

LAOS

Buffer State or Battleground

HUGH TOYE

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PREFACE

THIS attempt to relate the current problem of Laos to its historical sources originated in the period 1960-2, when I had the good fortune to spend nearly two years there. During this period, perhaps the most critical in recent Laotian history, I was able to observe political and military developments at close quarters, and to make the acquaintance of some of the national leaders. I returned to Europe with a great affection for this lovely land and for its charming people, affection which provided the impetus for a prolonged historical study. Part of the result is set out in the present volume, which was started in the leisure moments of a two-year appointment in Paris and carved into shape during my tenure of the Gwilym Gibbon Research Fellowship at Nuffield College, Oxford, in 1964-5.

My debt to the scholars of Indo-Chinese history, in particular to M. Georges Coedès, Professor D. G. E. Hall, and Mr. Donald Lancaster, will be obvious to those who know their works, even where it is not acknowledged in footnotes. I have been fortunate in the number of friends who have helped me with advice, information, patience, by lending me documents or finding me books, and in the Canadian, British, French, Indian, and Thai colleagues whose knowledge of Laos and sympathetic interest in its people have been a constant encouragement. In particular I thank Mr. John Shattock for the idea of writing about Laos, Dr. Saul Rose and Mr. G. F. Hudson for penetrating criticism and sound counsel, Mr. Stuart Simmonds for his generosity, his expert knowledge, and for allowing me to forget that I can read neither Lao nor Thai, Mr. T'ej Bunnag and Mr. Patrick Tuck for contributions from their own research, Mr. Guy Wint and Major General R. E. Lloyd for encouragement, sponsorship, and much forbearance, Mr. J. M. Addis, Major General F. J. C. Piggott, Mr. F. A. Warner, Mr. A. S. B. Olver, Brigadier C. I. V. Jones, Sir Anthony Rumbold, and Mr. W. A. R. Wood for reading and commenting on the typescript in one of its several stages, and my wife for doing so at every stage. I am also most grateful to Miss Julie Savage for doing most of the hard work on the Index.

Translations from the French are my own except where otherwise stated. The spelling of place names follows the pre-war map *Burma, Malaya and Indo-China*, published by John Bartholemew, which is still the best general map available, except where a different spelling is in current use. Here, and also in dealing with historical and personal names, my aim has been simplicity and ease of understanding rather than scrupulous adherence to a system of transliteration. I apologise to Thai and Indo-Chinese scholars if this has sometimes led me to take liberties with their history and languages.

Wheatley, Oxon.
August 1966.

HUGH TOYE

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ABBREVIATIONS

C.D.N.I.	Committee for the Defence of National Interests
C.I.A.	The United States Central Intelligence Agency
D.R.V.N.	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
H.M.S.O.	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
N.L.H.S.	Neo Lao Hak Sat; Laotian left-wing political party
P.E.O.	Programs Evaluation Office; the military section of the United States Operations Mission in Laos from 1958 onwards.
R.I.I.A.	Royal Institute of International Affairs
S.E.A.T.O.	South East Asia Treaty Organization
U.S.I.S.	United States Information Service

Note: British Command Papers are referred to by their Cmd. or Cmnd. numbers after their first appearance.

TO BETTY

INTRODUCTION

FOR over a thousand years the Indo-Chinese peninsula has been the scene of a conflict between the Indian-influenced kingdoms to the south and west of the Annamitic Chain, and the Chinese-influenced Vietnamese, pressing southwards with their colonists from the over-crowded delta of the Red River. It is not so much a matter of cultural differences, manners, and ways of thought, although after a millenium the yawning gulf that lies between the austere and self-contained civilization of China and the tolerant earthiness of Hindu cultures, adds an inevitable measure of mutual dislike to the antique fears and ambitions of thirty generations. It is a matter of land; the need for living space on the one hand and the fear of conquest and extermination on the other.

The historical role of this conflict has long been recognized. Less clearly has it been seen that the ancient quarrel also underlies many of the modern problems of Indo-China. Amongst the most difficult of these problems is that of Laos, a country which has been cast in modern times for the role of neutral buffer state between Siam and the Vietnamese, the old protagonists who are now backed by the two sides in the Cold War. This study of Laos in its contemporary role shows how essential elements of the modern confrontation represent a renewal of the ancient conflict, and how the geographical and ethnic anomalies of Laos as formed under French rule, together with the traditional fears and ambitions of its neighbours, have prevented its establishment as a stable buffer state.

The book is divided into two parts: Part One outlines in two chapters the historical antecedents; Part Two deals with the development of the Laotian question from 1940 to 1964 in six chapters, the last of which considers in conclusion the conflicting interests which will have to be reconciled in a future Laotian settlement.

The long process of Vietnamese expansion southwards from the Red River delta to that of the River Mekong had resulted by the nineteenth century in a confrontation between Siam and the Vietnamese across a neutral buffer zone which stretched along the Annamitic Chain from Dien Bien Phu in the north to Cambodia

in the south. Cambodia paid tribute to both the Siamese king and the Vietnamese emperor. In the north traditionally neutral hill-states likewise acknowledged a dual suzerainty. In between lay the belt of territory bounded by the River Mekong and the Annamitic mountains; this was partly inhabited by hill peoples whom neither side had ever been able to subdue and had in part been depopulated as a defensive measure by Siam.

In the second half of the nineteenth century France extended her empire over Vietnam and, in spite of Siamese opposition, over the whole of the neutral zone. She based her imperial prosperity upon the vigour of the Vietnamese who were seven times as numerous as her Laotian and Cambodian subjects, and it was naturally in populous Vietnam that the main economic development took place. The logic of geography and population caused France to see her imperial problems from the Vietnamese point of view and to rule as a Vietnamese ruler might have done. She tried to solve the problem of over-population in the Vietnamese way, encouraged migration from Tongking into the less populous lands, subordinated the interests of Cambodian and Lao, and took what France and Vietnam wanted from the Siamese. In consequence the traditional fears, hatreds, and enmities of the Indo-Chinese peninsula were intensified and the circumstances in which Laos would one day be called upon to act as a buffer state were prepared.

The second part of the book opens with the French capitulation to Germany in 1940. Vietnamese nationalists already saw themselves as the natural heirs to French power and Siam was well aware of the danger which this Vietnamese ambition represented. The Siamese tried, with Japanese favour, to push their eastern frontier back to the former neutral zone. Laos gained, as a result of strong Siamese pressure, the beginnings of a national consciousness which gave rise to an anti-French independence movement after the Japanese defeat in 1945. It was however a Lao national consciousness and a Lao independence movement. The hill peoples of Laos, who made up more than half of its population, were still kept at arm's length. In 1949 the Independence leaders chose modified independence under the French rather than co-operation with the Vietnamese in continued resistance to them.

The Vietnamese rebellion against the French had by this time turned into the Indo-China War. The Communist leadership of

the rebels, the aid they received after 1949 from the Communist Chinese, and the intervention of Communist China in the Korean War, brought American help to the French in Indo-China and also to Siam, whose fear of a revival of Vietnamese power now began to appear in anti-Communist terms. The settlement of the Indo-China War at Geneva in 1954 and the establishment of a Communist state in North Vietnam led to the formation of S.E.A.T.O., by which the United States and its allies sought to base a firm anti-Communist position on Siam. The old struggle between Siam and the Vietnamese, now coinciding with the world ideological conflict, thus took its place in the Cold War.

Fundamental to the Geneva settlement of 1954 was the concept of a neutral Laos separating pro-Western Siam and the Communist world of North Vietnam and China, on the analogy of the nineteenth-century buffer zone. China exerted pressure on the North Vietnamese to withdraw their troops from Laos on condition that the Americans did not attempt to establish military influence there. Laos undertook to integrate the Pathet Lao movement, which the North Vietnamese had sponsored during the war, into the life of the country and to preserve strict neutrality.

But Laos as formed by the French was not a national entity. Nor was it either geographically or ethnically the same as the nineteenth-century buffer zone. Firstly, the dominant Lao people, while forming less than half of the population in Laos itself, were far out-numbered by the Lao in north-eastern Siam with whom they shared their history, language, and customs. Secondly, the frontier with North Vietnam ran through the territory of the formerly neutral hill peoples. On the Vietnamese side of the border these peoples had been largely conciliated by the subtler racial policies of the Communists; this affected their kinsmen on the Laotian side who resented Lao domination as they had always done. The peoples of Laos were thus much more likely to take the part of one or other of their two neighbours than to unite against them. Unless this tendency to division could be overcome—and it had already been exploited by the Vietnamese in the formation of the predominantly tribal Pathet Lao—Laos could not function satisfactorily as a buffer state.

Everything thus depended on the integration of the Pathet Lao into the Laotian national structure. This was partially achieved in 1957. Amid many misgivings and open Siamese and American

disapproval the Pathet Lao was admitted to a government of national union. When, however, it appeared at partial elections in 1958 that the process of integration had already allowed the Pathet Lao to obtain strong political influence throughout the country, the growing apprehensions of Siam and the United States caused the abandonment of the policy of reconciliation. The Pathet Lao resumed their rebellion. By the end of 1959 the United States was hardly less committed on the one side than was North Vietnam on the other. Laos had become a theatre of the Cold War.

As the issue was joined, Siam needed strong friends in Laos, the United States needed anti-Communist ones. With Marshal Sarit master of Siam, who could be more suitable for both roles than Sarit's kinsman Phoumi Nosavan? With General Phoumi rising to power, Siamese interests seemed secure against Vietnam, as well as those of the United States against Communism. Early in 1960 the General rigged the elections and emerged as virtual dictator of Laos.

There followed the neutralist *coup d'état* of August 1960. A month later Prince Souvannaphouma, who had negotiated the agreement with the Pathet Lao in 1957, began another attempt to create national unity. If the Siamese had been nervous in 1958, they were now thoroughly alarmed. Phoumi overthrew the prince's government with Siamese and American help. Russia came to the aid of the Neutralists. In the ensuing civil war the Neutralists, in alliance with the Pathet Lao who were more strongly backed than ever by the North Vietnamese, took control of most of the Laotian hill country. Phoumi's forces appeared incapable of stopping them. A cease-fire was arranged and a new Geneva Conference was convened in May 1961.

The attempt to achieve a settlement of the Laotian question by international agreement in 1961-2 appeared at first to have some hope of success. When the newly elected President Kennedy met Mr. Khrushchev at Vienna in June 1961, the two statesmen agreed that Laos should be neutral ground between them; none of the great powers wanted to fight a war over Laos. The acceptance of Laotian neutralism by the United States, however, redoubled the fears of Siam, who saw a neutral Laos as no barrier to the approach of Vietnamese power. In spite of all American diplomacy could do, it was not until June 1962, when S.E.A.T.O.

forces had been deployed on the Mekong as the ultimate reassurance for the Siamese, that General Phoumi could be induced to accept a neutralist régime. By this time the development of the Sino-Soviet dispute and of the war in South Vietnam had gravely prejudiced the prospects of the international settlement which had for months only awaited formal and unanimous Laotian assent.

The essentials of the Geneva bargain of 1962 were not dissimilar from those of the 1954 agreement in so far as they concerned Laos. Externally, the condition was that American and Vietnamese troops should be removed from the country. Internally the three factions needed to be kept in careful balance as they progressed towards integration. Neither of these conditions could be kept. On the one hand the North Vietnamese involvement in the South Vietnamese war had now reached a point where Laotian territory held by the Pathet Lao was constantly used for the passage of reinforcements from North to South Vietnam. This traffic was excluded by the 1962 settlement and its continuance was quite unacceptable to the United States. On the other hand the Soviet Union, in the stress of the dispute with the Chinese, terminated the airlift to the Neutralist forces which had enabled them to remain independent of the two extremes. Under the competitive pressures of left and right the Neutralist position crumbled. The coalition broke up. Partition by altitude, along much the same contour line of ethnic division that had limited direct Siamese authority before the coming of the French, was an accomplished fact in 1964 as in 1961.

The problem of Laos is for the moment overshadowed by the war in Vietnam. When that war is ended it seems likely that another attempt at a Laotian solution will be necessary. The book concludes with tentative definitions of the Siamese and Vietnamese interests which will have to be reconciled if a lasting settlement is to be achieved.

PART ONE

THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

CHAPTER I

Vietnam and the Indian-influenced States of Indo-China

WHEN the Geneva Conference of 1954 sought to end the war in French Indo-China, one of the basic assumptions made was that Laos would become a neutral buffer between non-Communist Thailand and Communist North Vietnam, and so help to prevent the clash between the Western world and the Communist bloc which appeared imminent. In the following seven years it proved impossible to secure the internal stability in Laos which was essential for its role as a buffer state. At the end of 1960 a civil war broke out in which factions in the country were favoured by Thailand and North Vietnam, backed respectively by the United States and the Soviet bloc. There followed a second Geneva Conference, which tried to establish the neutrality of Laos by international guarantee. This attempt also failed and Laos lapsed into a *de facto* partition between two groups supported on each side by the world power blocs.

The failure of Laos to act as a buffer state arose partly from divisions among its own people. Partly it sprang from political developments in the Indo-Chinese peninsula under French rule and during its decline. But before these matters can properly be examined it is relevant to ask why there should be a buffer state in this area at all. The answer to this question is not to be found simply in the modern ideological conflict. The roots of the problem lie in a deep mistrust between the Thai and Vietnamese peoples which has ancient historical origins.

*The Ancient Quarrel*¹

Two thousand years ago Chinese imperial power extended southwards along the Indo-Chinese coast well beyond the seventeenth parallel. In 111 B.C. China had annexed the independent kingdom of Vietnam, then centred in the lower valley of the Red River, where it was cut off from the River Mekong valley to the south-west by the formidable mountains of the Annamitic Chain. South of the Chinese borders were the Chams. The Mekong delta was inhabited by the Khmers, the Menam valley and lower Burma by their close relatives, the Mons. These non-Chinese peoples possessed a common civilization which they shared with the coastal and valley communities of Malaya and Indonesia.

In the early centuries of our era Indian influences, customs, and culture flooded into this little world. The reasons for and the manner of their arrival are a matter of debate, but that they did arrive is beyond dispute. Throughout the region, in what is now Indonesia, Burma, Malaya, Thailand, and the states of Indo-China, kingdoms arose which practised Indian religion, arts, and customs and whose sacred language was Sanskrit.

The earliest of these states of which we know emerged somewhere about A.D. 100 in the Mekong delta. The Chinese called it Funan. At its zenith Funan stretched from the Kra Isthmus in the west to Camranh Bay in the east. Beside it on the coast to the north grew up the kingdom of Champa, founded in A.D. 192 when a local official rebelled against his Chinese masters in what was then the southernmost province of the empire of China.

The virile, aggressive Chams eventually spread as far south as the Mekong delta and westwards into the middle Mekong valley. From the first, however, they were at odds with the Vietnamese, their even more vigorous neighbours to the north, whose sophisticated Chinese culture must have contrasted sharply with their own Indian manners.² In A.D. 939 the Vietnamese threw off the yoke of China and took up the conflict with the Chams on their own account. For Vietnam it was a matter of land, of population

¹ The principal authorities used for the early history of Indo-China are: D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (London, 2nd edn., 1964), G. Coedès, *Les états hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* (Paris, new edn., 1964), and L. P. Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire* (Philadelphia, 1951).

² The struggle 'in its cultural aspect represented a struggle between Chinese and Indian influence'. Hall, *op. cit.* (1st edn.), p. 186.

pressure from Chinese immigration and from her own fecundity.³ The struggle went on for five more centuries up and down the narrow plain between the Annamitic Chain and the sea. Bit by bit the Chams were ousted or absorbed and their lands settled by the teeming Vietnamese.

Far back in the sixth century, meanwhile, Funan had given place to the kingdom which the Chinese called Chen La, from whose ruins there emerged three hundred years later the Indianized Khmer kingdom of Cambodia. The Khmer empire and its great capital of Angkor reached their zenith in the twelfth century when the Cambodians ruled not only the coastal provinces of Funan but also the hinterland, the Menam and Mekong valleys as far to the north and east as the Annamitic Chain. Early in the thirteenth century, however, Khmer power began to give way to that of the Thai peoples who, pushed in their turn by Chinese pressure, were now moving into this area from the north and north-west.

The Thais had hitherto figured in Champa and at Angkor as prisoners of war, slaves, or barbarian allies from the outer fringes of civilization. Syams, they were called, the name of the Thai group which was settling in the north of the Menam basin. The great bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat show a detachment of them in the Khmer army, their curious dress and unmilitary appearance contrasting sharply with that of the business-like Khmer legionaries. The Chinese had known this ancient people as early as the sixth century B.C. Chinese records often refer to them as the barbarian folk south of the Yangtse River. They were to be found near Lake Tali in Yunnan, across that great upland where the Red River, the Mekong, the Salween, and even the Irrawaddy, flowing close by on neighbouring courses, gave easy access for their raiders to the rich deltas of Burma and Indo-China.

The Thais came under Chinese suzerainty early in the Christian era but made many attempts to assert their independence and never received the stamp of Chinese civilization that so marked the Vietnamese. In the ninth century they twice raided China by way of the Yangtse valley, raged down the Red River to sack Hanoi, and even conquered parts of the Irrawaddy delta. As time went on small groups of them settled among the Khmers, Mons, and

³ Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China* (London, 1944), pp. 34-35.

Burmese. At the end of the eleventh century the Thai-Syam state of P'ayao appeared between the Mekong and Menam rivers in the far north of modern Thailand. While raiders still ranged far and wide, other Thai settlements to the south and west of Lake Tali began to form themselves into new independent states, among them the twelve Thai-Lu states known as the Sipsong Panna.

Unlike the southward drive of the Vietnamese, the spread of Thai rule did not involve large movements of population any more than did the Norman invasion of England or the growth of the Khmer empire. What happened was that, after a certain amount of Thai settlement, a Thai ruling class seized power in the centres concerned and a restricted Thai middle class followed. The original inhabitants adopted the language and some of the customs of the new rulers; intermarriage blunted still further the edges of racial difference and gave the new states ethnic as well as political reality. The further south conquest and assimilation went, the larger were the indigenous populations encountered, and the weaker the Thai ethnic element in the resultant mixture. Hence, in part, the difference today between the Thai of Bangkok, the Lao of Laos and north-east Siam, and the hill-Thai of the Laos-Vietnam border.

The process was not always peaceful, but few battles are recorded. In its story of the origins of the Sipsong Panna, the chronicle of the pagoda of Chom Yong in the eastern Shan States gives an example of the sort of thing that may have occurred.⁴ It tells of Phya Ngam, chief king of a group of seven non-Thai kingdoms on the upper Mekong. There were Thai communities in several of these kingdoms but they were subject to the non-Thai rulers whom they called Khas. One day the ruler of the Thai state of Xieng Hong who was also subject to the Khas, called together his four sons. 'The Khas are our masters', he said, 'it is shameful for us to suffer their yoke.' Sonanta, his second son, replied, 'Give me five hundred men and I will deliver you.' Sonanta took the five hundred men and with them offered his services to Phya Ngam. He was welcomed and allowed to build a fortified settlement of his own where, from time to time, Phya Ngam would visit him. At length he invited the king and his suite to a great dinner. Three sorts of wine were served, the first one good, the second strong, the third poisoned. 'The whole country

⁴ F. Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine* (Paris, 1885), p. 400.

was subdued', says the chronicler. The ruler of Xieng Hong sent his other three sons to govern neighbouring principedoms.

Early in the thirteenth century the Mongols began their conquest of China. A great surge southwards of Thai migration followed. In the Menam valley two Thai-Syam chiefs combined to defeat the Khmer regional commander and established the kingdom of Sukhothai. Fresh impetus came from the Mongol annexation of Tali in 1255. Thai-Shan principedoms took over much of the territory of the Pagan kingdom of Burma, overthrown by Kublai Khan in 1287. Thai-Lao princes came southwards to Luang Prabang⁵ in the Mekong valley. The Thai prince of Xieng Sen pushed steadily against the Mons on the upper Menam and in 1297 founded Chiengmai.

Meanwhile Sukhothai, which had absorbed much Khmer territory to the south and east, began to decline. In the middle of the fourteenth century power passed to two new kingdoms, the Thai-Syam kingdom of Ayuthia on the lower Menam, and the Thai-Lao kingdom centred at Luang Prabang, forerunners of the modern states of Thailand and Laos.⁶

The Thais have been called the world's best diplomats. Certainly they are marvellous assimilators, for they have the graceful gift of making the manners or culture they borrow appear to arise out of their own genius. At Sukhothai they had had easy access to the capitals of their neighbours, the Mons and the Khmers, and it was here between A.D. 1250 and 1350 that the characteristics of Siamese civilization had been elaborated. From Cambodia, says Coedès:⁷

The Siamese assimilated political organisation, way of life, writing and a great many words. Siamese artists learnt what the Khmer artists had to teach them and transformed it according to their own genius, under the strong influence of their western neighbours, the Mons and the

⁵ The modern name, which dates only from the sixteenth century, is here used to avoid complication. For a discussion of the town's various names see: G. Coedès: 'A propos des anciens noms de Luang Prabang', in *Bulletin de l'école française d'extrême orient*, XVIII (1918), pp. 9-11.

⁶ Again, although the ancient kingdom was called Lan Xang, the modern word Laos is used throughout. To avoid confusion with the generic sense of the word *Thai*, *Siamese* and *Siam* are used for the Thai people of the lower Menam valley and for their country, which is now called Thailand.

⁷ Op. cit., pp. 402-3.

Burmese. From the latter the Siamese took their legal traditions, of Indian origin, and also Ceylonese [Theravada] Buddhism together with its artistic traditions.

Meanwhile, of course, other Thai peoples continued to inhabit the upland regions of Yunnan and Tongking from which the Siamese had come, their character being moulded somewhat differently over the centuries by the influence of their Chinese and Vietnamese neighbours.⁸

As they learnt so the Siamese fought. From Ayuthia their pressure on the Khmers continued until the great walled city of Angkor Thom was besieged and sacked in 1431. As soon as the Siamese had departed the Khmer crown prince procured the assassination of the Siamese governor and was crowned in the ruined capital. Angkor was however no longer considered a safe centre for the kingdom; it was evacuated in 1432, the Khmer court moving eventually in 1434 to Phnom Penh which is again the Cambodian capital today.

Over the next hundred years peace between Siam and Cambodia never lasted long. The Siamese raided a passive Cambodia at intervals until 1540. During most of the four decades which followed Siam was fighting for her life against the Burmese conqueror, Bayinnaung. Cambodia took her revenge, carrying the war again and again deep into Siam. The Siamese recovered after the death of their Burmese oppressor in 1580 and from 1594 there was a Siamese garrison in the Cambodian capital. The weakening of Siam in the early seventeenth century led the Cambodians to reassert themselves and fight off a Siamese invasion in 1622. Siam nevertheless continued to look to the borders of Cambodia for booty, and for slaves to satisfy the continued demand for labour in her vast under-populated lands. Unlike the Vietnamese, the Siamese did not colonize: they never had the people to spare.

The Vietnamese, having long ago extinguished all but the name of freedom in Champa, were by now also encroaching upon Cambodia, using the methods of forceful colonization they had employed against the Chams:

Exiles, deserters and other vagabonds infiltrated into the country. In time their numbers enabled them to form colonies, the inevitable

⁸ See L. P. Briggs 'The Appearance and Historical Usage of the terms Tai, Thai, Siamese and Lao', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1949, p. 61.

prelude to annexation. Thus in 1658 the provincial governor of Tran-bien occupied the colony of Moi-Xui under the pretext that the King of Cambodia had violated the Vietnamese frontier. When King Ang Chan resorted to arms he was defeated and captured and sent in a cage to Hué. There, on paying homage as a vassal, he was liberated and escorted back to his capital. His two brothers, however, refused to accept the situation and set themselves up as joint kings. In 1673 the inevitable succession dispute gave the Vietnamese an opportunity to intervene effectively and install two tributary rulers, one as king at Udong [the latest Cambodian capital], and the other as second king at Saigon.⁹

Before the end of the seventeenth century Cambodia was once more under Vietnamese suzerainty after a brief reassertion of Siamese influence, but in 1714 a further succession dispute brought the Siamese back again. Thus, in the ancient conflict of Chinese-influenced Vietnam with the Indianized peoples, the first clash had occurred with Siam.

