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Opposing French colonialism Thailand and the independence movements in Indo-China in the early 1940s

Eiji Murashima

Abstract: It has been generally accepted that having been able to maintain its independence during the age of colonialism, Thailand had no need to be involved in the struggle to throw off the region's colonial shackles. However, having lost more than half of its territory to France and Britain by 1909, Thailand, in common with the other countries of South East Asia, had a vested interest in liberating the region from the European colonial system. Based mainly on Thai primary sources, this study brings out the Thai role in the origins of Indo-China's liberation movements, and endeavours to show that Thailand was an important player in the anticolonial struggle against the French in the 1940s.

Keywords: colonialism; Thailand; Lao Issara; Khmer Issarak; Vietminh; Golden Peninsula

During the 1940s, there was an ongoing undercurrent within Thai politics that sought to rid Indo-China, as well as Thailand itself, of French colonialism, irrespective of the ruler or government in power.

Numerous indicators point to the existence of this undercurrent. During the 1940–41 territorial dispute with Indo-China, the Phibun government pursued its own initiatives, separate from Japan's own plans for southern advance, in demanding that France should return Thailand's former territories. To realize this demand, the Phibun government actively called on the peoples of Indo-China to rise up in a united front against the French, and his government became involved in united-front activities. Ultimately this led to the successful return of a portion of the lost territories in the Japanese mediated Treaty of Tokyo signed by Thailand and France on 9 May 1941. Following the advance of Japanese military forces into South East Asia at the end of 1941, Phibun

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concluded an alliance with Japan, and his government permitted neighbouring Asian peoples to use Thai territory in their struggles for independence.¹ At the same time he joined with Japan in calling for the liberation of Asia from the power and influence of Great Britain and the USA. He declared war against Britain and the USA and carried out a military incursion into Burma's Shan states. Following the overthrow of the Phibun government in July 1944, the Khuang Aphaiwong government was set up under the guiding hand of Pridi's Free Thai movement. Following the end of the war, Britain and France were able to return to their South East Asian colonies, and Thailand was compelled to hand back to France the Indo-Chinese territories it had regained with the 1941 Treaty of Tokyo. In response, the government under Pridi's control invoked the UN's principle of national self-determination, and demanded that Indo-China be given its independence. His government also gave assistance to the Vietminh, Lao Issara and Khmer Issarak liberation movements, and it allowed these movements to use Thai territory as an all-important rear base. The beginnings of the Lao Issara and Khmer Issarak go back to the propaganda efforts and support provided by the Phibun regime at the end of 1940 at the time of the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute. In 1947, Pridi conceived the idea of forming a new post-colonial Indo-Chinese regional order, and together with the leaders of the different Indo-Chinese independence movements, he attempted to organize a South East Asian league in Bangkok. In November 1947, military leaders supportive of Phibun regained control of the government. The new government continued to allow the Indo-Chinese independence movements to reside in Thailand, and these groups continued to use the country as a rear base for their fight against French colonial rule until the intensifying Cold War brought this to an end. All these phenomena become understandable within the context of an undercurrent of antagonism in Thai politics towards European colonialism, particularly towards French colonial rule in Indo-China.

Ultimately, on 28 February 1950, as the Cold War intensified, the Phibun government officially recognized the three newly independent nations of Indo-China within the French Union, and this solidified Thailand's borders at that time, leaving them unchanged from where they had been during the colonial period. Nevertheless, the important

¹ See Eiji Murashima (2002), 'Thai–Japanese alliance and the Chinese of Thailand', in Kratoska, P., ed, *Southeast Asian Minorities in the Wartime Japanese Empire*, Routledge Curzon, London, p 197.

point is that Thailand's political rulers of the 1940s made every possible effort to rid Indo-China of its French colonial system.²

Thailand's quest to reclaim its lost territories has largely been viewed as nothing more than an opportunistic move by the Phibun military dictatorship to take advantage of France's defeat in the Second World War and exploit the rising tide of Japanese military might in order to seize a small amount of land where Laos, Khmers and other non-Thai peoples were living; but with Japan's defeat, this opportunism proved to be an insignificant, momentary historical episode that left Thailand unchanged. A victory monument stands in Bangkok commemorating the fight against French Indo-China, but even for the Thai people it is simply a memorial to a past event of no particular consequence to the country.

However, such a condescending view of Thailand's anti-French campaign to regain its lost territories overlooks its great significance for modern mainland South East Asian history. Thailand's campaign to reclaim its territories was not just an event in Thai history that momentarily united the nationalistic aspirations of the country's leaders and its people. As a nation, the Thais identified themselves as people of *Lãm Thong* [the Golden Peninsula], the legendary name for a realm that encompassed Thailand and the Indo-China peninsula.³ They called on the Laos and Khmers to undertake a united struggle against the French under their aegis. Meanwhile, with regard to Vietnam, the Thais called for revolution and independence, and they sought to cooperate and bring about a united front with the Vietnamese people. A number of the revolutionaries fighting for Indo-China's independence responded to Thailand's call. These people constituted one of the sources from which the liberation movements in Indo-China later arose. In effect, the Thais saw themselves as playing a leading part in a

² The present article is, by and large, a translation of the first half of my (1998) article in Japanese, '1940 nendai ni okeru Tai no shokuminchi taisei dakkyakuka to Indoshina no dokuritsu undō' [Thailand's role in the breakdown of colonialism and Indo-China's independence movements in the 1940s], in Eiji Murashima, Masaya Shiraishi, *et al*, *Betnam to Tai [Vietnam and Thailand]*, Taimeidō, Tokyo. The second half of this Japanese article deals with the post-World War II period of Franco-Thai territorial negotiations and the support the Thai leadership gave to the Indo-Chinese revolutionaries and their anti-French struggle up to 1950.

³ For a discussion of Laos as a part of Thai space under the concept of *Lãm Thong*, see Soren Ivarsson (2003), 'Making Laos "our" space: Thai discourses on history and race, 1900–1941', in Goscha, C. E., and Ivarsson, S., eds, *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past*, NIAS Press, Copenhagen, pp 239–264.

struggle for liberation from French colonial rule that encompassed the whole of Indo-China.

Through an examination of Thai propaganda directed at Indo-China, Thai united-front activities and support for Indo-Chinese anticolonial movements, and the reactions of Indo-China's revolutionaries to Thailand's efforts, this study will show that the Thai anticolonial movement in the early 1940s went beyond Thailand itself and affected the whole of Indo-China. By elucidating the Thai-related origins of Indo-China's liberation movements, this study will bring out the importance of Thailand's anticolonial activities in the modern history of South East Asia. This anticolonial aspect of Thai history and the country's effort to initiate liberation movements in French Indo-China in the 1940s have not been examined thoroughly before, and very few of the documentary sources that this author has relied upon have been used in previous studies.

Background to the Thai–French Indo-China territorial dispute

In 1867, 1893, 1904 and 1907, Thailand signed four treaties with France that deprived it of 467,500 km² of land that it had possessed in Laos and Cambodia.⁴ In the early 1930s, Thai military journals and other periodicals began publishing articles about the history of the territorial losses that the country had suffered. Then from around 1935, following the constitutional revolution in 1932 and stabilization of the new People's Party government under Phraya Phahon, a heightened fervour began to appear, especially within the military, for the return of the lost territories. But in dealing with a powerful France, the Thai government had to limit its aspirations to proposing only small-scale revisions of the Thai–Indo-China border that involved adjusting jurisdiction over islands in the Mekong River.

France's surrender to Germany in June 1940, followed by Japan's demands that it should be allowed to station troops in the northern part of Vietnam completely altered the circumstances of Indo-China. On 17 September, the Thai government contacted the new Vichy French government to demand a revision of the border that would make the Mekong River the line between Thailand and Indo-China, and requested

⁴ Publicity Department (1940), *Thailand: How Thailand Lost her Territories to France*, Thai Commercial Press, Bangkok.

the Vichy government to guarantee that in the event of a future change of sovereign authority in Indo-China, all of Thailand's lost territories would be restored. In demanding that the Mekong should be made the border, the Thais were trying to get back at least a portion of the land they had lost.⁵ But the French rejected the demand twice, and by the end of September the Phibun government had decided to pursue return of the lost territories resolutely. It was around this time that the Phibun government began its underground contacts with anti-French and anticolonial revolutionaries in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

During October, the Thai government organized officially sponsored demonstrations in various places around the country. It also began recruiting volunteer soldiers, carrying out a fundraising campaign, and started undertaking military preparations. At the same time, however, it sought the assistance of the British in the hopes of finding a diplomatic solution, but this effort was unsuccessful. On 13 November, the Thai government announced that Thai forces were mobilizing in preparation for hostilities, which could break out at any time. The Thais were also expecting the Cao Dai religious sect in the southern part of Vietnam to rise up in rebellion around this time.

Hostilities broke out on 28 November 1940 with both sides carrying out reciprocal air raids, and on 5 January the next year, Thai forces crossed the border and advanced into Indo-China. During this period of armed conflict, Thailand ardently called on the peoples of Indo-China to fight against the French, and it sought to build solidarity and a united front with the Indo-Chinese anti-French movements. Finally at the end of January 1941, with the intervention of Japan, both sides agreed to a ceasefire. There followed a mediation conference in Tokyo, at the end of which, on 9 May 1941, the Thai and Vichy governments signed a treaty that returned to Thailand the area of Laos along the right bank (west side) of the Mekong, as well as the Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siemreap, which lay adjacent to the Thai border. Most of the returned territories were areas that the Thai army had been occupying since its January invasion and which were already under military administration. The newly acquired territories were organized and governed as four new provinces – Lan Chang (formerly Xayaboury) and Nakhon Champasak in what had been Lao territory, and Battambang and Phibunsongkhram in Cambodia's former territory.

⁵ Publicity Department (1948), *Report of the Franco-Siamese Commission of Conciliation June 27, 1947*, Prachandra Press, Bangkok, pp 66, 129–131.

Læm Thong [the Golden Peninsula] identity and the logic of Thailand's united-front efforts

During the time of the Thai–French Indo-China territorial dispute, the Thai Publicity Department broadcast the well known *Nai Man, Nai Khong* radio programme along with other Thai-language programmes, which it directed at Indo-China as propaganda to counter the Thai-language propaganda broadcasts emanating from Saigon. On 5 November 1940, the Department began Khmer-language broadcasts, followed on 16 November by Vietnamese-language broadcasts. Through these broadcasts, the Thai government called on the inhabitants of Indo-China to immigrate to Thailand and to rise up against the French, backing this call with a promise to support such rebellions. It used these broadcasts to report the successes of the Thai army against the French forces, and to make known the formation of anti-French revolutionary movements among Indo-Chinese peoples living in Thailand.

The Thai government's anti-French propaganda was not only directed at the Lao and Khmer people living in the former Thai territories in Laos and Cambodia. It also directed its broadcasts at the Vietnamese. The government referred to these various peoples of Indo-China, including the Thais themselves, as comprising the 'people of Læm Thong', and it made frequent use of this concept in its anti-French appeals. Compared with the French, the people of Læm Thong had in common the 'same skin' and the 'same blood' (what the Thais call *chuachat*); they also shared the same Buddhist faith,⁶ and more than

⁶ During the Thai–French Indo-China territorial dispute, the Thai government considered Catholics to be the same as the French. Since people of the Thai race had to believe in Buddhism, Thai people who were Catholics were more or less compelled to convert to Buddhism. A considerable number of these successful conversions were reported in *Khao Khosanakan* [*Publicity Department News*], an official periodical issued monthly by the Thai Publicity Department. One example of conversion propaganda was in Announcement No 38 broadcast over Thai national radio (which was under the Publicity Department). After telling how French Indo-Chinese troops in Indo-China had destroyed Buddhist facilities and inflicted as much violence as possible on Buddhist monks before withdrawing, the declaration went on to say, 'Together with the help of our Indochinese compatriots, the time has come to drive France, our enemy and the enemy of Buddhism, out of Læm Thong. For our compatriots who believe in the Catholic faith, it is time that they seriously deliberate on whether they will continue in their faith or will convert to Buddhism which the great majority of their compatriots believe in. The reason for talking about interfering in such a personal matter is because of our rightful desire for the spiritual unity of all our brethren in the Thai race' (*Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, p 331). See also the publication of the Archdiocese of Bangkok (1995), *Prawat sangkhep khunpho Nicolas Bunket Kritbamrung* [*The Short Biography of Father Nicolas Bunket Kritbamrung*],

anything else, the same French enemy. The Thai government welcomed without discrimination any Lãm Thong people to immigrate to Thailand, a welcome that included the Vietnamese. This period when Thailand did not look upon Vietnam as a rival and when the Thai people felt a sense of sympathy and solidarity with the Vietnamese was indeed an exceptional time in modern Thai history.

Following the commencement of hostilities on 28 November 1940, the Thai and Indo-Chinese forces carried out air raids against each other and engaged in cross-border shooting and artillery fire. In the midst of these hostilities, on 20 December, the Thai Ministry of Interior decreed that henceforth it would completely disregard French sovereignty in Indo-China, would regard as belonging to the same Thai race all the peoples living in Laos, Cambodia and parts of northern Vietnam that had been Thai territory taken away by the French, and would unconditionally give these people Thai citizenship; regarding the Vietnamese [*Yuan*], the Ministry would henceforth stop regarding them as French subjects, would treat them as people of an independent country, and although being treated as having Vietnamese citizenship, they would be exempt from the need to register as foreign nationals. Included in this decree was an added explanatory note from the Minister of Interior addressed to the governors of the provinces.⁷ In this note, the inhabitants of Indo-China were referred to as Lãm Thong people, and were divided into two major groups: those of the Thai race (*Chuachat Thai*) and those of the Vietnamese race (*Chuachat Yuan*). All the local

Assumption Press, Bangkok, which tells of Thai government suppression of Catholics during the time of the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute.

