmen or group leaders at fifteen rupees per month, for guerrillas at ten rupees per month, and an advance of a half-a-month's pay in silver to lure new recruits. He assigned one convoy of the Punjab Regiment to Cox's Bazaar for the purpose of Muslim guerrilla recruitment. Given the imminent food shortage in Arakan because of the war, White also recommended food imports to feed the Muslim guerrillas and their headmen: "Food in belly [is] better than political idealisms."[35]

For most of the Second World War, Northern Arakan was in the grey zone between military and civil administration. Food distribution was a civilian task but feeding guerrillas to fight the Japanese was a military priority. Local British military authorities needed a civilian administrator who could win over Muslim leaders at a time when they were feared to be already enamoured with Japanese promises of an independent Muslim nation-state in Arakan. A.A. Shah, subdivisional officer of Cox's Bazaar in Bengal fulfilled this role. Shah belonged to the highly selective Imperial Civil Service, and was a Muslim fluent in Urdu and, likely, Arabic; deemed to be on service from New Delhi, not from the Bengal provincial government to which he was originally appointed, Shah was deputed to accompany British military officers to Maungdaw to "stiffen Moslim opposition to Thakins."[36]

The fluidity between military and civilian control of North Arakan between 1942-45 was evident not least in bureaucratic institutions. The Military Administration of North Arakan, as the British wartime regime in the area was called, was under Civil Affairs Services of the central government in New Delhi. British troops nicknamed the area "Phelipstan" after Denis Phelips, former Defence Secretary to the Burma Government, who was entrusted with its governance.[37] Phelips, himself a civil officer, was commissioned as a lieutenant-colonel and expected to "run a purely military administration" directly under the British Indian Army.[38]

Even before the British decision to arm the Muslims of Northern Arakan, Chittagong's Muslims was already a proven resource for attaining military goals against the Japanese. While

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[35] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Reference Col. White's report, 26/6/1942, Para 2(e), Note 4.

[36] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Telegram from Bengal, Calcutta to Home Department, New Delhi, 30 June 1942.

[37] British Military Administration of North Arakan, 1942-43: Note by Peter Murray, 1 November 1971, https://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/peter-murray-1980.pdf (last accessed July 12, 2022); See also: Jacques Leider, "Territorial Dispossession and Persecution in North Arakan (Rakhine), 1942-43", Policy Brief Series 101 (TOEP, 2020).

[38] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Note from Directorate of Military Operations to General Staff, 5 August 1942.

the Royal Air Force bombed Buthidaung where the Japanese-backed Thakin administration was believed to have been set up, in June 1942, an armed group of Muslims from Chittagong had "advanced on Buthidaung and recaptured the town". This set the initial stage for the British decision to "back up the Moslems." However, faced with Thakins' inability to govern Northern Arakan because of armed Muslim resistance, the Japanese decided to back local Muslims as well. They floated offers of "arms, money, food, and the establishment of PAKISTAN."[39] When Sultan Ahmed of Akyab and E.D.S. Maracan of Majlis-i-Shura of Lambaguna met in Buthidaung to discuss the Japanese political offer, British military authorities were spurred into action.

Neither the provincial government of Bengal nor the government of Burma (exiled in Simla) were willing to "offer anything more tangible than promises to reward our friends after the War." Neither did they have "any serious counter to PAKISTAN." Both insisted that "no idle [political] promises should be made by any Military Commander" to the Muslims of Northern Arakan. British military administrators, therefore, decided that arming local Muslims was their only plausible option. Uncertainty remained, at least at the beginning, about the Muslims' allegiance to the British. "The danger lies in the fact that we may distribute arms [of 700 muskets and ammunitions] to the Moslems, only to find them used against us. This may well occur through our inability to outbid the Japanese politically."[40]