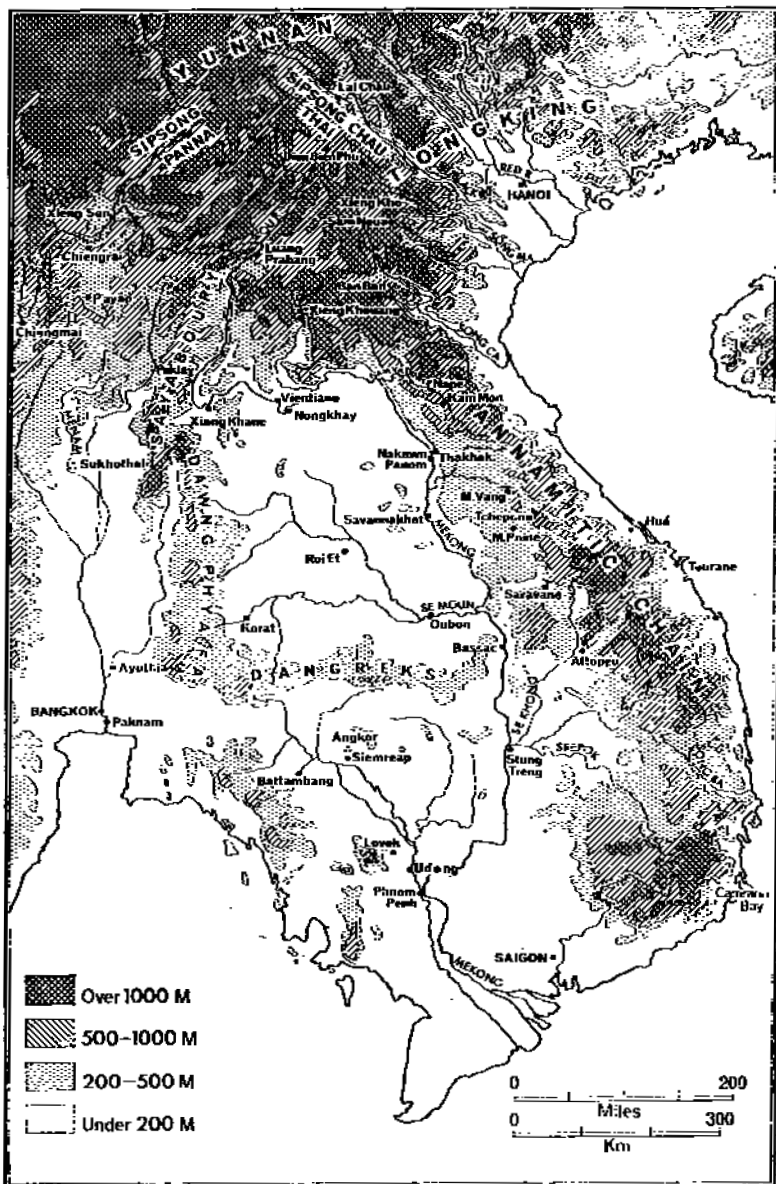
There had been a clash of equal moment a little earlier in the kingdom of Laos. In 1700 a pretender who had promised homage to the Vietnamese was placed by Vietnamese arms on the Laotian throne. Although the kingdom now broke into three, the portion which remained under Vietnamese suzerainty far outflanked the Siamese in Cambodia. The power of Vietnam had crossed the Annamitic Chain and reached the Siamese frontier.

The Kingdom of Laos

To understand how the situation had arisen and the nature of the conflict that now existed in Laos, it is necessary to trace in outline the history of the Laotian kingdom from the time when it emerged from legend as a confederation of Thai-Lao states in the fourteenth century.¹⁰ Tradition says that the Lao people originated in the valley of Dien Bien Phu, whence part of them migrated to Luang Prabang, driving the earlier inhabitants, who came to be

⁹ Hall, *op. cit.* (2nd edn.), p. 399. Robequain, *op. cit.*, p. 65, also discusses what is known of the process of Vietnamese colonization.

¹⁰ The only existing history of Laos is: P. Le Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos français* (Paris, 1931), which is based on Laotian annals, some of which are available in *Mission Pavie, études diverses*, vol. II (Paris, 1898). Mahasila Viravong's *History of Laos* (U.S. Joint Publications Research Service, 1958) is a collection of documentary material but not a systematic history.



Indo-China, Relief and History.

known as Khas,¹¹ into the hills. This movement was probably historical and it could well have taken place in the eleventh century or perhaps earlier. The Lao princes of Luang Prabang became vassals of Cambodia and their state part of the Indianized civilization of the Khmers. Before the fourteenth century began their allegiance had been transferred to Sukhothai. When, however, the power of Sukhothai was fading, the Lao prince Fa Ngum, who was in exile at Angkor, obtained from the Cambodians the military backing he needed to displace his grandfather as king of Luang Prabang. This he did in 1353,¹² forming a wide confederation of Lao states in the Mekong valley and temporarily restoring Cambodian influence there. With him there came from Cambodia Theravada Buddhism, which had already been adopted by the Siamese, and the Prabang, a sacred golden Buddha of reputed Ceylonese origin, which, in the sixteenth century gave the Laotian capital its modern name, and which became the palladium of the kingdom.

The authority of King Fa Ngum extended over the Sipsong Panna¹³ on the upper Mekong, the Sipsong Chau Thai¹⁴ on the Black River, the mountain state of Xieng Khouang, Muong Phoueun as it was called, and thence southwards to the borders of Cambodia. His frontier with the Vietnamese to the east ran along the watershed of the Annamitic Chain down to the high plateaux in the south, whose unconquered Kha tribesmen effectively insulated him from the Chams. He took possession of the Korat Plateau, perhaps originally to help the Khmers repulse an expedi-

¹¹ *Kha* is a Lao term applied to these peoples but not used by them. It means *slave* and is used here for convenience only. The same people are known in South Vietnam as *Moi*. A modern term recently introduced by the Lao is *Lao Theung* or *Lao of the mountains and forests*. While socially less opprobrious this is ethnically misleading.

¹² Coedès, *op. cit.*, p. 405 points out that the details of Fa Ngum's conquests are based only on the Laotian annals which cannot be accepted without reserve. However, this date is supported by a Sukhothai inscription, which cannot be dated earlier than 1359, mentioning Fa Ngum as Sukhothai's neighbour on the Mekong (*ibid.*, p. 407).

¹³ Sometimes translated 'land of the twelve thousand ricefields', *sip-song* meaning *twelve*, and *pan na* a unit of measurement for ricefields. In fact, however, *panna* is generally interpreted as *cantons* and the Sipsong Panna did consist of twelve cantons.

¹⁴ The twelve Thai cantons, an area centred on the Black River valley.

tion from Siam; Chiengnai to the west was his vassal; even Ayuthia may have sent him tribute.

The successors of Fa Ngum up to the middle of the sixteenth century were men of peace and the full extent of Laotian power was not maintained. Chiengmai was quickly lost, while Xieng Khouang and the Sipsong Chau Thai soon came to owe a partial allegiance to Vietnam. For the most part, however, the greater powers of Indo-China—Siam, Cambodia, Champa, and Vietnam—were sufficiently embroiled among themselves. Laos was remote, comparatively poor, and fraught with perils for the stranger. The one occasion when its tranquillity was seriously disturbed from outside, by the Vietnamese in 1479, is the more worth studying.

In 1400 a usurper had seized the throne of Vietnam and the deposed dynasty had appealed to China. The Chinese occupied the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi, and ousted the interloper; but they soon made it clear that they intended to stay, attempting for instance to force their language on the country. The Vietnamese found this oppressive and in 1418 began to resist. Three years later Luang Prabang offered to help, but hardly had the substantial Laotian force arrived than it changed sides and joined the Chinese. The Vietnamese nevertheless won their war and a new dynasty was founded by the victorious leader.

It was not until their decisive victory over Champa in 1471 that the Vietnamese chose to recall the treachery of the Laotians—so at least runs the story. By 1478 they appear to have been waiting for an excuse to attack. The occasion for their expedition of the following year is said to have been an unsatisfied request to the Laotians for a white elephant.¹⁵ The invaders had to travel some three hundred miles, much of it across the broadest part of the Annamitic Chain, difficult country and short of supplies. Perhaps for this reason they came by three routes, assembling in Xieng Khouang, at Xieng Kho on the borders of modern Sam Neua, and in the Sipsong Chau Thai. When all was ready they converged on Luang Prabang along the same valleys that the Viet Minh invaders of Laos used in 1953 and 1954. A bitter fight ensued;

¹⁵ For the significance of the white elephant in the Indianized states see Guy Wint, *The British in Asia* (London, 1947), p. 92. The Vietnamese, however, had no traditional regard for white elephants; if mentioned, it was a mere excuse.

the Laotians were beaten and the king fled down-river with the debris of his army.¹⁶

According to the Laotian annals the king's son rallied the fugitives and drove the enemy from the Mekong valley, but it seems more probable that the Vietnamese withdrew of their own accord after sacking Luang Prabang. This was until recently one of the most malarial places in Indo-China¹⁷ and it could not have been easy to maintain an army there. Malaria too may account partly for the Laotian tradition of heavy Vietnamese casualties on the way home. The speedy restoration of relations with Vietnam and the swift Laotian recovery from total defeat argue that the expedition had been essentially punitive, possibly originating in some frontier or trading dispute and designed to inspire respect.

However that may be, no action at all would have been possible for Vietnam without the connivance or coercion of states like Xieng Khouang and the Sipsong Chau Thai, whose neutrality between their two more powerful neighbours was now becoming traditional. Their rulers married princesses from both sides of the mountains. Sometimes they paid tribute in one direction, usually in both. This is understandable from all three points of view. Firstly, the mountain states depended on their neighbours for basic necessities such as salt. Secondly, to the Vietnamese in the plains of Tongking, the mountains of Xieng Khouang and the Sipsong Chau Thai could be seen as the dominating heights to the south-west and west, the natural refuge of bandits preying on the prosperous plainsmen and their trade. To the land-bound kingdom of Laos, on the other hand, the passes through these same hills were the trade-routes to Vietnam and the sea, and the gateway to the kingdom for an invader. Furthermore, he who controlled Xieng Khouang could menace trade and communications on the Mekong, which was the central highway of the whole Laotian country.

Both Laos and Vietnam therefore had legitimate interests in the neutrality and co-operation of the mountain states, who in turn

¹⁶ Le Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 66 and *Mission Pavie, études diverses*, II, pp. 50-51 are clear as to the fall of Luang Prabang after a bitter battle.

¹⁷ In 1941, before the introduction of anti-malarial prophylactic drugs, French troops in Luang Prabang had an annual hospitalization rate from malaria of 317 per cent.

needed both their neighbours. The highland princes made the most of their position. Considering themselves too weak to maintain absolute independence, they established themselves by alliances and marriages in a balancing position between the two, so preserving their individuality and prerogatives of government.

The damage done by the Vietnamese attack on Luang Prabang was soon restored and the city quickly recovered its influence over the upper Mekong states. The episode had however been a most unpleasant experience and it undoubtedly played its part in the renewal of close relations between Laos and Siam that now took place. The long reign of the great Siamese King Trilok¹⁸ (1448-88) was drawing to a close. Trilok had created for his kingdom a strong, centralized social and administrative organization which was to last unchanged into the nineteenth century. The development could not but have its effect on other states of common origin, including Laos, whose attention was in any case turning southwards because of the demands of European traders, now arriving on the coasts, for the gumlac and benzoin it produced. The king began to spend part of each year in Vientiane. Then in 1558 the Burmese conqueror, Bayinnaung, occupied Chiengmai, thus threatening both Luang Prabang and Ayuthia. The Laotian warrior king, Setthathirat, having failed to dislodge him, thereupon entered into an alliance with Siam and in 1563 transferred his capital to Vientiane where he would be safer from Burmese attack.

Bayinnaung moved against Ayuthia in 1564. The city surrendered and the Burmese army returned north to chastise Chiengmai for its attitude after the Burmese had left it earlier in the campaign. The ruler of Chiengmai fled to Vientiane and the Burmese followed. Setthathirat's new capital was not yet fortified. The Laotian king slipped away to the east, raised the countryside against the invaders and so harassed them that in 1565, at the height of the rains, they made for home. The Siamese immediately tried, with Setthathirat's help, to recover their independence, but Bayinnaung returned in 1568, sacked Ayuthia, demolished its walls, and deported its population. The Burmese punitive expedition against Vientiane nevertheless failed, and in 1571 Setthathirat marched southwards against Cambodia, who had been taking her

¹⁸ Boromo Trailokanat. See Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-9, for a summary of his reforms.



From B. P. Groslier, *Angkor, hommes et pierres* (Archaud, Paris, 1956)

Angkor Wat: 'Syams' in the army of King Suryavarman II

THE MEKONG EXPEDITION 1866-8



From F. Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine*, Paris, 1885
The passage of a rapid



From F. Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine*, Paris, 1885
The Nam Khane at Luang Prabang in 1867

revenge for past humiliations by raiding his prostrate ally, Siam.¹⁹

This campaign was Setthathirat's last. He seems to have made little impression on the Cambodians and on his way home he mysteriously disappeared, possibly in the course of a foray against the still unconquered Khas of the southern highlands.²⁰ Laos went through a period of Burmese domination and anarchy which lasted until the accession of Setthathirat's son, permitted by the failing power of Burma in 1592.

The seventeenth century saw the golden age of Laos under King Souliga Vongsa, whose court was visited by Dutch traders and Portuguese missionaries between 1641 and 1647. Vientiane was a proud city, Souliga Vongsa a stern king who made his name respected at home and abroad. Perhaps for this reason his relations with his neighbours in his early years were not always harmonious. The European accounts speak of a Siamese embassy received with great suspicion, of a rupture of relations with Vietnam, and of rumours of war with Cambodia. The king acknowledged no superior: 'there is not a monarch in existence, however powerful, that he does not consider to be beneath him'.²¹

As time went on Souliga Vongsa's relations with his neighbours improved and he was able to re-define his frontiers with Siam and Vietnam. South of the Sipsong Chau Thai and Xieng Khouang, which continued to pay tribute to both Vietnam and Laos, the frontier with Vietnam still followed the Annamitic Chain as far as the broad central highlands which neither side could penetrate. In doubtful areas where the watershed was hard to distinguish,

¹⁹ G. Maspéro, *L'Indochine* (Paris, 1929), vol. I, p. 116, mentions this expedition and says that it was beaten off by the Cambodians. B. P. Groslier, *Angkor et le Cambodge au XVIème siècle* (Paris, 1958), pp. 15-16, finds support in the Cambodian annals but wrongly quotes Le Boulanger as saying that the Laotian annals confirm.

²⁰ Le Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 90 says that he disappeared after having decided to abandon an unsuccessful campaign against the Khas.

²¹ P. Levy, 'Two accounts of travels in Laos in the seventeenth century', in De Berval (ed.), *Kingdom of Laos* (Saigon, 1959), pp. 66-67. The Manchus were ousting the Mings in China at this time. It may therefore have been true, as the missionaries assert, that the king did not acknowledge Chinese suzerainty for the moment. This was not normal. Both Vietnam and Luang Prabang held seals bestowed on them by China as a token of authority. The camel seal of Luang Prabang, received from the Manchus in exchange for that held from the Mings, can still be seen in the royal palace today.

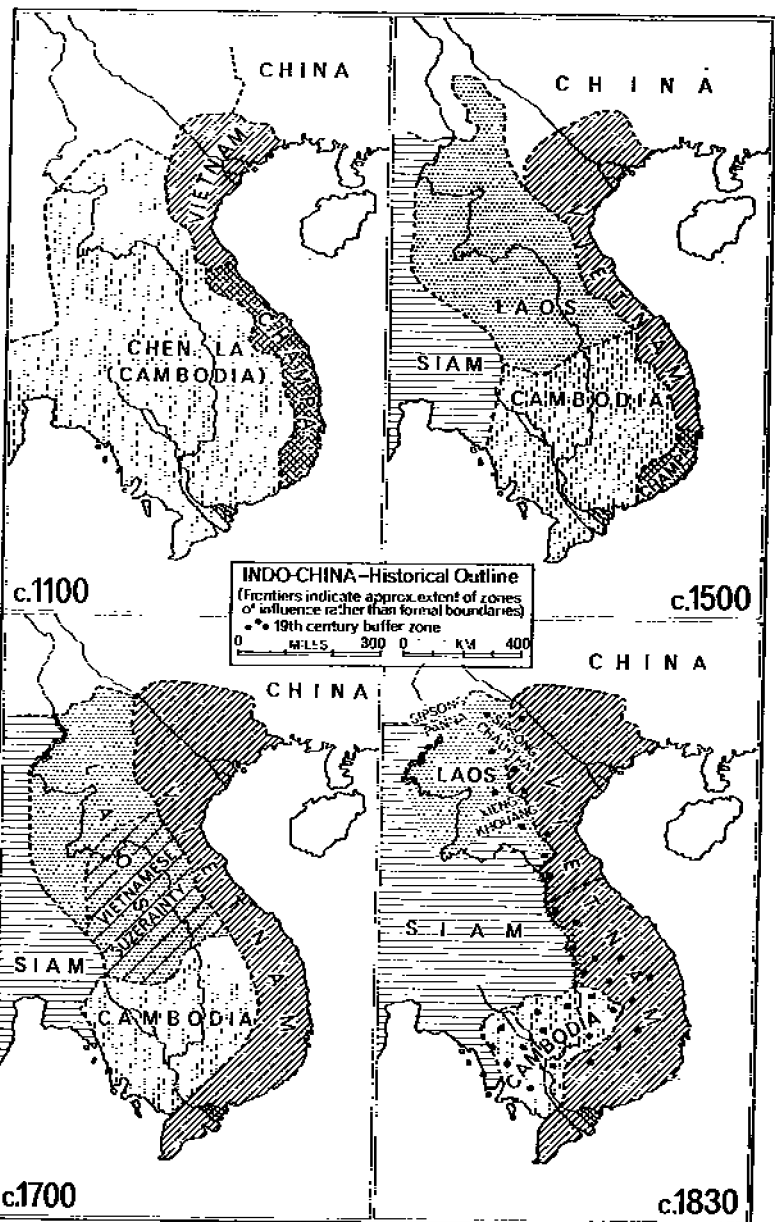
it was agreed that people who built their houses on stilts and with verandahs were to be considered Laotian and the rest subjects of Vietnam. The distinction might have been drawn in other ways, for the difference is one of culture rather than of race. Those who ate long-grained rice with chop-sticks and ornamented their houses with dragons belonged to the Chinese-influenced civilization of Vietnam although their language might be closely akin to Lao; those who ate glutinous rice with their fingers, and decorated their houses with serpents, were part of the Indian-influenced civilization of Laos, Cambodia, and Siam.

The frontier agreed by Setthathirat with Siam in 1560 was reaffirmed by Souligna Vongsa. From the northernmost limits of Siamese power in the Menam valley, it ran north and south along the Dawng Phya Fa hills between the Menam and Mekong basins, perhaps as far south as Korat. In the south the provinces of Bassac, Attopeu, and Saravane were already Laotian and the boundary with Cambodia was at the waterfalls of Khone²² where it remains today.

The end of Souligna Vongsa's reign was marred by tragedy. The crown prince, the king's only son, seduced the wife of the chief of the palace pages. The king insisted on his trial and execution according to law.²³ In 1694, therefore, when Souligna Vongsa died, there was no crown prince and the king's two grandsons were too young to succeed him. There followed a period of disorder which in 1700 permitted the dead king's nephew, the son of a brother who had taken refuge at the Vietnamese court, to seize the throne with the help of a Vietnamese army. This brought Laos under the suzerainty of Vietnam. Souligna Vongsa's grandsons had, however, escaped to Luang Prabang where in 1707 they proclaimed their independence; the new king in Vientiane was never able to dispute this and Luang Prabang thus evaded Vietnamese dominance. Six years later the principedom of Bassac also broke away, to pass thereafter more and more under the influence of Siam. What remained was the kingdom of Vientiane, the great expanse of middle Laos from the Annamitic Chain to the Dawng Phya Fa hills. The richest and most populous part of the country, including the great plain that is today north-eastern Siam, now owed allegiance to Vietnam.

²² Noted by Van Wusthoff: P. Levy, loc. cit.

²³ Le Boulanger, op. cit., p. 129.



Siam and the Vietnamese

The extension of Vietnamese influence to the Vientiane kingdom materially altered the pattern of power relations in Indo-China. At the very time when Siamese interests were beginning to conflict with those of the Vietnamese in Cambodia, the authority of Vietnam had reached the Siamese frontier. The immediate struggle in Cambodia, where the reimposition of Siamese control in 1714 did not halt the tide of Vietnamese colonization, masked for a time the significance to Siam of the change in Laos. But in 1753 another Burmese conqueror began to make himself felt. Ayuthia was again under Burmese attack in 1760 and in 1767 it was destroyed. Instead of helping Siam as Setthathirat had done two hundred years earlier, the ruler of Vientiane sided with Burma, and when in 1771 he was threatened with punishment by Luang Prabang who had also suffered a Burmese occupation, a Burmese force rescued him.

Helped meanwhile by Chinese attacks on Burma, which may have been prompted by the Burmese campaigns in Laos,²⁴ Siam had regained her independence under Phya Taksin, and was once more embroiled with the encroaching Vietnamese in Cambodia. This struggle was again coming to a climax when, in 1773, civil war broke out in Vietnam. It was not until after the Vietnamese Prince Nguyen Anh had, with French assistance, reconquered the country and established himself as the Emperor Gia Long of a unified Vietnam in 1802, that Siamese authority in Cambodia could be seriously challenged.

In the interval Siam consolidated her power. Having decisively repulsed a new series of Burmese invasions, she occupied Vientiane in 1778 and exacted tribute from Luang Prabang. Whatever the immediate cause of this action, and on this there is some uncertainty, the plain fact was that Siam could not afford to leave the Laotian states free to co-operate with her major enemies.²⁵

A domestic revolt now brought Siam's leading soldier, General

²⁴ The renewal of regular tribute by Luang Prabang to China in 1734 is recorded in the annals: *Le Boulanger*, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-1.

²⁵ See D. K. Wyatt, 'Siam and Laos, 1767-1827' in *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, September 1963, an admirably clear and consistent reconciliation of the available material on this complicated period.

Chakri,²⁶ founder of the present royal dynasty, to the throne. The reign of King Rama I, as he was called, was to see another great struggle with Burma and the annexation by Siam of much of western Cambodia. By the time Rama I died in 1809 the foundations of Siamese strength were firmly laid.

To the east, however, the power of Vietnam had revived. Cambodia, her territory greatly reduced, was already paying tribute to both her neighbours, and in 1806 the Laotian Prince Anou, whose family King Rama had restored to rule Vientiane in 1782, formally renewed his kingdom's homage to Vietnam. There had been an embassy to Hué with a letter which read somewhat as follows:

Vientiane has long been the vassal of Vietnam and used to pay tribute every three years. The revolt of the Tayson [i.e. the Vietnamese civil war] forced it into submission to the Siamese who are illtreating its people. Today the prince of Vientiane, seeing the power and fame of the Emperor Gia Long, asks to be allowed once more to be the servant of Vietnam and to pay tribute as in the past.²⁷

Gia Long showed great interest, acknowledged Vientiane formally as a vassal, agreed to a triennial tribute, and sent back the embassy loaded with presents.

This curious transaction was not necessarily detrimental to Siamese suzerainty over Vientiane. It was accepted that the rulers of small states placed between powerful neighbours might pay tribute in more than one direction, although a suzerain would make his authority predominate if he could. The Siamese would refer to a vassal owing a dual allegiance as a 'bird with two heads';²⁸ similarly the towns of the neutral Sipsong Chau Thai were sometimes called 'the towns on the two sides of the sky'.²⁹ Siam's influence over Vientiane was, however, still stronger than that of Vietnam and she made no particular issue of Prince Anou's action.

In 1812, after a few years in which the power of Siam and Vietnam had been precariously balanced in Cambodia, Siam intervened to support a pretender to the Cambodian throne and the king

²⁶ He was Taksin's *chakri*, i.e. military commander, and turned the title into the name of a dynasty.

²⁷ Le Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

²⁸ This phrase and the general view of Siamese policy as pragmatic and defence-orientated, I owe to Mr. E. H. S. Simmonds' reading of Siamese records of the period.

²⁹ See Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, *A Collection of Chronicles* (Prachum Pongsawadan), Part XXIV (Bangkok, 1924), p. 2.

fled to Saigon. Vietnam reinstated him in the following year with a Vietnamese garrison. Siam then seized a broad band of Cambodian territory south of the Dangrek mountains, which included the province of Stung Treng east of the Mekong. This, together with the existing vassal state of Bassac, constituted a thick wedge of Siamese territory between the ruler of Vientiane and his Vietnamese allies in Cambodia.

Prince Anou appears in fact to have been cherishing ideas of independence. In 1819 his services in stifling a Kha revolt in the south won from the Siamese the governorship of Bassac for his son. At Anou's instigation the son proceeded to fortify Oubon, which lies fifty miles from Bassac in the direction of Bangkok,³⁰ and to raise troops there. Anou claimed that this would help in the defence of Siam, but the Siamese who saw no danger in this particular area can hardly have believed him. The prince also sent emissaries to Luang Prabang proposing a secret alliance against Siam. He himself maintained a considerable court and Vientiane recovered something of its former glory. At length in 1827, perhaps believing a rumour that the British, after their victory in the first Burma War, were about to attack Siam, Anou marched on Bangkok from Oubon and Vientiane.³¹ The Siamese gathered their forces, defeated the rebel and once more occupied his capital.

Prince Anou escaped and, when his efforts to drum up support from his Laotian allies had failed, he took refuge at the court of Vietnam. The king of Siam had just written to the emperor pointing out that Anou owed allegiance to them both and threatening invasion if Vietnam supported him. However, a suzerain had certain obligations to his vassal. The emperor solved the difficulty by giving Anou two companies of soldiers for the journey only. They were to return after installing him in Vientiane.³²

In these circumstances Anou's cause was hopeless. After another defeat near Vientiane in 1829 he was intercepted by Prince Noi of Xieng Khouang when on his way to China, and handed over to Siam. He died in Bangkok a few years later. For having delivered

³⁰ The new capital of Siam since the accession of Rama I.

³¹ So Prince Phanuphantuvongwardja in *Répression de la révolte de Vientiane* (Bangkok, 1926), whose account is supported by the Vietnamese annals: Bui Quang Tung, 'Chao Anou, roi de Vientiane', in *Bulletin de la société des études indochinoises*, XXXIII (1958), pp. 401-6.

³² Bui Quang Tung, loc. cit.

Anou to the Siamese and for other acts of insubordination, the emperor of Vietnam executed Prince Noi and annexed his principedom.

Vientiane was devastated. Not only did the Siamese loot and burn the city itself, carrying off the sacred Prabang, its most precious statues and other booty; they also depopulated much of the trans-Mekong area. The river towns were moved to the Siamese bank. Nongkhay was built eleven miles down-stream to replace Vientiane, Xieng Khane was rebuilt south of the Mekong. The people of Kam Mon were removed across the river almost as far as Roi Et; those of Vientiane itself were transported even deeper into Siam.