⁷ Ministry of Interior decree, 20 December 1940 (*Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 67–68); see also Minister of Interior note 444/2483 of the same date to the provincial governors (Thai Foreign Ministry, Documents Section, Archival Documents, NC3:3/4; *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 242–245). Prior to these measures, on 5 September 1940, the Ministry of Interior issued ‘Ministry of Interior Decree Concerning Exemptions from Immigration Fees and Procedures’, which exempted persons owning dwellings in Sipsong Chuthai, Houaphane, Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champasak and Kampucha from immigration taxes and procedures (Sathian Lailak, compiled 1941, *Prachum Kotmai Prachamsok*, Vol 53, Bangkok, pp 374–375). On 2 March 1942, the Ministry of Interior decreed that the Shans and Karens in Burma and the Mons in Tenasserim were part of the Thai race, and if they entered Thai territory, they would be given Thai nationality (National Archives of Thailand – hereafter: NAT – (2)So.Ro.0201.82/20). This was the same measure as that taken on 20 December 1940 towards the peoples of the Thai race in Indo-China. This is evidence that following Thailand’s 25 January 1942 declaration of war on Britain, it was now seeking to break free from British colonialism, and it clearly shows that there is some continuity between the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute and the Thai declaration of war on Britain.

inhabitants living in Laos and Cambodia, excluding the Vietnamese, were grouped as belonging to the Thai race.⁸

In a noteworthy radio address on 20 October 1940, Prime Minister Phibun commented that,

There are people in Thailand who are under the impression that they are Khmers or Laos and not brothers and sisters of ours in the Thai race. But this is wrong. Cambodia and Laos, like Bangkok and Chiangmai, are just place names. Just as inhabitants of Chiangmai are Thai people, so are the inhabitants in Cambodia and Laos Thai people. We are all of the same Thai blood and are all brothers and sisters. . . . The demand for the return of Thailand's territories arouses in our compatriots and in the Vietnamese people an awareness of liberty and independence. It awakens in us the realization that the day is coming when the French will have to get out of Indochina.⁹

Ethnically speaking there is no problem with including the Lao people within the broader Thai race, but the Thai government also maintained that the Khmers too were part of the Thai race. In an announcement on 5 November 1940, 'Concerning the Start of a

- ⁸ In the 20 December 1940 decree of the Ministry of Interior, the Thais and the Vietnamese were both in the broad sense said to be people of Læm Thong. Although it is usual to classify them as different ethnic groups, in some decrees the Thais and the Vietnamese were said to be of the same race, meaning that the Vietnamese could also be thought of as part of the Thai race. An example of this view appeared in an explanation, 'Concerning the Naming of Thai Peoples in Indochina', by the Thai Ministry of Defence, dated 7 December 1940, which commented, 'The situation in Indochina is tense, and there is a serious shortage of goods. Therefore our fellow compatriots from Indochina who are immigrating to the Kingdom of Thailand are increasing daily. There has been misunderstanding about them, because there are people who refer to these compatriots of ours as "Yuan" (Vietnamese), "Kamen" (Khmer) and "Lao". This sounds like they are the same as any other foreigners. These people who are frequently called Yuan, Kamen, Lao are actually with us Thais in the same race and have the same blood. For this reason it is inappropriate to call them by other names. Our kindred brothers and sisters should be referred to as *our Thai compatriots of the country of Vietnam*, our Thai compatriots of Laos and our Thai compatriots of Cambodia. Likewise regarding the revolution that *our Thai compatriots of the country of Vietnam* are waging today to regain their independence, there are people who mistakenly call it a rebellion. . . . But it is a revolution for the independence and freedom of the nation, therefore it should not be called a rebellion. Officials in the Defense Ministry should have a correct understanding of this matter' (*Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 128–129; author's emphasis). Also, a text edited by the Thai Army Education Office (1941), *Banthuk kanson kanpokkhrong khwaen Lao [Educational Reader on the French Rule of Laos]*, Bangkok, states on p 21 that the Vietnamese belong to the Thai race.
- ⁹ Publicity Department, ed (1942), *Pramuan khamprasai lae sunthoraphot khong phanathan chomphon P.Phibunsongkhram nayokratthamontri phunam khong chat chabap thi 2 [Speeches and Addresses of Field Marshal Phibun, Prime Minister and Leader of the Thai Nation, Vol 2]*, Bangkok, pp 20–32.

Special Radio Program in the Khmer Language’, the Publicity Department commented, ‘The Thais and Khmers are not unrelated people. Since long ago they have been of the Læm Thong Thai race (*Phao Thai*).’ The Department went on to say that the Khmer language was one of the Thai dialects of Læm Thong.¹⁰ But it is well-nigh impossible to include the Khmers among the Thai peoples, and the French broadcasts from Saigon criticized this greatly distorted Thai argument. On 21 November, the Thai ideologue behind the campaign to recover the lost territories, Luang Wichit Wathakan, cabinet minister-without-portfolio, countered the French criticism in a radio address entitled ‘Responding to Saigon Radio about the Racial Relation between the Thais and the Khmers’. In his address, Wichit noted that, ‘The sole basis for Radio Saigon saying that the Thais and Khmers are different is that the Thai and Khmer languages are different. But in saying that races are different only because of a difference in language, then France itself would have to turn over four or five provinces to Germany and Italy.’ He further rebutted the Saigon broadcast by citing the argument of a French scholar:

Felicien Challaye states that people of the same race have the following points in common: (1) the shape of the face and skull, (2) skin color and body shape, (3) illnesses, (4) foods, (5) music, (6) traditions and beliefs, (7) houses and furniture, (8) designs and colors, (9) memorials, and (10) temperament. In which of these ten points is there a difference between the Thais and the Khmers?¹¹

On 18 November 1940, the Thai Publicity Department reported that:

Males in [French controlled] Laos between the ages of 18 and 60 years old have to work for the authorities 16 days a year without any kind of remuneration. To avoid such work, a *Thai person (Lao)* has to pay 30 cents for each day, and a *Thai person (Kha)* 12 cents. . . . The Thai government is working to improve the life and welfare of its people, and it is providing the people with total freedom and equality. The Thai government welcomes the Thai people on the left bank of the Mekong [Laos] who are suffering under the heavy hand of the French, and it is prepared to offer farmland and to provide liberty and equality impartially to all. In this way the government hopes that our Thai brethren on the left bank who are of the same Thai race (*phaophan*) can find the same happiness as

¹⁰ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, pp 1799–1801.

¹¹ Wichit Wathakan (1941), *Luang Wichit Wathakan's Addresses on Thailand's Demand for the Return of Its Lost Territories* (in Thai), Bangkok, pp 45–63. In the journal *Sinlapakorn* (October 1937, p 58), he developed the thesis that the Khmer people were racially Thai.

the Thai people living in Thailand. The Thai government is always concerned about the Thai people living on the left bank (author's emphasis).¹²

As shown in this report, the Thai government even included the Kha people as part of the Thai race. The reason for making all the people who were living in Cambodia and Laos (with the exception of the Vietnamese) part of the Thai race was that, in the minds of the Thai leaders, both regions were former domains that had to be recovered, and they needed a rationale that would justify the return of these lost territories.

In Thai government propaganda, French rule in Indo-China with its repression, discrimination and extortionate taxation was contrasted with a utopian Thailand, which enjoyed liberty and equality founded on the new political principles of its constitutional revolution.¹³ Having been disunited by France's colonial invasion, the Thai race now had to reclaim its lost lands and realize a united Thai nation. Laos and Cambodia were not only former territories of Thailand, all of their inhabitants belonged to the Thai race. Therefore, rather than seeking independence, their objective had to be the restoration of the Thai nation; and to realize this objective, they had to rise up and fight against the French. As part of the same Thai race, it was Thailand's duty to assist its unfortunate Thai brethren who were suffering under the rule of a foreign race. Regarding the Vietnamese, their country had once been an independent nation of Lãm Thong, and they had to carry out a revolutionary anti-French struggle to restore this independence. Thus the anti-French struggle of the Thai peoples to recover their lost lands, and the anti-French struggle of the Vietnamese to regain their independence were two sides of a joint struggle against French colonialism. By forming a united front and mutually assisting each other, each of their struggles could help promote the progress of the other.

Thailand saw the recovery of its lost territories and the building of a united Thai nation as part of the struggle to liberate the people of Lãm Thong (which included the Vietnamese) from the yoke of French colonial rule. It was their expectation that their fight against the French would expand into an anti-French struggle encompassing the whole of Lãm Thong.

¹² *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, pp 2044–2045.

¹³ In its revenue code of 1939, Thailand abolished the poll tax.

Thailand's anticolonial efforts towards Indo-China: encouraging immigration

On 5 September 1940, the 'Ministry of Interior Decree Concerning Exemptions from Immigration Fees and Procedures' (mentioned in footnote 7) came into effect. This indicated that the Thai government had initiated a new policy towards Indo-China. The purpose of this decree was to increase the number of immigrants coming to Thailand from Laos and Cambodia.

Publicizing results of the decree, on 19 September the Publicity Department reported that,

People of the Thai race (*Chuachat Thai*) living in regions adjacent to the Kingdom of Thailand's Mekong River basin, regions called Laos and Cambodia, have been moving to Thailand in large numbers and settling along the border. These are Thais loyal to the homeland, and most of them arrive lacking and in need of the basic necessities of daily life. Therefore the government has told the Interior Ministry to give them immediate assistance. To help them become well settled in the homeland, the Interior Ministry has sent out an urgent order to the governors of the provinces bordering Indochina to provide these people with seed rice, food rice, other kinds of seeds and farming tools, and to try to help them obtain housing.¹⁴

It can be inferred from this report that most of the immigrants from Indo-China were not from the informed intellectual stratum who were burning with a desire to fight the French; rather, they were peasant farmers. Throughout the period of the Thai-Indo-China territorial dispute, the Thai Publicity Department frequently reported on the entry of Indo-Chinese immigrants into Thailand, and most of these people were peasant farmers who crossed the border in groups of families or a few dozen individuals. Along with helping the immigrants with their immediate daily lives, the government set up a committee in mid-November to examine settlements (*nikhom*) and other assistance for immigrants from Indo-China.

In a broadcast on 29 December 1940, Thailand national radio reported the main points of Declaration No 19 issued by the Thai government. The broadcast said,

In addition to the provision of land sufficient for maintaining daily life, immigrants from Indochina will be eligible for the following types of funds: (1) For private citizens having Thai nationality, a family of 2-5 people will get 20-50

¹⁴ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, p 1669.

baht; a family of over 5 people will get up to 60 baht; and an unmarried person 10 baht.¹⁵ (2) Private citizens who are not of the Thai race (*chuachat Thai*), such as Vietnamese, will get up to half of (1); most of the Vietnamese immigrating to Thailand have relatives and friends in this country, and these relatives and friends will also provide assistance. (3) For soldiers and police belonging to the French Indochina military forces, those at the non-commissioned officer (NCO) level or lower will get 10–50 baht. (4) Civil servants working in the French colonial government administration will get the same as (3). If you Indochinese patriots know about the assistance we are offering, we want you to tell your friends that only we Thais, whose skin is the same, can help the kindred peoples of Læm Thong; we want you to tell them that it is a futile waste to try to rely on the French who differ in race and lifestyle. One-third of the Indochina budget is used for the monthly salaries of the French officials. Thousands of Frenchmen are employed in jobs that native Indochinese could do just as well. We will remain weak and emaciated as long as the French stay. So isn't it about time that we drove our common enemy out?¹⁶

From the main points of the declaration, one can see that the Thai government was welcoming as immigrants not only Laos and Khmers, who as part of the Thai race had automatically been given Thai nationality, but it was also welcoming Vietnamese. The reason for the particular reference to NCOs and lower-ranking soldiers in the French Indo-China army was because the Thai government expected that by gaining the Vietnamese, Khmer and Lao troops who were in the Indo-Chinese army, French military power and will to fight would be weakened. This expectation was clearly expressed in a 15 December 1940 radio address by Luang Wichit entitled 'The Thai Nation Shall Be Victorious', in which he stated, 'The French have come to no longer trust their Vietnamese, Khmer and left-bank Thai native soldiers. The French cannot provide these soldiers with weapons.'¹⁷

On 17 February 1941, the Thai Publicity Department reported that up to 15 February the number of immigrants from Champasak, Cambodia and the Mekong left bank, which in effect meant from the whole of Indo-China, was 18,541 people. The breakdown of this total figure was as follows – from the Mekong left bank: 1,295 people had moved to Chiengrai province, 1,117 people to Nan province, 172 to

¹⁵ As stated earlier, the Ministry of Interior decree of 20 December had given native Laos and Cambodians Thai nationality.

¹⁶ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 38–42.

¹⁷ Wichit Wathakan, *supra* note 11, at p 74. As can be seen from this quote, the Khmers were not always put together with the Thais; Khmers and Thais were also seen as being parallel to each other.

Uttradit province, 1,955 to Loei province, 1,490 to Nongkhai province and 632 to Nakhon Phanom province (a subtotal of 6,661 people); from Champasak and Cambodia: 1,397 people had moved to Ubon province, 369 to Sisaket province, 283 to Surin province, 352 to Buriram province, 5,941 to Prachinburi province, 1,653 to Chanthaburi province and 1,885 to Trat province (a subtotal of 11,880 people).¹⁸ Among these Indo-Chinese immigrants and exiles, as will be discussed later, were activists and revolutionaries who were fighting against the French and who cooperated with the Thai government in propaganda and cross-border operations against the French. But the number of such intellectually informed people was limited. The preponderance of the immigrants, as stated earlier, were peasant farmers who did not have a high level of political consciousness and could not be regarded as useful in a military capacity against the French. So what merit did the Thai government see in accepting large numbers of these people?

At that time the notion was still strong that the size of a country's population was the most important indicator of its national strength. The loss of territory to France also meant a loss of population, and the Thai leadership's hope was to regain population. Even before the territorial dispute, the Thais had been looking for ways to encourage people living in Indo-China to move to Thailand. One example of this effort was a detailed report that Phibun, then Defence Minister, submitted on 8 May 1937 to the Minister of Interior, Thamrong Nawasawat. In the report, Phibun made the following comments:

In the past two to three years a large number of people who have entered Thailand from Indochina have come to escape heavy taxes and oppression. This shows that they have trust in Thailand's constitutional system and in the competence of Thai officials, and they have brought us the special benefit of increasing our population. Recently however, the Indochina government announced a new policy directed at the people living in areas along the border that exempts them from the poll tax for three years, and says that the authorities will not pursue charges against people involved in petty crimes. This was done to try to draw back to Indochina people who had moved into Thai territory. This will not only hinder the special population increase that our country is enjoying, but the people who have always been living in Thai territory will not like the government's poll tax and will escape into Indochina, and this will have a negative impact on our

¹⁸ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 426–427. As of 15 March 1941, the total number of immigrants had reached 19,474 (*ibid*, pp 683–684).

interests. So it seems it would be good for our country to take measures like Indochina and exempt people from the poll tax.¹⁹

In an address on 17 October 1940 to students at the Military Academy, Luang Wichit talked about the building of a united Thai nation. Speaking rhetorically, he said:

Isn't there a large amount of undeveloped land even in Thailand today? And the lost territories are not especially abundant in minerals and other resources. So I have been asked why there is a need to get the lost territories back. I answer with the following. Firstly, in trying to recover our lost lands, it is not that we are robbers trying to steal other people's property, or that we are trying to enslave other people, or that we are trying to dig up other people's resources for our own selfish use. It is because we are thinking of the honor of our race. A race that respect honor cannot sit idly by while people of the same race are forcefully suppressed by a foreign race. We are Thai [Free – in the word 'Thai' there is a meaning of 'being free' – author's note]. Our brothers and sisters too must be Thai [Free]. The important thing in the territorial problem is the problem of race. Our lost lands are not colonies nor something belonging to a foreign race. They are part of our Thai blood and Thai flesh and share with us the same religion and culture. Therefore we have to take them back. Secondly, we can never accept France's forceful plundering of our territory and wealth as in any way justifiable.