The British military in India had already formed a V Force of irregular troops in the hilly areas of Tripura and Assam, arming local populations to support regular Allied troops.[41] British military administrators "suggested that 'V' Force extend their activities to raise these guerillas" in Northern Arakan. Recruiting guerrillas in Chittagong and Arakan was easier said than done. This was not least because the Bengal government opposed the British Indian Army's plans for Muslim recruitment on communal grounds, fearing postwar political and social consequences of wartime military choices. It advised that Muslim guerillas "should have as their ideal, anti-Japanese and anti-Thakin feelings"— not religious animosity against Buddhists.[42] The chief secretary to the Government of Bengal was unequivocal about A.A. Shah's role in Northern

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[39] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Correspondence No. 835/I H.Q. 15 Ind. Corps, C/O No. 12 Adv. Base P.O. to H.Q. Eastern Army, 2 July 1942.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Guyot-Réchard, "When Legions Thunder Past".

[42] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): "Subject: Raising of Guerilla Organisation in Arakan Hill Tracts", 2 July 1942.

Arakan: "Very definite instructions have already been given to Mr. Shah that he is not to prejudice the future Muslim Arakanese problem by showing any concern for Muslim demands for 'Pakistan' or union with Chittagongian Muslims or other demands of an anti-Burmese character."[43]

Another administrative problem was inadequate local paramilitary forces to back up V Force guerrillas in Arakan and Chittagong. In Assam, the Force was backed by Assam Rifles. In Tripura, the Tripura State Forces were expected to back it up as needed. However, the Bengal government refused to provide support of the Eastern Frontier Rifles in Arakan and Chittagong, opposing its deployment in any "anti-Japanese role" and insisting that its purpose was merely to "preserve law and order and as a Provincial Police Reserve." Originally founded as a frontier protection force by the British East India Company in the late 18th century to protect Bengal against Burma, the Eastern Frontier Rifles was reconstituted in the early twentieth century, predominantly with Gurkhas hailing from various ethnic groups of Nepal and of Hindu and Buddhist faith. During the Muslim-Buddhist communal violence of May-June 1942 that had led to the first wave of wartime refugee crisis in the area, the Gurkhas had killed several Muslims, thereby "becoming bad odour on the [Northern Arakan] coast," where the Muslims lived.[44] Bengal authorities therefore feared further communal tensions in the area caused by Eastern Frontier Rifles personnel themselves.

The responsibility to train, lead, and manage the guerrilla troops in Northern Arakan thus directly fell on the British Indian Army, while A.A. Shah provided extensive support to military personnel. Shah himself was aware of the grey zone in which he was expected to function: "Governments of Bengal and Burma both disown responsibility for me and the Army seems to think that I represent the civil government... it appears to me that if it is decided to 'do' anything in these parts I should have a better status than visualized in these instructions (or lack of instructions)."[45]

Shah developed good relations with Omra Meah, who provided intelligence about the Japanese and Thakin presence in Buthidaung and Akyab. Shah considered Meah trustworthy,

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[43] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Resistance to Japanese in Arakan, from J.R. Blair, Secretary to the Government of Bengal to Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 27 July 1942.

[44] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): "Subject: Raising of Guerilla Organisation in Arakan Hill Tracts", 2 July 1942.

[45] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Diary of Mr. A.A. Shah on a military mission in Northern Arakan, 7 July 1942.

unlike Maracan, whom he considered unreliable, opportunistic, and potentially pro-Japanese. Meah once asked Shah about the possibility for the "separation of the predominantly Muslim portion of Arakan from Burma after the war and joining it to India." In response, Shah admitted that he "had no instructions regarding this matter." Meah then wanted to know whether Arakanese Muslims could "send representations" to the British Indian government to discuss the territorial plans, to which Shah replied, "Yes."[46] Wary of jeopardizing British plans to recruit the Muslims as guerrillas, Shah publicly maintained a studied ambiguity.