This was of course far more than mere retribution for Anou's rebellion or the traditional enslavement of a conquered people. It was a defensive measure directed against Vietnam. By emptying the country beyond the Mekong, Siam secured the river as a possible defence line for herself, denied it to Laotian rebels of the future and made the return of Vietnamese influence more difficult. The despatch of an army in 1831 to restore Siamese authority in Cambodia was part of the same struggle. The British intervention in lower Burma had reduced the danger to Siam from the west. She could now afford to look resolutely once more towards the east.³³

The Siamese invasion of Cambodia started well. The Cambodians were defeated, the Siamese occupied most of southern Cambodia, and the king fled to Vietnam. Then resistance began to stiffen. Irregulars harried Siamese detachments, the eastern provinces prepared to fight, and finally Vietnam sent an army. In front of this the Siamese withdrew, and the king of Cambodia was restored to his throne. When he died in 1834, however, the Vietnamese proceeded to integrate his country into their own. In 1841 the Cambodians rebelled, murdered every Vietnamese they could find, appealed to Siam for help and offered the crown to a prince who was living under Siamese protection. But the Vietnamese were too strongly entrenched for such a manoeuvre to succeed. After four years of effort Siam could achieve no more than a resumption of dual suzerainty. King Ang Duong, great-great-grandfather of Prince Sihanouk, accordingly received his crown jointly from the two. A wise and pious monarch with no illusions

³³ Walter F. Vella has an extensive account of Siamese dealings with Laos and Cambodia at this time in *Siam under Rama III* (New York, 1957), pp. 78-114.

about the jealous intentions of his neighbours, he gave neither of them any excuse to resume their quarrels at his expense.

In Xieng Khouang also the traditional dual relationship was eventually restored. At first Siam had acquiesced in the annexation of the mountain state by Vietnam. The removal of Vietnamese influence from the Mekong valley, however, had restored the significance of the mountain barrier. Siam was now the Mekong valley power and it was not long before she had adopted the traditional Laotian interest in the hills. At length a rebellion took place with her encouragement in Xieng Khouang, and in 1855 the Vietnamese found it prudent to reinstate a member of the old ruling family.³⁴ The new ruler paid tribute to his neighbours on both sides of the mountains as his forbears had done.

Thus for the moment equilibrium had been restored in what was now Siam's conflict with the Vietnamese, a conflict which she had inherited from the Chams and Cambodians and in which Cambodia was the prize. It was an equilibrium established by buffers. The two peoples were separated in the south by Cambodia, in the north by Xieng Khouang and the Sipsong Chau Thai, states who showed their neutrality by paying tribute to both sides. In the centre there was the long depopulated zone between the Mekong and the Annamitic Chain, and the Kha and Moi tribesmen in their highlands, unsubdued by either side. Siam stood in awe of her thrusting and dynamic rival and her mood was defensive. The teeming Vietnamese, secure in the knowledge of their past achievements, their hardihood and vigour, looked to the empty Mekong valley and beyond as the natural sphere of their future action. Each found the civilization, religion, language, and manners of the other alien if not barbaric. There was no reason for liking or trust between them; a succession dispute in Cambodia or Xieng Khouang could well again have led to war.

History had thus provided some reason for the attempt to establish a buffer zone between Siam and Vietnam. A century later when the French empire in Indo-China had come and gone, that reason had been immeasurably reinforced.

³⁴ Le Boulanger, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-5. James McCarthy, *Surveying and Exploring in Siam* (London, 1900), p. 38, has a substantial account of the rebellion, which Le Boulanger does not appear to have seen. McCarthy was in Xieng Khouang with the Siamese in 1884-5 and probably heard first-hand evidence.

CHAPTER II

The Consequences of French Rule

THE French formed their Indo-Chinese empire between 1858 and 1907. From the first they were in conflict with Siam across the neutral zone, which they eventually absorbed. Their first move was in the south. Having annexed part of southern Vietnam, they proceeded in 1867 to replace the joint suzerainty over Cambodia hitherto shared by Vietnam and the Siamese, with exclusive French protection. Twenty years later, masters of all Vietnam and the conscious heirs of the Vietnamese expansionist tradition, they began to penetrate the north and centre of the former buffer zone. The greater part of what is now Laos was surrendered to them by Siam in 1893; the rest, together with the Cambodian provinces Siam had managed to keep, was French by 1907. These acquisitions, and the area of influence in Siam which France obtained as a result of her agreement with Britain in 1896, brought her well beyond the furthest limits ever attained by Vietnamese authority.

This advanced position was not fully maintained. Except in Cambodia, France did not confirm her influence over the western half of the middle Mekong basin. But the rest was organized as a unity, Cambodia and Laos becoming the up-country regions of what was in effect a French empire of Vietnam. Vietnamese efforts in the nineteenth century to integrate border territories into Vietnam had failed. Those of France succeeded; over the appearance of local autonomies there was imposed an administration of which the lower officials and technicians were predominantly Vietnamese, and which adopted some of the traditional Vietnamese points of view.

The defeat of France by Germany in 1940 started the disintegration of French power in the east. Siam, fearful that the whole of French Indo-China would become Vietnamese as and

when French power departed, tried to reassert herself in Cambodia and Laos. The old rifts reopened. By the time the French empire was finally dissolved in the Geneva settlement of 1954 they had become a great chasm, widened and deepened by the tensions of the Cold War in which Siam and North Vietnam were on opposite sides, and in which a resurgent China supported North Vietnam. There was thus urgent reason for the attempt to turn the kingdom of Laos, whose territory had once insulated the two peoples in the north, into a neutral buffer state.

But could this be done? The kingdom of Laos as formed by France did indeed contain much of the territory which had separated Siam and Vietnam in the nineteenth century. The zone Siam had depopulated was, however, no longer empty. Its Lao people had returned from across the Mekong. The population of Laos was now composed of two traditionally hostile groups, approximately equal in strength, each backed in its internal quarrel by close ethnic kindred in Siam and North Vietnam. This was bound to make stability difficult, and without stability 'a buffer state loses its purpose'.¹

* * *

The potential instability of Laos had resulted from the circumstances in which the French colonial empire was created. France moved into Indo-China after the Opium Wars in the 1840s and 1850s had demonstrated China's inability to resist Western pressure.² The first phase of her conquest she owed to her missionaries and admirals; the second to her explorers, in particular to a young naval officer of genius, Francis Garnier, whose courage and enterprise were to prepare the way for the French conquest of Tongking, and to Auguste Pavie, whose winning of Laotian hearts proved remarkably useful to the colonial party in Paris.

In 1858 the duties of France to her missionaries in Vietnam happened to coincide with her desire for a naval base in the Far East.³ After several forceful attempts to secure freedom from

¹ Professor H. Trevor Roper in his introduction to Prince Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life* (London, 1960).

² The best general account of the French conquest of Indo-China is in D. Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indo-China* (London, 1961), to which I am greatly indebted.

³ See Pierre Renouvin, *La question d'extrême orient* (Paris, 1946), p. 66. Vietnamese persecution of the missionaries was in fact done more for

persecution for her missionaries, she seized Tourane.⁴ In 1859, having still failed to obtain satisfaction from the Vietnamese emperor, she occupied Saigon. This led to the cession of about half of southern Vietnam to France in 1862. As the country was pacified French influence spread across the Mekong into Cambodia, which the weakening of Vietnamese power had left under the domination of Siam.

France was already acting very much as, given the power, the Vietnamese themselves might have done. As early as 1861 an officer had been sent to inform the king of Cambodia that France intended to occupy southern Vietnam and was anxious to help him maintain his country's independence. The king, who only in the previous year had owed his throne to Siamese help against a rebellion, replied coldly. France nevertheless continued to court him and in April 1863 sent a sloop under the command of Lieutenant Doudart de Lagrée with orders to make a geographical survey of the country and to establish close contact with the king. He succeeded: 'the [king's] children eat out of my hand', he wrote, 'and climb on my shoulders'.⁵ French missionaries in Cambodia were also at work. The king was eventually persuaded that his only hope of avoiding absorption by Siam lay in accepting the protection of France. In September 1863 he agreed to a treaty transforming into a protectorate the suzerain rights over his kingdom which France claimed as heir to the power of Vietnam in the south.

Siam, supported by the British whose commercial interests in that country were already substantial, protested that the treaty ignored her title as joint suzerain over Cambodia, and then insisted that the Cambodian king go to Bangkok to receive his crown, thus acknowledging Siamese overlordship in the accepted fashion. But France was not to be diverted. As soon as the monarch left his capital on 3 March 1864, Doudart de Lagrée landed a naval party and hoisted the French flag. The king, hearing from afar the guns with which the flag was saluted and fearing a revolution, changed

political than religious reasons. The emperors saw them as agents of the encroaching French: P. Devillers, *Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris, 1952), p. 185.

⁴ Now Da Nang, one of the main United States bases in South Vietnam.

⁵ R. Vercelet, *Francis Garnier* (Paris, 1952), p. 27.

his mind; he formally accepted the treaty with France on 17 April. The Siamese ended by acquiescing in what they could not alter. In 1867 their claims to suzerainty over Cambodia were exchanged for French recognition of their possession of the formerly Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siemreap. France had meanwhile annexed the remainder of southern Vietnam. The foundations of her empire in the East had been laid. Her eager young men burned to extend it.

For by now French eyes were being drawn to the supposedly rich possibilities of trade with Yunnan which, even before the British annexation of Rangoon and lower Burma in 1852, had long assumed great importance in British eyes. In 1863 Francis Garnier, a young naval officer who had already distinguished himself in the conquest of southern Vietnam, had conceived the idea of a voyage up the River Mekong, known hitherto only by the accounts of the Dutch and Portuguese visitors in the seventeenth century, and by that of the explorer Henri Mouhot who had died near Luang Prabang in 1861.⁶ Like several of his naval contemporaries Garnier dreamed of giving France possessions in the Far East as vast and flourishing as the British empire in India. The central artery would be the Mekong, whose fertile delta was already in French hands. The first essential was exploration, to determine the possibilities of the river as a means of access to Yunnan.

By June 1863 Garnier was urging the idea of a Mekong expedition upon his superiors in Saigon and his friends at home, with all the enthusiasm and eloquence of which this intense young man was capable. At length, says a fellow-officer,⁷ 'his letters, his representations and those of his friends to Count Chasseloup-Laubat, then Minister for the Navy, won confidence in and finally acceptance for his project'. The Minister authorized the expedition in 1865; as Garnier was still only twenty-six, Doudart de Lagrée was chosen to command it.

The expedition left Saigon on 5 June 1866. It returned there two years and fourteen days later, having voyaged up the Mekong,

⁶ H. Mouhot, *Voyages dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos*, F. de Lanoye (ed.), (Paris, 4th edn., 1883).

⁷ Capitaine de Vaisscau Trève, 'Notice sur Francis Garnier' in *Revue maritime et coloniale*, 1874, quoted in F. Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine* (Paris, 1885), p. iv.

marched through the chaos of the Panthay⁸ rebellion in Yunnan and sailed down the Yangtse-kiang to Shanghai. The journey cost the life of Doudart de Lagrée who died three months before it ended. For Garnier, whose work as deputy had been of outstanding importance and who wrote the excellent official account,⁹ it won wide public acclaim. The findings were clear. 'The Mekong was not, after all, a navigable highway to Yunnan, access to which should rather be obtained by the Red River from Hanoi, a relatively easy and very much shorter route. The Mekong valley was nevertheless a desirable acquisition for France. There was gold, silver, and other minerals. The people were amenable and would prosper when freed from their present evils, the scourge of the slave trade which created insecurity and terror in the south,¹⁰ and the oppressive hand of Siam. However the country was thinly populated and could not be exploited without labour from overpopulated Vietnam. 'At the sight of a naturally fertile soil', said one of the explorers, 'only half-inhabited and only half-cultivated . . . one cannot help thinking of the Vietnamese.'¹¹ When the Vietnamese crossed the mountains into the Mekong valley, they would transform the country by their industry and healthful example.

Thus from the first the French view coincided with Vietnamese ambitions as to their future role on the Mekong. The defensive measures taken by Siam in 1830 had, however, been effective; the zone between the river and the Annamitic Chain was still largely free from Vietnamese influence. Even in 1877, ten years

⁸ The Thai Muslim rebellion against Chinese rule in Yunnan began in 1855 and lasted until 1873 when it was put down with the help of arms from the French.

⁹ F. Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine*, two vols. (Paris, 1873), and one volume (Paris, 1885). References are to the later edition. Among Garnier's honours was a gold medal awarded to him jointly with David Livingstone by the first international geographical conference at Brussels in 1871, and the patron's medal of the Royal Geographical Society.

¹⁰ On the slave trade in southern Laos, see Aymonier, *Voyage dans le Laos* (Paris, 1895), vol. I, p. 122, *Mission Pavie, géographie et voyages*, vol. IV, pp. 156, 184, 207, and Garnier, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

¹¹ L. de Carné, *Voyage en l'Indochine et dans l'empire chinois* (Paris, 1872), pp. 96-97. When Dr. Harmand visited Laos in 1877 he said that the climate was so bad that France would have to colonize the country with Vietnamese and send few Europeans: E. Lefèvre, *Un voyage au Laos* (Paris, 1898), p. 164.

after the Mekong expedition, Vietnamese authority extended only over Tchepone, Muong Vang, and Muong Phine,¹² and even so Siamese influence was present as well. Except at Nakawn Panom, from which runs the shortest route between Vietnam and the Mekong, where there had been Vietnamese traders since the seventeenth century and where there was now a regular Vietnamese colony, the Vietnamese were as far away from the Mekong as ever.

Having started their voyage with the promise 'to do better than the English', the explorers were plagued throughout it by the fear that their rivals would forestall them. At one time they heard of a great British expedition coming down the river towards them. They quickly put their records in order so that they could prove their exploration as far as it had gone. But their immediate, obsessive reaction was anxiety for the prestige of France. What sort of comparison, said Garnier, would the Laotians make between the modest French undertaking, neglected by its authorities, run on the cheap, and a fat British mission of forty Anglo-Saxons lavishly equipped by an imaginative government.¹³ The incident ended in laughter, for the rumoured English turned out to be a solitary Dutch geographer in Siamese employ, equally apprehensive of the vast, heavily armed French expedition which report had led him to expect. But the moral remained. Again and again the explorers found evidence of English enterprise, British textiles specially designed for Laotian markets, British Indian currency in circulation alongside the local cowrie shells, while the only signs they could see of France were bottles of liquor in the Phnom Penh shops.¹⁴

By the time Garnier led the expedition back to Saigon in June 1868 a British reconnaissance party had in fact already entered Yunnan from Burma.¹⁵ The explorer's message was the more urgent and he argued it with his usual one-pointed force. The best way into Yunnan was by the Red River from Hanoi. To gain the riches she sought, France had only to control the river. It was not long before proof was provided. At Hankow the mission had en-

¹² Garnier, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-8, note, quoting Dr. Harmand.

¹³ Garnier, *op. cit.*, p. 268. The total budget allotted for the mission over the two years was 20,000 francs: Vercei, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ Vercei, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁵ Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 594. It was followed by numerous British journeys overland between China and Burma in the next ten years.

countered Jean Dupuis, the French trader and adventurer, then on his way to Yunnan. Garnier had told him of his views about the Red River and had urged him to use this route on his way back. The stalwart Dupuis, who had had a similar idea himself, found that the river was navigable without undue difficulty and in 1873 delivered a cargo by this route to Yunnan.

The Franco-Prussian War had meanwhile diverted France and Garnier from oriental ambitions. Garnier was the first to recover. By the middle of 1871 he was urging his countrymen that the moment of national disaster they were experiencing was also the moment to resume their expansion and restore their prestige in the East. France was depressed and her response discouraging.¹⁶ Garnier therefore obtained the long leave he required for a further exploration of the upper Yangtse and Yunnan on his own account. From this adventure he was recalled to Saigon in August 1873 by the governor of the colony, Admiral Dupré.

The voyage of Dupuis up the Red River had been made against the wishes of the Vietnamese authorities in Hanoi. When he reappeared there in April 1873 with a load of Yunnanese tin and copper, and announced that he meant to go back with a cargo of salt, trade in which was a government monopoly, he met sharp Vietnamese opposition. The authorities refused him the salt and did whatever else they could to thwart and harass him. Dupuis was accompanied by 150 well-armed Yunnanese, lent to him as an escort by the Chinese authorities in Yunnan. With these he now occupied part of Hanoi, calling meanwhile for help to the French in Saigon who had hitherto supported him. The Vietnamese also appealed to Saigon, asking that Dupuis be removed.

Admiral Dupré had recommended to his government in the strongest terms that France should follow up the initiative of Dupuis in opening the Red River to trade, by establishing a protectorate over Tongking.¹⁷ The answer from Paris had been firm:

¹⁶ French reluctance to acquire colonies at this time, and the contrast with the brief colonialist spell later on, is clearly shown in S. H. Roberts, *The History of French Colonial Policy 1870-1925* (London, 2nd edn., 1963), pp. 424-8. It may be compared with British reluctance to exploit the opportunities gained by Raffles in South-East Asia earlier: S. Rose, *Britain and South-East Asia* (London, 1962), pp. 29-36.

¹⁷ Northern Vietnam. The three divisions of imperial Vietnam were Tongking in the north, Annam in the centre, and Cochin China in the south.

'à aucun prix il ne faut engager la France au Tonkin'.¹⁸ Dupré argued that the Vietnamese request, which he heard was being supplemented by an appeal to the English, had created a new situation. 'Let me act on my own', he said, 'I take full responsibility. If the results are not what I have led you to expect you can disavow me.'¹⁹

While Paris was slowly accustoming itself to the idea of an inexpensive protectorate,²⁰ the admiral recalled Garnier from his exploration and gave him command of a force of two hundred men—he had only asked for sixty—to go to Hanoi. Garnier's orders, which he drafted himself,²¹ were concerned with composing the Dupuis affair and opening the Red River to navigation. The real object was, however, to present France with a protectorate over Tongking which she could accept as a *fait accompli*.

Garnier reached Hanoi on 5 November 1873. On 20 November he seized the citadel by surprise assault. With his own men and those of Dupuis, together with additional volunteers he was able to enrol, he then proceeded within a month to capture the five key towns of the Red River delta. On 21 December, just as talks with representatives from the Vietnamese imperial court were beginning, he was killed leading a handful of men in a sortie against bands of Chinese irregulars who were helping the Vietnamese.

Paris could no longer pretend not to know what was afoot. Garnier's bold action was disowned and his conquests handed back. In exchange the Vietnamese emperor recognized French conquests in the south, admitted French trade to his major ports, opened the Red River to French commerce, and again promised toleration for the Christians.

There were other concessions and at first the French were quite pleased with their bargain. But they had lost face. As soon as French troops were removed the Vietnamese began to harass the Christians and all those who had helped Garnier and Dupuis. Increasingly unsettled conditions in the country soon ended any possibility of free navigation on the Red River. By 1879 the treaty

¹⁸ P. Lchault, *La France et l'Angleterre en Asie*, vol. I (Paris, 1892), introduction, p. xix, and p. 689, note 2.

¹⁹ J. Ferry, *Le Tonkin et la mère-patrie* (Paris, 1890), p. 86.

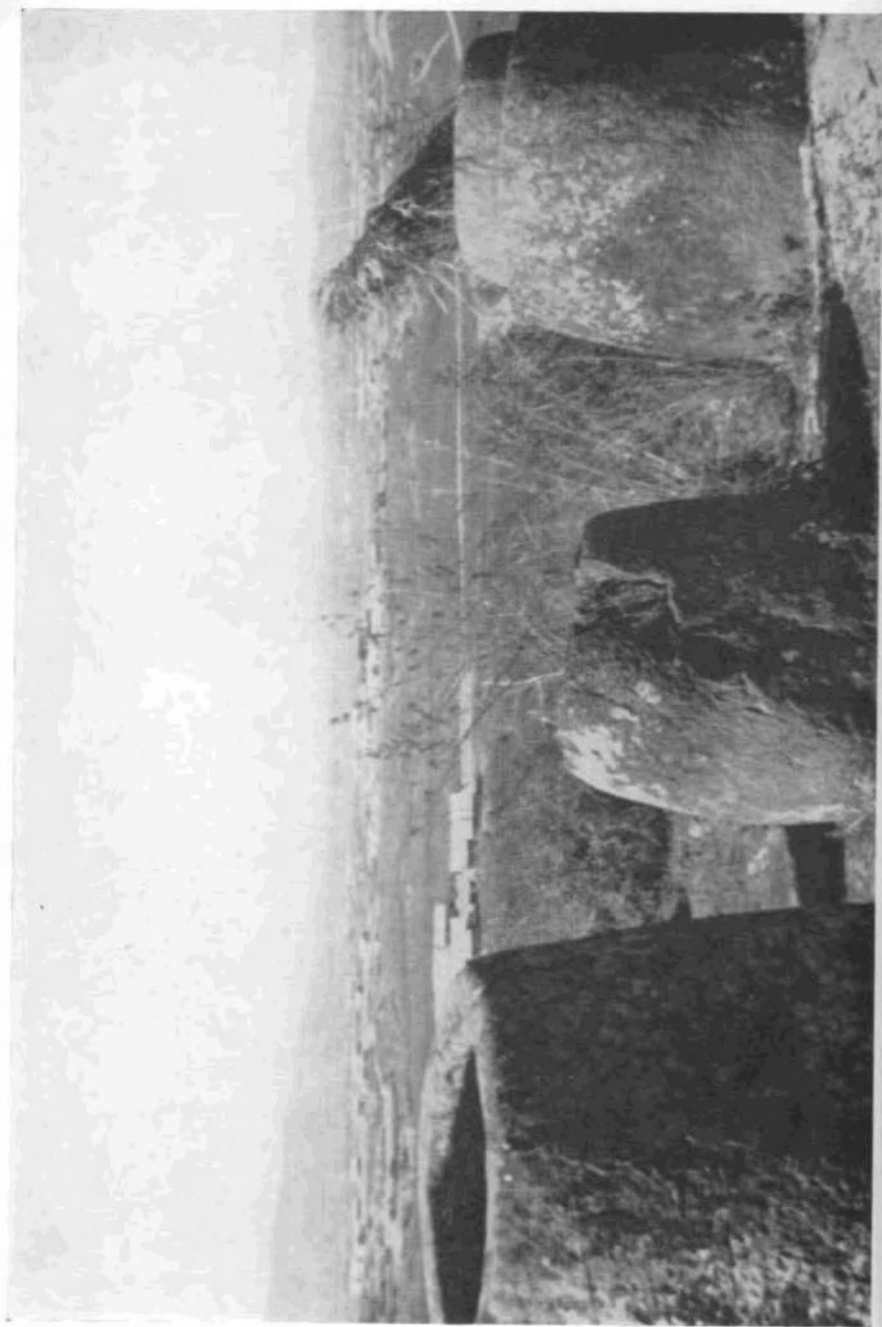
²⁰ Ferry, *op. cit.*, p. 86: 'Enfin le ministre finit par céder: il consent à l'établissement éventuel d'un protectorat au Tonkin.'

²¹ Garnier, *op. cit.*, introduction, p. x.



From G. Maspéro, *L'Indochine*, Paris, 1929

King Sisavang Vong in 1928



The Plain of Jars

was virtually a dead letter and in 1880 China publicly reasserted her suzerainty over Vietnam.

France now had the clear choice between annexing Tongking and abandoning her interests there. She decided on annexation. In 1882 Hanoi and part of the Red River delta were seized, but again the leader of the French expedition was killed by Chinese irregulars in Vietnamese employ. The French realized that they could never control Tongking unless they had mastered the emperor. This final step was taken in 1883. Over the following two years its consequences were forced upon China. By the Treaty of Tientsin in 1885, China accepted the French presence in Tongking. The whole of modern Vietnam thus came under French rule.

The French Mekong expedition of 1866-8 had attracted little attention in Siam, whose hand still rested comparatively lightly on her far-flung Laotian territories. If the Siamese were concerned at all it was in relation to Cambodia, whose loss they were still reluctant to accept. The establishment of French authority in northern Vietnam, however, contained a possible threat to Siamese security which depended, in Xieng Khouang and the Sipsong Chau Thai, on joint suzerainty of the sort that had been abruptly ended in Cambodia.

This was already in the minds of the Siamese when in 1884 they despatched an expedition to deal with Chinese outlaw bands who had been preying on northern Laos at intervals for twelve years. These bands, closely related to those responsible for the death of Garnier in 1873, consisted of soldiers who had fled from China after the final defeat of the 'I'ai P'ing army there in 1864.²² Known by the colour of the pennants they flew as Black, Yellow, or Red Flags, they had spilled over the border into Tongking and upper Laos. In 1872 two thousand Red Flags, ousted from the Black River valley by Yellow Flags at the end of 1871, moved south and installed themselves at Ban Ban in eastern Xieng Khouang, a strategic point even today on the main route into Vietnam. They were still there, having ravaged the country as far as Vientiane and the Mekong, in 1884.

The Siamese had tried and failed to remove the interlopers in 1872-3. In 1884 a stronger force laid siege to Ban Ban but was

²² See Lady Flavia Anderson, *The Rebel Emperor* (London, 1960), for an account of the T'ai P'ing rebellion.

eventually forced, by malaria and the rains, to withdraw.²³ Following this failure Siam decided to occupy all the high country north and east of Luang Prabang, including the Sipsong Chau Thai. Two forces were raised for this purpose. The first, assembled at Nongkhay in 1885 to deal with the Red Flags in Xieng Khouang, found that the outlaws had retired further north. A second force of a thousand Siamese and Laotian troops under Colonel Wai Woranat,²⁴ reached Luang Prabang in October 1885. It was intended for the Sipsong Chau Thai and for Sam Neua, a formerly autonomous hill state annexed by Vietnam after the Siamese conquest of Vientiane. Woranat appointed two commissioners to supervise the administration of the country at the side of the king, and set off on a cautious campaign in the hills.