In the same address, Wichit also talked about the building of a powerful Thai nation:

Prime Minister Phibun has said over and over again that we must now become a great power. If we don't, our country will be doomed. The reason the prime minister talks this way is because changes are occurring in the world that are greater than any that have ever happened before, and in his mind he sees the small countries being absorbed by the great powers. Most of the small countries bordering Russia have been absorbed by the Soviet Union and have disappeared. On the morning after the present war is over, there will be a new map of the

¹⁹ NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/11. Citing this same Thai source, Christopher E. Goscha (1999), *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954*, Curzon, London, p 119, makes the following comment: 'In November [1937] Phibun sent a letter to the Prime Minister, Phya Phahon, informing him that border authorities had reported an increase in the number of Vietnamese crossing into Thai frontier areas during the last two to three years. . . . Phibun also noted that the increase in the number of Vietnamese along the border was good for Thailand.' Goscha's work is a valuable piece of research; however, his foregoing comment contradicts the original document on several points. Among them, this letter made no reference at all to the Vietnamese. It talked about the Khmers and Laos who had crossed the border from French Indo-China and settled in Thailand.

world. Small countries will have been swept away for sure, and only great powers will remain. That means we have the choice of either becoming a great power ourselves or of being absorbed by a great power [implicitly meaning Japan – author’s note] and disappearing. If we can recover our lost territories, we can become a great power. This is because if we are able to recover all of our lost lands, our country will double in size, our population will increase by four million people, and even more, our borders will extend up to the expanse of Thai lands lying north of Sipsong Chuthai. Up there are 24 million people [the Zhuang people of Guangxi province in China – author’s note] who have preserved our Thai blood, call themselves Thai, speak Thai, and possess the Thai mind and spirit. *We will be the ones who open the door for them to come visit us. This carries no meaning of invading those lands. Our own country is filled with abundance. We only desire that our brothers and sisters come and join us in this country and enjoy happiness with us.* It is our steadfast belief that this will surely come to pass. Within not too long a time we will become a great power with a land area covering some 900 thousand square kilometers and a population of over 40 million people. If we do not do this, we will be absorbed by some great power. We have a choice of being a great power or being absorbed (author’s emphasis).²⁰

Wichit told his listeners that he looked forward to the building of a greater Thai nation whose population would have grown to 40 million people through efforts to get the Thai people (the Zhuang people) living in China to migrate into Thailand’s territory.

It is evident from the above that the Thai government at that time placed great value on population expansion as an end in itself, and was not particularly concerned about the quality of the immigrants from Indo-China or whether they could be used directly in the struggle against the French.

Seeking a united front with Laos

By the end of September 1940, Prime Minister Phibun was resolved in his determination to recover Thailand’s lost territories. On 26 September, the Publicity Department announced that, ‘The government will not retreat from this matter [the recovery of the lost territories], and it wants to emphasize to the people that it is resolved to carry on to the end and is hopeful of final success. Our only concern is, will it be quickly or slowly.’²¹ Two days later, Wanit Pananon, Director of the

²⁰ Wichit Wathakan, *supra* note 11, at pp 37–38.

²¹ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, pp 1484–1485.

Commerce Department and Phibun's liaison officer with the Japanese, visited Torigoe Shin'ichi, the Japanese naval attaché in Bangkok. Wanit informed him of Phibun's resolve to recover the lost territories, and asked for Japan's cooperation.

Captain Torigoe later sent a note to the Army Section of the Imperial General Headquarters, reporting: '28 Sep. Wanit came/Phibun is determined (effects of Tripartite Pact 27 Sep.)/1 Oct. Torigoe and Phibun met/Wanit's words are Phibun's true intentions/If required he will also reshuffle the cabinet.'²² From Torigoe's note, it could be concluded that after seeing the Tripartite Pact come into effect, Phibun decided to rely on Japan to get back the lost territories. However, the above-mentioned announcement by the Publicity Department, and Phibun's repeated statements at that time calling for caution towards the Japanese²³ raise doubts about the impact that the Tripartite Pact had on Phibun's determination to retake the lost territories and his decision to rely on Japan. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that by this time he had resolved to take back Thailand's lost lands, and if it proved impossible to achieve this through direct negotiations with the French, then he had the choice of a number of other ways to achieve this.

Prince Phetsarath and his idea of a Thai–Lao confederation

One of those other ways was Thailand's covert operations and propaganda directed at Laos. The start of these operations can be dated back to 24 September 1940 with the Ministry of Interior directive appointing Major Sawai Sawaisaenyakon as Deputy Governor of Nongkhai province, which lay across the Mekong River from Vientiane in Laos. His appointment was announced by the Publicity Department on 1 October.²⁴

The background to Major Sawai's appointment was among the recollections of Colonel Saeng Chulacharit. Saeng and Sawai were both

²² Library, National Institute for Defence Studies, Japan (hereafter NIDS-L), *chūō/sakusen shidō nikki/336, Imoto nikki [Imoto diary]*.

²³ In a radio address on 20 October 1940, Prime Minister Phibun showed implicit caution towards Japan in stating that, 'Unbeknownst to us, our expressed intentions to recover our lost territories, which arise from our genuine feelings, are being used as a contrivance by people with sinister motives toward Thailand'. On the other hand, in the same address, Phibun expressed his expectation for British support by saying, 'I want to tell you once again about the auspicious omen we have received. Today new relic of the Lord Buddha have been brought to us' – a reference to the friendship visit to India by a Thai envoy during which the British presented him with ashes of the Buddha (Publicity Department, *supra* note 9, at pp 20–32).

²⁴ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, pp 1630–1631.

confidants of Luang Serirengrit (a Phibun aide and influential person in the military faction of the People's Party), who fought together with Sawai in the suppression of the 1933 Boworadet rebellion. According to Saeng's recollections,

One day around the time Nai Chantha was shot to death in Vientiane [which happened on 26 September 1940 – author's note], Col. Serirengrit told me that Prime Minister Phibun was looking for someone who belonged to Luang Phrabang or Vientiane royalty who could undertake a special mission along the Laotian border, but the prime minister was having difficulty finding the right person. I informed Serirengrit that Sawai's grandfather had been the fifth king (Chao Ounkham) of the Luang Phrabang dynasty. With this revelation Sawai was made the deputy governor of Nongkhai. Following his welcome greetings with the governor of Nongkhai, on the same day Sawai crossed the Mekong with a number of other officials and conveyed to Prince Phetsarath a secret letter that Phibun had entrusted to the deputy governor.²⁵

Phetsarath was of royal descent and collateral lineage to the royal family of Luang Phrabang. He was the ruler of Vientiane with the regal title of Chao Rajphakinai; he also held the post of Inspector General in the Laotian colonial government and was the highest ranking Lao official in the government.²⁶ Phetsarath raised two conditions in

²⁵ *Cremation Volume for General Sawai Sawaisaenyakon* (in Thai), 1981, pp 88–91. Sawai's father had come from Luang Phrabang as a student to study in Bangkok, and during his studies, Luang Phrabang became a protectorate of France. As a result his father decided to remain in Bangkok. Sawai was a cousin of King Sisavang Vong who reigned in Luang Phrabang from 1904 to 1959.

²⁶ Under their protectorate of Laos, the French allowed three Lao royal families to have administrative status. These were: (1) the king of Luang Phrabang, who had administrative powers in Luang Phrabang, only one of the 10 provinces in Laos. The king presided over a cabinet that had law-making powers. Statutes enacted by the cabinet were implemented after being countersigned by the French commissar, who was the highest ranking French official in the province. (In other provinces this official was known as the resident.) The king's authority to confer awards and decorations was executed after being countersigned by the French commissar, while his authority to appoint and dismiss Lao administrative and judicial officials could be executed after obtaining the countersignature of the French resident-general of Laos, the highest ranking French official in the colonial government of Laos. (2) Chao Rajphakinai (the regal title of the ruler of Vientiane), and (3) Chao Champasak, the regal title of the ruler of Champasak province. Phetsarath's status was that of Chao Rajphakinai, while at the same time he held the post of inspector-general in the Laotian administration. In this position he had the authority to check on the district chiefs (*chao muang*) and other Lao administrative and judicial officials who ran the Lao administration and law courts (Chaichalerm Nakhaprawet (1950), *Khrang nung mua nakhon champasak pen khong rao [When Champasak Was Our Territory]*, Rongphim Uthai, Bangkok, pp 42–43; see also Thai Army Education Office, *supra* note 8).

response to Phibun's call for cooperation. The eminent Lao intellectual, Maha Sila Viravong (whose cooperation with the Thais will be discussed later) heard about the two conditions directly from Phetsarath and wrote them down. The first stated that if Phibun wanted to have the cooperation of the left-bank Laos [meaning the Lao people living on the left side of the Mekong – author's note] in the present war, then the Thai government should not treat the Lao people as though they were Thais, as it had done to the ethnic Lao people in north-eastern Thailand (*Isan*); the government would also have to pledge to recognize Laos (particularly the left-bank area of the country) as a separate state and establish a confederation between the two countries. The second condition stated that, since the people of Isan and those of Laos were of the same race, the Thai government should not use the Isan people in its fight against the French, and the fighting should be between only the Thais [meaning the Siamese people – author's note] and the French.²⁷ Sawai transmitted the two conditions to Phibun, but it is not clear what the prime minister's response was.

A noteworthy point in Phetsarath's conditions, as conveyed by Maha Sila Viravong, was his idea of a confederation with Thailand. This contrasts with his position five years later, in September 1945, soon after his 1 September rejection of France's intention to reinstate its protectorate over Laos. At that time he told the Nongkhai governor who was visiting Vientiane, 'In the event we claim independence, the government of Laos will demand the following territory on the right side of the Mekong [north-eastern Thailand – author's note]: the area from the border with Burma in the north, and running from the eastern border of Chiangmai to Korat in the east, and bordered by the Dangrek Mountains in the south'.²⁸ To the governor Phetsarath was advocating

²⁷ Maha Sila Viravong (1996), *Prawatisat Lao (History of Laos)*, Matchon Publishers, Bangkok, pp 325–326.

²⁸ Telegram #388, 8 Sep 1945, from Nongkhai governor to Interior Minister. 'Concerning your telegram #380, one day in September, Capt. Winn and I visited Vientiane, and met with His Highness Phetsarath and a leader of the French guerrillas, Maj. Fabre. His Highness spoke as follows: (1) Authority in Laos still remains, as it has been, in the hands of the Laos. When the Japanese army occupied Laos [carried out their coup de force against the French – author's note], France could no longer protect Laos, therefore Laos considers that France has not fulfilled the agreements between France and Laos. After the Japanese withdrew from Laos, Laos began governing itself. Right now we are checking to see if the Allied Powers will give Laos independence or will put it under a French protectorate. If it is returned to France, we will regard the old agreements as having become null and void; therefore new

a greater Laos that included north-eastern Thailand, a concept that contradicted his idea in 1940 of a confederation with Thailand. There are two possible ways to explain this contradiction. One is that his thinking changed with the change in the international situation. Until Thailand's position weakened and there was external support from the great powers, there was no possibility of building a greater Laos. After the war ended in 1945, Phetsarath could have come to think that a Greater Laos was now possible. Another explanation is that Maha Sila Viravong's above account of what Phetsarath said in 1940 reflected more Maha Sila Viravong's wishful thinking than Phetsarath's own real thoughts.

But Maha Sila Viravong was only one of many within the Lao leadership who advocated a confederation or even a union with Thailand. This is apparent from a number of documents, one being a report dated 29 March 1945 from the Head of the Publicity Department to the Secretary General of the Cabinet concerning the situation in Vientiane around the time of the Japanese coup de force in French Indo-China that occurred on 9 March 1945. The report said that after the Japanese army had taken control of Vientiane, Maha Sila Viravong, Tham Ritrangsi (who seems to have been the same person as the later mentioned Tham Xayasithsena) and Bouachan Sririmongkhon (who seems to have been the same person as the later mentioned Bouachan Inthavong), three anti-French exiles who had fled to Thailand during the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute, got together in Vientiane with a group of Lao government officials. They met twice to deliberate on whether Laos should become independent and self-governing or should join in a union with Thailand. The opinion of the majority was that Laos was still not capable of self-government, and since the Laos and Thais were ethnically the same people, Laos should join with Thailand. However, Phaya Khammao, the Mayor of Vientiane and the highest ranking among the gathered Lao officials (and who would become prime minister-cum-foreign minister in the Lao Issara government set up in October 1945), along with a number of other influential high-ranking officials, were

agreements will have to be concluded. In the case that Laos seeks independence, the Lao government will demand the following territory on the right side of the Mekong river: *from the border with Burma in the north, running from the eastern border of Chiangmai to Korat in the east, and bordered by the Dangrek Mountains in the south* (2)’ (NAT, So.Ro.0201.37. 6/21; author’s emphasis).

opposed to this,²⁹ which led to a heated debate. Finally, it was decided to seek the advice of Prince Phetsarath, and he was asked to come down from Luang Phrabang.³⁰

²⁹ Behind Phaya Khammao's opposition was the close contact he had maintained with the Chinese Nationalist government in Chungking, and it seems he felt confident of getting China's support (Taiwan, Kuomintang Party History Committee, *tezhong dangan/te 015/18*, 'Taiguo gongzuo baogao' [Report on underground operations in Thailand] (in Chinese).