Together with British military officers Calvert and Robey, Shah agreed that the Arakanese Muslims they had developed ties with were "sincerely friendly people" such that "there was no likelihood of muskets or rifles we might issue these people being used against us." Nevertheless, "it was too much to expect these people to fight for us [the British] gratuitously." In the face of the Japanese offer of Muslim "hegemony in these northern parts of Arakan," Shah and his military colleagues resolved to "counterbalance this suitably." But how? Insinuating the Bengal government's restrictions on his role, Shah's note in his diary read, "It was too much to ask, if this job of work is to succeed, that we must avoid 'propaganda of a character which would be likely to prejudice the future Muslim-Arakanese problem'."[47] His main task was to unite the Arakanese Muslims under a common anti-Japanese and anti-Thakin banner, prevent infighting among the many peace committees, and inspire them to fight as guerrilla warriors of the V Force. By August 1942, a small force under the command of British military officers was sent to "teach guerrilla warfare to Arakanese Muslims" and to provide them with food and medical supplies.[48]

The British Indian Army wanted more freedom of action for Shah so that he could further influence local Muslims. The military administrators advocated that the governance of Northern Arakan, including training Muslim guerrillas, should fall under direct military control, while Shah should be given "some sort of special commission" to allow him "the maximum possible scope" of action. Shah had become very easily "a persona grata [sic] with the Muslims" of North Arakan. Providing a special position to Shah would remove any responsibility from the Bengal government with respect to the V Force (a major headache for the provincial authorities), as well as reducing civilian bureaucratic hurdles for the military. Legal wrangles would remain, but

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[46] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Diary of Mr. A.A. Shah on a military mission in Northern Arakan, 9 July 1942.

[47] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Diary of Mr. A.A. Shah on a military mission in Northern Arakan, 11 July 1942.

[48] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Note signed 1 August 1942.

military administrators hoped that "surely a <u>de facto</u> arrangement could be arrived at, even if a declaration to this effect is <u>de jure</u> impossible."[49] The British Indian government in New Delhi accepted the Army's request, making Shah the "civil adviser" to the Military Administration of North Arakan led by Phelips.[50] Shah thus became an employee of the Government of India's Defence Department in the middle of August 1942, formally departing the Bengal government.

Shah spoke Urdu, which was not comprehensible to all Arakanese Muslims except for the educated (such as Meah), the cosmopolitan and wealthy (such as Maracan), and religious leaders (such as *maulvis*). At a meeting with 500 Arakanese Muslims in July 1942 to form a civil government combining the various peace committees, Shah had brought an interpreter.[51] At this meeting and others, Meah remained adamant about his demand that Northern Arakan join British India after the war— a goal he would openly embrace against the backdrop of decolonization and partition.

The role of Urdu in Arakan remains ambiguous. Several Arakanese Muslim leaders could speak Urdu, but it was not a language that was spoken by all the population. The British military administration had brought A.A. Shah into the area to inspire Arakanese Muslims to fight on the side of the Allied forces. The British authorities assumed that because Shah was Muslim, like the locals whom he was expected to work with, he would wield a significant influence, notwithstanding the language barrier. After the war some Arakanese Muslims would agitate for an Urdu-speaking territorial entity belonging to the future state of Pakistan, adding a further layer of complexity to this history. British attempts to undermine Arakanese Muslim support for the Japanese allowed for in-between spaces to persist in which locals debated imaginary political futures.

Postwar Rearmament

The formal decolonization of India and Burma and the partition of British India into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan allowed Arakanese Muslims to further nurture

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[49] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Note signed 4 August 1942.

[50] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): A.A. Shah, Civil Adviser to Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, Maungdaw, 21 September 1942.