The French representative in Bangkok did not hear of the new Siamese expedition until after it had left the capital. According to Le Boulanger, it had been kept secret from the French at the instance of British advisers to the king of Siam, who were hoping that it might limit French penetration of Tongking, considered dangerous to British commercial plans and interests in Yunnan.²⁵

It is certainly true that by 1885, when they signed their treaty with the Chinese, the ambitions of the French were sharply in conflict with British interests in South-East Asia. This had been most marked in Burma. King Mindon had long realized the possibilities of playing off other European powers against the British, who had occupied the southern part of his country in 1852. In 1872 he negotiated a commercial treaty with France and in the following year he received a French envoy who, after giving soothing assurances to the British, made damaging secret agreements with Mindon, which included an undertaking to provide French officers to train his army.

Like Garnier's action in Tongking a year later these agreements were quickly disavowed by the French government in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. But the years when France was

²³ James McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-91 has an eye-witness account of part of this siege.

²⁴ Properly, the Chaomoen Wai Woranat, the title by which he was generally known. His name was Jerm Sangchuto. The Sangchuto family is related to the Bunnag family of Siam, and it is to Mr. Tej Bunnag of St. Antony's College, Oxford, that I owe this detail.

²⁵ Le Boulanger, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-2.

recovering her morale and strength after defeat in Europe, also saw a dramatic deterioration in British relations with Burma. After the accession of King Thibaw in 1879 matters began to move towards a crisis. In May 1883 Thibaw sent a mission to Europe which installed itself in Paris and at once asked France for arms. In spite of repeated French reassurances to England, the Franco-Burmese treaty signed at the beginning of 1885 was accompanied by a guarded French promise that as soon as Tongking was pacified, arms and military stores would be sent to Burma from there.

This secret promise did not leak out until August 1885, when it became one of the inner causes of the British annexation of upper Burma.²⁶ But the British had reason to think that France had designs on Siam as well as on Burma. A pre-emptive move to forestall the French in upper Laos was thus as much a British as it was a Siamese interest.

By October 1885, when Colonel Wai Woranat reached Luang Prabang, France was heavily involved in operations in Tongking and her expansionist government had fallen. British annexation of upper Burma was imminent. Confronted with the evidence of her secret dealings, France had withdrawn her consul from Mandalay. The Siamese expedition into upper Laos appeared, however, to aim at territory to which she could reasonably lay claim now that Tongking was French. Sam Neua, the Sipsong Chau Thai, and Xieng Khouang had all owed allegiance to Vietnam as well as to Luang Prabang; their position was arguable. Luang Prabang itself had invoked the protection of Vietnam by volunteering tribute in 1831. Although no protection had been granted and Siamese predominance had not been challenged, the court of Hué thus had a possible claim even here, and the claims of Hué were now the rights of France.

In order to settle these matters in their favour without becoming embroiled with the English, the French asked Siam for a joint

²⁶ The occasion for the annexation was, of course, Thibaw's case against the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation. J. G. Scott, *Burma, from the earliest times to the present day* (London, 1924), p. 320, calls this 'a reckless step which warranted active intervention by the British Government without the undesirable development of friction with France'. For the kind of policy that was being recommended to Paris, see Deloncle's report dated 19 July 1889 at Appendix I, which quotes despatches he wrote in 1884. J. G. Scott, *France and Tongking* (London, 1885), pp. 369-81 shows that the British were fully aware of French ambitions in Siam.

commission on the boundaries of Luang Prabang and 'Tongking. In May 1886 laboured negotiations resulted in a provisional agreement which regulated French commerce in Luang Prabang and gave France the right to open a vice-consulate there, but which left the question of a boundary commission unsettled. To the post of vice-consul was appointed Auguste Pavie. His immediate instructions were to find a practicable route between the upper Mekong and 'Tongking, and to hold himself in readiness to join an eventual boundary commission.

Auguste Pavie, then in his fortieth year, had already made a name for himself in Cambodia where he had been a member of the Postal Service since 1871. His explorer's interest in the country, his knowledge of the language, and his evident gift for friendship with its people came to official notice and he was given the task of constructing the telegraph line from Phnom Penh to Bangkok. Having turned this undertaking into a first class piece of exploration, Pavie was sent to Paris in 1885 with thirteen young Cambodians whom he planned to have educated so that they could help France in the pacification of their country. His idea was approved and the eventual result was the foundation of the *École Coloniale* in Paris. Who could be better fitted for the new post at Luang Prabang?

Pavie reached Bangkok as vice-consul designate in March 1886, impatient to begin. But the Franco-Siamese agreement was still provisional and the Siamese were able to prevent Pavie from reaching Luang Prabang until their military expedition had had time to achieve its aims. On 12 March 1887, a month after the Frenchman had at last reached his post, Colonel Woranat returned in triumph from his campaign in the north and very agreeably showed Pavie his maps, which marked all the cantons of the Sip-song Chau Thai and Sam Neua as dependencies of Luang Prabang. In spite of himself Pavie was impressed with the alert, self-assured, and polished young officer, but he knew quite well how these results had been obtained. Hostages had been taken from most of the chiefs as a guarantee of their good behaviour, good behaviour which was naturally to include the right answers to any questions about suzerainty posed by France. The colonel had a large number of hostages with him, and four young princes taken in the north had already been sent down the Mekong chained and trussed up in pig baskets. These, it transpired, were the three

sons and a son-in-law of the powerful chief of Lai Chau, Prince Cam Sinh. They had been seized by Colonel Woranat when visiting him at Dien Bien Phu on behalf of their father.²⁷

The reasons for this action, which was to cost Siam any claim she might have had to the Sipsong Chau Thai, are still obscure, although both on this occasion and on an earlier visit to Dien Bien Phu in 1884, the Siamese had been accompanied by a British geographer in Siamese government employ, James McCarthy. McCarthy, who was making a map with which the Siamese hoped to establish their frontier claims, says that in 1884 satisfactory assurances had been received from Lai Chau. At the end of 1886, however, he had arrived in Dien Bien Phu a few days after the colonel to find the Lai Chau princes already under arrest. It would appear that the Siamese commander was not satisfied with the deputation of princes from Lai Chau and hoped to induce Prince Cam Sinh to come to Dien Bien Phu himself. McCarthy thought that so far from achieving this result the arrests would lead to endless complications unless Cam Sinh could be appeased. He urged Woranat without success to release the men.²⁸

The explanation may lie in the internal politics of the Sipsong Chau Thai or in an underlying resentment on the part of Lai Chau at Siamese interference. An over-forceful demand for hostages might well have caused the princes to point out that, since the French treaty with China in 1885, they were in a position to invoke the protection of France if they chose.²⁹ This was not of course what Woranat wanted to hear. The account given by the princes themselves to Pavie after their release, that they had been arrested for saying that Lai Chau would recognize French rather than Siamese authority, was probably an adaptation of the truth composed to please their liberator.

However that may be, soon after the Siamese had left Dien Bien Phu, Cam Sinh sent an expedition southwards under his eldest son Cam Oum—better known by his Vietnamese name, Deo-van-

²⁷ *Mission Pavie, géographie et voyages*, vol. VII, p. 96.

²⁸ McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-9. The French and Siamese versions of the affair are not easy to reconcile. Prince Damrong, *A Collection of Chronicles* (Prachum Pongsawadan), Part IX (Bangkok, 1918), pp. 76-III, attributes the incident to the internal politics of the Sipsong Chau Thai; Pavie, *loc. cit.*, says that Lai Chau preferred French to Siamese suzerainty.

²⁹ Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 649 comes close to this explanation.

Tri—to rescue his sons. By the time Deo-van-Tri reached Luang Prabang, the Siamese army had left for Bangkok. Prince Souvanaphouma, the 'second king' or viceroy of Luang Prabang, was killed in the subsequent fighting and it fell to Pavie's party to rescue the aged King Oun Kham, regally determined not to leave his palace, and to accompany him on his flight down-river. Few Europeans in the Orient can have had such an opportunity. Pavie made the most of it. His patient goodwill and kindness in time of disaster won him the hearts of the king and his people, and undermined the position of the Siamese. Pavie also took the initiative in the release of the Lai Chau princes, an act which helped him at the end of 1888 to secure the Sipsong Chau Thai for France without serious opposition from Siam.

Nothing had happened yet to change the dependence of Luang Prabang on Siam, though Pavie, already a bitter enemy of the Siamese, had conceived a great longing to make Laos French, as he put it, by the consent of its people. France had, however, already given evidence of her ambitions in central Laos. As early as 1884 French defence posts had been set up along the watershed of the Annamitic Chain, from which vantage point the French 'were able to appreciate the strategic importance and potential economic interest of the western slopes . . . to the middle Mekong'.³⁰ This was the zone which Siam had depopulated after the sack of Vientiane in 1828. Much of its population had now returned.³¹

At the end of 1887 the French began to revive Vietnamese claims to the area as part of the former kingdom of Vientiane, once a Vietnamese vassal. The Siamese reacted by moving small garrisons towards the Annamitic Chain which they considered to be the eastern frontier of their territory. They firmly rejected French claims on behalf of Vietnam but in September 1888 agreed to evacuate the post they had established at Kam Mon pending a joint delimitation of the frontier.³²

³⁰ Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 50. The reason for French activity in this area was the resistance of the Vietnamese Emperor Ham Nghi, who held out against them in eastern Kam Mon until 1888.

³¹ See Professor Pensri Duke, *Relations entre la France et la Thaïlande (Siam)*, (Bangkok, 1962), p. 130, quoting a report by Captain Luce dated 15 October 1888 to the French Minister for the Navy.

³² For Siamese statements of their position and for the exchanges in Bangkok between March and September 1888, see Duke, *op. cit.*, pp. 117 and 127-9.

Early in 1889 Pavie found the Siamese still in possession at Kam Mon, territory which he alleged had until recently been actually under Vietnamese administration. He proceeded to install a French post nearby at Napé, west of the watershed, and returned with all haste to Hanoi whence he was recalled to France for consultations. It was meanwhile agreed with Siam that neither side would advance further pending a frontier settlement which would be negotiated on Pavie's return.

Pavie reached Paris on 13 June 1889. What he had to say was that as far as he could ascertain from his own explorations and researches in Laos, and from those of Captain Luce in the Vietnamese archives, some of the territory which the Siamese had occupied east of the Mekong certainly belonged to Vietnam and therefore to France. Indeed, Siamese rights to any territory at all east of the Mekong were doubtful, even Luang Prabang having at one time paid tribute to Hué. He himself was strongly in favour of a forward policy.

The French government was already under pressure from colonial enthusiasts at home. One of these was M. François Deloncle, a French consular officer who had been involved in the secret negotiations with Burma in 1884-5 and who, on 19 July 1889, presented a remarkable report on French policy in Indo-China.³³ To Deloncle the affair was already a simple case of Siamese aggression promoted by the English into territory that was unquestionably French. France had rights derived from those of Vietnam over the old Vientiane kingdom, even to the west of the Mekong. Siam should be confined as of old to the Menam valley. She was in any case a bad ruler and France was justified in using any means to evict her. Let there be a campaign to put down the crying evil of slavery in the Mekong valley—the English would swallow that one—let the local rulers be given French assistants to help them in the task, and then let the assistants remain as French Residents. Let quiet political penetration proceed everywhere under the guise of scientific, economic, or commercial enterprise. The commercial agents would naturally be remunerated from the colonial budget. As for Luang Prabang, let the clever M. Pavie worm himself even further into the favour of the aged monarch and

³³ L. de Reinach, *Le Laos* (Paris, 1901), vol. II, pp. 19-29; a translation is at Appendix I.

seek a chance to have him sign a convention which—'for some object or other such as the repression of slavery'³⁴—would place Luang Prabang under French protection.

Amidst pressures such as this, arrangements were made for Pavie's second mission. It was decided, he tells us, to work by a series of border agreements made on the spot, bringing Siam step by step to recognize the boundary as it had existed before her recent moves.³⁵ The more extensive French claims would be taken up later. To the topographers already assigned to the mission for frontier demarcation purposes were now added scientific, economic, and commercial specialists who could later represent France in the territories they had explored. The newly formed 'French Upper Laos Company' provided fifteen tons of merchandise with which to start the commercial part of the operation. That meant, chuckles de Reinach, that France would now have private commercial interests in the Mekong valley which would increase her right to intervene there.³⁶

It was thus in the conscious role of empire-builder that Pavie returned to Indo-China in November 1889. Like any emperor of Vietnam, the French had decided to extend their influence into the Mekong valley. Pavie broke his journey in Bangkok to settle with the Siamese how the border arrangements were to be made. The king, he tells us, wanted all negotiations to take place in the capital.³⁷ Before this could be done the appropriate reconnaissances had to be made. The Frenchman therefore set off on his new explorations, and nine months were to elapse before any discussion of frontiers could begin. By that time Pavie's numerous teams of explorers and experts were scurrying in all directions across Laos and north-east Siam, and the Siamese were thoroughly alarmed. Pavie was offered much politeness, therefore, in Bangkok; but there were no discussions. Pavie's agents told him, moreover, that Siam was preparing to reinforce her positions across the middle Mekong after the rains, and to extend them to all areas where she claimed sovereignty. The French border posts were told in January 1891 to do all they could to stop Siamese advances without resorting to force, but six months later it was apparent

³⁴ De Reinach, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 25.

³⁵ *Mission Pavie, géographie et voyages*, vol. I, pp. 326-7.

³⁶ De Reinach, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 13.

³⁷ *Mission Pavie, géographie et voyages*, vol. II, p. 8.

that serious preparations were being made to defend Siamese claims.

In July 1891, therefore, declining a Siamese offer to talk the matter out, Pavie went once more to Paris to urge a stronger line of action. A major extension of his activities was planned. He himself was appointed resident French minister in Bangkok where he arrived in June 1892, and more French commercial agents were stationed on the Mekong. France was taking up her Vietnamese heritage with a vengeance. 'We are now obliged', wrote Dr. Harmand from Rangoon a few months later:

to extend up to the Mekong not merely our influence but our direct domination. For we have a duty to meet the historic ambitions of the Asians we have brought under our control, as well as their material needs. The Vietnamese nation is older than ours; it is a nation of conquerors and colonists which we stopped in mid-career more than thirty years ago; we have no right to keep it back for ever from the paths of Destiny.

In order to get full value from the empire, he continued, French policy must be associated with the traditional aspirations of Vietnam, must

embrace the ambitions to which more than twenty centuries of history bear witness, and ensure their realisation. . . . It is to the Vietnamese, shut in and stifled as they are between the sea and the mountains . . . that we must open the Mekong valley.³⁸

In Siam, however, tempers were beginning to rise, particularly among the European contract officers and advisers, who felt deeply for their country of adoption and were eager champions of its territorial integrity. While negotiations made little progress, incidents began to occur between the Siamese and French agents. Insignificant in themselves the incidents strengthened further the hand of the colonial lobby in France.

On 4 February 1893, Deloncle made an inflammatory speech in the French Chamber:

³⁸ Report to the Quai d'Orsay dated November 1892. I am indebted to Mr. P. J. N. Tuck of Wadham College, Oxford, for this extract from the archives of the French Foreign Ministry.

We cannot have conquered Cambodia, Tongking and Annam, we cannot have acquired, by solemn treaties freely signed, rights over all Laos on both banks of the Mekong, just to hand over the advantages of our conquest to Siam. For five or six years Siam has made dupes of us: I say 'Enough!'

The question of frontiers between Siam, Cambodia, and Vietnam, he said, interested no country but France. Indeed, Lord Salisbury had publicly voiced England's disinterest. France was therefore free to take what minor military measures were necessary. It was no great task: after all, he concluded, it might surprise the deputies to know that the Siamese invasion of which he was complaining had been carried out with fewer than two hundred soldiers.³⁹

France could hardly lose. She decided to use force if necessary. During March, therefore, Pavie in Bangkok demanded compensation for the damage suffered by French subjects in the various incidents. He also made it clear that France was now claiming in the name of Vietnam all territory east of the Mekong from Kam Mon southwards. The Siamese protested, offering to refer doubtful matters to arbitration; but Pavie who now considered that the whole of Siam would eventually come under French protection,⁴⁰ insisted on the immediate evacuation of all Siamese posts in central Laos east of the Mekong.

These demands caused concern in Whitehall where the French admitted that they had similar claims to make on the upper Mekong.⁴¹ Since the acquisition of upper Burma in 1885, Britain had been securing the allegiance of the Shan states who had formerly paid homage to the Burmese kings. The allegiance of Keng Tung obtained in 1890 had brought with it suzerain rights over territory to the east of the upper Mekong. Britain had taken up these rights partly to forestall action by France. She did not propose to keep the trans-Mekong area and meant to divide it between Siam and China so that there would be a buffer zone between the French colonial empire and her own; its disposal was, however, a British prerogative and there could be no question of a

³⁹ De Reinach, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 17-20.

⁴⁰ See his letters dated 29 Dec. 1892 to M. Ribot and 28 Jun. 1893 to M. Develle in the French Foreign Ministry Archives, quoted by Duke, *op. cit.*, pp. 140 and 152.

⁴¹ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 650-7 gives a clear account of conversations on this matter between Britain and France.

surrender to France. For the moment the British attitude was one of 'cautious diplomatic reserve'.⁴²

Siam rejected the French demands on 5 May and appealed to Britain for help. The British Foreign Secretary, Lord Rosebery, replied that Britain could not intervene. Siam should settle the matter directly with France and do nothing that might provoke her to war. However, three French columns had already begun to occupy southern Laos. The incidents that occurred became more serious, opinion in France more inflamed, the European advisers in the Siamese capital more indignant. At length fears of civil disturbances in Bangkok caused the British to send two gunboats to the mouth of the Menam below the capital in case it was necessary to protect their nationals. The French affected to see this as encouragement of Siamese resistance to their claims, and on this excuse, though in reality in order to exert pressure on the Siamese court, decided that they also would increase the number of their warships at Bangkok from one to three. Out of this, largely by misunderstanding and accident, ensued the Paknam affair in which two French gunboats were engaged by Siamese ships and shore batteries as they were entering the mouth of the Menam. The French ships replied with telling effect, and sailed up-river to Bangkok.⁴³

Whatever might have been said of previous incidents, the French were technically within their rights at Paknam. Siam, provoked, had put herself grievously in the wrong. On 19 July Pavie was authorized to deliver an ultimatum demanding, on pain of naval blockade, compensation for damage, the punishment of those responsible for the various incidents, and the evacuation by Siam of all territory east of the Mekong as far north as her jurisdiction reached.

This extension of the French demands to the upper Mekong directly involved British rights there. The blockade of Bangkok which actually commenced on 29 July, affected British commercial interests in Siam, nine-tenths of whose foreign trade was in British hands. War with France over Siam was nevertheless out of

⁴² Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 656.

⁴³ This affair has never been properly elucidated. The account of Mr. B. S. N. Murti in his thesis, *Anglo-French Relations with Siam 1880-1904* (London University, 1952), is not fully satisfactory, while Professor Duke (*op. cit.*, p. 155) makes no attempt to unravel the incident at all.

the question.⁴⁴ Britain was isolated in Europe and she had an empire to defend. The eyes of Russia, ally of France, rested on the frontiers of British India. What Britain wanted was to keep Siam as an independent state between the two colonial empires in the south, just as she wanted a buffer zone between them on the upper Mekong in the north. She now asked for a clear statement of French aims.

The French replied that, while there could be no going back on the ultimatum whose terms had been published, France was not threatening the independence of Siam. Once Siam had accepted the French demands, the way would be open for the establishment of a buffer state between French and British territory further north. On this assurance Britain advised Siam to accept the French terms.

The Siamese have sometimes blamed Britain for failing to support them in their conflict with France. Officially the British had made their position clear at the outset. Rosebery had plainly said that Siam could not expect British intervention in her border disputes with France. The Siamese appear to have been misled—for it is difficult to explain their action otherwise—by the enthusiasm of their foreign contract officers and also by that of the British minister himself, Captain Jones. Recent research has revealed evidence that even after the Paknam incident, in defiance of Rosebery's instructions, Jones was urging the Siamese to resist the French on the assumption of British support.⁴⁵

The new Franco-Siamese treaty was signed on 3 October 1893. On 25 November the establishment of an Anglo-French boundary commission for the upper Mekong was agreed. France now claimed, however, that all the territory east of the Mekong as far north as the Chinese frontier was French. Pavie was unable to agree with his British colleague on the boundary commission as to the limits of the proposed buffer state and negotiations were transferred to Europe. The considerable Anglo-French tension that ensued

⁴⁴ See R. R. James, *Rosebery* (London, 1961), p. 288. In a letter to Queen Victoria, after strongly condemning French conduct towards Siam, Rosebery nevertheless concluded: 'If the French cut the throats of half Siam in cold blood we should not be justified in going to war with her.'

⁴⁵ India Office Library: Curzon Papers, F111/87, E. H. French to G. N. Curzon, 26 July 1893. W. A. R. Wood, who succeeded French in the Bangkok Legation, strongly supports this reference, supplied by P. J. N. Tuck.

ended with an agreement in January 1896. Britain gave up her claims to the territory east of the Mekong and conceded the special French interest in Siamese territory in the middle Mekong basin, in return for French participation in a joint guarantee of the independence of Siam in the Menam valley, which contained four-fifths of the population and most of the British interests in the country.⁴⁶

The French empire now extended from the coast of Vietnam to the Mekong throughout the whole length of Laos. It was rounded off in 1904 and 1907 when Siam handed over her Cambodian provinces and the Laotian provinces of Bassac and Sayaboury, as part of a general settlement with France. To Siam the whole painful period may well have come to seem merely a phase in the continuing struggle with Vietnam. For in building her empire France had behaved towards Siam much as a powerful Vietnamese emperor might have done and had made the same demands. The next stage of French colonial development was also in the Vietnamese tradition. Already in 1897 France had begun to organize her conquests as an administrative unity. Although the appearance of local autonomy was largely preserved, although the kingdom of Luang Prabang survived as part of the new Laos, the great French proconsul, M. Paul Doumer, had by 1902 turned French Indo-China into what was in effect a new empire of Vietnam, with a common budget and common services, ruled by a French governor-general in Hanoi. Cambodia and Laos became in a sense the Vietnamese hinterland, a result no emperor of Vietnam had been able to achieve.⁴⁷

The most obvious feature of the new unity was the uneven distribution of its population.⁴⁸ The Red River delta, cradle of the

⁴⁶ Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 662. Criticism of the agreement was vocal both in England, where it was regarded as a pusillanimous surrender, and in France where the eventual annexation of Siam was seen by some as essential to the future of French Indo-China. See on the one hand Sir J. G. Scott, *Burma, from the earliest times to the present day* (London, 1924), pp. 359-61, and on the other, Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin et de Madagascar* (Paris, 1921), pp. 470-6. Scott was Pavie's opposite number on the boundary commission and the future Marshal Lyautey a major serving in Tongking.

⁴⁷ For the subordination of Laotian requirements to those of Vietnam, see P. Doumer, *L'Indochine Française* (Paris, 1905), pp. 291 and 309.

⁴⁸ Robequain, *op. cit.*, p. 49 ff. See also *Indo-China*, Naval Intelligence Division Geographical Handbook, December 1943, pp. 213-38.

Vietnamese nation, had population densities as high as 1,500 to the square kilometre, a figure which approached those of the most crowded regions of monsoon Asia. The Vietnamese as a whole accounted for 72 per cent. of the population. Cambodia, with densities ranging from 83 down to 13 to the square kilometre, and Laos whose average density was only 4, were empty in comparison with the relatively small areas occupied by the Vietnamese.

Here indeed was the old problem of Vietnam, the problem which had through the centuries given rise to the pressure southwards of the Vietnamese people, and which had caused their rulers to regard the Mekong delta, and then the Mekong valley, as the natural sphere of Vietnamese expansion. The French explorers and empire-builders had shared this view. The old problem had now fallen to the new rulers, who attempted to solve it in the traditional Vietnamese fashion—by encouraging emigration southwards from Tongking. There were obstacles. Robequain has spoken of the unpredictable importance of malaria, and of the traditional factors which inhibited the Tongkingese peasant from leaving the coasts and river plains.⁴⁹ Migration was never the success which the French had hoped and even in 1939 the colonial government's greatest concern was to level out the density of population which was seen as 'an essential step in harmonious economic development'.⁵⁰ The Vietnamese themselves, however, realized the trend and assumed that their advantage would be permanent. 'One day', they dreamed, 'Indo-China will no longer be a collection of separate and distinct countries, but a single country fertilised by Vietnamese blood, inspired by Vietnamese dynamism and power of action.'⁵¹

Under French rule numbers of Vietnamese certainly moved into Cambodia and Laos as well as into the Mekong delta. By 1936 there were 191,000 Vietnamese in Cambodia and by 1945 there were 50,000 in Laos.⁵² Vietnamese immigration could no longer be resisted, but it was not popular with the Cambodians and

⁴⁹ Op. cit., p. 60.

⁵⁰ Robequain, op. cit., p. 53. See also *Indo-China*, Naval Intelligence Division Geographical Handbook, December 1943, p. 240.

⁵¹ *La Patrie Annamite* (1939), quoted by Pierre Gentil, *Remous du Mekong* (Paris, 1950), p. 24, who recalls that the statement was occasioned by French moves to replace Vietnamese officials in Laos by Laotian ones.

⁵² Lancaster, op. cit., p. 70.