³⁰ NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/19. Then on 16 April 1945, the Nongkhai governor (Pakon Angsusing) sent the following report to the Interior Minister: 'Following their occupation of Vientiane, the Japanese army called on the local Lao administrators to return to their offices and work as usual, and they made Phaya Khammao (the Vientiane mayor) the interim head of the city administration. On 5 April the Japanese army occupied Luang Phrabang, and on the 8th King Sisavang Vong declared independence.... One reason you can imagine that our Thai compatriots in Indochina are extremely excited at their independence is because Japan has promised to let them govern themselves, and therefore they will be able to free themselves from French oppression. Another reason is that during the time of French rule, the people were not only ruled by the French, they were also held down administratively, economically and militarily by the Vietnamese. By gaining independence, they have now been able to get rid of Vietnamese power and influence. The French gave the Vietnamese high positions in the administration, and they stationed Vietnamese soldiers and police in Laos. Vietnamese soldiers and police used their authority to greatly tyrannize the Thai people [meaning the Lao people – author's note]. Economically the Thai people on the left side of the river are not as shrewd as the Vietnamese, and are not as diligent, so most of the jobs and occupations are in the hands of the Vietnamese. This makes it appear like the Vietnamese are controlling Laos. The foregoing is my reckoning of the feelings of the average Thai people on the left side of the river and of the middle-level government officials. I haven't had any opportunity to get in contact with any high-level officials. However, *there is another group of left-bank people who would like to form a union with Thailand. The reason for this is because no matter how much Laos might declare itself independent, it cannot actually realize that independence. This is because Laos is a small country with a small population; it doesn't have the military or economic power to defend itself. Therefore they think that it is better to form a union with Thailand than become a colony of another country*' (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.98.1/19; author's emphasis). It is possible that the Japanese government and the Imperial GHQ also looked into the idea of uniting Laos with Thailand at the time of the Japanese coup de force in French Indo-China. This can be inferred from an entry in the *Confidential War Diary of the Imperial General Headquarters No. 17*, p 45, dated 1 March 1945, which comments, 'The 46th meeting of the supreme conference began at 2:00 p.m. It approved the declaration of the Imperial Government should French Indochina reject our demands. The following points were discussed at the meeting: (1)..... (2) eliminating from the agenda the matter of Thailand recovering its lost territories; if there is a request from Thailand, we will rework things from a clean slate and come to an agreement' (NIDS-L, *chūō/sensō shidō jūyō kokusaku bunsho/1192*, *Daihonei kimitsu sensō nisshi Sono 17*). However, according to Oun Sananikone (1977), *Khwamlang khong Khaphachao* [*Reminiscences*], Duang Kamol, Bangkok, p 120, Oun writes that when he paid a secret visit to Phaya Khammao in 1945, the latter displayed displeasure over the Japanese army using the Vietnamese as their cat's-paw to keep control of anti-Japanese groups in Vientiane, and he asked Oun's Free Lao movement for armed support.

Another document is an account by Wisut Busayakun, who as an aide to Tiang Sirikhan, the top leader of the Free Thai movement in north-eastern Thailand, had close contacts with Oun Sananikone (who is discussed later) and other Lao leaders. Wisut divided these leaders into three types in accordance with the attitude they held concerning Laos's future. The first type felt that it would be hard for Laos to exist as an independent state, therefore it should continue to rely on France; this was a minority group made up of Lao officials who had been educated in France and had held high positions in the Indo-China colonial government. The second type also thought that it would be difficult for Laos to exist independently, but they distrusted France and thought it better to join with the Thais who were the same people who would support Laos's economic development and cultural traditions under a democratic system; most of the leaders supporting this argument were high-school- and university-educated officials like Oun Sananikone. The third type wanted to increase the national strength of Laos itself by uniting the people and territory of north-eastern Thailand with the country to form a greater Laos; this argument was supported by a small number of leaders who had been high-ranking officials in the colonial government. This third type was by far the smallest of the three.³¹ In setting out his three types, Wisut did not say anything specific about the idea of confederation. But from other parts of his account it is apparent that the leaders of the second type supported this idea. Thus the three types of leaders could be summarized as those who argued for continued dependence on France, those who argued for confederation or union with Thailand, and those who wanted a greater Laos.

In addition to the above documentation, it is also known that in late March 1945, following Japan's coup de force against the French, Prince Phetsarath's anti-French-pro-Japanese son, Chao Suriya, who had been commissioned as a captain by the Japanese military, told the governor of the Thai province of Nakhon Phanom that if his father, Phetsarath, was not put forward to be the king of Laos, then he (Suriya) would cooperate in the effort to unite Laos with Thailand.³² It is also known

³¹ Suphot Dantrakun, ed (1997), *Wiraburut nakprachathipatai khunphon phuphan: Tiang Sirikhan [Hero of Democracy, General of the Phuphan Mountains: Tiang Sirikhan]*, Sathabanwithayasad Sangkhom, Bangkok, pp 55–57.

³² NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.98.1/19. At that time in 1945, Chao Suriya Phetsarath was pro-Japanese, and he provided information to the Japanese army about the movements of anti-Japanese groups. For this reason, Oun Sananikone and other anti-Japanese people belonging to the Free Lao feared him (Oun Sananikone, *supra* note 30, at p 117). There is also a study published in 1997, which says that in 1955–56 Phetsarath

that Phetsarath was a leading figure in the South East Asian league, which Pridi organized in 1947 in preparation for a federation of independent Indo-Chinese states.³³ Also, Phetsarath together with Thai leaders in the north-east conceived of a plan to have large numbers of north-eastern Thais emigrate to Laos when that country finally became fully independent.³⁴ The foregoing information can be interpreted as showing that Phetsarath vacillated between the idea of a confederation or union with Thailand, and that of a greater Laos. Either way, however, it is not difficult to surmise that within this man there existed the pride of a Lao who did not want to be subordinate to Thailand and the identity of being Lao, which made him feel distinct from the Thais.

With the coming of October 1940, the students of Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities carried out a demonstration on the 8th of that month in support of the government's demand for the return of the lost territories. This was the start of government-organized demonstrations that took place throughout the month of October. Great numbers of students and the general citizenry were mobilized, and demonstrations were held in provinces and districts throughout the country in support of the government's policy to recover the lost territories. On 13 November, it was announced that Prime Minister Phibun had assumed the post of Supreme Commander of the Thai armed forces. This marked the start of Thai military mobilization and preparation for the outbreak of fully fledged warfare. On 21 November, the government submitted to the National Assembly an amendment to the act establishing government offices that would set up a new Indochina Department within the Ministry of Interior. The task of the new department was to study the administrative organization of French Indo-China and to make a survey of the actual living conditions, welfare and the political rights and liberties of the Indo-Chinese people. The law was gazetted and came into effect on 29 November. At the same time it was announced

cooperated with Police General Phao Sriyanon, a top Thai leader, in trying to expand Thai influence in Laos, and he planned to form a federation between Thailand and Laos (see Daniel Fineman (1997), *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p 186).

³³ Pridi Banomyong (1972), *Ma Vie Mouvemntee et Mes 21 Ans d'Exil en Chine Populaire*, Paris, pp 77–84.

³⁴ From the author's interviews with former Major Siphanom Phichitwarasan (11 November 1997, 5 January and 18 March 1998 in Bangkok), a very active member in the Lao Issara movement, who was elected in 1979 to the House of Representatives from Sakon Nakhon province; and who was the leader of the assembly delegation that visited Vietnam in 1983.

that the Deputy Interior Minister, Major Chawengsaksongkham, would concurrently be the director of the new Indochina Department.³⁵ Meanwhile, hostilities had broken out between Thailand and Indo-China the previous day, 28 November 1940.

Oun Sananikone and the origins of the Lao Issara movement

As Deputy Governor of Nongkhai province, Major Sawai Sawaisaenyakon was also responsible for helping the young intellectuals from Laos who escaped across the Mekong River in response to Thailand's anti-French appeals. One of the young Lao revolutionaries who took up exile in Thailand was Oun Sananikone, who recalled the events of that time.

It was 9 December 1940 when he swam across the Mekong and successfully escaped to Thailand. Oun started working in the Thai Publicity Department helping with propaganda directed at Laos. Soon after, he and other members of the Department together with the Department's Deputy Director, Phairot Chayanam, were sent to Udon, Nongkhai and Sri Chiangmai (a subdistrict of Nongkhai province at that time, directly across the Mekong from Vientiane) to show films and propagandize. In Sri Chiangmai, they called out to the people in Vientiane to come across the river to see films and listen to Oun speak. No-one actually came across, but several dozen people gathered on the bank on the Vientiane side of the river and listened to Oun's speech. In Nongkhai, Oun met over 50 people who had fled Laos in response to his appeal. Many of them were part of the Lao elite who later took up leadership positions in Laos. Among them were Oun's cousin, Oudone Sananikone (later Laos army chief-of-staff), Bouachan Inthavong (later a member of the national assembly), Khammouane Khantharusai, Tham Xayasithsena (who became deputy foreign minister in the Lao Issara government) and Maha Sila Viravong. After conferring with Oun and Sawai, some of these people were given jobs in places such as Sawai's home department, the Thai National Railway and the Publicity Department where Oun worked. Oudone Sananikone began studying journalism at Chulalongkorn University, while Maha Sila Viravong undertook

³⁵ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, pp 2073–2074, and 1941, p 62,807. In the *Thamniap kharachakan krasuwang mahatthai [Thai Interior Ministry Official Name List and Postings]*, published on 25 December 1940, it says that organizationally the Indochina Department had the same status as the Police Department and the Department of Civil Engineering, but the only official assigned to the office was the department chief (*ibid*, p 5).

research on Lao history at the National Library of Thailand.³⁶ Maha Sila Viravong (1905–87) had been born in north-eastern Thailand, in Atsamart district of Roiet province, but had been educated in Laos. He later entered the priesthood in Thailand, eventually passing the fifth-level examination in the Buddhist Pali language. In 1930, he returned to Laos and became involved in cultural activities under Prince Phetsarath.³⁷ At the time he sought exile in Thailand, Maha Sila Viravong was already one of Laos's foremost intellectuals. All of these people later joined the Pridi faction of the Free Thai movement. When the Lao Issara government was formed on 12 October 1945, Oun and Tham Xayasithsena were named as part of the 11-man cabinet as Economics Minister and Deputy Foreign Minister respectively.

Oun Sananikone, a well-born Vientiane native, left a record of his life in his *Reminiscences*. He studied veterinary science at Hanoi University, graduating in 1933, after which he found employment as a veterinarian in the colonial government of Indo-China. Oun's first place of work was in Champasak, but he angered his French boss by his failure to carry out the boss's nonsensical orders rapidly. This led to a quarrel, and at the end of 1933, without any opportunity at all to present

³⁶ Oun Sananikone, *supra* note 30, at pp 64–65. Along with Oun, there was Thao Katay (1904–59), a major political figure in post-war Laos who had cooperated with the Thais. In October 1945, he became the Minister of Finance in the Lao Issara provisional government. There is no documentation clearly indicating that during the period of the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute, Thao Katay had any contacts with the Thais, but there is a document showing that on 1 November 1942, he informed an officer of the Thai Publicity Department's Nongkhai office about conditions in Vientiane. One of the Publicity Department's duties was collecting intelligence, so it also functioned as an intelligence-gathering organization. The Department officer whom Thao Katay contacted wrote in a report to the Department's Director, Phairot Chayanam, that Thao Katay headed a pro-independence group in Vientiane, and that he was the head of a publishing company in the city (NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/19). Thao Katay was also involved in publishing a fortnightly French anti-Thai propaganda sheet called the *Lao Nhay*; from its 15 March 1945 issue following the Japanese coup de force in Indo-China, the paper was renamed and published as the *Lao Chalern*. A Thai-language translation of this 15 March first issue is preserved in NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.98.1/19. Oun Sananikone, *supra* note 30, at pp 118–119, wrote that in 1945 before Japan's surrender, Thao Katay was living in Pakse, his home town, and as a political adviser to the Japanese, he was very pro-Japanese. Not only did he reject all invitations to join Oun's Free Lao movement, he advised Oun to cooperate with the Japanese. For more details about *Lao Nhay*, see Soren Ivarsson, 'Towards a new Laos: *Lao Nhay* and the campaign for a national "reawakening" in Laos 1941–45', in Grant Evans, ed (1999), *Laos: Culture and Society*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, pp 61–78.

³⁷ From the author's interviews with former Major Siphanom Phichitwarasan, *supra* note 34.

his explanation for the quarrel, Oun was demoted and ordered to the remote province of Samnua. His anger at this unjust treatment from the French never disappeared. In 1940, when Japanese forces moved into Indo-China and the territorial dispute with Thailand broke out, Oun and four other Lao officials working in Samnua got together in discussions and reached the conclusion that France was going to lose control over Indo-China, that Thailand would take back its lands, and that Japan was now the strongest power in Asia. They also concluded that Laos could not escape Thailand's reach, and it was better to cooperate with Thailand as a partner than with Vietnam. Finally, so that Thai troops would not maltreat the Lao people when they invaded Laos, and in response to the anti-French appeals coming from Bangkok radio, they decided to send Oun immediately to Thailand.³⁸ Accordingly, Oun departed Hanoi carrying a letter of introduction written by a female Thai student who had grown up in Nakhon Phanom in north-eastern Thailand and was studying in Hanoi, addressed to Chai Prathipasen, a close confidant of Prime Minister Phibun. During daylight on 9 December 1940, he swam from Thakhaek across the Mekong River to Thailand. He worked in the Thai Publicity Department, and in his reminiscences he wrote that he had organized the Khana Lao Issara (Free Lao Movement).³⁹ In October 1945, with the establishment of the Lao Issara provisional government, he took the posts of Economics Minister and Supreme Commander of the armed forces.⁴⁰

After hostilities broke out on 28 November 1940, Thai forces remained in place exchanging cross-border rifle and artillery fire with the French. Then on 5 January 1941, they began their invasion of Indo-China. In a report on the state of the fighting, the Publicity Department acknowledged that Thai troops were advancing into Indo-Chinese territory, but said this was for reasons of self-defence:

On 5 January 1941 at 6:00, Indochinese forces carried out a fierce attack on our positions at Aranyaprathet. This was pushed back. But to prevent any future invasion by Indochinese forces, our army has occupied a number of sub-districts (*tambon*) inside Indochinese territory.⁴¹

³⁸ Oun Sananikone, *supra* note 30, at pp 29, 86.

³⁹ Oun Sananikone, *supra* note 30, at p 81.

⁴⁰ Oun Sananikone, *supra* note 30, at p 183. Thereafter he was chairman of the national assembly and held a succession of other posts. Following the communist takeover of Laos, Oun went into exile in France, and only one month later at the age of 70, he died.

⁴¹ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, p 121.