[51] NAI, File 21/19/42-Poll(I): Diary of Mr. A.A. Shah on a military mission in Northern Arakan, 12 July 1942.

their dreams of new political futures, their territorial desires hardened by their wartime experience. In August 1947, Pakistan's territorial constitution as two geographically separate wings in the east and west gave them hope that Muslim-majority areas of Northern Arakan could still merge with East Bengal, thus becoming part of (East) Pakistan.[52]

As Burma became independent of British colonial rule in January 1948, separatist Arakanese Muslims reconstituted themselves as the Arakan Mujahed Party. The ammunition dumps left behind by departing Allied forces, such as in Ukhia just south of Cox's Bazaar, became a source of the Mujaheds' postwar rearmament. They formed a loose and opportunistic alliance with the Burmese communists jointly to fight the Burmese state with the "object of ultimately carving out an independent Muslim state in Arakan," which "might eventually join up with East Pakistan if the party achieved success."[53] The Mujaheds, many of whom were "ex-army men" on the side of the Allied forces, attacked "the flanks of regular troops" of the Burmese military before crossing the Naf River to find refuge in Chittagong in East Pakistan.[54]

Support for the rebels was uneven in East Pakistan. Although they expressed some sympathy for their co-religionists in Northern Arakan, "some Bengali Muslims are indifferent to non-Bengali speaking Mujahids."[55] Neither the political leaders of East Pakistan nor the Pakistan government in Karachi were keen to support the Mujaheds, considering it an internal matter of the Burmese government. The district-level officers in Chittagong were, however, sympathetic and eager to help.

Also called "Pyaukkyas" or P.Y.K. in the archives, the Arakan Mujaheds received arms and ammunition from the sub-divisional officer and township officer at Cox's Bazaar. Their wounded guerillas fleeing the Burmese military received treatment in the hospital there. The Mujaheds smuggled rice to the Chittagong district, making them desirable to Chittagong officials who were struggling to meet local demand for rice.[56] Smuggled rice, however, was not the only reason for

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[52] On the protracted and political nature of Bengal's partition see Joya Chatterji, "The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52", *Modern Asian Studies* 33 (1999). 185-242.

[53] Kew, UKNA, DO 142/453: Pol 9560/48, Weekly Report No.28 for the period ending 18th July 1948 from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca.

[54] UKNA, DO 142/453: Burma-Arakan, Secret, Enclosure to REF.144, 4 August 1948.

[55] UKNA, DO 142/453: Secret Questionnaire, Enclosure to REF.144 from the Deputy High Commissioner, Dacca, 16 December 1948.

[56] Kew, UKNA, FO 371/83115: Note No. 51 from James Bowker at UK Embassy in Rangoon to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Ernest Bevin, 12 February 1949.

local support across the Naf river. Cultural and linguistic affinities between Northern Arakan and southern Chittagong were key.

Yet, the Mujaheds also laid claims to a more expansive belonging—extending far beyond Chittagong— through their calls for Urdu to be the official language of their future independent state. They vowed complete loyalty to Pakistan, leading Major N.H. Niblett, deputy commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, to draw parallels with other violent borderlanders fighting political outcomes of decolonization in South Asia. According to Niblett, the Mujaheds of Northern Arakan employed tactics that were "almost identical to those of the Mahsuds and the Wazirs on the N.W. Frontier, attacking the flanks of regular troops and then retiring to hills and forests." Niblett had met with the leaders of the Mujahed Party at the border, when "they declared 'their heartfelt devotion to Pakistan and their longing to be linked with this Islamic State if it were possible.'"[57] Niblett allegedly even offered the Mujaheds that "if they would surrender their arms, he would give them 'personal guarantee' that these would be used in Kashmir fighting" by their co-religionists.[58] It is unclear what the Mujaheds' response was to Niblett's offer.

Omra Meah, Sultan Ahmed, Jafar Meah, and others in Maungdaw had transformed themselves from wartime peace committee leaders to post-war violent agitators for a Muslim state in Arakan. To deputy commissioner of Akyab in Burma, Maulvi Jafar Kawal,Meah articulated the demands of his party: "(a) to declare Akyab district as a free Muslim State under the Burma Government (similar to Hyderabad under the British Government); (b) the state language must be Urdu; (c) the establishment of a free Urdu school; (d) all convicts to be released unconditionally; (e) to declare the Mujahed party legal."[59] Since they received no response from the Burmese government, the Mujaheds, together with the communists, despite their at-times uneasy relations, conducted violent attacks in Bawli Bazaar and Ponnagyun.[60]

By the fall of 1948, the situation in North Arakan had become dire, with Burmese government forces and Muslim insurgents engaged in direct armed conflict. The Burmese

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[57] Ibid.