Laotians, particularly since, because the main French commercial and economic effort was made in populous Vietnam, the immigrants included numbers of technicians, artisans, and petty officials who were liable to be ahead of the local people in general outlook and social development. In Laos, for instance, where the public services were largely staffed from Vietnam and the urban population was predominantly Vietnamese,⁵³ the effect was that much of the available secondary education was taken up by the children of immigrants. Thus in the whole decade of the thirties only 52 Lao completed an education at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane, the only secondary school in the country, as against 96 Vietnamese.⁵⁴ Even in 1945, two-thirds of the primary and assistant teachers in Laos were Vietnamese.⁵⁵ In commenting on the effects of Vietnamese immigration into Laos, Virginia Thompson writes:

The contempt of the industrious and formalistic [Vietnamese] for the . . . carefree Laotian is only matched by the latter's impotent hatred. Yet the evil is without remedy. Rich, unoccupied land will inevitably attract an industrious and prolific people like the [Vietnamese], who are able and willing to do what the Laotians cannot and will not do.⁵⁶

There was of course another means of reducing the unevenness of the population, on which the French laid great stress in the early years of their rule. From time to time large numbers of Laotians and Cambodians had been transported by victorious armies into Siam. In the treaty of 1893 the French had insisted on the right of these people, now termed French subjects, to return to their old homelands. It was not altogether a practical condition. Nevertheless, by the time the clause was abandoned as part of the Franco-Siamese settlement of 1907, some migration had taken place; in particular a number of Lao had moved to the French

⁵³ E. Pietrantoni, 'La population du Laos en 1943 dans son milieu géographique' in *Bulletin de la société des études Indochinoises* XXXII, iii (1957), pp. 223-43, shows 30,300 Vietnamese out of a total population of 51,150 in the six chief towns: Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Thakhek, Savannakhet, Pakse, and Xieng Khouang.

⁵⁴ The tribal areas did not figure in the diploma lists at all.

⁵⁵ Somlith Pathammavong, 'Compulsory Education in Laos' in *Compulsory Education in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam* (UNESCO, Paris, 1955), p. 94.

⁵⁶ *French Indo-China* (London, 1937), p. 376.

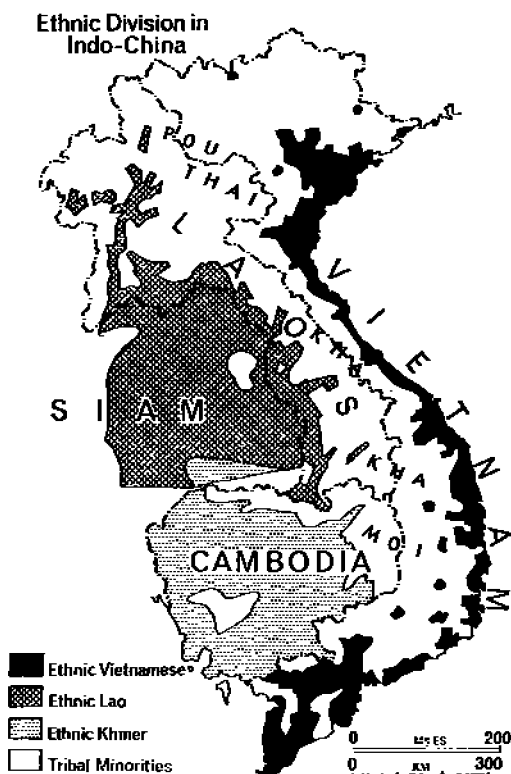
bank of the Mekong, where Vientiane, as the centre of the French administration, resumed some of its old importance, and the new town of Savannakhet was founded in the south.

The Laos that was formed by the French was, however, very different from the old kingdom, the greater part of which was now within the frontiers of Siam. Old Laos had been the land of the Mekong. The great river had been the national highway of trade and the Lao people of its banks had been united by its simple industries and seasons. Now, from Sayaboury in the north to Bassac in the south, the central feature of the old country was the western frontier of the new. The narrow plain between the Mekong and the hills could never absorb a population that would compare numerically with that sustained by the great plain to the west. The mass of the Lao people was, therefore, still to be found on the right bank of the Mekong under Siamese rule. North-east Siam, as far south and west as the limits of the old kingdom, continued, in spite of Siamese efforts at assimilation, to contain a distinctively Lao population six or seven times as numerous as the Lao in Laos. Indeed the Lao in Siam were almost as numerous as the Siamese themselves.⁵⁷

The new demarcation created other anomalies. As if to compensate Laos for the loss of territory in the west, the French colonial administrators added Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang in the east, areas which had never been subject to direct Lao rule. The Sip-song Chau Thai, on the other hand, inhabited by the same hill people as Sam Neua, and like Sam Neua more inclined towards Vietnam than towards Laos because situated on the Vietnamese slope of the Annamitic watershed, eventually came within the boundaries of French Vietnam.⁵⁸ In the south-east, where the sharp mountain range merges into the broad mass of uplands and loses much of its significance as a geographical barrier, the watershed was accepted as the administrative boundary between Laos and Vietnam. Here too the frontier ran through an ethnically homogeneous area, for the unconquered Kha tribes in the southern highlands of Laos were one with the unsubdued Moi tribes in the central highlands of Vietnam, just on the other side of the theoretical watershed. Even the French did not succeed in subduing them.

⁵⁷ See additional note 1 at end of chapter.

⁵⁸ See additional note 2.



Data is taken from the *Carte ethnolinguistique d'Indochine*, published in 1949 by the École Française d'Extrême Orient, and supplemented from G. Maspéro (ed.), *Un Empire colonial français; l'Indochine* (2 vols., Paris, 1929).

The new Laos was thus not only not the same as the old kingdom, it was also critically different from the buffer zone which had separated Siam from the Vietnamese in the nineteenth century. The formerly neutral states in the north had been shared out between Vietnam and Laos in a way that left the two most closely akin on opposite sides of the border. In the centre the depopulated tract east of the Mekong was now inhabited by Lao who formed, with the Lao people of Luang Prabang, only two-fifths of the population of Laos, but who could not be separated from the mass of their fellows across the river. Finally, in the south, the Kha and

Moi mountain area had been divided between Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The population of Laos fell thus into two potentially hostile sections: the Lao in the valleys of the Mekong and its tributaries, and the hill peoples who had severally in the past resisted Lao rule.⁵⁹ With doubtless the best of administrative intentions, the virtue of the former buffer zone had been destroyed.

In the peaceful era brought by France the life of the Mekong valley revived. The Lao people mingled freely across their great river; the scattered hill peoples hardly noticed the new boundary posts in the north-east, and the Khas astride the frontier in the south remained largely impervious to outside influences. The encroaching Vietnamese communities lived in peace with their Lao and Cambodian neighbours.

The consequences of French rule were nevertheless profound. From the first, attracted by Vietnamese energy and impressed by Vietnamese problems, France had based her empire on the Vietnamese people and ruled it, after her own advantage, to theirs. Siam, the enemy of Vietnam, was also the enemy of France. Restrained only by the British, the French used their power to take from Siam what France and Vietnam required. The balance between Siam and the Vietnamese was thus turned heavily to the east. The expansionist ambitions of Vietnam were encouraged, Cambodian and Laotian interests subordinated, Siam compelled to face a European incarnation of her ancient enemy directly across a land frontier in the Mekong valley. Traditional fears and enmities throughout the Indo-Chinese peninsula were immeasurably increased, the former solution of the buffer zone gravely prejudiced.

ADDITIONAL NOTES TO CHAPTER II

1. This appears to have been true at the beginning of the century, and also in 1929. Lunet de Lajonquière, writing of the situation in 1904 (*Le Siam et les siamois*, Paris, 1906) says Siam contained 1,766,000 Siamese and 1,354,000 Lao. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th edn., 1929) gives 3,800,000 Siamese and 3,600,000 Lao, showing an increase in the proportion of Lao as compared with 1904. As Siamese census figures have not distinguished between Siamese and Lao since 1932, the present situation can only be estimated. Wendell Blanchard (et al.), *Thailand, its People, its Society, its Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1957) estimates, on a linguistic basis, 5 million Lao for north-east Siam and 2 million for the

⁵⁹ See additional note 3 at end of chapter.

north, out of a total 'Thai' population of 18½ million, and an overall total of 22·8 million.

However, the latest census figures show a population of nearly 9 million in north-east Siam and over 5½ million in the north out of a total population of over 26½ million. This suggests that there may not have been as great a change in ethnic proportions as Blanchard's linguistic estimate implies.

Population figures for Laos are more uncertain as there has been no systematic census since 1941. Joel M. Halpern, *Economy and Society of Laos* (Yale, 1964), pp. 9-13, gives what appears to be a reasonable assessment of the present position. Taking into account a number of hitherto unconsidered factors, he arrives at a figure of 2 million for the total population, the Lao element forming 40 per cent, i.e. 820,000.

Thus, even assuming that Blanchard's figure does not under-estimate the number of Lao in north-east Siam, there are today more than six times as many Lao in this area as there are in Laos itself.

2. The *Carte ethnolinguistique de l'Indochine*, École française d'extrême orient, Saigon, 1949, gives the detailed racial distribution as established by the French, and clearly shows that the eastern frontier of Laos has no ethnic validity: the essentials of this map are reproduced on p. 47. The report Pavie wrote in 1888 for the French Commander-in-Chief in Hanoi is in *Mission Pavie, géographie et voyages*, vol. VII, p. 130 ff. A translation of an extract, showing the situation in north-east Laos and the Sipsong Chau Thai on his arrival is at Appendix II.

3. It is perhaps misleading to say, as Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 55, that the Lao accepted French rule with a sense of grievance at the anomaly of the Mekong as a frontier, for the repopulation of the left bank of the river was partly due to the French. Furthermore, one of the reasons for French success in obtaining the co-operation of Laotian officials during their initial occupation of Laos was that the country had been suffering from famine and the Siamese had refused to grant tax reliefs. The real resentment arose much later. It was directed as much at the attachment of Laos to Vietnam, with whom it had no natural ethnic or geographic links, as at the political separation of the two banks of the Mekong. See Katay D. Sasorith, *Le Laos* (Paris, 1953), p. 92.

There are relics even today of popular resentment in north-east Siam at the loss of Laotian territories to France. See, for instance, F. Cripps, *The Far Province* (London, 1965), p. 51, for a popular festival of indignation—a sort of Guy Fawkes Day—against 'Mo Pawi'. This may owe something to the anti-French propaganda campaign mounted by the Siamese in 1940-1, which, according to Mr. W. A. R. Wood, contained similar demonstrations.

PART TWO

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE
PROBLEM, 1940-1964**

Introduction

THREE phases can be discerned in the development of the modern problem of Laos as a buffer state. The first, which embraces the Second World War and the war in Indo-China, saw the dissolution of the French empire of Indo-China and the re-emergence of the old conflict between Siam and the Vietnamese in cold war terms. Siam, supported by the West, now faced a Communist North Vietnam backed by the East. One of the principal aims of the Geneva Conference which ended the Indo-China war in 1954 was therefore to establish the kingdom of Laos as a neutral buffer state between them. This phase is covered in Chapters III and IV.

The second phase, lasting from 1954 to 1961, which saw the failure to create a stable neutrality in Laos, is the subject of Chapters V and VI. The inbuilt anomalies of Laos would in any case have made the achievement of internal harmony difficult. The force of the external strains, of the two sides each seeking allies in the country, made it impossible. At the end of 1960 Laos lapsed into a civil war which was ended by international agreement in May 1961, in order that a new Geneva Conference might bring about the stability that was essential. The conference lasted until July 1962. The difficulties it overcame and the continuing divisions in Laos which, even by the end of 1962, were beginning to destroy the settlement it had achieved, constitute a third short phase. This is dealt with in Chapter VII, which also covers in outline the progressive breakdown of the succeeding two years.

In the concluding Chapter VIII an attempt is made to focus attention on the factors which should perhaps be considered in any future Laotian settlement.

CHAPTER III

Laos in the Second World War

SIAM had bowed before the French onslaught, but she remained fully aware of the real nature of the French challenge. When France was defeated in 1940, therefore, Siam was ready with territorial claims on Cambodia and Laos which were chauvinistic in part, but which also marked her realization that the security of her eastern frontier was coming into question. Japan forced France to return the Cambodian and Laotian provinces ceded by Siam in 1904 and 1907. The resulting dissatisfaction in Laos stimulated the French into reforms designed to build up a Laotian national consciousness which would resist Siamese irredentism. From this there grew a Laotian independence movement against the French after the war.

The reconciliation of this movement to France by the grant of limited independence in 1949 left in Laos only a trace of the anti-colonial nationalist resentment which had meanwhile given rise to full-scale war in Vietnam. The trace was however to be important. Prince Souphanouvong, the most ebullient and possibly the ablest member of the Laotian aristocracy, had thrown in his lot with the anti-French rebels in Vietnam, the Viet Minh. His gift for leadership found him allies among the hill peoples of Laos, always more attached to their kinsmen in upland Vietnam than to the Lao whose domination they resented. Siam, deprived once more by the defeat of Japan of the Laotian and Cambodian provinces she claimed, watched anxiously as the Laotian rift brought her old Vietnamese rival towards her borders.

* * *

The escape of Siam from colonialism at the beginning of the century had served her well. The stability that ensued from the establishment of Britain and France as her neighbours brought an era of prosperity to the country. Foreign capital gave her economic strength. Siam took the side of the Allies in the First World

War. Her relations with France became cordial. Once more she assimilated what suited her from the alien, without compromising her independence.

One of the elements Siam had tried was parliamentary democracy; a revolution in 1932 turned her autocratic king into a constitutional monarch. However the parliamentary experiment failed to develop and the country had moved by 1939 to the prevailing fashion of military dictatorship, which intensified the new self-assertive nationalism that revolution had brought. The shadow of Japan was looming southwards through China. Government maps had already been published showing Cambodia, Laos, and part of Vietnam as Siamese territory and the Annamitic Chain as Siam's natural frontier.¹ Never slow to note a changing climate, Siam in 1939 took the new name of Thailand: in advance of the possible arrival of Japan, whose influence upon her had already outstripped that of France, Siam was preparing to claim the leadership of all of 'Thai race'.²

The outbreak of the second world war made the new Siamese mood look dangerous. Conscious of her vulnerability on the Mekong, France sought a new non-aggression pact with her neighbour across the river, which was provisionally agreed on 12 June 1940. Siam had, however, on the same day entered into a treaty of friendship with Japan. A few days later France capitulated to Germany and Japan was soon pressing the French for the use of Indo-Chinese territory in her war against China. In August 1940, while Japan bore harder upon the French, the Siamese launched a violent anti-French propagandist campaign along the Mekong, claiming the return of Laos to Siam. The Lao people were reminded of their Thai race, of the fact that overwhelmingly more Lao lived in Siam free from colonialist domination than in the country that

¹ When the British and French diplomatic representatives protested at the appearance of this map in schools and public places, the Siamese ruler replied that it was intended only for educational purposes: Sir Josiah Crosby, *Siam: The Crossroads* (London, 1945), p. 114. Sir Josiah Crosby was British minister at Bangkok from 1934-41. See also R. Emerson, L. A. Mills, and V. Thompson, *Government and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (New York, 1942), p. 219.

² The country had been known as 'Muong Thai' or 'Prathet Thai' by the people themselves, and internationally as Siam, the name to which it reverted after the second world war. The name was changed to Thailand again in 1949.

bore their name. 'Your kinsmen', said the leaflets, the radio broadcasts, the agents from across the river, 'live in a free country with free institutions. They are your own people, separated from you only by the false frontier of colonialism.'³ The propaganda had some effect, particularly in southern Laos where people had always tended to look across the river to Siam rather than upstream to Vientiane.

The actual Siamese demands were soon made clear. If Japanese troops were to enter Indo-China, it was argued, a totally new situation would arise for Siam. Siamese security would demand the return of part of Cambodia and of the Laotian provinces on the west bank of the Mekong. Moreover, if French sovereignty over Indo-China were to end, Siam would not consider herself safe unless the whole of Laos and Cambodia were returned to her.⁴

This was not the mere treacherous oriental rapacity which some thought it at the time. The Siamese feared that, with the disappearance of French power, the influence of Vietnam would reassert itself in the entire area of French control and along the whole vulnerable eastern frontier of Siam. Japan, though obviously a force to be conciliated, was unlikely to restrain the Vietnamese. Siam's object must therefore be, as it had been in 1890, to push towards the traditional geographical barrier of the Annamitic Chain. Her claims against France and the attempt to attach to herself by propaganda the Lao people across the Mekong, were in the nature of preliminary steps.⁵

The Governor-General of Indo-China, Admiral Decoux, who had taken office in July 1940 after General Catroux had been recalled by Pétain, who doubted his reliability, did not see the Siamese point of view. He had formerly been French naval commander in the Far East and knew only too well that the British could not,

³ Crosby, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-21 deals with Siamese chauvinism at this period. See also Admiral Decoux, *À la barre de l'Indochine*, pp. 123-47, for a full account of Siamese action against the colony.

⁴ See M. Sivaram, *Mekong Clash and Far East Crisis* (Bangkok, 1941), p. 7; K. P. Landon, 'Thailand's quarrel with France in perspective' in *Far Eastern Quarterly*, I, No. 1 (Nov. 1941), pp. 25-42 has a reasonable statement of the Siamese case.

⁵ The extent to which the continuous nature of the problem was in Siamese minds can be judged from the fact that, when Siam declared war on Britain and the U.S. in 1942, one of the complaints against the U.S. was that she had failed to support Siam against France in 1893: Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 137. Admittedly it was a silly complaint, but the fact that it was made is significant.

and the United States would not, prevent the Japanese having their will of Indo-China. His own forces were too weak to oppose Japan: in September he had been compelled to accept a virtual Japanese occupation of northern Tongking. But France should, he thought, be able to stand up to Siamese pretensions. He therefore reinforced his positions along the Mekong in Laos and prepared to defend western Cambodia where Siam was most likely to attack. Tension sharply increased with the end of the rains. In December the Siamese entered the disputed ground in Laos and began harassing French territory across the river with machine-guns, artillery, and aerial bombardment. The French replied meticulously in kind.

By now eight French or French-led battalions had been concentrated in Cambodia where they confronted a strong Siamese force already on Cambodian soil. The area was however short of water and Decoux was faced with the choice of an advance into Siam or a withdrawal. He chose to advance and on 16 January 1941 his forces attacked. The Siamese, forewarned and in superior numbers, counter-attacked. Some of the French units raised in Indo-China bolted and at the end of the day the French found themselves back where they started; they broke off the action and withdrew to their main position.⁶ A naval success in the Gulf of Siam on 17 January provided some consolation for the losers. Three days later, however, the Japanese imposed a suspension of hostilities and finally a settlement, by which France surrendered to Siam the Cambodian province of Battambang, a strip of northern Cambodia extending to the Mekong,⁷ the Laotian province of Bassac in the south, and Sayaboury on the western bank of the Mekong opposite Luang Prabang in the north.⁸

⁶ Decoux, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁷ The strip was bounded on the south by the 15th *grade* of latitude, which corresponds in the more familiar measurement to about 13° 30' N. Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 95 calls it misleadingly the 15th *parallel* of latitude, which does not run through Cambodia at all. Decoux, *op. cit.*, p. 144 and fold-out map refer.

⁸ Japan's intentions, in case a division of spoils in South-East Asia was made possible by a German victory, are given in W. M. Elsbree, *Japan's role in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements* (Harvard, 1963), pp. 16-17. Independence movements were to be encouraged and the French forced out of Indo-China. Chiang Kai-Shek was to be offered Tongking and parts of upper Burma; Cambodia was to be presented to Siam.

The prospect of losing Sayaboury with its royal teak forests, and of having the Siamese back on the opposite side of the river, caused consternation in the protected kingdom of Luang Prabang and there was talk of the king's abdication.⁹ Only the immediate union of the whole of Laos under the crown of Luang Prabang, it was said, could repair the insult and loss of territory. But the haughty northerners of Luang Prabang were not liked in the south¹⁰ where, furthermore, the arbitrary retirement in 1935 of Prince Nhouy, head of the old royal house of Champassak, who had served as governor of the former kingdom under the French, was still widely resented. Moreover Siamese propaganda had been particularly effective in the south. The union of the whole country was something the French could not yet concede.

Admiral Decoux was, however, able to propose that the kingdom of Luang Prabang, which had hitherto consisted only of Luang Prabang, Sam Neua, Sayaboury, and Phongsaly provinces, should be extended by the incorporation of the provinces of Xieng Khouang, Vientiane, and Nam Tha, to cover the whole of northern Laos. In a state visit to Hanoi, which he made a little later, King Sisavang Vong of Luang Prabang agreed; the new statute was signed on 29 August 1941.

It may be that not since the departure of Auguste Pavie had the French thought so deeply about Laos and the Laotians. When Pavie reached it in 1887 there had been some kind of unity between the land and its people. Laos had seemed to possess a national personality, in spite of its divisions, in spite of subservience to Siam. But now after fifty years of the French peace, there was little more than the indignation of the Laotian aristocracy to set against greater Thai imperialism and to counter the propaganda from across the river.

In fact it was Siam that had changed and grown into assertive modern statehood, while the administrative and social structure of Laos remained much as it had been for centuries. A French and Vietnamese civil service had ruled the country from the ad-

⁹ The Siamese had kept Sayaboury by the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1893 and had surrendered it under the convention of 1904 after repeated representations from the king of Luang Prabang to the French. Le Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

¹⁰ See Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 71, and Pierre Gentil, *Remous du Mekong* (Paris, 1950), p. 32.

ministrative capital of Vientiane. The kingdom of Luang Prabang had been preserved under French protection, its king having reigned ever since his investiture by the French at the age of nineteen in 1905.¹¹ The provincial centres had become pleasant French colonial towns. But development had been slight. Laos was still backward, an inaccessible and unprofitable hinterland to the bustling progress of populous Vietnam. Although it represented a third of French Indo-China in area, its population of just over a million in 1941 compared with twenty-two millions in the rest of the country, and its trade amounted to barely one per cent. of the whole.¹²

France might undoubtedly have done more. Laos had always had a favourable balance of trade with the outside world; benzoin and gumlac were still being exported: there was also tin, coffee, and opium. Opium might have made a much greater economic contribution had efforts to control its smuggling proved successful. Tung oil trees, introduced into northern Laos in 1938, also might have led to important development earlier. But there had been no commercial need to exploit the remote resources of Laos, no ambitious urge, no internal pressure that would have created the economic necessity to do so, and in any case too much malaria and too little labour. Thus, when in spite of efforts to improve its navigational possibilities, the Mekong was seen not to be a great highway of commerce, and when the flow of Laotian trade itself proved hardly worth diverting to Saigon, interest had moved away.

The amount that the French administration at Vientiane had been able to accomplish in the way of public works, education, medical, and other services was therefore minimal, and even so it had largely to be financed from the central Indo-Chinese budget.¹³ If roads were built, their purpose was to facilitate the movement of troops from Vietnam in case of civil emergency; Luang Prabang, Sam Neua, Savannakhet were connected by simple metalled roads with the road and rail system of Vietnam, but were not linked to each other. Thus Sam Neua could be reached from Hanoi by dry-weather road in a day, but it was still

¹¹ See additional note 1 at end of chapter.

¹² The figures were: 0.9 per cent. in 1937, 1.3 per cent. in 1938, 0.9 per cent in 1939.

¹³ In the period 1896-1917, Laos had covered 56 per cent. of its expenditure from its revenues; in the period 1917-41, only 45 per cent.

several days by mountain trail from Luang Prabang and Vientiane which administered it. Hospitals were built at six of the main centres, but again, although they treated Laotian patients within their capabilities, their *raison d'être* was to serve the few hundreds of French people in Laos.

Education remained for the most part in the hands of the monks. Even by 1940 there were but ninety-two government schools, which catered for less than four and a half per cent. of the children of school age.¹⁴ There was only one secondary school and, as we have already seen, more than half its places were occupied by Vietnamese. The growth of an indigenous middle class had therefore been slow, and its lack, together with the shortage of labour in all spheres, strengthened the existing French inclination to think of the development of the country in terms of its settlement by the surplus population of Vietnam.

The aristocracy, the few families of the Lao *élite*¹⁵—and it was only the Lao who counted—had found little to regret in a French association which maintained their positions intact in a changing world. They modified their ancient ways a little and played without complaint the parts allotted to them under the colonial régime. Sometimes they did much more. From 1921 onwards Prince Phetsarath, third son and heir of Prince Boun Khong, the viceroy of Luang Prabang when French rule began, took a beneficent and active part in the government of the country on the staff of the French commissioner in Vientiane. He had not inherited the title of viceroy when his father died in 1914, but in the course of his own service he acquired such popularity and authority in Laotian affairs that he was sometimes called 'king of Vientiane'. His younger brother, Prince Souvannaphouma and his youngest half-brother, Prince Souphanouvang, both qualified as civil engineers in France and joined the Public Works Service

¹⁴ Out of an estimated 160,000 children of school age, there were 7,000 pupils in the government schools and 5,600 pupils in the 231 village pagoda schools: see p. 45 above.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the *élite* in Laos, see Joel M. Halpern, *Government, Politics and Social Structure in Laos* (Yale University, 1964). Before the second world war less than a dozen Lao could be said to have received a full college education (p. 6). For French neglect of the hill peoples and their subjection to Lao officials, see Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-China* (London, 1937), p. 369; it should be added that French efforts for the advancement of the minorities were often frustrated by Lao opposition.

in Indo-China. Within the kingdom of Luang Prabang the king's son, Prince Savang, cultured, highly educated in law and political science, won much authority of his own.

But for the rest, for the broad majority of the Laotian people in their ten thousand villages, even for the king and his court, life remained much as it had always been. Needs were simple and satisfied from simple resources, methods were primitive, manners good, communications bad. The hill people were still undisturbed in their mountain fastnesses. Laos remained a Shangri-La, a land of charm and gaiety, of love, fairies, magic spells, cheerful festivals, and the gentle unforgettable music of the khênc.

Now suddenly, in 1941, the Mekong had become a frontier in more than name. There had been a brief, bitter, and terrifying war. The continuing Siamese challenge had to be met. Somehow, in a country which had depended largely on Vietnamese immigrants for its educated class, a sense of positive national unity must be created if its identity was to be maintained. The constitutional statute of August 1941 and the new French policy that went with it, were thus far more than compensation to the king of Luang Prabang for loss of territory and population. France had realized that she might lose all of Laos to the Siamese by default. It was vital to remedy the consequences of past inertia, to rouse the Laotian from his lethargy.

