Imperial Military Transportation in British Asia: Burma 1941–1942

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Indivar Kamtekar

Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India. E-mail: indivar@mail.jnu.ac.in

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The hero of this book is a Colonel Francis John Biddulph, who became, after some hiccups, the Director of Military Transportation in Burma during the Second World War. Its author is Michael Charney, Professor of Asian and Military History at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. The new historical source highlighted is an old leather suitcase, or rather the papers ("treasure") disgorged by the suitcase when Professor Charney was allowed by Biddulph's family to read them. The story told is that of an expert officially brought in from outside to revive and transform Burma's transportation, in particular the Burma Railway system, during the Japanese onslaught on Burma in the first few months of 1942. Biddulph worked against the resistance of local officialdom. Insiders resisted both his presence and his methods. Nevertheless, his efforts made it possible for the Burma Railway to function, after a fashion, for a couple of months in the war against Japan, after the railway's chief civilian overseer had thrown in the towel. This is a sedate plot to set against the other excitements of wartime, but Charney insists that it is an important one.

Our protagonist was commissioned in the Royal Engineers in 1915, near the beginning of the First World War, during the course of which he served in France, Belgium and Italy, acquiring experience in running military railways. We then fast-forward to 1934, when he became an instructor at Longmoor in Britain, where training in running military railways was imparted. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he was the chief instructor at Longmoor. War duties sent him to Iraq. In May 1941 he was appointed Assistant Director of Transportation, India. His superior at Longmoor, Lionel Manton (who had been the Commanding Officer of the Railway Training Camp at Longmoor from 1930 to 1935), became India's first Director of Transportation. At the end of January 1942, Biddulph arrived in Burma, where he remained until May 1942. While the Japanese routed British power, in one of the most ignominious series of defeats in British imperial history, Biddulph was in the thick of things, at least as far as transport was concerned. He maintained notes and later wrote "A Narrative of the Military Railways in Burma," which remains unpublished.

Although transport in Burma encompassed roads, rivers and railways, the railways engaged most of Biddulph's attention. The road network of Burma was poor, consisting mostly of feeder roads for the railways or river traffic. By contrast the railways were more impressive, possessing 360 locomotives, 949 passenger coaches and 9,805 freight cars. The railway network was oriented towards imperial economic priorities, which meant that it pointed towards the port of Rangoon; war against the Japanese would have made a safer, more northern centre of operations preferable. The organizational structure of the Burma Railway was departmental rather than divisional. It had separate departments dealing with Locomotives, Traffic, Engineering, Signals, and so on. As it was divided by function across the whole network, the powers of local railway controllers were limited, even over the personnel within their areas of operation. Railway employment stood at about 22,000. Among the higher echelons, there had been a degree of what was called "Burmanisation," although about two-thirds of the ninety-one gazetted officers were still white in 1940.

It is the thesis of this book that Biddulph, who arrived in Rangoon on 27 January 1942, embodied and preached an "Imperial Military Transportation Technique" which, combined with local knowledge, was essential to success in warfare. "Transportation Technique" is the refrain of the book. The dissemination and inculcation of Transport Technique was Biddulph's mission. He looked on himself as a prophet. Curiously, this is an assessment which the author seems to endorse.

Eight chapters unfold the story. The first is titled "Metropolitan Transportation Technique from Burma to India and Iraq." This technique was incubated and taught at Longmoor. Longmoor trained personnel of the Royal Engineers, including engine drivers and signalmen, in how to manage a military railway. Manuals and rule books were published. Unfortunately experience of how the colonies worked was lacking. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn from subsequent chapters that experienced local railwaymen in Burma had problems with outsiders lacking local knowledge. As insiders they knew the local language, the nature of local traffic, and when crucial events like torrential downpours occurred within their territory. The British and Burmese officials of the Burma Railway, like the Burmese population, did not desire connections with India: they wanted to be left alone. Insularity suited them. Some of the British had applied for premature retirement. Most of them had learnt their skills on the job, and were not overly impressed by formal training. Although they were no strangers to infighting and backstabbing among themselves, they retained some group loyalty. Biddulph complained about the "distrust and suspicion" with which he was greeted.

The officers of the Burma Railway were resentful of men parachuted in to take over their operations from the top (modern management consultants are detested for less). Among the most uncooperative officers was the Chief Railway Commissioner, William Henry Chance. The swift successes of the Japanese Army undermined his evil influence. After Chance called it quits, declaring that the railways were "dead," Biddulph came into his own. The situation seemed impossible. Fear evoked by Japanese bombings was compounded by dacoities by local villagers, causing many members of the railway labour force to abscond from their posts. Despite this, Biddulph proved successful in keeping sections of the railway functioning. He did this by empowering the local railway managers to take full control over their area of operations. Although the south-east portion of the railways was lost, and the Rangoon to Mandalay trunk line was cut, the railways continued to move evacuees and troops, including large numbers of Chinese soldiers, whose language not a single railway officer could understand. It was remarkable to have kept functioning in conditions of widespread panic, labour shortage, and disrupted communications. This "outstanding" railway performance was Biddulph's "resounding success" and "magnificent" achievement.