[58] UKNA, DO 142/453: Burma-Arakan, Secret, Enclosure to REF.144, 4 August 1948.

[59] UKNA, DO 142/453: Pol 10550/48, II Border Affairs, Extract from Report from Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca on events in E. Bengal (Enc. To Despatch No. 240), 5 September 1948.

[60] UKNA, DO 142/453: Pol 10550/48, Extract from Report from Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca on events in E. Bengal (Enc. To Despatch No. 216), 1 August 1948.

government reportedly "brought planes to bomb the insurgents at Maungdaw and Buthidaung," while Mujahed groups "armed with light automatic weapons," were patrolling the Naf River.[61] In November, the situation worsened. Burmese forces attacked the Mujaheds from land, sea, and air, "burning 13 villages, including six mosques near Maungdaw." In response, the insurgents—likely a combination of Mujaheds and communists—ambushed a Navy motor launch, which had to fire its guns for "half an hour before it could break through."[62] Fearing a refugee crisis on its border with Burma, the East Pakistan government decided to "strengthen their armed forces in Cox's Bazar subdivision".[63] The Burmese government armed the Arakanese Buddhists against the Muslims, leading to concerns of renewed communal violence, as had happened in 1942. However, by 1949, the Arakanese Buddhists also grew restless with the Burmese government, which was paying far more attention to the Shan and Chin political claims than those in Arakan.

The identity of the Muslims of Northern Arakan became the site of violent contestations by the Burmese state and a malleable tool for Muslims themselves to express allegiance to nation-states born in the vicinity of their lands. Linguistic and scriptal politics became a defining point of contestation.[64] Depending on whether an Arakanese Muslim group campaigned to join Pakistan (such as, the Arakan Mujahed party) or it desired regional autonomy within independent Burma (such as the Arakanese Muslim autonomy movement), it pushed for the Urdu language or, alternatively, the Burmese script of their language. Geographically speaking, Maungdaw saw more Mujahed support, while Buthidaung, Akyab, and other areas further south witnessed a stronger regional autonomy movement. The autonomy movement was "considerably stronger than the two" movements, agitating for a separate state within the union of Burma.[65]

In this context, local language, rather than foreign Urdu, took a life of its own. The spoken form of the Arakanese Muslim language was similar to Chittagongian—which is close to but

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[61] UKNA, DO 142/453: Pol Pol 11743/48, Extract from Report No. 43 for the period ending 31 October 1948, from Deputy High Commissioner in Pakistan.

[62] UKNA, DO 142/453: Savingram from UK High Commissioner in Karachi, Pakistan to Commonwealth Relations Office, 245 Saving, 17 December 1948.

[63] UKNA, DO 142/453: Pol 10206/48, Extract from report from Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca on events in E. Bengal (Enc. To Despatch No. 229), 22 August 1948.

[64] On script readoption and script invention to reinvent and/or reinforce political identities against the nation-state in contemporary India and Bangladesh, see Willem van Schendel, "Rebuffing Bengali dominance: postcolonial India and Bangladesh," *Critical Asian* Studies (2022): 11-14, online view.

[65] Kew, UKNA, FO371/69489: 1148/19/48 British Embassy Rangoon to UK High Commissioner Karachi, 11 September 1948.

different from the standardized Bengali spoken in Dhaka and Calcutta due to its absorption of Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, and Burmese words. The Muslims of Northern Arakan thus sought to preserve their identity through their language script, which remain a motley assemblage of their dreams for various political futures: the Perso-Arabic, Burmese, Urdu, the Arabic-based Hanifi, or the contemporary Latin-based Rohingyalish scripts.