In the time that remained to her France did her best. The Laotian administration was reorganized, salaries were raised and Laotian provincial governors appointed with the title of *chao-khoueng*. The quality and composition of the European cadre of officials was critically reviewed and strengthened; schemes for further large scale Vietnamese immigration were dropped.¹⁶ Considerably more funds were provided from the central Indo-Chinese budget for projects in Laos. The garrisons along the Mekong were strengthened to discourage Siamese adventures; two Laotian infantry companies were raised. An extensive road-building programme was launched, and the agricultural and forestry services, retrenched in the economic crisis of 1934, were revived. Mobile medical teams were set to work in the mountainous tribal zones of the north, more schools were opened in the rural areas and a

¹⁶ E. Pietrantoni, *op. cit.*, p. 243, mentions plans for bringing 100,000 Vietnamese into the Song Khone valley south of Savannakhet and 50,000 into the Bolovens Plateau.

new emphasis on the production of national leaders was demanded of the School of Laotian Administration in Vientiane. Finally, as a direct reply to Siamese propaganda, an information service was created of which the central figure was M. Charles Rochet, the Director of Laotian Public Education. M. Rochet believed in the Lao, and it was under his inspiration that Katay Don Sasorith and Nhouy Abhay founded the National Renovation Movement which was to provide so many of the independence leaders in 1945 and 1946.¹⁷

Even now, little if anything was done to correct the balance in development between the Lao and the hill peoples. The Meo, the Kha, even the 'Pou Thai',¹⁸ remained isolated in their mountain fastnesses. This was partly due to difficulty of access, partly to increased reluctance on the part of the Lao to share what few benefits there were with the backward tribal people. Now that political power was coming his way the Lao seemed particularly content that a lack of sophistication should continue in the hills.¹⁹ This was to have unhappy consequences.

The new kingdom of Luang Prabang extended as far south as the Nam Ka Dinh river. The king of Luang Prabang became its ruler under a formal protectorate treaty with the French government—as opposed to an agreement with the Governor-General to which he had owed his former status—and his civil list salary was increased by sixty per cent. For Prince Phetsarath, who had been credited with hopes of a throne, perhaps that of a new kingdom of Vientiane, was revived his father's title of Viceroy. Phetsarath also

¹⁷ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm over Laos* (New York, 1961), p. 8. In his moving book, *Pays Lao, le Laos dans la tourmente* (Paris, 1946), which deals chiefly with the period of Japanese violence in Laos just before their defeat, M. Rochet describes the relations between France and Laos at this time. The book shows him as a colonial servant with a rare sympathy for and understanding of his people.

¹⁸ Pavié used the collective term *Pou Thai* for the Thai folk of Sam Neua and the Sipsong Chau Thai who are now commonly subdivided into Black Thai, White Thai, and Thai Neua. They are essentially the same people and the fact that they straddle the present frontier between Laos and Vietnam is one of the elements of the modern problem. See extract from Pavié's report at Appendix II and map on p. 47.

¹⁹ The French administration had always had difficulty with the Lao leadership over the establishment of schools in minority areas. In 1940 no member of the minority races in Laos had achieved a secondary education.

became prime minister in a modern adaptation of the traditional king's council,²⁰ with his half-brother Prince Souvannarath as Minister of Economy and the king's brother Prince Settha as Minister of the Interior. The settlement thus also represented a reconciliation between the two branches of the royal family; for the ambitions and influence of Prince Phetsarath and his many able brothers had been viewed with suspicion by the senior line headed by the king.²¹

The new council was to meet under the chairmanship of a high French official, its composition was not far removed from tradition, and its authority was limited. Moreover the changes, territorial and political, were understood only within the small educated circle of Laotians,²² and the significance of the ceremonies celebrating the transfer of the new provinces to the old kingdom passed the people by. They marked, nevertheless, the beginning of modern national government in Laos. South of the Nam Ka Dinh the country continued to be administered as before, but with some thought of an eventual union of the whole of Laos.

Unhappily, time was fast running out for the French. When she launched herself into war in December 1941 Japan had been prepared to seize French Indo-China, control over which was essential to her operations in Malaya. Admiral Decoux had avoided outright Japanese occupation by agreeing not to oppose Japan's war plans and by putting the economic resources of the country at her disposal. This bargain saved the forty thousand French people in Indo-China from Japanese concentration camps for over three years, and avoided the risk of atrocities upon the twenty-three million Indo-Chinese. It also kept the Japanese to some extent out of sight of the population of the colony as a whole, a fact which, together with Decoux's programme of public works and his success in keeping the economy going, probably slowed down the decline of French prestige in the East. It must be said on the other hand that the passive collaboration of French Indo-China was vital to

²⁰ The French had 'abolished' the king's council of Luang Prabang, the *Hosanam Luang*, in 1915. Their action had however been disregarded by the ruler and the council had continued to sit.

²¹ See additional note 1.

²² Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 97, considers that as late as 1959 the Lao *élite* consisted, in terms of political decision making groups, of a few dozen people.

the Japanese; it hastened their conquest of Malaya and delayed Allied victory in the Far East.²³

After the liberation of France in 1944, Decoux himself assumed full powers in Indo-China in accordance with the standing orders of the Vichy Government. Many of his subordinates, however, had long been in touch with Free France through the French mission in Kunming, and in September one of them, General Mordant, was secretly appointed Delegate-General for Indo-China by General de Gaulle,²⁴ an arrangement in which the admiral agreed to co-operate when he was informed of it at the end of October. But the circumstances were such—an ebullient, wildly optimistic, ill-co-ordinated and indiscreet resistance movement, increasingly rent by the bitter rivalries of French domestic politics—that the Japanese could not fail to realize that something was afoot. Towards the end of 1944, on the pretext that the reoccupation of the Philippines by the United States in October had made an Allied invasion of Indo-China a serious possibility, they moved in reinforcements and quietly deployed their forces so as to thwart the most probable French course of action.

The French had planned to withdraw their main military units from the towns to areas from which they could retreat freely to the mountains in the event of a Japanese move against French sovereignty. Allied air supply would thereafter enable them to harass Japanese communications and bases. The preparatory steps were being taken when, on 9 March 1945, the Japanese struck. Within twenty-four hours of the rejection of their ultimatum by Admiral Decoux, they were in complete control. Some six thousand French and three thousand Indo-Chinese troops began to fight their way out to China from Tongking. Elsewhere isolated parties of French survivors made their way to the hills, some garrisons fought heroically to the death, but the resistance movement collapsed and co-ordinated action ceased.²⁵ American forces in

²³ See Decoux's own account, and on the other hand Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 96, and P. Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris, 1952), pp. 116-17. General de Gaulle makes his own view clear in *Mémoires de guerre, le salut 1944-1946* (Paris, 1959), p. 164.

²⁴ General de Gaulle had written to General Mordant as far back as 29 February 1944 'pour l'affermir dans les bonnes intentions dont je sais qu'elles sont les siennes'; de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre, l'unité 1942-1944* (Paris, 1956), p. 286 and pp. 680-1.

²⁵ Lancaster, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-6. See also Devillers, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-3.

Yunnan were ordered not to supply the French with the arms and ammunition they needed.²⁶ The troops who nevertheless escaped were deprived by Chiang Kai-Shek, under whose command they were placed, of any further role in Indo-China.

The Japanese now informed the princely rulers in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that the colonial régime was at an end and that their countries had become independent members of Japan's new order. In Cambodia the position was accepted, in Vietnam the nationalists seized their opportunity, but in Laos, where the Japanese had hardly yet appeared, Crown Prince Savang, in the name of his father, proclaimed the loyalty of the royal court and people of Luang Prabang to France. On 16 March 1945 he ordered a general rising of partisans against the Japanese and severe penalties for anyone who refused to help the French. The Japanese accordingly occupied Luang Prabang early in April, forced the king to declare the independence of his kingdom and obliged the crown prince to promise co-operation. In the meantime, with the full agreement of the king, French and Laotian troops in upper Laos, together with Prince Kindavong,²⁷ Phoui Sananikone,²⁸ and many other Laotian leaders, had made their way into China.

Further south the French and Laotian garrisons who could escape took to the jungle, where patriotic organizations fostered by the French since 1941 supported them, helping also the new French resistance groups from India already parachuted into the hills. The young head of the house of Champassak, Prince Boun Oum, led his people against the Japanese in the south.²⁹ Kou Voravong³⁰ was with the parachutists in the Paksane area, Leuam Insisengmay east of Savannakhet.³¹ Such was the feeling in the country that most of the French civilians working there who were

²⁶ See additional note 2 at end of chapter.

²⁷ Brother of Phetsarath and chaomuong (district governor) of Muong Kassy. He died in 1947.

²⁸ Chaokhoueng (provincial governor) of Nam Tha, prime minister of Laos in 1950-1 and 1958-9.

²⁹ See C. H. Duparc, 'Le problème politique Laotien' in *Politique Étrangère* XII (1947), p. 538, and Michel Caply, *Guérilla au Laos* (Paris, 1966), pp. 105-6 for Prince Boun Oum's outstanding leadership at this time.

³⁰ Later chaokhoueng of Thakhek and Minister of Defence in 1954 when he was assassinated.

³¹ Later chaokhoueng of Savannakhet, a strong southerner and conservative, connected by marriage with the Champassak family.

not caught by the initial surprise, succeeded in escaping from the Japanese.

Prince Phetsarath, viceroy and prime minister, behaved with greater circumspection. Realizing, as did the crown prince in Luang Prabang, that the Japanese were now his only protection against the exultant Vietnamese who were already acting as heirs presumptive to French power in Laos, he was careful not to antagonize the new masters. They found his attitude satisfactory and merely appointed 'advisers' to his administration. This gave him a certain freedom. He saw it as an opportunity to prepare Laos for independence and to remove some of the Vietnamese from the Laotian public services. In the north he had some success, but the Vietnamese were tenacious. Caply writes:

Dans les ministères et les services, ils ont, dès le début de l'occupation, tenté de prendre les rênes du pouvoir et de diriger l'administration. Cette dualité de pouvoir, responsables lao dépendant du Premier Ministre où de la Résidence supérieure, cadres annamites prétendant commander avec l'appui nippon, amène, dès le mois d'avril, une stagnation quasi complète des services.³²

Although the king had limited his declaration of independence strictly to his own domains, Phetsarath and the Japanese ignored sentiment in the south and treated the country henceforth as one. Thanks to the quality of the underground resistance, however, the Japanese writ rarely ran outside the limits of the towns, and many even of the officials appointed by Phetsarath worked secretly with the French.

Elsewhere in Indo-China the best efforts of Free France could do little to save what remained of French prestige in the months that followed. It was a time of cruelty and chaos. The Japanese behaved with their usual sporadic savagery even in Laos. Forty-seven French civilians were murdered in Thakhek. Everywhere the Japanese tried to provoke and sustain anti-French sentiment. Without their French administrators the civil governments were too weak to cope with their problems.

In Vietnam the revolutionary nationalist movement of Ho Chi Minh, nurtured by the Allies for its potential resistance to the Japanese,³³ and now supported by United States secret service

³² Caply, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

³³ Its actual achievements against the Japanese were minimal. B. B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Harrisburg, 1961), p. 24.

missions, consolidated and extended its grip with the connivance of the Japanese, so that when Japan surrendered on 15 August it was in a position to take control of the greater part of Vietnam within a few days. The plan was to disarm the Japanese before the arrival of the Allies, to take over power, and to receive, as the authority in control of the country, the Allied forces coming to demobilize the Japanese.³⁴ The Viet Minh,³⁵ as they were henceforth to be called, were effectively masters of Vietnam by 23 August 1945, and were sending armed detachments into Laos and Cambodia.

The armies of the British South-East Asia Command, then poised for an invasion of Malaya, were not prepared for the sudden total victory of the atom bomb, which gave them at a stroke, a vast agglomeration of lands with their hundreds of thousands of internees, prisoners, refugees, and partisans, all in some degree of extremity, and which added, among other things, half of Indo-China to their responsibilities. Military and political considerations had suddenly to give place to human rescue. Everything had to be improvised. Decisions taken for the continuance of war had to be adapted; the only priority was to reach, relieve, and repatriate the prisoners. Information on conditions in the area was scarce, inaccurate, and slow. It took a surprisingly long time even for surrender orders to reach the Japanese in the field, and in the interval there was much local uncertainty from which the Viet Minh profited and the French and French influence in Indo-China suffered.

There were conflicts of Allied policy. Siam had declared war on the Allies in January 1942 and, as a reward from Japan, had received portions of Burma and also the Malayan states she had ceded to Britain in 1909. Britain as well as France was thus inclined to treat Siam strictly as an ex-enemy. The United States, on the other hand, whose interests Siam had not directly damaged, regarded her as an occupied country and sought to moderate French and British attitudes.

Furthermore President Roosevelt had made no secret of his wish to prevent a French return to Indo-China. He had told his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, in 1944, that 'nothing was to be done

³⁴ Truong Chinh, *La révolution d'août* (Hanoi, 1962), p. 12.

³⁵ Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, commonly abbreviated to Viet Minh.

in regard to resistance groups or in any other way in relation to Indo-China'.³⁶ In the face of dogged British resistance he had reluctantly abandoned his plan to place the country under international trusteeship³⁷ but he was more than ever determined on its independence. Churchill himself was unable to change the president's decision not to supply the French when they were fighting their way out of Tongking, a callous act which served no Allied purpose.³⁸ It is also certain that had Roosevelt lived he would have tried to prevent their return, as Lord Mountbatten implied in August 1945 when he received General Leclerc in Ceylon.³⁹

Official American policy after the Japanese surrender was more friendly to the French. On 22 August 1945 President Truman assured General de Gaulle that his government would not oppose the French return to Indo-China.⁴⁰ This was not, however, the feeling in Indo-China itself where American officers attached to the Viet Minh waxed enthusiastic in the anti-colonial cause, while their colleagues assisted from across the Mekong; there were painful incidents in which they treated the French openly as enemies.⁴¹ De Gaulle had few of his own troops in the East and was dependent on his allies for means of transport. He could therefore not have opposed the arrangement made at the Potsdam Conference whereby the Chinese and British were to receive the Japanese surrender in Indo-China, to the north and south of the sixteenth parallel respectively, though he bitterly resented it.

³⁶ *Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (New York, 1948), vol. ii, p. 1598. Nicol Smith, *Into Siam* (New York, 1945), p. 192 shows that the U.S. State Department was secretly canvassing the views of national leaders in South-East Asia on the return or otherwise of their colonial masters.

³⁷ See Lord Avon, *The Eden Memoirs, the Reckoning* (London, 1965), pp. 378, 426, and 513 for persistent British opposition to the trusteeship plan of which the 'anti-colonial' Cordell Hull was a supporter. The plan had been dropped by February 1945 as Roosevelt made clear at a press conference after Yalta: see S. I. Rosenman (ed.), *The Public Papers and addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt: Victory and the Threshold of Peace* (New York, 1950), pp. 562-3.

³⁸ See additional note 3.

³⁹ P. Devillers, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-50.

⁴⁰ De Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre, le salut 1944-1946* (Paris, 1959), pp. 213 and 555.

⁴¹ See Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 125. Sainteny, *Histoire d'une paix manquée* (Paris, 1953) *passim*, and for a particular instance near Thakhek, P. Kemp, *Alms for Oblivion* (London, 1961), pp. 49-56.

The Chinese also had purposes of their own. In the formal sense, it was from China that France had acquired Tongking in 1885. If there was to be any question of a change in the *status quo*, the Chinese of course expected to benefit.⁴² In spite of his assurances to President Roosevelt in 1943 Chiang Kai-Shek had been planning for more than a year to install a puppet régime in Hanoi⁴³ and was somewhat put out when the Viet Minh forestalled him. While he was friendly and reassuring to de Gaulle, he was determined to extract everything he could from the French predicament.

The result of the conflicting interests of her allies was that, in the face of Viet Minh power, France was left to reconquer Indo-China if she could. The small British force sent to receive the Japanese surrender in the south did more than it at first intended to help the French in Saigon, but its purpose was to save French lives rather than to put down a nationalist rebellion.⁴⁴

The success of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam was watched with a mixture of admiration and apprehension in Laos. American support of the Viet Minh made it appear doubtful whether the French would be permitted to return. The immediate problem was therefore to protect Laos from the triumphant Vietnamese, which implied a measure of detachment from the remaining French on the part of the Laotian leaders. As early as 20 August Laotian elements of the anti-Japanese guerrillas in Siam, encouraged by their own instructors and by the Viet Minh, were changing direction against France; some hoped to win independence for the Lao people on both banks of the Mekong.⁴⁵ Prince Souphanouvong had already been in contact with the Viet Minh for some months; Sithone Khamadam, son of the chief of the Bolovens Kha killed by the French in 1936 after twenty-five years of dissidence, had been released from prison with two of his brothers by the Japanese,

⁴² Devillers, *op. cit.*, p. 116. Tongking was already shown as Chinese on one of the maps at the Chinese military school at Cheng Tu.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 109, Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 115. E. R. Stettinius, *Roosevelt and the Russians* (London, 1950), pp. 211-12, quotes Chiang Kai-Shek's assurances to Roosevelt in 1943, during discussions of a possible trusteeship for Indo-China, that he had no designs on the country.

⁴⁴ See *Documents relating to British Involvement in the Indo-China Conflict 1945-1965* (Cmd. 2834) (London, 1965), pp. 6-8.

⁴⁵ For the Seri Thai movement and its Lao-pen-Lao (Laos for the Lao) element, see Caply, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-5. This book is an objective and authoritative source for the politics of this period.

and the anti-French Meo leader, Faydang, had sided with the Japanese from the first.⁴⁶ When a French military detachment arrived in Vientiane at the end of August, Phetsarath refused to allow the released French commissioner to resume his functions and on 1 September he announced that independence from France had come to stay. In Thakhek the Viet Minh quickly took over from the Japanese who moved south to avoid surrender to the Chinese, harassed such French internees as had escaped massacre, and did their best to wipe out the Franco-Lao irregulars who waited in the jungle. By degrees Xieng Khouang, Sam Neua, Phongsaly passed into Viet Minh control.

On 14 September, however, French troops from the south entered Pakse at the invitation of Prince Boun Oum, and King Sisavang Vong welcomed the French mission parachuted into Luang Prabang, sending loyal greetings to General de Gaulle. The king's decision to resume the kingdom's adherence to France had been telegraphed to Prince Phetsarath on 7 September, but the prince did not reveal this for ten days. By then he was receiving additional support from the Nationalist Chinese who were moving into Laos from the north, and had declared the union of the whole country as the Kingdom of Laos. In Luang Prabang the Chinese brutally harassed the French and behaved as if they had come to stay. In Vientiane the Chinese general invited the formulation of complaints against France,⁴⁷ reduced the French detachment to a nucleus, and finally exerted such pressure that the last French elements were compelled to leave.

Phetsarath continued to build up the Independence Movement. Peter Kemp, then a member of the British special force in north-east Siam, who had been trying to help the French against the Viet Minh near Thakhek, visited the prince in the company of a French officer towards the end of September. 'A swarthy, heavily-built man,' he tells us,⁴⁸ 'in early middle age, he received us in a cool and comfortable room where the strong morning light filtered faintly through sun-blinds; his beautifully manicured hands and smart white linen suit matched the opulence of his surroundings.

⁴⁶ For Kha and Meo rebellions against French rule, see Le Boulanger, *op. cit.*, and W. G. Burchett, *Mekong Upstream* (Berlin, 1959). The latter, when its Communist bias is discounted, provides an interesting account of Faydang (pp. 228-33) and the Khamadam family (pp. 209-14).

⁴⁷ Gentil, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴⁸ P. Kemp, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

He had an unfortunate manner compounded of shiftiness, complacency and arrogance.' The viceroy was contemptuous of the French and made 'exaggerated claims' of the support he enjoyed among his own people.

The extent of popular support for Phetsarath's Independence Movement was indeed doubtful. The prince did of course possess considerable influence among his own people. He was reputed to possess mystic powers,⁴⁹ he had been for twenty years the leading Laotian personality in the French administration of Laos, he occupied the principal office of state in the Luang Prabang kingdom and shared the semi-religious popular reverence paid to the king. But there was not sufficient political consciousness in the country for his support to be termed political; there was in Laos none of the deep-rooted popular nationalism that had borne up Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam.

Moreover, Phetsarath was now claiming leadership throughout the whole of Laos, proclaiming a union which the French had regarded as premature only four years earlier. Not only were the king and crown prince against him in the north, but also Prince Boun Oum of Champassak, the foremost personality and traditional leader in the south. The king's opposition had dynastic as well as constitutional elements, for the association with Phetsarath of his brother and half-brother, the Princes Souvannaphouma and Souphanouvong, brought back uneasy memories of their father's hopes of the throne in 1904.⁵⁰ For his part, Prince Boun Oum resented the union of Laos under any part of the royal family of Luang Prabang and possessed a southerner's nervousness of Phetsarath's links with the Vietnamese. The viceroy's prestige

⁴⁹ Joel M. Halpern, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-25 gives an account of a journey in rural Laos with Prince Phetsarath which illustrates the prince's influence and sheds some light on that of his brothers Souvannaphouma and Souphanouvong today. The popular feeling appears to be that the royal family in general have intermediary powers with the unseen world. If a representative of the family has no personality or natural grace then these powers are thought not to have 'come through' in him. But Phetsarath, Souvannaphouma, and Souphanouvong had and have great personal qualities. However much the two latter may try to discourage popular belief in their powers, it remains an element in their public position.

⁵⁰ See additional note 1. See Roger M. Smith in *Governments and Politics of South-East Asia*, G. McT. Kahin (ed.), (2nd edn., Cornell, 1964), p. 534 for the rivalry between Phetsarath and the crown prince.

could never have outweighed these formidable influences on the popular mind. His Independence Movement consisted of a few politically-minded leaders, whose following followed for personal rather than political reasons and whose strength depended on Vietnamese and Chinese backing.

Matters came to a head on 10 October. Fortified by a message from General de Gaulle, the king dismissed Prince Phetsarath both as prime minister and viceroy. Two days later the Independence Committee proclaimed a provisional constitution for a united Laos, formed a provisional National Assembly and a provisional government which included Phetsarath's brother Prince Souvanaphouma and later his half-brother Prince Souphanouvong, who was the most decidedly anti-French of the three. The king was invited to become constitutional monarch of the new state, but he declined, pronouncing the provisional government illegal and against the will of the majority,⁵¹ and summoning the ex-vice-roy to Luang Prabang. Phetsarath refused to go and on 20 October his National Assembly passed a motion deposing the king. On 4 November he organized a *coup d'état* in Luang Prabang with the help of the Chinese, who neutralized the French detachment there while the king was forced to surrender.

It now seemed possible that Phetsarath would mount the throne himself. His more extreme supporters urged this course upon him.⁵² But substantial French forces had by now arrived in Saigon and it was clearly only a matter of time before they reoccupied Laos. This may have decided him against it. Instead he again invited the king to assume office as constitutional head of the new Laos and to give legitimacy to all that had been done. After long persuasion and with great reluctance King Sisavang Vong agreed and was reinstated with due ceremony on 23 April 1946, two days before the French entry into Vientiane.

The sixteenth parallel, which divided the British and Chinese zones of occupation in Indo-China, cuts the Mekong south of Savannakhet. On 28 February 1946 the signature of a Franco-Chinese agreement, under which the Chinese undertook to withdraw by 31 March, had enabled the French to cross it. Their

⁵¹ Gentil, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵² Sisouk Na Champassak, *op. cit.*, p. 13, says that he actually decided on it and changed his mind when he realized the imminence of the French return.

forces at once moved northwards from Pakse and occupied Savan-nakhet without opposition on 17 March. Six days later Phetsarath offered negotiations, but by then a strong Franco-Lao guerrilla force, together with the advancing French detachments, had routed the Viet Minh and their Free Lao allies under Prince Souphanouvong at Thakhek. Pausing only to clear the road from Thakhek to the Vietnamese coast, which had been Phetsarath's main link with the Viet Minh centre, the French reoccupied Vientiane.⁵³

Thus it was that on the day of the king's reinstatement, while Phetsarath and his government participated in the long ceremonies at Luang Prabang, there were scenes of chaos in Vientiane. The Independence partisans, the Viet Minh, and most of the Vietnamese residents⁵⁴ of the administrative capital ferried themselves and everything they could carry across the river into Siam.

Only the Chinese remained to oppose the French entry into Vientiane on 25 April, for here as elsewhere in Indo-China the forces of Chiang Kai-Shek did not withdraw until the French had shown that they were prepared to remove them by force. They had already stolen all they could from Laos, and further north still lingered long enough to carry away the opium crop in due season. The French reoccupation of Luang Prabang on 13 May, and the reaffirmation by the king of his links with France, ended the Independence episode in the country itself. The Independence leaders and partisans took refuge in Siam, whose traditional hostility to the French continued in the slender hope of keeping the territory acquired by Japanese favour in 1941. From the Siamese bank of the Mekong, Viet Minh and Lao guerrillas harassed the French as best they could. But the government in exile was soon left behind by the march of events.

⁵³ It is not true, as Ellen Hammer asserts (*The Struggle for Indo-China* (Stanford, 1954), p. 156), that Independence forces seriously resisted the French return. Such opposition as there was came from the Viet Minh, with a handful of Lao sometimes acting as a front.

⁵⁴ The great majority of the Vietnamese residents of Laos left before the return of the French. The Vietnamese population had been estimated at 50,000 in 1940. By 1958 it was only 9,000 (LeBar and Suddard, *Laos, its People, its Society, its Culture* (New Haven, 1960)). Pietrantonio, *op. cit.*, gives the Vietnamese population of Vientiane as 12,400 in 1943, as against 9,570 Laotians. The exodus in April 1946 thus left the place comparatively empty.