On 8 January, soon after ground warfare had started, Oun spoke on Thai national radio in a Lao-language broadcast directed at the people of Laos, calling on them to cooperate with the Thai forces that would soon invade Indo-China. In essence, Oun said in his broadcast,

I was greeted with a big welcome in Thailand. I was received like a brother even by high government officials. For the first time I felt the real meaning of liberty, equality and humanity. In Indochina there is only suppression; people suffer under numerous heavy taxes. Just as with me, the Thai government will welcome all fellow Laos who come to Thailand. They will support you financially and materially, and help you find employment. For the people who cannot come to Thailand, the Thai army will invade Indochina before long, and I want you to prepare for that time so you can help the Thai troops. The soldiers of Thailand are ready to sacrifice their lives to liberate us from the yoke of the French. For this our Thai brothers gain nothing. They make all the sacrifice; our side receives all the gain. Let us not miss this golden opportunity in the history of Laos to cooperate with our brothers from the right bank of the Mekong and win back our freedom.⁴²

Fighting between Thailand and Indo-China continued until a ceasefire took effect on 28 January, but during this time the Thai army never crossed the Mekong River. However, they successfully occupied Champasak and Xayaboury, Indo-Chinese territories on the right side of the river that bordered Thailand.

Cooperation of the Champasak ruling family

From around 19 January 1941, the Thai north-eastern army began advancing into Champasak, and by 21st it had taken control of the area without any bloodshed. The ruler of Champasak, Chao Ratsadanay (1870–1946) and his son, Chao Boun Oua, had been actively cooperating with the Thais even before their army moved in, and word circulated that because of this he was arrested on 18 January by the French military and confined.⁴³ In a letter dated 17 November 1941 in which the Thai Minister of Interior recommended a decoration for Chao Ratsadanay, he cited the Lao leader's cooperation during the territorial dispute with Indo-China as the reason for his recommendation:

From a thorough study of Chao Ratsadanay's conduct and mentality, it is our conclusion that in mind and spirit he is a Thai and is sincerely loyal to Thailand. This was demonstrated during the time of our territorial dispute with Indochina

⁴² *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 287–291.

⁴³ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, p 473.

when he officially expressed loyalty toward us, and from the start of the dispute was in contact with us and offering support for our victory. When we occupied Nakhon Champasak, we appointed him the first acting governor. His ancestry is from Vientiane; he has relatives and kin living in many parts of Ubon province, therefore he has extended familial relations on both sides of the river, and he is respected by the populace on both sides.⁴⁴

Describing the welcome that the Champasak citizens gave the arriving Thai troops, the Thai supreme command on 23 January 1941 reported that,

In Champasak the people were so filled with joy that they thronged the streets to welcome our troops. After its takeover, our northeast army declared that Champasak had now returned to Thai sovereignty and raised the Thai flag. Our Champasak brothers and sisters have now been liberated from their slavery. Everyone cheered when they realized they had been freed.⁴⁵

Chao Ratsadanay's son, Chao Boun Oua, visited Bangkok from 2 to 10 February as a guest of Minister Wichit Wathakan. Reporting on the visit, the Publicity Department commented on 7 February that, 'This voluntary visit is proof that despite its long enforced separation from Thai rule, the close brotherly affection of old between Thailand and Nakhon Champasak remains unchanged'.⁴⁶

On 9 February, Chao Boun Oua gave an address that was broadcast by Thai national radio, stating that,

Even while under the control of a foreign country, the people of Champasak regarded themselves as genuinely Thai people. As proof of this, when my father built his palace in 1926, he had the words 'The Palace of Chao Ratsadanay' carved on it, and they were done not in *Thai-noi* [Lao] lettering but in the Thai lettering used in Bangkok. Although he was pressured to remove them, those words still remain just as they had been carved. Also all of us in the Na Champasak family are required to learn Bangkok Thai. Minister Wichit was surprised at how well both my father and I can speak Thai. A large number of the signs on our temples and shops are written in Thai lettering. These show that the people of Champasak regard themselves as Thais, and have maintained a strong desire to escape foreign rule and join their Thai brethren. January 21st, the day the Thai army took over Champasak, is a day when the people of Champasak felt their greatest happiness. It is a day that brought back their joy which had been snuffed out for 40 years. Our priests in particular welcome this because our

⁴⁴ NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.46.3/28.

⁴⁵ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 474, 476.

⁴⁶ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 550–551.

Buddhist religion will flourish again. Back in the days when we were part of Thailand, Champasak vied with Vientiane for leadership. It was a large, thriving city. But during the past 40 years, Nakhon Champasak has seen no stop to its ruinous decline, and today it is but a shadow of its past splendor. Meanwhile, Pakse, which once only had elephant and horse stables, is now flourishing. I studied for 12 years in Saigon, and I have traveled widely, but I don't know of any other place that is as prosperous as Bangkok. It's not just an external splendor either. The people are happy, and internally it is prospering as well.⁴⁷

Clearly Chao Ratsadanay and his son Chao Boun Oua cooperated with the Thais. At the same time, however, there was a questionable aspect to this cooperation. This concerned one of Chao Ratsadanay's other sons, Chao Boun Oum (1913–75), who became prime minister in the government set up under King Sisavang Vong following France's return to Laos after the Second World War. When the Thai army invaded Laos, Boun Oum cooperated with the French, and in 1941 France conferred a decoration upon him. Then at the time of the Japanese coup de force against the French on 9 March 1945, Boun Oum was arrested by the Japanese military. But he escaped and made contact with French forces, and helped France return to southern Laos. For these actions, Boun Oum was again decorated by France in October 1945.⁴⁸ Comparing the actions of the two sons, it is likely that Chao Ratsadanay was playing both sides and keeping a leg in both the Thai and French camps.

Despite the cooperation of Chao Ratsadanay and his son Chao Boun Oua, the Thai government gave no preferential treatment to the Lao ruling elite in its administration of Champasak. According to one Thai official, Chaichalerm, who was assigned to work in Champasak, the Thai government ignored the privileges and practices that Champasak officialdom had come to enjoy under the French, and instead applied Thai methods that had been introduced since the constitutional revolution of 1932. These included such practices as a government personnel system that only placed importance on an official's educational background, a judicial system based on constitutional law that did not recognize punishment as being at the personal discretion of a government official, and the abolition of discriminatory social practices between officialdom and the general populace. The Thai

⁴⁷ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 551–555. Even today in Champasak's Wat Thong, there remain many grave markers written in Thai lettering. But the lettering on Chao Ratsadanay's palace has been changed to *Thai-noi* lettering.

⁴⁸ NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.86/48, p 138. Chaichalerm, *supra* note 26, at p 79 says that both Chao Boun Oum and Chao Boun Oua were sons of Chao Ratsadanay.

government brought in the Thai administrative methods in use at the time, and applied them without any concern for the circumstances prevailing in Champasak. Chao Ratsadanay was soon dismissed as the acting governor and replaced by an interior ministry bureaucrat sent from Bangkok; and the provincial government offices were moved from Champasak to a place further down the Mekong River. The former ruler and his officials were not even invited to the ceremonies of the new Thai rulers. Such insensitivity on the part of the Thai government alienated the Lao ruling elite, and when Champasak was returned to the French in November 1946, there were only five Lao officials who accompanied the Thai government officials when the latter went back to Thailand.⁴⁹

The liberation of Xayaboury

On 26 January 1941, the Northern Division of the Thai army, under the command of Lt Col Hansongkhram, occupied Xayaboury, the Laotian province lying on the whole of the right-bank area opposite Luang Phrabang (and which the Thais renamed Lan Chang). On 28 January, in a declaration 'Concerning Administration of the Right-Bank opposite Luang Phrabang', Lt Col Hansongkhram announced that the region was to be divided into four parts, and the four provinces of Chiengrai, Nan, Uttaradit and Loei would each take over administrative responsibility for one of the parts.⁵⁰

On 3 February, the governor of Nan province, together with the priest, Phrakhru Khamphirapanya, arrived in Muang Ngen village in Hong Sa district in the area of Xayaboury, which had newly come under Nan's jurisdiction. They were met by the district chief and the village head

⁴⁹ Chaichalerm, *supra* note 26, at pp 102–105, the author reminisced that even if a plebiscite had been held in Champasak after the war on whether to remain as part of Thailand or return to French control, it was doubtful whether Thailand would have won. Oun Sananikone, *supra* note 30, at pp 96–97, also painted a picture of Lao ruling class dissatisfaction with Thai officials and their governing of Champasak during 1942 and 1943. According to Oun, Thai officials acted as if they were ruling a vassal state. They looked after their own personal interests while troubling and tormenting the local people. 'While the central government instructed that Thais and Laos should be governed impartially, that the Lao people should be led in a flexible and adaptable way to an understanding of Thailand's system of government', local Thai officials were rigidly and formalistically applying Thai laws that harassed and troubled the local Lao citizenry who had no knowledge of Thailand's legal system. Oun was dispatched to Champasak, and following his report on the local situation to his superior, Chai Prathipasen [Prime Minister Phibun's secretary], Oun said that personnel changes took place and the attitude of the Thai officials was improved.

⁵⁰ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 310–312, 482–483.

men whom he had assembled. Khamphirapanya called together the local monks and instructed them. That evening they set up a radio and had the villagers listen to a broadcast from Bangkok. Some 500 people gathered to hear it.

The next morning after making offerings (*thambun*) at Wat Luang, Khamphirapanya gathered together some 300 of the villagers and gave them a sermon. The governor of Nan also spoke to the villagers, and in his speech he: (1) discussed Thai politics and explained the principles of liberty, equality and humanity; (2) gave advice on starting vegetable gardens and raising animals; (3) explained the reasons for reclaiming the lost territories and told the villagers that they were no longer slaves, that they had become completely Free (*Thai*), that they all were masters of the nation and that they had to defend this right even if it meant sacrificing their lives so that it would never be taken away from them again; he went on to say that: (4) the people who had fled into the forest should return to their villages and start living their normal lives again; (5) medicines would be distributed to people with illnesses; (6) the present government was suspending all tax collection and the villagers should await further orders from the government; (7) henceforth they were to obey the laws of Thailand; and (8) people with problems should seek the help of the Thai officials who were now being posted to administer the area. In closing, the governor said he wanted to thank those villagers who had provided transportation to the soldiers and police who had advanced into the area.⁵¹

The governor spoke to the villagers about the principles of Thailand's 1932 constitutional revolution and about Prime Minister Phibun's cultural policies. But he was also accompanied by a Buddhist priest when he visited the newly occupied area, because he realized that along with the constitutional principles of the revolution, Buddhism and its tenets were also important for winning over the hearts and minds of the people in the recovered territories. Like their Nan counterpart, the governors of the other three provinces also undertook activities to reassure and win over the people in the newly acquired areas now under their jurisdiction.

Thailand's anticolonial efforts towards the Khmers: formation of the Khmer Issarak

The only Khmer leader who cooperated with Thailand that this author

⁵¹ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 560–561.

found clearly named in the Thai documents was Phra Phisetphanit, whose Khmer name was Poc Khun and who had been born in Phnom Penh. According to a 21 April 1941 letter to the Secretary General of the Cabinet written by Wilat Osathanon, Director of the Publicity Department, Phra Phisetphanit had started helping in the Department from around November 1940, before the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute had begun to heat up. He worked in the Department like the other employees, but without pay. Based on the many contributions that he had made to the operations of the Publicity Department, which the director had been able to observe directly, Wilat recommended that Phra Phisetphanit should be awarded a decoration. These contributions included: his proposal to organize a Free Khmer movement (Khmer Issarak) to help the Thai government; his assistance with Khmer-language broadcasts, which, as already mentioned, the radio-broadcast section of the Publicity Department had started on 5 November 1940; his map drawing of various cities in Cambodia that helped the Thai air force to conduct their air raids; his two trips to eastern Thailand in the middle of the fight against Indo-China to make contact with Khmers who had immigrated to Thailand. The letter stated that Phra Phisetphanit had been born into a high-ranking aristocratic Khmer family, and was the son-in-law of Chaophraya Aphaiphubet (father of former prime minister Khuang Aphaiwong) who had governed the Battambang region before its cession to the French in 1907. Phra Phisetphanit's father, Oknha Mahamontrey (Poc Duch), had been the grand chamberlain to the King of Cambodia. His elder brother, Oknha Udommontrey (Poc Hel), was the chief justice of the Cambodian supreme court. The French had this brother speak on Saigon radio, criticizing his younger brother's broadcasts coming from Thai national radio.⁵²

It seems that Phra Phisetphanit (Poc Khun)'s asylum in Thailand came as no small shock to the French. On 30 November 1940, Saigon radio broadcast a report about a letter from a well educated Khmer who, after fleeing to Thailand, wrote to his relatives in Cambodia about his regret. He wrote that he should not have come to Thailand, that he had tried to return home, but that the Thai government had closed the border and he could not leave the country. The next day in a counter-broadcast over Bangkok radio, Phra Phisetphanit called the reported

⁵² NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.46.3/38. For a genealogy of the Poc Khun family, see Ben Kiernan (1985), *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930–1975*, Verso, London, p 31.

letter a fabrication of the French; its content was contrary to the facts. In his broadcast, he said that he had been born in Phnom Penh, that he was a well known personage in Cambodia, and clearly everyone, whether Khmer or French, especially among government officials, whether high- or low-ranking, knew all about him.

In his broadcast, Phra Phisetphanit spoke about his life, saying that after receiving a French-language education in Indo-China, he was engaged in a number of occupations, and that he had received his present noble title of Phra Phisetphanit as an honour from the King of Cambodia. He thought that no country surpassed Thailand in progressive nation building, so he had made the decision to move with his family to Thailand. Phra Phisetphanit then went on to compare Cambodia with Thailand:

Since its constitutional revolution, Thailand has been striving to develop as a nation. Like the countries of Europe, the Thai nation has been striving to progress on its own. By comparison, what has France done in Indochina for the benefit of the Khmer nation? France has built fine hotels and roads, but these have been only for the benefit of the French. French officials, even the low-ranking ones, live in buildings that are more splendid than those of high-ranking Khmer government officials. In Battambang, for example, if you are French, then even if you work as a prison guard, you can live in a beautiful two-storey western-style house, while the official residences of the governor and the court judge, the highest-ranking Khmer officials in the province, are incomparably inferior wooden bungalows. In education, too, what have the French done other than building simple educational facilities in temples? All the Khmer students who go to France study at their own expense. The French fear that students who study overseas will cause problems for their rule, so they don't give them scholarships. Meanwhile in Thailand, soldiers and civilians alike are sent to study in Europe at government expense because it helps promote the development of their own country. In Cambodian government offices, everything down to the smallest matters is administered by Frenchmen. Khmers aren't able to do anything. In Thai government offices, people who return from studying overseas become the officials in charge. Thailand has its own army, navy and air force. In French controlled Cambodia, non-Khmer people [meaning Vietnamese – author's note] get government posts. No Khmer is satisfied with such things, but French power prevails, so no one can complain. Two years ago the French government planned to have people from northern Vietnam migrate into Cambodian territory in an effort to open up and cultivate new land, but as everyone knows, they discontinued this plan because the Khmers were against it. Today the Thai government and our Thai compatriots are exerting every bit of their strength to liberate their fellow Khmers.⁵³

⁵³ *Thai Mai* newspaper, 4 December 1940.