The Bengali language movement in East Pakistan in the early 1950s and the violent creation of Bangladesh and Bangladeshi society throughout the 1970s made the Arakan Mujaheds' affinity for joining Urdu-speaking Pakistan even more complicated, even traitorous. To Bangladesh, Chittagong and Arakan remain incomprehensible troubled borderlands, where people speak a strange language that can never belong to the core of Bengali language and culture as viewed from Dhaka. The ambiguities in language, religion, race, and territoriality in the long cosmopolitan and bounded histories of these people, hardened in the battlefields of the Second World War and reproduced in the violent borderlands, continue to haunt the Rohingya people's identity till this day.

Conclusion

Wartime alliances created opportunities for local actors to either reinforce certain hierarchies and communal divisions or to create new ones. Whether in the form of joining Pakistan or aspiring for independent statehood, Arakanese Muslim demands for political self-determination in the era of decolonization partly stemmed from the exigencies produced by the Second World War. The war coincided with, aggravated, and further complicated longstanding ethnic and communal tensions within Northern Arakan. Not only did it shine light on the multiple, often competing identities embodied by locals— Indian or Burmese, Muslim or Buddhist, local or cosmopolitan— it also reinforced violence as the key means for asserting intra-regional and trans-regional relations, further exacerbating local divisions.

Wartime internationalism in this South(east) Asian borderland was multi-directional. British and Japanese officials brought international, regional, and local concerns to Northern Arakan. They sought local allies to make regional strategic gains, which had consequences for the global war. But the agency of local actors— in this case, Arakanese Muslims— complicated this agenda. As demonstrated by individuals like Meah and Maracan, Arakanese Muslims did not merely think or act locally. They were attuned to broader regional and international shifts taking place.

Not only did they seek the security of their local communities, but they also participated in broader conversations about alternative forms of belonging, citizenship, and statehood at a time of boundary-making in South and Southeast Asia. Their ability to serve as British allies, against the backdrop of Japanese promises of Muslim statehood, created a space in which Arakanese Muslims could make demands about their political futures that the British could not readily dismiss. In turn, this reinforced the ambiguous place of this community in a post-war world.

In this, the Arakan-Chittagong frontier's trajectory mirrored that of the wider Indo-Burma borderlands in the 1940s. The war's trans-nationalising impact unsettled existing spatial imaginaries, not least the idea of India and Burma as clearly separate cultural and geographical spheres, and opened space for additional ones, which were often incongruent. Local people and colonial officials alike began discussing and lobbying for alternative cartographies for South and Southeast Asia to depict a multitude of territorial possibilities.

The Maungdaw-centred Arakan Mujaheds' campaign to make Arakan part of a future Pakistan rubbed against the efforts of Buthidaung's and Akyab's Muslims to negotiate autonomy for themselves in independent Burma. But they also mirrored, intersected with, and sometimes clashed with, visions of distinct post-colonial futures elaborated by neighbouring Naga, Zo, or Kachin people, visions some British officials encouraged. Their hope was to redraw the map of India and Burma's border-worlds before the border became an international dividing line and as such, solidified. As in Arakan, most of these discussions and petitions never came to fruition. Even in their failure, however, these efforts highlight the nature of decolonization as an internationalizing process, violent and contested to this day.[66]

Arakanese Muslims were neither Burmese, Pakistani, nor Indian. Despite the hardening of postcolonial borders, which ostensibly rooted Arakanese Muslims in the Burmese nation-state, Arakanese Muslims did not see themselves as Burmese. Instead, they laid claim to Pakistani belonging or autonomy. In turn, political authorities reframed them as enemies of the state, often with brutal outcomes. Questions of wartime loyalty persisted in post-war years in the forms of citizenship and legitimate/illegitimate belongings.[67] Northern Arakan's transmutation from borderland to bordered land is ongoing. The liminalities of Arakanese Muslim identity and belongings, many of which were distilled in wartime, thus continue to persist, complicating local, national, regional, and ultimately global politics.

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[66] Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, "Tangled Lands."

[67] Mazumdar, "Illegal Border Crossers and Unruly Citizens".