Before the monsoon ended in 1946 the French had completed their reoccupation of Laos and repaired the worst of the loot and ruin in Vientiane. At the end of the year international pressure compelled Siam to return her 1941 acquisitions. Meanwhile, on 27 August 1946, the French and Laotians had agreed on a *modus vivendi* which recognized implicitly the unity of the whole of Laos and the autonomy of its provinces. Prince Boun Oum of Champassak, in spite of some southern reluctance, agreed to merge his royal rights into the sovereignty of Laos.

Under the new dispensation the French provincial commissioners became advisers, and the Laotian chaokhouengs ruled their provinces in the king's name. The crown prince took charge of a provisional national government and in January 1947 elections were held to form a Constituent Assembly which proceeded to draw up a constitution. The constitution was promulgated by the king on 11 May and Laos became formally a constitutional monarchy within the French Union. In recognition of his gesture in the cause of national unity, and of his performance as a guerrilla leader in the south, Prince Boun Oum was granted for life the title of Inspector General of the Kingdom with precedence after the king.⁵⁵ General elections took place in November; a new government under Prince Souvannarath was formed early in 1948. Phetsarath and the most important of the Independence Movement leaders remained in Bangkok.

Progress towards a final understanding on the international status of Laos was now delayed by events in Vietnam, where after an initial realization that Vietnamese independence was irreversible, France had retreated into a determination to reassert her authority. There had followed the outbreak of hostilities at Hanoi in December 1946. The Viet Minh were not yet ready for war and had withdrawn to long-term bases in the mountains of Tongking.

⁵⁵ For the whole problem of political aspirations in southern Laos, see C. H. Duparc, *op. cit.* The unification of Laos was seen in the south as the absorption of the richer, more populous half of the country by the crown of Luang Prabang. The south had agreed to it on condition of fair southern representation in the government and of consideration of special southern interests. This condition did not appear to have been met. Prince Boun Oum was in France while the Constituent Assembly was meeting, and clearly felt on his return that his position had not been properly safeguarded. The adoption of the flag of Luang Prabang as the national flag was particularly resented in the south.

France assumed that defeating them was only a matter of time and tried to find an alternative Vietnamese political leader who would not demand more independence than she was prepared to give.

Eventually in March 1949 the Emperor Bao Dai of Annam, who had abdicated under pressure from Ho Chi Minh after the defeat of Japan, was persuaded to head the united state of Vietnam which was declared 'independent within the French Union'. This arrangement allowed the French at last to negotiate the association of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in an Indo-Chinese Federation and so preserve some of the advantages of unity; among these was the annual subvention to the kingdom of Laos from the Indo-Chinese general budget. Conventions were signed with Laos and Cambodia, similarly recognizing their independence and establishing its conditions, the principal one being that defence and foreign relations remained French responsibilities.⁵⁶

There were many in Laos who freely acknowledged their debt to France and welcomed as necessary the continuance of some degree of French tutelage. In October 1945, M. Uthong Souvannavong, then Finance Minister in the royal government, had commented thus to Phetsarath on the Chinese invitation to turn against the French:

We are a small people. Few of us are educated. Our country is without great resources and can only live with the support of other countries. We must necessarily choose foreign tutelage. . . . Our interests dictate that among the great powers we should choose France. So we shall preserve the moral and intellectual gains we have made; with another power we should have to go back to school, learn another language. The king has chosen and save for a few fanatics we are attached to France; in the smallest jungle village the Frenchman has been received like a brother. . . .⁵⁷

This was no more than true. In Laos the French had been helped against the Japanese and not betrayed to them as happened so often in Vietnam and Cambodia.⁵⁸ Even Phetsarath had prevented

⁵⁶ The Laotians signed with the reservation that the frontiers of Laos 'should include the territories which historically depended on the kingdom but which are now attached to neighbouring states for administrative reasons'. Katay D. Sasorith, *Le Laos: son évolution politique, sa place dans l'union française* (Paris, 1953), p. 68.

⁵⁷ Gentil, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁸ The French resistance leader in the Paksane area writes: 'Between March and August 1945, I personally was able to go, alone or with my

the statue of Pavie from being thrown into the Mekong and had at one time protested that he was not anti-French, that he was too old to learn Chinese or English, and that he was only trying to make France understand that times had changed.

When therefore it was clear that real political progress was soon to be made in Laos, the exiled leaders in Bangkok began to reconsider their positions. The retention of defence and foreign affairs in French hands was not the serious limitation upon independence which it seemed in Vietnam, for Laos was short of experienced political leaders and had virtually no military ones. Furthermore Laos could not balance her budget without help from the central exchequer. Much of the reason for nationalist protest had thus departed. At the same time, since the revival of military dictatorship in Siam at the end of 1947,⁵⁹ Bangkok no longer welcomed the exiles so warmly. They lived modestly, working as weavers, pamphleteers, or even as hotel dish-washers when funds were low.⁶⁰ Prince Souvannaphouma took a post with the Thai Electric Company. Many of his colleagues had already gone home; Nhouy Abhay, for instance, the talented Minister of Education, had returned to Vientiane as long ago as August 1946.

By the beginning of 1948, however, a fundamental conflict had developed among the exiles themselves. Prince Souvannaphouma and Katay Don Sasorith, whose trenchant articles under the pen-name *William Rabbit* had made him the chief spokesman of the movement,⁶¹ were men of moderate views and prepared to trust the French. Prince Souphanouvong, on the other hand, believed that concessions by the French, however far-reaching, were mere colonialist tricks to prolong their power: to be worth having independence must be seized by force. He now proposed that the Independence Movement be united with the Vietnamese rebels

batman, on foot from Paksane to Napé and to Tha Thom, without any other danger than the stray Japanese or tiger.' Charles Rochet, *Pays Lao, le Laos dans la tourmente* (Paris, 1946), gives many examples of Laotian loyalty to the French at this time.

⁵⁹ When the wartime dictator, Marshal Phibul, seized power and forced Pridi Phanamyong, one of the originators of the constitutional régime of 1932, and wartime resistance leader, to flee the country. Pridi eventually sought asylum in Communist China.

⁶⁰ O. Meeker, *The Little World of Laos* (New York, 1959), pp. 129-32.

⁶¹ See Katay, *Contribution à l'Histoire du mouvement d'indépendance national Lao* (Bangkok, 1948). Katay in Laotian means rabbit.

under Ho Chi Minh. This led to a decisive break between the prince and his colleagues.

Prince Souphanouvong was born in 1912 to the eleventh wife of Prince Boun Khong. He had lived and worked in Vietnam ever since 1937 when, having shown himself an outstanding student, he took a civil engineering degree in Paris. Souphanouvong had seen much of France, and before he returned home he had also studied irrigation works in North Africa, undergone courses in practical engineering, and made the acquaintance of the anti-Fascist Popular Front.⁶² Naturally of a brilliant, inquiring intellect, outclassing most of his French contemporaries in Paris, he found the conditions of his work in the Public Works service of Indo-China galling. Considering that Laos had no prospects, he chose to serve in Vietnam. Here his local origin restricted him to a lower status and salary than were enjoyed by Frenchmen of similar qualifications, and he undoubtedly encountered the occasional arrogance which used to come naturally to many Europeans in the Orient. Articulate, extrovert, physically robust, his reaction was predictable.

The prince spent most of the years from 1938 to 1945 building roads and bridges in central Vietnam and Laos. He seems to have made contact with the Viet Minh soon after the Japanese action against the French in March 1945. When Japan surrendered he was at Vinh, whence he was flown by United States agents to an interview with Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi. He told the Viet Minh leader that he wanted to form a Lao national government, was given full Viet Minh support, and was soon marching into central Laos with an escort of Viet Minh soldiers dressed as Laotians.⁶³ Gathering a few genuine recruits and organizing anti-French resistance groups on the way, the prince reached Vientiane after the formation of the provisional government, in which he was appointed Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief.⁶⁴

In this capacity Souphanouvong organized such Lao resistance as there was to the French return in March 1946. After sharing in

⁶² A. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos* (London, 1965), p. 21. Dommen gives what is probably the fullest Western account of the career of Prince Souphanouvong; he does however reproduce some popular inaccuracies.

⁶³ Michael Field, *The Prevailing Wind* (London, 1965), p. 42.

⁶⁴ Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 24. He was later Foreign Minister in the 'government in exile' in Bangkok, *ibid.*, p. 27.

the Viet Minh defeat by French forces at Thakhek he fled across the Mekong with some of his partisans. A French plane machine-gunned the boat and killed thirty of his men. He himself was wounded and perhaps owes his life to friendly Siamese who rescued him and three other survivors from the sinking craft.⁶⁵ A few months later he was seen by a United States representative in the house of the Governor of Nakawn Panom,⁶⁶ his arm in a sling, evidently directing partisan raids across the river. In July 1946 he went to Hanoi which the Viet Minh still shared uneasily with the French. Ho Chi Minh, who might at this stage have counselled prudence, was in France and the prince was exposed to the full militancy of the Viet Minh under their military leader Vo Nguyen Giap. He returned to join the Lao Independence leaders in Bangkok, much strengthened in his view that for Laos armed rebellion in alliance with the Viet Minh was the only way to independence.

At the beginning of 1947, after the outbreak of hostilities between France and the Viet Minh, Souphanouvong went back to Laos to try and raise the country against the colonial power. There was some response from sections of the Khas and Meos, for the hill minorities were already beginning to be uneasy under the authority of the Lao which was rapidly replacing that of the French.⁶⁷ The prince made contact with Sithone Khamadam, the only significant Kha leader, and the Meo chieftain Faydang, tribal enemy of Touby Lyfoung who had assisted the French return to Xieng Khouang and was now a member of the Laotian civil service.⁶⁸ But there was no general rising and some of the partisans Souphanouvong himself had brought back to Laos strayed home to their villages.

After a few months, therefore, the prince returned to Bangkok. His Chief of Staff, Phoumi Nosavan, visited Vietnam to plan a common offensive against the French with Ho Chi Minh and Giap. Fifteen mixed Lao-Viet Minh companies began to be raised in

⁶⁵ Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (Penguin, 1964), p. 244.

⁶⁶ Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27, who, however, incorrectly places the meeting at Nongkhay.

⁶⁷ See additional note 4.

⁶⁸ See Lucien Bodard, *La guerre d'Indochine, l'enlèvement* (Paris, 1963), pp. 346-9, for an account of Prince Canh, chief of the Black Thai at Son La, who, like Khamadam, had been released from a French prison by the Japanese. Prince Canh became a Viet Minh colonel.

Siam. Throughout 1947 partisan groups based in security on the Siamese bank of the Mekong, harassed the French with raids and propaganda. One such raid captured and killed the French adviser to the chaokhoueng of Savannakhet who was on his way to the Constituent Assembly in Vientiane. Two Laotians in the party were 'executed'. The third, M. Kou Voravong, chaokhoueng of Thakhek, was severely wounded and left for dead, but when the raiders had gone he found a pirogue which he was able to paddle with his hands to safety down a small river to the Mekong.

Grievous as such incidents could be, they did but dent the armour of the French, who were still confident that they would eventually re-establish themselves not only in Laos but throughout Indo-China, even if they had not done so already.

Most of the Lao leaders in Bangkok were in favour of some link with the Viet Minh, in spite of the traditional Lao fear and hatred of the Vietnamese,⁶⁹ for it must have seemed that the prosperity of Laos would continue to depend to some extent on a large Vietnamese domestic community. Prince Souphanouvong's proposal that the Independence Movement should combine with the Viet Minh was nevertheless regarded as outrageous, for it would serve the Vietnamese ambition to inherit French control of Laos and Cambodia. Although his colleagues did not formally remove him from the government-in-exile until May 1949, the prince broke off relations with it in 1948 and went his own way.

The moderate rebels were meanwhile beginning to view the progress of Laos towards independence as the outcome of their own efforts and increasingly as the satisfaction of their aspirations. Phetsarath had said in 1947 that he was not against negotiations with France and secret exchanges had taken place throughout 1948. 'We can say', wrote Katay, 'that broadly the structure of the new

⁶⁹ There is a Lao proverb: 'Dog and cat, Annamite and Lao.' Fear of Vietnamese encroachment was still very apparent in Laos. Early in the war Phetsarath himself had objected to the adoption of a Roman script for Lao, remarking that it would deliver the country into the hands of the Vietnamese. For anti-Vietnamese attitudes of leaders and people in Laos see Gentil, *op. cit.*, p. 43, Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 148, Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 29, Rochet, *op. cit.*, *passim*, and Caply, *op. cit.*, *passim*. An officer present at the battle between Franco-Lao forces and Viet Minh at Thakhek in March 1946 has said that it turned into a savage demonstration of Lao hatred for the Vietnamese, which the French were unable to stop.

Lao state . . . is in a great measure our work. At least it is inspired by the clear and firm position we have taken and takes account of the claims we have consequently presented and defended.⁷⁰ Phetsarath's reconciliation with the king he had dared to dethrone presented its own problems,⁷¹ but after the Franco-Laotian convention was signed in July 1949, there seemed no good reason why his colleagues should not return home. Knowing that they could not take Phetsarath with them and exasperated by the way in which they considered he had exploited his position among them, the exiles formally broke their connexion with the ex-vice-roy on 19 October, proclaimed the dissolution of their Independence Movement and its activities, and in November 1949 returned to Vientiane.

In the general reconciliation of families and factions that followed, it seemed that Laos could at last resume the progress towards united nationhood under French guidance, which had been interrupted by the Japanese *coup de force* in 1945. As the ministers, officials, and governors of the kingdom swore once more their loyalty to the king, and undertook, on pain of the direst calamities, 'not to stir up plots with unbelievers or foreign enemies . . . not to seek to kill the representatives of the government by means of spells, not to give secret shelter to rebels',⁷² the dissidence of Prince Souphanouvong seemed hardly worth a thought.

⁷⁰ Katay, *Le Laos*, pp. 69-70, quoting an article he wrote in 1949.

⁷¹ In spite of his active role in 1945-6, Prince Phetsarath had been a reluctant exile. However, his deposition from the office of vice-roy in 1945, and the failure of the new Laotian constitution to include a vice-roy, made it additionally difficult for him to compromise. He visited Laos on family business in 1956 and returned in 1957 on his reinstatement as vice-roy. He died in retirement in 1959.

⁷² The oath, a picturesque and very long recitation, is substantially that taken to Prince Anou of Vientiane in the early nineteenth century and to the President of France under French rule. For texts, see de Reinach, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 167-8 and *Lao Presse* of 2 November 1960.

ADDITIONAL NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. A family tree of the royal family of Luang Prabang is at Appendix III. On the death of King Zakharine in 1904, the French had decided after some debate to retain the monarchy. They chose the dead king's young son, Prince Sisavang Vong, who was just completing a course at the *École Coloniale* in Paris, in preference to the elder Prince Sisaleumsak, as

Zakharine's successor. Prince Boun Khong, the viceroy or 'second king', was son of the viceroy Prince Souvannaphouma who had been killed in the attack on Luang Prabang by Deo-van-Tri in 1887. Boun Khong had done well as viceroy, an office in which, by tradition, he had much more to do with government than the king whose concern was more ceremonial and religious, and was credited with hopes of the crown after the death of Zakharine who was his second cousin.

2. C. D. Chennault, *The Way of a Fighter* (New York, 1949), p. 342; G. Sabattier, *Le destin de l'Indochine, souvenirs et documents 1941-51* (Paris, 1952), pp. 205-7, General de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre, le salut 1944-46* (Paris, 1959), p. 166, and General Wedermeyer, *Wedermeyer Reports!* (New York, 1958), p. 340, make it clear that this was a deliberate act.

3. In W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. VI (London, 1954), p. 632, appears a memo by Mr. Churchill dated 19 March 1945, initiating a suggestion to General Marshall that the French in Indo-China should be assisted with ammunition; a footnote says that General Marshall 'acted next day'. However General Chennault, who was commanding the U.S. 14th Air Force in Yunnan, says (*op. cit.*, p. 342) that the order not to supply the French came direct from the U.S. War Department, and his immediate superior General Wedermeyer (*loc. cit.*) reports a personal instruction to this effect from Roosevelt.

4. See Gentil, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-6 for Kha unrest in the Muong Sai area in 1947. During the course of a visit, M. Gentil, then a French adviser in Luang Prabang, had reason to criticize the head Lao official as follows:

If you had brought the rule of justice, or more simply if you had looked after your area, the hillmen might not have become restive. But you have never toured your territory, you have not maintained the tracks, you have requisitioned labour (and then always Kha labour) only to maintain your own houses. The only information we receive in Luang Prabang about your area, we get from the head of another province

CHAPTER IV

Laos and the Indo-China War

As the Laotian leaders rejoiced in their reconciliation, Mao Tse-Tung at the head of his Communist armies was sweeping away from China the Kuomintang and Marshal Chiang Kai-Shek. In January 1950 the Communist leader recognized the Viet Minh régime and in 1951 he intervened against the United Nations' forces in Korea. These events brought him into conflict with the United States, who had supported Chiang Kai-Shek to the last and were the mainstay of the United Nations' effort. The Americans had hitherto viewed the war in Indo-China as a colonialist affair in which they must not dirty their hands. From 1950 onwards they regarded it more and more as part of their confrontation with the Communist Chinese and therefore gave increasing support to the French.

France was nevertheless doomed to defeat. To her American allies, the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu, won with Chinese help, and the surrender of North Vietnam to a Communist régime as part of the peace settlement signed at Geneva in 1954, were bitter pills indeed. The United States and their friends reacted by forming the South-East Asia Treaty Organization, which aimed to prevent a further extension of Communist power from the north. The centre of S.E.A.T.O. and the site of its headquarters was Siam. Siam's consciousness of her old Vietnamese enemy, newly backed as he was by a resurgent China from whom there had been nothing to fear for a century, now coincided with the chief concern of the new alliance, and thus became one of the elements in the confrontation of the United States with Communist China.

At the heart of this confrontation lay the kingdom of Laos, which the Geneva Agreement sought to establish as a neutral buffer between pro-Western Siam and the Communist enemy to the north. But the Indo-China War had made Prince Souphanouvong and his Pathet Lao a force to be reckoned with. Laos had emerged

from the war politically divided and deeply impressed by the new power of the Viet Minh. The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu left her exposed as never before. Whether the kingdom could ever become stable enough to act effectively as a buffer state was indeed the question.

* * *

The French had slipped into the Indo-China War almost by inadvertence. After the first savage outburst at Haiphong and Hanoi at the end of 1946, Ho Chi Minh had withdrawn into the hills of north Tongking, where his troops could be safely augmented and trained. He and his military commander, General Giap, had studied too well the doctrines of Mao Tse-Tung to risk their main force until the foundations of French strength had been rotted away, until the population was under their control, and until their soldiers were prepared and properly armed. By the end of 1947 Giap had created wide guerrilla zones largely impervious to French military action, but activity outside them was limited to raids by isolated groups of guerrillas, intended as often as not to capture arms.

Even now Ho Chi Minh was not entirely committed to war with France. He would still, some believe, have preferred negotiations. Given a readiness to face the facts, France could still have obtained a settlement which safeguarded her economic interests. She could also have won the war militarily if budgetary and political factors had allowed her to make the necessary effort.

The endless restricted war she waged instead drove more and more people whom Communism would not otherwise have attracted into the Communist camp. When the Viet Minh struck they struck at the French. But the rebels were intermingled with the village people, so that when the French struck back they seemed to strike at the inhabitants in general. Every innocent killed or injured, every hut burned, and every village razed confirmed to the people what the Viet Minh were telling them about the French. The control of the population which he sought as a basis of victory thus passed with the minimum of effort to Ho Chi Minh, much as it had passed to Mao Tse-Tung over a much longer period in his struggle with Chiang Kai-Shek.

The arrival of the Chinese Communists on the frontier of Tongking in December 1949 changed both the political and the

military outlook. Ho Chi Minh won recognition by Peking and Moscow in January 1950.

From then on, the Viet-Minh possessed, like the Reds in Korea, a 'sanctuary' where they could retrain and refit their troops with full impunity in Chinese Communist training camps at Nanning and the artillery firing ranges of Ching-Hsi. Soon, Viet-Minh battalions began to appear in full field formations, equipped with heavy mortars and pack howitzers, followed shortly thereafter by complete artillery battalions using American-made recoilless rifles and 105 mm howitzers.¹

By the beginning of 1951 the French had lost control of all Tongking north of the Red River delta, the bridgehead without which they could not continue the war. The Viet Minh had already formed six divisions and 'felt ready to throw the French into the sea'.²

Chinese Communist involvement, first on the side of the Viet Minh and then in Korea, progressively changed the attitude of the United States. Substantial American aid began to arrive for the French in Indo-China. France's greatest serving soldier, General de Lattre de Tassigny, took command. There followed hard fought battles on the fortified line defending Hanoi and the delta, pitched battles which de Lattre won. Giap realized his mistake and returned to guerrilla operations, steadily building up within the delta itself well-armed battalions and even regiments which methodically harassed French communications and melted into the countryside when the French attacked.

At the end of 1951 General de Lattre went home to die. During 1952 the French under General Salan were ever more immobilized by rebel infiltration and by the turmoil of their home politics. The population of North Vietnam passed under Viet Minh control. Giap's striking force systematically, brilliantly, avoided battle as it grew.

After the rains of 1952 three Viet Minh divisions overran most of the hill country of north-west Tongking, the old Sipsong Chau Thai, now the Thai Federation ruled by a son of Deo-van-Tri.³

¹ Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ The administration of the semi-autonomous Thai Federation, formed in 1948 under Deo-van-Long as a condition of his support of the French against the Viet Minh, had been handed over to the Vietnamese government of Bao Dai on 27 May 1952.

'The frugal and indefatigable Viet Minh troops', says Lancaster,⁴ 'accompanied by hordes of porters, were able to range at will throughout the mountainous region where the forests and a canopy of morning cloud provided protection from air attack.' In March and April 1953 they entered Laos, occupying Sam Neua and penetrating from Dien Bien Phu, down the valley of the River Ou, to within striking distance of Luang Prabang. With them into Sam Neua came Prince Souphanouvong who had by now turned his splinter group of the dissolved Lao Independence Movement into a politico-military organization known as the Pathet Lao.

Although the prince himself was not a Communist, the heart of the Pathet Lao was a small group of Laotian members of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party, die-hard Communists like Nouhak Phoumsavan and Kaysone Fasan,⁵ who formed the Laotian Communist Party, the Phak Khon Ngan, in 1953 and are believed to be the real directors of the Pathet Lao today. In any case the prince's total dependence on Viet Minh support at this time made actual membership of the Communist Party irrelevant; effective direction of the Pathet Lao by the Viet Minh was inevitable. Prince Souphanouvong might think that he was using the Viet Minh for Laotian nationalist purposes, but to the Viet Minh he and his movement were simply the agents through whom Vietnam would inherit French power over Laos.⁶ On 19 April 1953 the prince set up what he called a resistance government at Sam Neua, and began to take control of the population, his personal gift for leadership and his traditional prestige being backed by the now classical methods of peasant revolution which the Viet Minh had borrowed from Red China.

At the cost of further dispersion of their scanty forces, the French reinforced Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang, where a fortified camp had been hastily constructed round the small airfield in the centre of the plateau, close to the jumble of huge,

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 257.

⁵ For a short account of Nouhak, see Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 76. For Kaysone, see additional note 1 at end of chapter. Prince Souphanouvong went to China on a Communist indoctrination course after moving his headquarters from Bangkok to North Vietnam in 1950. Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85 and 92-93 gives an account of the Phak Khon Ngan.

⁶ See additional note 2.

mysterious stone urns from which the Plain of Jars takes its name.⁷ These measures kept the Viet Minh away from the Mekong until the onset of the rains, when their main forces returned to their base areas around the Red River delta. Much of Laos remained, however, if not wholly controlled by Prince Souphanouvong, his tribal allies, and the Viet Minh, at all events a dangerous no man's land. In the greater part of Phongsaly and Sam Neua provinces and throughout a broad belt of Kha territory along the mountainous border with Vietnam as far south as Saravane, the writ of the Laotian government ceased to run. The Viet Minh left depots of rice and ammunition in some of the areas they abandoned, thus clearly indicating their intention to return.⁸

Invasion by the Vietnamese enemy, whose exploits in modern warfare against the French had lost nothing in the telling, had caused consternation in Laos. When the danger to Luang Prabang seemed greatest, the aged king, like his grandfather in 1887, had with a kind of desperate firmness resisted pleas that the royal family should move to safety, and the blind monk of the royal city accurately prophesied that the Viet Minh would not come nearer than the Nam Suong, ten miles away.⁹ Although comparatively little fighting had taken place it was clear to all that France had once more saved the kingdom, and it was therefore natural that when in October 1953 all remaining qualifications on Laotian independence were removed,¹⁰ Laos should reaffirm its continued membership of the French Union. As neither Vietnam nor Cambodia appeared likely to offer the French this consolation for their loss of empire, France felt particularly responsible for Laotian defence.

General Salan had meanwhile been succeeded as Commander-in-Chief in Indo-China by General Navarre. At home in France

⁷ See H. Deydier, *Introduction à la connaissance du Laos* (Saigon, 1952), pp. 9-10, for a brief account. It is now generally thought that they are funerary urns of the Bronze or Iron Age.

⁸ Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

⁹ For an account of Luang Prabang during this crisis see H. Deydier, *Lokapala* (Paris, 1954), pp. 158-84. As an anthropologist well known in Laos, M. Deydier was able to visit the blind monk freely and seems to have had no doubt that he had telepathic powers.

