

Teacher's Guide

For high school & university — history, geography, political science, Southeast Asian / Asian studies, and peace studies classes.

CONTENT ADVISORY

Battle for Burma is built from documented, real events. Gameplay and its narrative cards reference armed conflict, forced displacement, war crimes, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. It is designed for the classroom, but educators should preview the Unpredictable Future cards and choose an age-appropriate cut of the deck before playing with younger students.

Learning objectives

1. The nuance and complexity of a civil war now in its eighth decade.
2. The role natural resources play in prolonging and financing conflict.
3. The after-effects of colonization on a fractured, multi-ethnic state.
4. The difficulty — and frequent failure — of international aid delivery in an active conflict zone.
5. The process, costs, and trade-offs of building a functioning state from nothing.

The conflict, by the numbers

Read aloud or hand out before the first session — these are the real figures behind the game's mechanics.

68 years

of ongoing civil war

46+

current combatant groups

158

ethnic groups involved

3

failed constitutions

36

broken major ceasefires

2.6M

internally displaced people

2.1M

have fled the country

50,000+

killed since the 2021 coup alone

Setting the scene

The designers wrote this to be read aloud before play begins:

"After 75 years and three generations of brutal civil war, you are in the final hours of the battle for Burma. The Junta has staged yet another coup d'état... Parts of this land are littered in precious gems, metals & stones. Parts of this land have the largest tracts of undeveloped forests left in the world. You must strip these resources from your own land to fund this battle. Budget well so you have

resources left over to develop your new state or Union... Will you conquer all of Burma? Will you make a power sharing alliance? Will you declare independence for your region? Let the battle begin."

Core themes & discussion topics

ECONOMICS OF WAR

Resource extraction & the war economy

Every army funds its war by extracting the same raw resources driving the real conflict. Each is tied to an actual resource-hub region in the game's own district data:

RESOURCE	HUB REGION	DOCUMENTED VALUE
Jade	Hpakant, Kachin State	~\$30 billion/year; \$2B exported in 2010–11 alone
Teak	Lashio, Shan State	85% of the world's natural teak forest is in Myanmar
Rare earth minerals	Kachin State	40,000+ tons/year extracted, valued at \$1.4 billion annually
Oil	Mrauk-U, Rakhine State	Piped to China; regional energy exports
Gems	Kyaukme (Mogoke)	Rubies & sapphires, a centuries-old trade
Gold & minerals	Katha / Putao (antimony)	Antimony demand up 5x globally since 2021

Fishing adds an estimated \$10 billion market, much of it exported by sea to India, Japan, China, and the US. Even legitimate-looking trade isn't clean: a UK court fined a yacht builder £358,760 in 2024 for importing "blood teak" sourced from military-controlled forests. Ask students: who actually profits when a country's natural wealth is extracted under conflict conditions, and who bears the cost of extracting it?

ETHNIC & LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

The languages of the autonomous regions

Each playable army in the game represents a real, distinct ethnic group with its own language, flag, and autonomous territory — not palette-swapped factions. The roster alone maps a remarkable linguistic landscape: Kachin, Rakhine (Arakanese), Wa, Shan, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Chin, Ta'ang (Palaung), Pa-O, Kokang, and Bamar are all separately represented, each concentrated in its own historical region of the country. Myanmar is home to well over a hundred distinct languages in total — among the highest linguistic diversity of any country in the world — and the game's roster is a deliberately narrowed sample of that reality, not the whole of it. Ask students: what does it mean for a single national government to claim to represent this much linguistic and cultural diversity — and what happens when it doesn't?

HUMANITARIAN COST

Displacement & the duty of care

Every successful attack in the game generates Internally Displaced People and Prisoners of War that the attacking army must shelter, feed, and guard — or lose statehood points and troops to

desertion. This mirrors a real, ongoing crisis: 2.6 million people currently displaced inside Myanmar. The game makes displacement a recurring cost of every decision, not an abstraction.

ILLICIT ECONOMIES

The drug trade & the black market

Since 2021, Myanmar overtook Afghanistan as the world's largest opium producer — a fact reflected directly in the game's “Poppy King” mission card and several Unpredictable Future cards about drug production, scam centers, and black-market arms deals. Ask students why illegal economies tend to flourish precisely where state authority is weakest.

FRAGMENTED POLITICS

Alliances between ethnic armed organizations

Players can formally ally — sharing missions, reinforcements, prisoner exchanges, or a ceasefire — but breaking an alliance costs statehood points every time. This models a real feature of the conflict: dozens of independent armed groups whose cooperation is constantly negotiated, provisional, and breakable.

STATE-BUILDING

What it costs to build a state

Territory alone earns nothing. Statehood points — earned by supporting displaced people, building hospitals and universities, and keeping promises — are what move an army up a real ladder: Nascent State, Emergent State, Established State, and finally an independent New Nation. Ask students what “legitimacy” actually requires, beyond military control.

How the game ends — and what that teaches

Every army still standing when the game ends receives one of ten Ending Cards. Controlling the whole map is not, by itself, a win — the same conquest can end four very different ways depending on how it was carried out:

Liberator

Clean record, hospitals built, high statehood

Occupier

Conquered, but civil services unclear

Tyrant

Conquest with no investment in the people ruled

Pillager

Resources looted, no thought for the population

A useful post-game question for any group: *you controlled the same territory as the player next to you — why did you get a different ending?*

Suggested discussion questions

Before playing: What do you already know about Myanmar/Burma? Where did that knowledge come from?

Useful for surfacing how little Western media typically covers this conflict relative to its scale.

During play: When you had to choose between funding your army and funding a hospital, what did you choose — and why?

During play: Did you break an alliance? What made it worth the statehood cost?

After playing: Look at your Ending Card. Does it match how you thought you were playing?

After playing: What real-world choices does the statehood system ask you to think about that a simple "who controls the most territory" scoring wouldn't?

Vocabulary

A full glossary of acronyms (armed groups, the Junta across its various names, and key institutions) is included with the game and at battleforburma.com/glossary — worth assigning as pre-reading.