The *Thai Mai* newspaper of 20 December 1940 carried an article penned by Phra Phisetphanit calling for the formation of a Khmer Issarak movement. In his article he said in essence,

Always in my mind is the deep emotion that Khmer people living in Thailand enjoy the same equality and freedom as Thai people. In Cambodia the Khmer people not only lack equality and freedom relative to the great power that rules them, but they are also trampled on by another race of Asian people [meaning Vietnamese – author's note] and have even less equality and freedom than these people have. The reason for this difference between Khmers in Thailand and those in Cambodia is because Thailand is an independent country and Cambodia is a French colony. I was born in Cambodia, and for 31 years I lived and worked in Cambodian society, and I never stopped lamenting the unhappiness and misfortune of our Khmer nation. But now I know about Thailand's policy, and I know there is a sense of morality, so my grief has disappeared. The Thai government is resolutely determined to support the Khmers in Thailand and in Cambodia so they can free themselves from French suppression and win their independence and freedom. I not only rejoice at this Thai attitude, but I also want to help the Thai government in its effort to expel the French from Indochina. In order that my Khmer compatriots can win their freedom and escape from their suffering, I am forming an organization of Free Khmers, the Khmer Issarak. I shall boldly stand at the forefront and resolutely cut through every obstacle so that we can be victorious in bringing freedom to the Khmer people. To all compatriots of good faith and good intentions toward ourselves and toward our nation, I call on you for your support and participation. To realize our hopes and to further our mutual understanding, I am calling for a rally to be held on the 22nd.⁵⁴

The Khmer Issarak that he proposed to organize held its rally on 22 December 1940, from 2 to 4 pm at the People's Party Club in Bangkok. Some 3,000 Khmers, including monks, participated in the rally. Phra Phisetphanit gave a speech in which he denounced the French and expressed thanks to Prime Minister Phibun. In short, he stated that,

France compelled King Norodom to make Cambodia a protectorate. Khmers are not given high positions, and even the people who attain the rank of second-lieutenant are extremely few. Government offices in Cambodia are overflowing with French and Vietnamese officials. To maintain their control, the French do not provide enough education, and they inculcate people with erroneous and mistaken history. The French only plunder the Khmer people with their taxes. During World War I they drafted a large number of Khmers, but they never offered any compensation in return; instead they increased their oppression and taxation..... In order to win back the freedom we used to have, we have to get rid

⁵⁴ *Thai Mai*, 20 December 1940.

of French rule. The policy of the Thai government is founded on moral justice; moreover their king is their sovereign, so let's obtain the support of the Thai government. Maj. Gen. Phibun, the prime minister and 'Phunam' (Leader)⁵⁵ bountiful in benevolence, has given us Khmer compatriots the freedom and opportunity to assemble here, the freedom to organize the Khmer Issarak, and he is giving us his complete and total support.⁵⁶

Prior to the formation of the Khmer Issarak, Phra Phisetphanit told the *Thai Mai* newspaper in an interview that he was planning to organize a military unit under the Khmer Issarak, which would cooperate with the Thai army, but whether this would be implemented or not depended on the decision of the Thai government. In the same newspaper, he asked that people inside Cambodia who were trying to rebel for freedom should contact him if they wanted weapons.⁵⁷

Phra Phisetphanit's role in relation to Cambodia was like that of Oun Sananikone in relation to Laos. According to Thai documents, in August 1946, a year after the war ended, he was still working as the top leader of the Khmer Issarak in Battambang province.⁵⁸ In the supplementary elections of 5 August 1946, following the amendment of the constitution, he was elected as representative to the House of Representatives from the Battambang second district.⁵⁹ In the National Assembly he spoke out vigorously against France and was active on the territorial issue.

⁵⁵ Phibun's self-proclaimed title patterned after Mussolini's 'Il Duce' and Hitler's 'Der Fuehrer'.

⁵⁶ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 174–181.

⁵⁷ *Thai Mai*, 22 December 1940.

⁵⁸ Phra Phisetphanit's name appeared in a 30 August 1946 report telegraphed to the Interior Minister from the governor of Phibunsongkhram province, which at that time was still Thai territory. The report said, 'The Khmer Issarak remaining in Battambang will ready a military force in the next few days for a revolution in Siemreap. I have received information that they will pass through the Thai territory of Phibunsongkhram province and enter Cambodia. The French currently have forces stationed permanently on the border, so there can be no doubt that they will see the Khmer Issarak coming in from Thai territory. If this happens, it will be something difficult to explain. French forces may use it as a pretext for pursuing their attackers into Thai territory. I think we have to summon Phra Phisetphanit, head of the Khmer Issarak movement in Battambang, and discuss matters with him. If we don't do this, before we know it, things may become complicated again' (NAT, (3)So.Ro.0201.9/3, p 79).

⁵⁹ At that time this area was still Thai territory. It was returned to France with the agreement settling the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute signed on 17 November 1946. Members of the House of Representatives from this area continued to hold office until November 1947. From the author's check of the records at the House of Representatives, Phra Phisetphanit (Poc Khun) used the Thai name Wibun Pokmontri. His wife's name was Chaoon Aphaiwong.

Thailand's anticolonial efforts towards Vietnam

The Thai government began Vietnamese-language radio broadcasts on 16 November 1940, and also from around this time the government's Thai-language broadcasts frequently expressed Bangkok's mounting expectations that the Vietnamese would revolt against the French. During this time, Thailand came to the conclusion that the only way it would get back its lost territories was through the use of military force, and it now moved on to a war footing. The growing tension heightened Thai expectations of the Vietnamese rising up to fight against the French, and the rebellion of the Cao Dai religious sect in southern Vietnam seems to have pushed these expectations higher still. But at the end of September, the Thai government had already commenced its anti-French underground activities directed at Vietnam.

The Thai consul in Saigon

At a meeting on 27 September 1940, the Thai cabinet approved the appointment of Police Lt Col Banchong Cheepensook as Thai consul in Saigon.⁶⁰ As part of his assignment, Banchong took the outward rank of a naval lieutenant, and from the sources that will be cited hereafter, it is evident that his assignment was to pose as the Thai consul in order to gather military intelligence and conduct subversive activities. His posting to Saigon signalled the start of Thailand's anti-French activities aimed at the Vietnamese. This coincided with Major Sawai Sawaisaenyakon's posting to Nongkhai province as deputy governor to conduct covert activities against the French in Laos.

A man of large build with Caucasian features, Banchong had been a naval lieutenant junior grade in 1932 when he took part in the constitutional revolution, although he had not been a member of the People's Party. Until his assignment to Saigon as Thai consul, he had been a district chief in charge of Aranyaprathet district on the Cambodian border. During that time he had carried out surveys of Cambodia's roads, bridges, troop positions and other infrastructure and topography of military use.⁶¹

⁶⁰ NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.86/47.

⁶¹ NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.86/48, p 12. After his return from Saigon, Banchong was posted to Java in April 1941 as consul general of the newly established Thai consulate there. In September 1942, following his return from Java, he became the Secretary-General of the Council on National Culture. On 26 February 1949, the same day as Pridi Phanomyong's failed palace rebellion, Banchong was appointed director of the Special Political Police. Two days later, on 28 February, he was shot and killed by a fellow police officer after he had criticized Police General Phao Sriyanon for being

Banchong arrived at his post in Saigon on 10 October, but during the next 50 days, ‘the French Indochina authorities did not respect the prerogatives of our consul. They put restrictions on him; they carried out searches of the consulate premises. Finally the French minister in Bangkok explained to the Thai foreign ministry that the consul was suspected of being a spy, and it was possible he could be arrested, so there was nothing else but to have him leave the country’.⁶²

After arriving in Saigon in October, the consul telegraphed Bangkok reporting the dispositions of Indo-Chinese military forces that he had seen as he travelled overland to Saigon. Thereafter almost on a daily basis he telegraphed reports on the naval ships in Saigon harbour, the size and ethnic composition of the military units passing through Saigon, the movement of Cambodia and Laos army units and other detailed military intelligence.

In his 5 November telegram he reported,

On 3 November in Phnom Penh, there was a demonstration by the thousand people.⁶³ This is because there is a general belief that the French had demanded that the Cambodian king protest against the demands of the Thai government in order to show his loyalty to the French. In my view, it seems that three-quarters of the population is inclined toward our side. The police are now suspicious of me, and for this reason my position as consul has not received approval from the governor-general. For now I have to be exceedingly discreet in my movements. . . . The situation in Cochin China is quiet. Because of the government’s strict regulation of news, people don’t know about anything.⁶⁴

Banchong did not expressly mention why the police suspected him, but in his 31 October telegram he reported, ‘[at night] Cambodia is

involved in opium smuggling (Chit Wiphatthawat (1960), *Phao Saraphap [Phao’s Confessions]*, Phraephitthaya, Bangkok, p 306; Chit writes Banchong’s name as Banchongsak). According to Wong Phonnikon, an under-secretary in the Foreign Ministry in 1976, and Deputy Foreign Minister in the Kriangsak cabinet in 1977, who worked with Banchong in southern Thailand after the war as a member of the committee for controlling rice smuggling, Banchong and the Banchongsak of Chit’s book were one and the same person. Wong said Banchong looked as if he was of mixed Thai–Caucasian parentage, as he was of large build and had Caucasian features; and he had been an upright, uncorrupted police officer (author’s interview with Wong Phonnikon, 6 November 1997, in Bangkok).

⁶² *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 323–325.

⁶³ An article in the French-language newspaper, *L’Opinion*, which Banchong sent to Bangkok under separate cover, reported that the demonstrators in Phnom Penh on 3 November marched carrying placards with slogans reading ‘Long Live France, Long Live Cambodia, Long Live the King. We Are Khmers and Will Always Be Khmers. Sisophon, Battambang, Siemreap Are Khmer Provinces’.

⁶⁴ NAT, (2)So.Ro.0201.86/46.

under wartime-like blackouts. The French governor of Cochin China told me that he has ordered all possible measures be taken to eliminate the dissemination of news that could disturb the peace. In my opinion, it seems this order was put out as a precaution against us disseminating information that we want to spreading'.⁶⁵ This last comment suggests that the French might have suspected Banchong of spreading subversive rumours.

With the exception of some small incidents, Banchong reported that for the most part since his arrival, Cochin China had been tranquil. Then in his 23 November telegram, he reported the outbreak of unexpected events: 'Last night a violent clash occurred between French security police and local citizens. There were 100 dead and injured. I'll make a full report after investigating. This morning 500 French and Annamese infantrymen with about 40 machineguns, 17 armoured cars and one anti-aircraft gun arrived from Hué.' On 25th he reported, 'In reference to my telegram of the 23rd, on the night of the 22nd, Indochinese people simultaneously attacked a number of security police posts in Cholon in an effort to steal guns. One French person and ten security policemen were killed. It is rumored that these attacks occurred because of the growing influence of Japan's power. The uprising was suppressed.'⁶⁶

On 26 November, Phibun read Banchong's telegrams of the 23rd and 25th and ordered that they be put in the news. However, on the previous day, 25 November, even before this order, the Publicity Department had announced that, 'Disorder has now broken out throughout Indochina. The French have lost hope of keeping control over Indochina, and they are making preparations so they can flee at any time.'⁶⁷

Banchong's 27 November telegram reported that, 'The commander

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ NAT, *supra* note 64. This failed uprising was planned by the Indo-Chinese Communist Party. See Sud Chonchirdsin (1997), 'The Indochinese Communist Party and the Nam Ky uprising in Cochin China, November–December 1940', *South East Asia Research*, Vol 5, No 3, p 278. The Thai government called on the Vietnamese people to cooperate with Thailand in overthrowing French colonialism. But the Indo-Chinese Communist Party looked upon the Thai government as a 'lackey of the Japanese' (Goscha, *supra* note 19, at p 125) and had no intention of cooperating with it. Most Thai communists held the same opinion. However, Yu Ren Fu (Thai name: Mani Sukhawirat, 1912–1971) and a few other Thai communists viewed Phibun as a Thai patriot and called for cooperation with his government in the fight against the French (interview with Damri Ruangsutham, former politburo member of the Communist Party of Thailand, 29 December 1999, in Bangkok).

⁶⁷ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, p 2180.

of the Indochina army is in Saigon; the commander of Cochin China is in Cambodia. Cochin China, Cambodia and Laos are under the total control of the military authorities. In Saigon there is a curfew from 10:00 p.m.; in the neighboring provinces the curfew is from 6:00 p.m. In Cambodia listening to radio broadcasts from Thailand is forbidden.’ Prime Minister Phibun read this telegram on 28th, the day hostilities broke out between Thailand and French Indo-China. On reading it he ordered, ‘Tell the consul to keep sending detailed reports about the revolution’. Accordingly, the Foreign Ministry prepared a draft telegram to Banchong saying, ‘Received your telegram of the 27th. The disturbances in the local population and their aftermath are extremely important to us; when incidents occur, send us detailed reports’. However, on 29th the order recalling Banchong back to Thailand was sent out, and the above draft telegram was never sent out.⁶⁸ The telegram on 27th would be the consul’s last. Thereafter the French Indo-China authorities refused to let Banchong telegraph any more reports.

Duong Van Giao and the Cao Dai rebellion

From the foregoing exchange of telegrams, it is apparent that the Thai leadership was greatly excited about the outbreak of a revolution in Cochin China. But the messages give no indication whether Thailand exerted any kind of influence on this revolution. A Japanese document of 28 December 1940 offers a bit of a clue. This was a note to Lt Gen Tanaka Shin’ichi, Chief of Army Operations IGHQ, from Col Usui Shigeki, Chief of the Eighth Section under the Office of the General Staff of the Japanese Army. The note said, ‘Saigon independence movement/Cao Dai sect is primary/Thailand taking advantage of situation to some extent/subversive activities (5th column) in Saigon area, also in Tonkin area/begin done underground’.⁶⁹ This note indicated the existence of subversive activities in the Saigon area, but like the Thai telegrams, it did not make clear whether these were being carried out by Japan or Thailand.

⁶⁸ Thai Foreign Ministry, Documents Section, Archival Documents, NC.3:6/11.

⁶⁹ NIDS-L, chūō/sakusen shidō nikki/18 *Tanaka Shin’ichi chuujou gyomu nisshi* [*Lt Gen Tanaka Shin’ichi duty log*]. For Caodaists’ pursuit of independence from the French, see Tran My-Van (1996), ‘Japan and Vietnam’s Caodaists: a wartime relationship (1939–45)’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 27, No 1, pp 179–193.