The argument of the final chapter is that, although Biddulph remained an unsung hero, his efforts had a profound long-term impact. They were reflected in the manner in which the railways were administered in Assam, where many officers of the Burma Railway were despatched after Burma had been conquered. The Bengal and Assam Railway management structure was changed in 1943 to a divisional organization, with authority given to divisional superintendents. Unfortunately, credit for improvements came to be wrongly attributed to the American military which was in Assam at the time.

The most frustrating part of this book is the author's refusal to spell out, beyond vague references to decentralization, what exactly the elements of the Imperial Military Transport Technique were. Very much is made of it. It is referred to as "Transport Technique," "the Technique," "Biddulph's Transport Technique," "a Technique for all seasons" and even as a "globally applicable technique," but the concept remains mystical. And few if any clues are offered about the social background or personality of the man whose ghost clambers out of his suitcase and into the pages of this book. Moreover, while Biddulph's suitcase is called a treasure, looking too intently at the contents of a prophet's suitcase, obscures much which was not crammed into it. In this entire book, the Burmese are reduced to a handful of cameo appearances. What were the views of the passengers of the railways, for example, or of the many Burmese and Indians who tried but did not manage to board one of the trains? The world of the subordinate railway staff requires investigation too. A satisfactory history of the railways cannot any longer be written in terms of the manoeuvres of its officers, any more than the history of a colony can be written in terms of its viceroys or governors.

Bayly and Harper's well-known books on the Second World War in Asia, and Ian Kerr's works on the Indian railways, display a certain sweep. Charney, who has written a history of Burma, is no stranger to books which are broad in scope, but here he functions in a resolutely monographic mode. The claim is made that this book speaks to wider historical debates about organizational history, military adaptation, and the circulation of knowledge. It is likely, however, that its main readers will be specialists in the history of the South Asian railways, or of the Second World War in Burma. What is actually

on offer is an extremely (and perhaps, given its argument, excessively) detailed history of some aspects of the official functioning of a few figures within the Burma Railway during the first few months of 1942. Their tale is competently and clearly told. But one may wish for a railway history with more steam, and for a military history without all the expletives deleted.

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The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China

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Yoshinobu Shino

Meiji University Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan, E-mail: shinoy@meiji.ac.jp

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The Way of the Barbarians elucidates the Chinese-barbarian dichotomy that prevailed during the reigns of the late Tang and Northern Song dynasties. The author, Shao-yun Yang, references numerous historical documents such as Han Yu's 韓愈 'Tracing the Way' (Yuandao 原道), commentaries such as the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the *Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) and other short manuscripts to describe the historical transformation of public opinion vis-à-vis barbarians. After Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 published a recent series of research results to which this book also alludes, defining China and describing the Chinese identity have become topics of robust scholarly debate. Yang's inquiry through the perspective of intellectual history enables readers to more accurately grasp such discourses about Chineseness.

In the first chapter, Yang asserts that Han Yu's "Tracing the Way" adopted an innovative manner of instituting an ethnicized orthodoxy by labelling Buddhism as a barbarian philosophy. It also inspired an ethnocentric moralism by indicating the possibility of barbarians being transformed into Chinese. According to Yang, annal commentators of the Tang dynasties such as Dan Zhu 啖助, Zhao Kuang 趙匡 and Lu Chun 陸淳 also suggested that customs and rites could transform barbarians into Chinese and vice-versa. However, Yang is doubtful of the direct influence exerted by these commentators on Han Yu.

The second chapter is devoted to a comparison of Han Yu and Liu Zongyua's 柳宗元 texts in relation to their evaluation of Buddhism. Han Yu subscribed to the conventional critique that regarded Buddhism as a barbarian worldview. Liu Zongyuan censured Han Yu for assessing Buddhism solely by its traces (*ji* 迹) or appearances (*ming*名) without contemplating its essence (*shi* 實). Yang complements this discussion with an allusion to a letter Wang Ling 王令 wrote in support of Han Yu's contentions. According to Wang Ling, Han Yu should have asserted that Buddhism was fundamentally incompatible with the very nature of Chineseness.

Yang next examines two short texts from the late Tang period to track the development of the discourse on the Chinese-barbarian dichotomy: Chen An's 陳黯 "Chinese at Heart" (Huaxin 華心) and Cheng Yan's 程晏 "A Call to Arms against the Inner Barbarian" (Neiyi xi 內夷檄). These two essays employ the rhetoric of appearances and hearts (essences) or the form-heart discrepancy to iterate that some people may be Chinese in physical form but barbarians at heart, and that others may be barbarians in name but Chinese at heart. According to Yang, moral barbarians are hence essentially Chinese and therefore "[t]his is an argument for moral universalism that is, paradoxically, couched in the