For documentation showing Thai subversive activities directed at promoting cooperation between Thailand's fight to regain its lost territories and Vietnam's struggle for independence, an important piece of evidence is a report, dated 9 November 1942, by Phra Phisetphanit (Poc Khun), the Khmer leader discussed in the previous section, which he submitted to Phairot Chayanam, Director of the Thai Publicity Department. The report said,

On 5 November [1942] Chanthi, an interpreter for the special political police, came and told me that Duong Van Giao⁷⁰ [rendered in Thai as *Duan Wan Yao*] wants to meet me because he wants to organize a league for the recovery of Indochina's independence. I met Duong Van Giao on the 7th. As head of the Publicity Department, you are already familiar with his career. But after he left Thailand, he opened a law office in Phnom Penh, and he was an advisor to the Cao Dai religious sect. In Cambodia he continued his interest in politics which he had been involved in since his time in Thailand. So it was usual for him to be in contact with Banchong Cheppensook, the Thai consul in Saigon. When Thailand took military action against French Indochina, Duong Van Giao and his followers threw all of their effort into fomenting disorder in Cochin China. Most regrettably, however, no sooner had the Thai army started fighting than they ended their attack and entered into a cease-fire agreement. After that the French violently put down the insurrectionists, arresting them, shooting them to death, blowing up the villages of the people who had sided with them. Duong Van Giao was one of those arrested. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, but with the cooperation of a guard, he escaped from prison and sought help from the Japanese army. The Japanese sent Duong Van Giao to Bangkok in July [1942]. From there he was sent to Shonan [the newly renamed Singapore] to help the Japanese in Malaya organize a 'Yuan Issara' (Free Vietnam) unit.⁷¹ On finishing that task, Duong Van Giao returned to Bangkok, and there he organized the same kind of unit which he wanted to make into the headquarters of an all-Vietnam independence movement like that of the Indian Independence League. Duong Van Giao said that the success or failure of this effort hinged on whether the Thai government opposed it or not. He belonged to the Asian People's Liberation and Independence Propaganda Unit of the Japanese Army which had its office in the

⁷⁰ For a personal history of Duong Van Giao, see Sophie Quinn-Judge (2003), *Ho Chi Minh, The Missing Years*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p 312. See also Goscha, *supra* note 19, at pp 132–133.

⁷¹ After the war, the Thais used the term 'Yuan Issara' to mean the Vietminh. The first use of the term 'Vietminh' in Thai government documents was a 17 December 1945 telegram from the governor of Battambang province (NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/21). But for the most part, the Thais continued to use the term 'Yuan Issara' rather than 'Vietminh'.

Bangkok Chinese Chamber of Commerce. In order to organize a league for the recovery of Indochina's independence, he is asking the following of the Thai government: (1) permission to set up this organization; (2) loans to fund its activities, to be repaid after the French are defeated; (3) assistance with weapons in order to form an armed group of comrades assembled from Indochina and elsewhere. When asked about approaching the Japanese army or government to request all possible support, and not relying on Thailand now that Indochina is in the hands of the Japanese, Duong Van Giao answered that this could not be done because Japan has given assurance of upholding French sovereignty in Indochina. However, if the Indochinese people themselves rise up and disorder breaks out across Indochina, at that time the Japanese might also be willing to give all possible support. On the day the league for recovering independence has achieved victory, his idea is to make Indochina into a federated state.⁷²

This report by Phra Phisetphanit states clearly that the Vietnamese revolutionary Duong Van Giao had connections with Thai government authorities, had contacts with the Thai consul in Saigon, Banchong Cheepensook, at the time of the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute, and worked to bring about a rebellion of the Cao Dai religious sect in southern Vietnam.

More information about this man came from Furuta Motoo, a professor of Tokyo University, who met Professor Tran Van Giau on 2 August 1997 and asked about Duong Van Giao. According to Furuta, Tran Van Giau told him that Duong Van Giao,

had studied in France and had majored in law. After returning to Saigon, he was active as a lawyer, but when the Second World War broke out, he began having contacts with pro-Japanese people in the Cao Dai. This brought him under the watchful eyes of the colonial government authorities. Tran Van Giau did not know if Duong Van Giao was arrested or not, but between 1941 and 1943 it seems he had fled to Thailand. After that he returned to Saigon, but he did not engage in any overt political activity. After the dropping of the atomic bomb and it became clear that Japan's fate had been sealed, Duong Van Giao turned anti-Japanese and drew closer to the Vietminh. It was also at this time that he and Tran Van Giau met. Then the French returned and reoccupied Saigon on 23 September 1945. Tran Van Giau had already withdrawn to Cholon where he got word that placards were appearing in many parts of the town reading 'Duong Van Giao: Head of the Vietnamese People's Provisional Government'. On seeing the return of the French, Duong Van Giao cut his ties with the Vietminh and seemingly tried to show that he was playing a political role. Tran Van Giau as

⁷² NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/19.

head of the South Vietnam Resistance Committee ordered Duong Van Giau's arrest. Giau sought refuge in a temple in Cholon where he was protected by troops of the Cao Dai's private army. When these troops saw Tran Van Giau's signature on the arrest warrant, they offered no resistance, and Giau fled. After that Tran Van Giau heard that Duong Van Giau died in 1946, but he did not know any details about his death.⁷³

Phibun's support of Vietnamese independence

Besides Duong Van Giau, the Phibun government had contacts with a number of other Vietnamese independence revolutionaries both during and after the territorial dispute with Indo-China, and evidence suggests that amicable relations existed between the Phibun regime and these revolutionaries. It also seems that the latter regarded Phibun as sympathetic towards Vietnam's revolution for independence. Various documents in the Thai government records show the existence of these perceptions and feelings.

One such piece of information concerns Vu Huu Binh. At the time of the Thai-Indo-China territorial dispute, Binh had been a non-commissioned officer in the Indo-China colonial forces, but he, along with his subordinates, surrendered to the Thais. Thereafter he readily cooperated with the Thai military, and for this distinguished service he was appointed as an officer in the Thai Army.⁷⁴

⁷³ Personal written communication to the author from Professor Furuta Motoo, dated 27 August 1997. Phibun, Pridi and other Thai students formed the People's Party while studying in France in 1927, and they participated in the 1932 constitutional revolution. Prayun Phamonmontri, an original member of the People's Party and later an important leader in the Phibun government, wrote in his autobiography that during their time in France, Pridi would take him to meetings of left-wing groups that supported Vietnam's independence. 'Pridi had many Vietnamese friends, and they all were activists who supported revolution and independence for Vietnam. One of these friends was Kuang Wan Yao, an important Vietnamese who had formerly lived in Bangkok, and who was later killed by the Vietcong' (Prayun Phamonmontri (1975), *Chiwit 5 phaendin khong khaphachao* [My Life Through Five Reigns], Bannakit, Bangkok, p 107). It would appear that Kuang Wan Yao, as rendered by Prayun in Thai, was Duong Van Giau. During the same interview with Furuta, Tran Van Giau acknowledged that after the war he had been active from January 1946 in western Cambodia, which at that time was still Thai territory. He maintained contacts with Pridi, and he was one of the principal members of the South East Asian league. His name also appears in post-war Thai documents, one example being a report that on 15 November 1947, Thai police in Bangkok confiscated weapons from the home of the Vietminh, Tan Wan Yao (the Thai rendering of Tran Van Giau). This same report makes known that he also used the Thai name Bamrung Charernchat (NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/23).

In the latter half of the year 1942, he was assigned to serve as a first lieutenant to the 22nd Infantry Brigade in Udon.⁷⁵

There is a report dated 23 September 1942 written by Lt Binh, which was submitted via his superior, the commander of the army in Udon province, to Prime Minister Phibun, who was also the Supreme Commander of the Thai armed forces. Binh had handed this report on 19th to his immediate superior, the commander of the 22nd Infantry Brigade, who had passed it on to the Udon province commander. In this report, Binh wrote that as a member of the Thai armed forces, military regulations required that he report to his superiors any involvement he might have in political matters. For this reason, he was writing to report that he had received a letter and a plan for an independence movement from Nguyen Ba Minh, representative of the Vietnam National Restoration League in Saigon, and a letter from Cuong De, leader of the Vietnam National Restoration League, who was in exile in Tokyo, Japan. Binh said that both men had entrusted him with the following tasks: (1) working to unite all Vietnamese living in

⁷⁴ From the author's interview with Wong Phonnikon, *supra* note 61. For Binh, see also Goscha, *supra* note 19, at p 121. Additional information about Lt Binh came from Wong Phonnikon. Near the end of the war, Wong had been sent to India as a member of the Free Thai movement to undergo military training. With the end of the war, he returned to Thailand but did not immediately go back to being a government official. Instead he was sent by Pridi and Tiang Sirikhan to Vientiane to be an economic adviser to the newly established Lao Issara government. For about six months until the Lao Issara government lost control of Vientiane in April 1946, Wong stayed in the Laotian capital acting as the liaison between Pridi/Tiang and the Lao Issara. During that time he also made the acquaintance of Lt Binh and learned of his shift of allegiance to Thailand, his appointment as an officer in the Thai Army, and of his work as a leader of the Vietnamese living in Thailand. After the November 1947 coup d'état, Lt Binh disappeared from Thailand. Wong heard nothing more about him until 1961–62 when Wong was the Thai Ambassador to Burma, and he happened to meet Lt Binh who had been posted to Rangoon as North Vietnam's Consul-General. They had no problem speaking to each other in Thai (interview with Wong Phonnikon, *supra* note 61). Also, the son of Pridi Phanomyong, Sukprida Phanomyong, who interacted a great deal with leaders of Indo-China, told this author in an interview (on 12 August 1997, in Bangkok) that, 'One of the Vietnamese communists who cooperated with Thailand at the time of the Thai-Indo-China territorial dispute was Binh. He received from Phibun the Thai name of Subin Phakdithai. After he returned to Vietnam, he rose to the rank of general. He was sent to Burma as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's first consul-general in Rangoon.'

⁷⁵ NAT, Boko Sungsut 1.13/53, which contains a document dated 2 December 1942 from the commander of the North-east (Isan) Division addressed to the commander-in-chief of the Thai Army, reporting that 1st-Lt Binh was an officer assigned to the 22nd Infantry Brigade in Udon.

Thailand; (2) educating them to have the highest sense of patriotism so they could sacrifice everything for Vietnam; (3) keeping them firmly united until independence had been totally achieved; and (4) acting with great care towards the French and maintaining secrecy. Binh added that accompanying the letter from Saigon was a large 39-page plan (in Vietnamese) for an independence movement, and if the Thai government thought that his report and the independence movement plan might be useful, he was willing to provide an explanation of the contents of the plan and information he had received.

On 28 September 1942, after reading Binh's report, Phibun commented, 'Understood. Do commend Lt Binh. Getting back Vietnam's independence is OK with us. That won't do us any harm. I think we should tell him it's OK to get started.' Binh's report was circulated by the Director of the Police Department, Adun Adundetcharat, who noted on the document that 'From evidence secured by the special political police, Vu Huu Binh is the appointed head of the movement in the Nongkhai-Udon area for the recovering Vietnam's independence'.⁷⁶

Binh's report informed the Thai government about the developing Vietnamese revolution for independence. It was a document by a Vietnamese revolutionary who was a soldier in the Thai army living in Udon, and who claimed to be submitting the report to his commander in accordance with military regulations. However, the report could also be construed as a request to the Thai government, submitted under the pretext of conforming to Thai military regulations, asking permission to organize a Vietnamese independence movement in Thailand. Whatever the case, Phibun responded by giving his permission. This document shows that not only during the time of the territorial dispute but thereafter as well, the Phibun government maintained a sympathetic and supportive attitude towards the independence movement of the Vietnamese living in Thailand. Because of this support and cooperation, there was nothing unusual in the Vietnamese regarding Phibun and his government as sympathetic to and willing to assist them in their movement for independence.

A 1947 Thai government document mentions Lt Binh as a top Vietminh leader living in Thailand. One of the documents reported that according to Le Van Dai, leader of the Vietnamese evacuees [*Yuan ophayop*] in Nakhon Phanom province, the headquarters for the Vietnamese living in Thailand was in Udon; it was made up of a nine-man

⁷⁶ NAT, Boko Sungsut 1/237.

committee, one of whom was Lt Binh, who was in charge of military affairs.⁷⁷

Another document showing that the Vietnamese in Thailand regarded Phibun as having a positive, supportive attitude towards their independence movement is a letter of 20 January 1948 addressed to Phibun, then Commander-in-Chief of the Thai Army, which was submitted by Col Nguyen Thanh Son, a member of the Viet Nam Government Delegation for South East Asia that was stationed in Bangkok. The letter was primarily a request for the return of Vietminh weapons and ammunition that the Thai military had seized following its coup d'état on 8 November 1947, but it read as follows:

So many times in the past, especially during the Indochina war in 1940 and 1941, Your Excellency Phibun showed his sympathy and favorable feelings toward the Vietnamese people in particular. Because of this, we are confident that conclusive measures regarding the weapons and ammunition can be worked out that will bring about good results for both Thailand and the Vietnamese patriots who are fighting hard to drive out French colonialism and win independence.⁷⁸

Yet another example is in the form of pamphlets that the Vietminh distributed in Udon city on the night of 4 December 1947 to protest against actions the Thai authorities had taken. On 25 November, the Thai police and military had searched the homes of the Vietminh leaders in Udon and had confiscated weapons. Written in Thai and Vietnamese, part of one of the pamphlets said, 'Phibun had promised that he would always help us, but what are we to make of this act? Are we to call this helping us?' Another pamphlet declared, 'Phibun has tilted toward the British and Americans. Phibun has broken his promises.'

⁷⁷ NAT, So.Ro.0201.35/47. Document 15774/2490, dated 20 December 1947, from Interior Minister Sinatyotharak to the governor of Udon province informing him about a report from the committee examining conditions on the eastern border that was submitted to the Ministry of Interior.

⁷⁸ NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/23. After receiving this letter, Phibun responded that as commander-in-chief, he did not hold a political post, thus did not have authority to act, and he had passed the letter on to the Defence Minister. The Defence Minister in turn informed the Prime Minister, Khuang Aphaiwong, of the matter, and it was taken up at a cabinet meeting on 24 April 1948. The cabinet decided to have the Defence Ministry examine the facts of the situation. On 19 May, the Defence Ministry submitted its report to the Secretary General of the cabinet. It reported that Vietminh weapons had been seized from the house of Tan Wan Yao on 15 November 1947, then from the house of Thongin Phuriphath on 3 December, and from the house of Thong Kanthatham on 5 December [the latter two people were Thai politicians who were leaders in the Free Thai movement, but Tan Wan Yao was the Vietnamese communist Tran Van Giàu – author's note].

We demand our weapons [be returned].'⁷⁹ These pamphlets showed that within the Vietnamese community in north-eastern Thailand, there was not only strong displeasure with the new post-coup d'état Phibun government for confiscating the Vietminh's weapons, but also a strong reaction that their cause had been betrayed by Phibun whom they had long come to regard as a man who understood and supported Vietnam's revolution for independence.

It is well known that Phibun's rival at that time, Pridi Phanomyong, and Free Thai governments under his control, supported and assisted the Vietminh. But it must also be pointed out that during the 1940s, Phibun and his government had cooperative relations with Vietnamese revolutionaries, which continued to be maintained even with the Vietminh. After Phibun's return to power following the November 1947 coup that overthrew the government under Pridi's control, the Vietminh began criticizing the new government, but Phibun's actions were not a total reversal of his predecessor's policy of supporting the Vietminh, nor did they signal a switch to suppressing the Vietnamese revolutionaries. That change in Thailand's view of the Vietminh, from patriots worthy of sympathy and support, to communists who had to be feared as a threat to Thailand's safety, would come a few years later.

Formation of an Indo-Chinese military force

As was stated in footnote 8, the declaration of the Thai military on 7 December 1940 had praised the Vietnamese people's anti-French struggle, clearly distinguishing it as a revolution and not a rebellion. On 12 December, Bangkok radio declared that, 'The violence and disorder in southern Vietnam are the manifestation of a patriotic movement to restore that nation's independence. They are not the actions of communists or traitors as claimed in the denunciations of Saigon radio. Patriotism and national independence will lead to the advancement of Lãm Thong.' On the following day, 13 December, the head of the information office of the Thai military supreme command issued a report entitled 'Indochina in disorder', which said in part, 'Indochina has a shortage of food; the people are suffering and in confusion. In some parts of Indochina the revolution to restore independence is destroying French authority. The French can no longer expect to maintain their control over Indochina.'⁸⁰

⁷⁹ NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/21.

⁸⁰ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, p 2207.

On 15 December, Bangkok radio broadcast the following declaration in rebuttal to broadcasts from Saigon radio:

Saigon radio's announcer 'Namman-kat' (kerosene)⁸¹ asked provocatively why, if Thailand is really so strong, it did not announce a declaration of war. Such a comment is nothing more than the posturing of a weakling. Today the whole of Indochina is in a state of disorder because of uprisings. The movement to restore independence has spread all across the land. The forces of the French are disintegrating, and many people have fled across the borders. The local native troops have no desire to fight on behalf of the French. Many French officials and private citizens have sent their families and possessions away to places that are safe. The transportation system has been cut in many places. A shortage of food and pillaging have spread throughout the land. 'Namman-kat' doesn't talk about this dire situation, yet he has the audacity to fume and bluster about a declaration of war. We Thais love peace, but we are warriors, and when we are coerced, we all unite and fight as one people. When fighting for our race and for L  m Thong where we were born, we Thais have no regret about spilling our blood in war. The strength and endurance of our military, our spirit, our unity and our economy are greater than France's in Indochina. It is the feelings of our compatriots in Indochina that sustain us. Our strengths and capabilities surpass those of the French in every way. To declare or not declare war is something for us to decide. For those who are about to die, there is no honor in declaring war. The evil deeds of the French in Indochina have turned into weapons that are coming back to destroy them. But even now, if the French come forward with a proposal regarding our territories, we will consent to negotiations for peace.⁸²

On 16 December, Announcement No 6 of the Thai National Radio, the newly renamed Bangkok radio,⁸³ was aired, announcing the following:

Saigon radio reported that on 12 December Indochina dropped three tons of bombs on Thailand. These bombings were carried out at night with total disregard for the lives and property of unarmed civilians, and were an outlaw act that runs against the laws of civilized nations. The same kind of outlaw methods are being used against Indochina's movement for independence which convinces us all the more that the French in Indochina are coming to the end of their days. If France attempts to maintain its unjust colonial control by force, then we the people of L  m Thong, out of our respect for justice, must hasten the victory over this injustice.⁸⁴

⁸¹ The Saigon radio announcer was dubbed 'kerosene' by the Thais because of the way he quickly flared up in anger when denouncing the radio broadcasts from Thailand.

⁸² *Khao Khosanakan*, 1940, pp 2149–2151.

⁸³ The Thai government radio station officially began using this new name from 16 December 1940.

⁸⁴ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 14–15.

On 21 December, Thai national radio's Announcement No 13 was aired in response to comments by the Governor-General of Indo-China, Admiral Jean Decoux, which Saigon radio had broadcast the day before. The announcement said,

According to Decoux, the violence and disorder in Indochina today are the acts of the communist party, and these, he said, will be thoroughly suppressed. But violence and disorder in Indochina caused by groups fighting for independence have occurred repeatedly in the past. The present upheaval has spread over the whole of Indochina, and our Thai compatriots in Laos and Cambodia have also voiced their agreement and joined in. The motivation for this resistance is the desire of the people to regain their independence, but in saying that all acts of resistance will be thoroughly suppressed, Decoux is saying that he does not accept Vietnam's independence. Decoux denounces the people fighting for independence as communists, but this is the worn-out terminology that the French always use. These are people fighting to liberate their nation (*khon ku chat*). They are people who want independence and freedom, and for this they are lauded the world over and deserve our support. It is rightful and just to want freedom, and that which hinders freedom is an injustice.⁸⁵

On 28 December, Thai national radio broadcast Announcement No 18, which publicized the previously discussed 20 December Decree of the Ministry of Interior. This broadcast announced that, 'Thailand is now treating our Vietnamese brothers and sisters as people of an independent nation. We no longer regard them as having French nationality or as under French jurisdiction. They are now designated as the nation of Vietnam, have Vietnamese citizenship, and are under the jurisdiction of Vietnam.'⁸⁶

One can see from the above citations that during the month of December 1940, as the Thai-Indo-China territorial dispute evolved into a military confrontation, the Thai government raised up the symbol of Lãm Thong and ardently called on the Vietnamese, as fellow people of Lãm Thong, to join with the Thais in an anti-French united front. During this time, the Thais loudly declared their support of Vietnam's struggle against the French, praising it as an anti-French, anticolonial revolution for independence. But the Thais also saw in this growing revolution an opportunity to realize the recovery of their lost territories.

With the coming of January 1941 and the start of ground combat between Thai and French Indo-Chinese forces, the Thai government

⁸⁵ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 28-30.

⁸⁶ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 35-37.

announced the formation of an Indo-China military force. On 5 January with the broadcast of Announcement No 23, Thai national radio reported that,

Our government has received a large number of letters from Vietnamese people who say they can no longer endure the cruelty and brutality of the French, that they want to get back their independence and want the Thai government to help them organize a military force of Indochinese people. Our government has already established such a military force, and it wants Indochinese people to volunteer which they can do by immediately contacting Thai border defense personnel. A large number of our Indochinese compatriots have already enlisted, and we want Vietnamese who seek the liberation of their country to volunteer.⁸⁷

This announcement was followed on 14 January by Announcement No 31, in which Thai national radio proclaimed the formation of an Indo-China Independence Army. 'To the Vietnamese, Khmers and fellow Thais of the left bank, the organization in Thailand of an Indochina Independence Army (*Kong Thahan Indochin Issaraphap*) has now been completed. Initially it will consist of one artillery regiment, and preparations are now under way for it to be deployed in cooperation with the Thai army for liberating Indochina. Oh brothers of Indochina, we should not be shooting at each other. Stop helping the French and join the Indochina Independence Army to liberate the nation.'⁸⁸ The June 1941 issue of the *Publicity Department News* carried a report stating that the Indo-China Independence Army had completed its duties at the border and had arrived back at Bangkok's railway station on 27 May.⁸⁹ Then on 24 June 1941, the anniversary of the 1932 constitutional revolution, the Publicity Department issued a publication entitled *Thai nai sami sang chat* [*Thailand in the Age of Nation Building*], which carried a photograph on p 94 of the Indo-China Independence Army, made up of 202 men, standing before the Democracy Monument in Bangkok. But other than this photo and the information presented above, no other details about this military unit are known. Most probably it never actually had any military capabilities and ended up being for propaganda purposes only. Nevertheless, the noteworthy point here is that as part of its policy of cooperating with Indo-China's struggle for liberation, Thailand went as far as to set up an Indo-Chinese military force.

⁸⁷ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, p 52.

⁸⁸ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, pp 322–323.

⁸⁹ *Khao Khosanakan*, 1941, p 1373.

In late January 1941, Thailand and French Indo-China accepted Japanese mediation of their territorial dispute, and for a time thereafter, Thai fervour for a united front with the Indo-Chinese people and their liberation movements dropped off sharply. However, following the end of the Second World War, Thailand renewed its involvement in Vietnam's liberation movement, and whether under Free Thai governments or under the military government of Phibun, the sympathy and support of Thailand's leadership for the Vietnamese people's struggle to reclaim their independence continued until the Cold War greatly intensified at the start of the 1950s.

Conclusion

During its territorial dispute with French Indo-China, Thailand did not simply demand of France the return of its lost territories. The Thai government also appealed to the Lao, Khmer and Vietnamese peoples to revolt against their French colonial overlord; at the same time the Thais sought to cooperate and create a united front with the anti-French independence movements in Indo-China. Largely because of the paucity of Thai sources and documents that have been researched to date, the existence of these Thai anticolonial pro-independence activities during the Thai–Indo-China territorial dispute has remained virtually unknown. This study made use of the Thai Publicity Department's official monthly publication, *Khao Khosanakan*, to survey the propaganda that the Thai government was directing at the people in Indo-China at the time of the territorial dispute. It also made use of the few relevant Thai government documents available in the National Archives of Thailand and the Documents Section of the Thai Foreign Ministry. These newly examined sources revealed the extent of Thailand's activities to cooperate and build a united front with the anti-French independence movements in Indo-China at the time of the territorial dispute in 1940–41.

In its propaganda campaign during the territorial dispute, the Thai government frequently employed the concept of the legendary Lãm Thong. The Thais, along with the Laos, Khmers and Vietnamese in Indo-China, were collectively regarded as the peoples of Lãm Thong, and the Thai government repeatedly called for the unity of the Lãm Thong peoples in a united front against the French. In its propaganda, the Thai government divided the Lãm Thong peoples into two major groups, one made up of people of the Thai race and the other of people

of the Vietnamese race. The former included the Thais, the Laos and the Khmers, as well as other ethnic groups native to Laos and Cambodia. By classifying the Thai race in this manner, the Thai government in its propaganda could appeal to the people in the former Thai territories of Laos and Cambodia, saying that they could achieve the objectives of their anti-French struggle by rejoining anti-French Thailand to build a single unified Thai nation of liberty and equality. At the same time, the Thai government could support the anti-French revolution of the Vietnamese people and their struggle to regain their independence.

For the Thai leaders of 1940, however, working together in an anti-French united front did not mean advocating independence for Laos and Cambodia. They looked upon both of these territories not just as parts of Thailand that had been taken away by France, but also as territories inhabited by people who were of the Thai race, and this justified their return to Thailand. Moreover, in the Thai mode of thinking this return did not mean the exchange of French colonial rule for a renewal of Thai colonial subjugation. Laos and Cambodia would not be returning to the Thailand of old with its absolute monarchy; they would be coming back to a new Thailand that had carried out a successful constitutional revolution and established a modern constitutional government. The compatriots of Laos and Cambodia were being welcomed back to a new national community where they would be guaranteed freedom and equality as members of that community, something they could never hope to obtain under France's colonial domination.

While it is doubtful whether Lao or Khmer leaders really wanted to see their territories revert to Thailand, there is no doubt that a number of ranking, well educated Laos and Khmers responded positively to the Thai government's anti-French propaganda and cooperated in Thailand's efforts to rid Indo-China of French colonial rule.

As part of its anti-French activities aimed at Vietnam, the Thai government in October 1940 sent Banchong Cheppensook to be the Thai Consul in Saigon, where he gathered military intelligence, spread propaganda and engaged in other subversive activities. One Vietnamese leader who maintained contacts with Banchong was the lawyer Duong Van Giao, who had spent time living in Thailand and who was involved in fomenting the Cao Dai insurrection that broke out in Cochin China in November 1940. The Thai-Indo-China territorial dispute intensified greatly in January 1941 when Thai forces began their invasion of Indo-China. Early in that same month, the Thai government had also

announced the formation of the Indo-Chinese Independence Army made up of Vietnamese and other volunteers from Indo-China.

During its territorial dispute with French Indo-China, Thailand clearly supported the idea of an Indo-China totally liberated from French colonial rule. In seeking to realize this idea, the Thai government propagandized, supported and cooperated with the revolutionaries fighting for Indo-China's independence; and it is this anti-French/pro-independence aspect of the Thai-Indo-China territorial dispute that gives it continuity with Indo-China's wartime and post-war struggle for independence. The Thai leadership saw the realization of recovering Thailand's lost territories and the achievement of Indo-China's independence as interconnected in a mutually complementary relationship; and from its start, the confrontation with French Indo-China was not just about lost territory; the Thai leadership saw it as interconnected more broadly with the liberation of the whole of Indo-China (Lam Thong) from French colonialism. Thailand's propaganda efforts and its support of anti-French Indo-Chinese contributed directly to the creation of the Lao Issara and the Khmer Issarak, and in this way these activities were also influential in moving the whole of Indo-China towards independence. In effect, the Thai-Indo-China territorial dispute was one of the flash points setting in motion Indo-China's move towards independence, and the independence movements in Indo-China had Thai-influenced origins.

Out of its territorial dispute with Indo-China, Thailand was able to regain a portion of its lost territories. But after the war, France re-established itself in Indo-China and took back those territories. This further increased Thailand's sense of being a victim, like Indo-China, of French colonialism. During this time, the charter of the United Nations was being enacted, one of its declared principles being national self-determination. In this post-war environment, Free Thai governments under Pridi's control formulated the idea of Thai solidarity with Indo-China to realize the latter's independence. But with the onset of the Cold War, this idea became associated with communism and took on negative connotations. However, since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the numerous ideas for regional cooperation that have been put forward for the Indo-China Peninsula are virtually a revival of those conceived by Free Thai governments in the 1940s. Looking at mainland South East Asia in the late 1940s before the Cold War grew intense and in the 1990s after the Cold War ended, it is not difficult to notice the common aspects and similarities between the two.