¹⁰ By the Franco-Laotian Treaty of 22 October 1953, which contained provisions for mutual defence; see De Berval (ed.), *Kingdom of Laos* (Saigon, 1959), p. 49.

there had been some optimism that the war could be brought to an end before the general elections of 1956, although the predominant desire was now only for a situation that would allow France honourably to quit. In the field, however, the French were already at a substantial disadvantage. Navarre found most of his available forces—all but a quarter of the near half million men the French Union had committed—taken up by thousands of guard-posts trying to maintain what was left to him in North Vietnam.¹¹ To hold a stretch of road twenty to forty kilometres long required on the average a battalion of infantry and a battery of guns. The enemy could keep the same area in a state of insecurity with one or two infantry sections. Less than a quarter of the Red River delta was firmly in French hands, more than half of it was controlled by the Viet Minh, five French divisions were immobilized there and yet it was now itself the main enemy base. Against an enemy battle force of nine divisions, France could move no more than three.

In these circumstances Navarre proposed a two-year plan, not to win the war—that was already impossible—but to demonstrate that the Viet Minh could not win it and so prepare the way for a negotiated settlement. In the first year, by means of reinforcements from France, by raising new Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese units and by reorganization on the ground, he would seek to restore freshness and mobility to his troops while avoiding major battles with the Viet Minh. In the second year, after the rains of 1954, he would go over to the offensive.¹²

The essence of the secret discussions of this plan in July 1953, during which Navarre had warned of the difficulties of defending Laos if the Viet Minh should renew their attacks on it during the next winter before he was ready, was revealed within a week in the Paris newspaper *France Observateur*.¹³ By October there was evidence that the Viet Minh were in fact preparing for the campaign which Navarre feared. They calculated that a spectacular success in Laos such as the capture of a Mekong town would have a disproportionate effect on public opinion in France, and so accentuate the rising French disposition to quit.

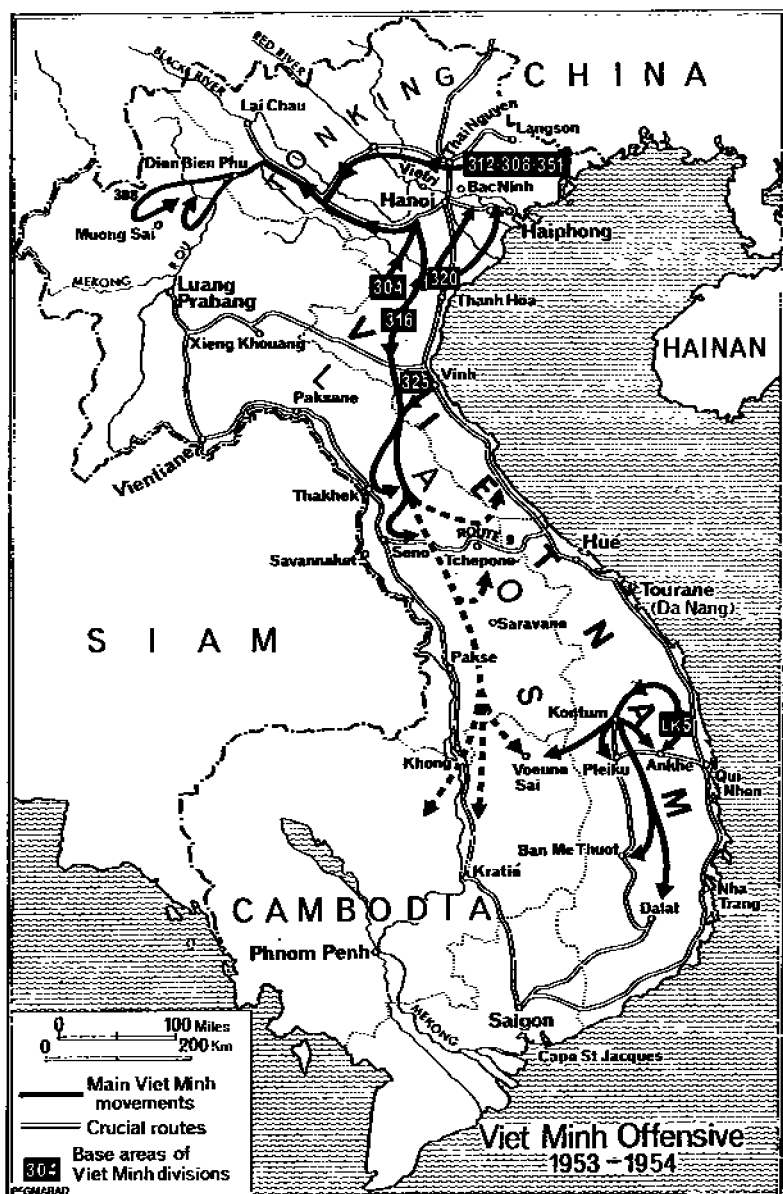
To abandon Laos was unthinkable.¹⁴ Navarre therefore decided to hurry forward the occupation of Dien Bien Phu, an operation

¹¹ H. Navarre, *Agonie de l'Indochine* (Paris, 1956), p. 46.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.

¹⁴ See additional note 3.



From General H. Navarre, *Agonie de l'Indochine* (Paris, 1956), p. 165.

he intended in any case, and so block the Viet Minh on their way to the River Ou and Luang Prabang. The occupation was carried out in November and December 1953 by parachute troops, and also by the move southward of the strong but isolated garrison hitherto maintained at Lai Chau on the Black River, capital of the Thai Federation. As the fortified camp was created round the old disused airstrip in the Dien Bien Phu valley, the Viet Minh build-up against it began, supported by unprecedented material assistance from China. General Navarre changed his mind; he had succumbed to the prevailing French military over-confidence in Indo-China and now waited confidently for the set-piece battle by which he would end the war.

The Viet Minh meanwhile launched diversionary attacks elsewhere in Laos. On 20 December 1953 the Viet Minh 325th Division moved from Vinh south-west over the Keo Neua Pass and across the Kam Mon Plateau to the Mekong. French and Laotian covering forces were brushed aside. On 26 December 1953 the enemy was in Thakhek and on 5 January 1954 was thought to be threatening the French air base at Seno, twenty miles east of Savannakhet. But this was all the Viet Minh intended to do and their forces moved away to the south-east.¹⁵ Their presence even for a few days astride French communications in the Mekong valley had forced a further dispersion of French forces and had sounded the trumpets of panic in Paris.

A few days later, when an attack on Dien Bien Phu by the main Viet Minh battle force now concentrated around it seemed imminent, troops of the 308th 'Iron' Division, lightly equipped, barefoot, each with his sling of rice, suddenly turned on the Franco-Laotian forces twenty miles to the south-west and drove them back down the River Ou upon their air-heads at Muong Sai and Luang Prabang. The Viet Minh followed no further than the Bac River, content that they had diverted even more precious French reinforcements.¹⁶ By 23 February their main force had returned to Dien Bien Phu, leaving irregulars in the Ou River valley and a screening force on the border, to prevent the movement of relief columns from Laos.

The epic, decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu followed. The

¹⁵ See Vo Nguyen Giap, *Dien Bien Phu* (Hanoi, 1962), pp. 53-54, and 67-68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

French had underestimated the extent of Chinese assistance to the rebels, ignored the possibility that Viet Minh guns could be deployed so as to dominate the French positions in absolute security, discounted above all the devoted, ant-like industry of the Viet Minh themselves, and overestimated their own technical advantages. The painful story of miscalculation, suffering, and heroism will long be told.¹⁷

To the Laotian who watched, it was not so much a matter of suffering as of disillusion. In proportion to his resources his own war effort had been greater than that of his Cambodian and Vietnamese neighbours.¹⁸ Now the hated enemy of his ancestors had defeated the all-powerful friend and protector in whom he had placed his confidence. Moreover, this latter-day battle of the giants and the pygmies had been fought in the high valley of Muong Theng, Dien Bien Phu, legendary cradle of the Lao people. Even the phis,¹⁹ the primal forces of mother earth, might thus be said to be fighting on the enemy's side. If France could not stand up to the Viet Minh, how much less could the Laotian do so on his own? A deep feeling of inferiority, intensified by propaganda, was to leave the newly independent Laotian army singularly unqualified to deal with the Pathet Lao, backed as the rebels were if not with the armed strength at least with the potent myth of the Viet Minh.

From a hardly greater distance the Siamese watched with almost equal anxiety. In December 1953 the Viet Minh had reached the Siamese frontier on the Mekong at Thakhek. They had come by an ancient route; Vietnamese had been passing over it into the Mekong valley for centuries. The word *Thakhek* itself means *foreigners' landing*. Since 1945 the old Vietnamese communities on the Mekong in north-east Siam had been increased by refugees from Laos and from the Indo-China War to a total of 60,000 people,²⁰ and now represented a well-established Vietnamese bridgehead in the Mekong valley. Vietnamese from Nakawn

¹⁷ See Jules Roy, *The Battle of Dien Bien Phu* (London, 1965), an account which tends perhaps to overestimate the Viet Minh, and B. B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place* (London, 1967).

¹⁸ Navarre, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁹ Spirits, mischievous or benign, of the animism which underlies the tolerant Buddhism of Laos. A near equivalent would perhaps be *fairies*.

²⁰ Thailand's letter to the U.N. Security Council, 29 May 1954. U.N. document S/3220.

Panom were said to have helped the Viet Minh in their occupation of Thakhek.²¹

Traditional Siamese apprehensions about the Vietnamese now came sharply into focus. It was not simply that seven thousand of the Vietnamese lived in Siam close to Thakhek itself, where they could be subverted against Siamese interests as the later submission to the Security Council implied, though that was bad enough. Siam also felt herself at a disadvantage because of her large Lao population in the north-east. The Lao people of Siam had at one time been almost as numerous as the Siamese. In spite of all efforts at assimilation, the great majority of the people of the north-east were still distinctively Lao, and still had more in common with their kinsmen across the Mekong in Laos than with the Siamese whose domination they still faintly resented.²² Sixty years of French rule had not in fact changed the ethnic unity of the Mekong valley. What, Siam asked herself, would be the influence of the Viet Minh in Laos upon her own Lao population?

The most immediate effects of the battle of Dien Bien Phu were, however, felt in Europe. While French military confidence in beating the Viet Minh had mounted in Indo-China, opinion at home had moved towards the idea of a negotiated settlement. The war France had never intended had lasted too long. It had cost vast sums of money that would have been better used at home and the casualties were mounting steadily towards the figure of 172,000 which they would finally attain. Immediately after the Korean Armistice in July 1953 the French government had decided on eventual negotiations,²³ and when in September a Vietnamese Congress in Saigon declared independence outside the French union as the national aim, France realized that even victory could not now prolong her presence in Indo-China.²⁴ Navarre's confidence that the military situation would have improved by the spring dissuaded the French premier from opening negotiations in December,²⁵ but the move could not long be delayed. At the Berlin four-power meeting in February 1954, France secured international agreement

²¹ B. B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (London, 1963), p. 125.

²² See Katay D. Sasorith, *Le Laos* (Paris, 1953), pp. 17-21. For a numerical comparison of populations see additional note 1 to Chapter II, pp. 48-49 above. See also map on p. 47.

²³ J. Laniel, *Le drame Indochinois* (Paris, 1957), p. 17.

²⁴ Lacouture et Devillers, *La fin d'une guerre* (Paris, 1960), p. 43.

²⁵ Laniel, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

to the discussion of Indo-China at the conference on the Korean War that was to meet at Geneva in April.

The Americans had agreed to this course with some reluctance, for they were still confident that, with the help they were now giving to the French, the Indo-China War could be won. This view had been consistently held ever since the Washington conference of Foreign Ministers in July 1953. Franco-American discussions at that time had resulted in an increase of United States' aid for Indo-China to a figure that covered seventy per cent. of the running costs of the war. The French had undertaken in return to 'make every effort to break up and destroy the regular enemy forces',²⁶ a promise which reflected American criticism of their war effort, and to respond to American military advice.

Once having stationed military advisers in the war zone, the United States became even more optimistic about French military prospects. When, therefore, in March 1954, General Ély arrived in Washington with the warning that defeat at Dien Bien Phu was possible, the shocked Americans appeared to believe that unless immediate action were taken, Indo-China would fall into Communist hands, with dangerous consequences for the strategic position of the United States in the Pacific. From the Communist point of view, said Mr. Nixon, then vice-president:

the war in Korea is about Japan . . . and so is the war in Indo-China, which is essential to Japan's economic survival. Without trade with Indo-China and Korea, and with these countries under Communist control, Japan would become an economic satellite of the Soviet Union, which is the Communist aim.²⁷

Lacouture and Devillers put it even more plainly:

Le Sud-Est asiatique fournissait au monde libre un certain nombre de produits vitaux. Il constituait d'autre part pour le Japon un partenaire commercial de premier ordre et s'il tombait, il serait difficile pour le gouvernement de Tokyo de rester l'allié des États-Unis. Le Sud-Est asiatique devait être tenu absolument. Or l'Indochine en était la clé.²⁸

Short of sending their own troops to Indo-China, an action to which President Eisenhower was opposed,²⁹ there were two possi-

²⁶ Joint Franco-American communiqué, 30 September 1953.

²⁷ *New York Times*, 17 April 1954.

²⁸ Lacouture et Devillers, *op. cit.*, p. 72. See additional note 4.

²⁹ Sir Anthony Eden, *Full Circle* (London, 1960), p. 90.

bilities open to the Americans: they could intervene with sea and air forces in the hope of saving Dien Bien Phu, a course that was proposed by General Ély,³⁰ and they could organize an international united front to prevent any further extension of Communist power in South-East Asia. While military planning for the first of these courses proceeded, Mr. Dulles embarked upon the second on 29 March:

Under the conditions of today the imposition on South-East Asia of the political system of Communist Russia and its Chinese Communist ally, by whatever means, would be a grave threat to the whole free community. The United States feels that that possibility should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action. This might involve serious risks. But these risks are far less than those that will face us a few years from now if we dare not be resolute today.³¹

By the time the French had accepted the American offer of air support at Dien Bien Phu on 5 April, however, it had transpired that the United States Congress would only consider such a venture if a number of conditions were met. The first was that it should be supported by America's allies. Accordingly the United States proposed that Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Siam, the Philippines, and the Indo-Chinese states should join with the United States and France in an *ad hoc* grouping which, before the Geneva Conference, should issue:

a solemn declaration of readiness to take concerted action under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter against continued interference by China in the Indo-China war. . . . The proposed warning would carry with it the threat of naval and air action against the Chinese coast and of active intervention in Indo-China itself.³²

The most important of those concerned, apart from France and the United States, was of course Britain, who was only now beginning to master the Communist rebellion in Malaya, and whose interest was to keep an effective barrier against Communist

³⁰ General Ély, *L'Indochine dans la tourmente* (Paris, 1963), pp. 65-77. The story of the projected intervention is well and analytically told by Geoffrey Warner in 'Escalation in Vietnam, the Precedents of 1954', in *International Affairs*, 1965, pp. 267-77.

³¹ Speech to the Overseas Press Club, text in *American Foreign Policy 1950-55* (Dept. of State publication 6446, Dec. 1957), pp. 2373-81.

³² Eden, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93. See also D. D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change* (London, 1963), pp. 346-7.

power as far to the north of Malaya as possible.³³ The British objected to the American proposal on three grounds. They considered that the warning to China would be ignored, that the retaliatory action planned would be militarily ineffective and politically dangerous, and that the whole procedure would prejudice the chances of success at Geneva.³⁴ France, principally concerned with ending her costly and unpopular war, was equally opposed to the constitution of a united front before the conference.³⁵ She saw no inconsistency, however, between her opposition on this score and United States' air intervention to save Dien Bien Phu, and on 23 April she made a last desperate call for unilateral United States action.³⁶

Dulles had already rejected the French appeal when, on 24 April, he pressed Britain once more to agree to a collective declaration. Sir Winston Churchill remained adamant, but so by this time was President Eisenhower who later wrote that 'air strikes against Dien Bien Phu would not have been effective',³⁷ and the Indo-Chinese sessions of the Geneva Conference began, on 8 May, in the shadow of the overwhelming Viet Minh triumph of the day before.

Differences of view between Britain and the United States both on the usefulness of the conference and on the priority to be accorded to a collective defence pact for South-East Asia, were to persist throughout May and June. Although President Eisenhower had himself stated on 29 April that the United States would take no action in Indo-China pending the outcome of the Geneva Conference,³⁸ Dulles persisted in his belief that no agreement acceptable to the United States could be reached there, and the negotiations were accompanied by uneasy rumblings from across the Atlantic.³⁹ The reality of American nuclear power was indeed a major influence.⁴⁰ Molotov, who was to alternate with Mr. Eden as chairman of the conference, early showed that he shared British

³³ Eden, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³⁴ Eden, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94. See also additional note 5.

³⁵ Ély, *op. cit.*, p. 88, Eden, *op. cit.*, p. 93. See also *Survey of International Affairs, 1954* (London, R.I.I.A., 1957), pp. 28-29 for a summary of French opinion.

³⁶ Lacouture et Devillers, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89, Eden, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-6. See also additional note 6.

³⁷ Eisenhower, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

³⁸ *The Times*, 30 Apr. 1954.

³⁹ Eden, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

apprehensions of the risks of a world war and that Russia wanted a settlement.⁴¹

It was not, however, until 16 June, when a partition of Vietnam, which was to prove the eventual solution, was already under discussion between France and the Viet Minh,⁴² but when the conference was nevertheless close to breakdown over the future of Cambodia and Laos, that the Chinese showed a similar disposition. Chou En-Lai told Mr. Eden 'that he thought he could persuade the Vietminh to withdraw from . . . [Cambodia and Laos] . . . and that China would recognize their royal governments, provided that there were no American bases in the territory'.⁴³ Thus were revealed China's conditions for peace, based on her own apprehension of American power, which were to be repeated to the French prime minister a week later. The American conditions were formulated during the visit of Sir Winston Churchill and Mr. Eden to Washington on 29 June. This visit, to settle, as Sir Winston put it, a few family differences, resulted in the establishment of a study group for a South-East Asia collective defence treaty, and in a joint communication to the French government stating the willingness of the United States and Britain to respect an armistice on Indo-China which:

1. Preserves the integrity and independence of Laos and Cambodia and assures the withdrawal of Vietminh forces therefrom.
2. Preserves at least the southern half of Vietnam, and if possible an enclave in the delta; in this connection we would be unwilling to see the line of division of responsibility drawn further south than a line running generally west from Dong Hoi.
3. Does not impose on Laos, Cambodia or retained Vietnam any restrictions impairing their capacity to maintain stable non-communist régimes; and especially restrictions impairing their right to maintain adequate forces for internal security, to import arms and to employ foreign advisers.
4. Does not contain political provisions which would risk loss of the retained area to communist control.
5. Does not exclude the possibility of the ultimate reunification of Vietnam by peaceful means.
6. Provides for the peaceful and humane transfer, under international supervision, of those people desiring to be moved from one zone to another of Vietnam; and

⁴¹ Eden, *op. cit.*, p. 121. ⁴² Lacouture et Devillers, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-90.

⁴³ Eden, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-3.

7. Provides effective machinery for international supervision of the agreement.⁴⁴

In the meantime the lack of progress at Geneva and the continuing slow deterioration of the French military position in Indo-China had led to a change of government in France. The new prime minister, M. Mendès-France, set himself a limit of a month for the achievement of an armistice, making it clear that an all-out French military effort would be required if he failed. This new firmness, the clarification of Anglo-American policy in Washington, together with decisive Chinese and Russian pressure on the Viet Minh, led to a hard-fought but not unsatisfactory agreement on 20 July 1954.⁴⁵

The Geneva settlement was indeed the best obtainable in the circumstances. Dien Bien Phu had admittedly only been a battle. Viet Minh control of the Tongkingese countryside, however, made it inevitable that unless the United States intervened with ground forces, France would concede the war. The immediate problem was settled by the agreed partition of Vietnam under international control, pending supervised elections for the whole country in July 1956.⁴⁶ But the wider, historic problem of international relations in the Indo-Chinese peninsula was also recognized at Geneva, at least by Mr. Eden.⁴⁷ All were agreed that Vietnam must eventually be united. In the short term, while the problem of over-population remained, a united Vietnam would certainly be aggressive, expansionist. What could be done to prevent the ancient conflict between Siam and the Vietnamese from bursting out again now that, as in 1893, great powers were engaged on both sides?

The attractive, obvious answer was to create what Mr. Eden called a *protective pad* by neutralizing Cambodia and Laos.⁴⁸ The immediate problem was in the north, for North Vietnam was now Communist and would clearly remain dependent on China. 'The essence of the settlement', said Eden, 'was that Laos should

⁴⁴ Eden, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-3.

⁴⁵ Lacouture et Devillers, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-74, have the fullest account of the final stages. The unusual willingness of Molotov to compromise and of Chou En-Lai to exert decisive pressure on the Viet Minh, as M. Mendès-France's deadline approached on 19 and 20 July, does not appear to have been brought out as clearly elsewhere.

⁴⁶ See additional note 7.

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 77-79.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

remain as an independent and neutral buffer between China and Siam. It was therefore essential that the United States should not attempt to establish any military influence [there]. Any attempt to do so was bound to provoke some counter-move by China.⁴⁹

While Vietnam was partitioned by the Geneva Agreement, therefore, Cambodia and Laos were cast for a neutral role. They were to join no military alliances except as envisaged by the United Nations' Charter, ask for no foreign military aid, and tolerate no foreign bases on their soil unless their security was threatened. The Pathet Lao, regrouped into the provinces of Sam Neua and Phongsaly, were to be integrated into the Laotian national life. Except for a total of 5,000 French defence and training forces in Laos, all foreign troops were to be withdrawn from the two countries under the supervision of international control commissions furnished, as in Vietnam, by India, Canada, and Poland.⁵⁰ These commissions, under Indian chairmen, would report to the co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference, the foreign ministers of Britain and Russia, who thereby retained a continuing responsibility for the settlement. All this was enshrined in cease-fire agreements, declarations by the parties, and the final declaration of the conference, eleven documents in all.

The settlement gave the Viet Minh less than at one time they had hoped. Their first reverse had been the Western refusal to seat at the conference the Pathet Lao and Free Cambodian elements they had been fostering as part of an Indo-Chinese national front since 1945. Their second was when Chou En-Lai 'persuaded' them to withdraw from Laos and Cambodia on the understanding that no American bases would be established there. Success at either of these two points would have gone far to win them a legitimate and permanent influence in the two states, which could be turned to their advantage. The Chinese and Russians had then

⁴⁹ The problem was immediate only in Laos. That it is merely latent further south has often been pointed out by Prince Sihanouk.

⁵⁰ Their formal titles are "The International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos (or Cambodia, or Vietnam)". The official account of the Geneva Conference and the eleven documents that constitute the agreement are in: *Documents relating to the Discussion of Korea and Indo-China at the Geneva Conference, April 27-June 15, 1954* (Cmd. 9186), and *Further Documents relating to the Discussion of Indo-China at the Geneva Conference, June 16-July 21, 1954* (Cmd. 9239).

forced them to accept a partition line in Vietnam four parallels to the north of the one on which they had been insisting, and the postponement of general elections until 1956, eighteen months later than they had demanded.

Nevertheless, the Viet Minh cannot have considered the settlement unsatisfactory. They had obtained control of Hanoi and the north. It was commonly accepted that they would win the general elections even in 1956, and so extend their grip to the south. The neutrality of Laos and Cambodia would then assume even greater importance than it possessed already, for it would hold American power and Siamese influence at arm's length while the new Vietnam was consolidated. There was thus good cause for the jubilation which the Viet Minh delegates displayed when the cease-fire agreements were signed.⁵¹

The position adopted by the United States with regard to the Geneva Agreement was curious, but clear. Even as late as 13 July Mr. Dulles appears to have believed that no satisfactory settlement was possible.⁵² Then during a visit to Paris he realized that M. Mendès-France was in some ways holding out for more favourable terms than the seven Anglo-American points had demanded. The Secretary of State had relented so far as to allow his under-secretary, Mr. Bedell Smith, to return to Geneva for the final stage of the conference.⁵³ But opinion in America, where the pernicious Senator McCarthy was still at work,⁵⁴ did not allow Dulles to associate his country fully with a settlement that handed over territory to Communism. Furthermore, the fourth of the seven Anglo-American conditions had not been met; Communist North Vietnam was more populous than non-Communist South Vietnam, and the elections in 1956 would thus clearly risk the loss of the south to Communist control. American approval therefore went no further than a unilateral statement implying that the United States would not upset the agreement by force or threat of force so long as nobody else did so.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Lacouture et Devillers, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 246; see additional note 8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 248-50; Eden, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-9.

⁵⁴ The condition of American opinion is well analysed by R. P. Stebbins, *The United States in World Affairs 1954* (New York, 1956), pp. 17-24. The action by the U.S. Army which resulted in the discrediting of Senator McCarthy had only been begun in April.

⁵⁵ See additional note 9.

There ensued, however, a change in the United States' attitude to the proposed collective defence treaty, which argues that Dulles nevertheless regarded the Geneva settlement as moderately satisfactory. The treaty had hitherto been seen to demand, like N.A.T.O., a joint military command and an organized force. The main purposes of the pact as now envisaged were:

1. To warn China that the full weight of American military power would be used to counter any overt aggression in South-East Asia.
2. To provide treaty obligations by other nations to join the U.S.A. in fighting a war of this kind, although it was realised that the main strength in meeting open aggression by China would have to come from the United States.
3. To strengthen the military and national police establishments of Siam and other countries, such as the Philippines, so that their governments could deal effectively with any internal uprising.
4. To build up the economies of Siam and the Philippines (as well as such non-member nations as Japan and Burma) in order to minimise the likelihood of local unrest and generally to demonstrate to the local peoples the value of ties with the Western powers rather than with Communism.⁵⁶

Washington had little fear of an attack by China in the area, but if an attack came, wished to be free to react to it as circumstances permitted at the time, rather than to be bound, as in Korea, to an alliance in which American influence would inevitably be less than American responsibilities.⁵⁷

Accordingly the South-East Asia Treaty signed at Manila⁵⁸ on 8 September 1954 by the United States, France, Britain, Pakistan, Siam, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand, set up no joint command and no military force. The main military provisions were that:

1. The parties would recognize aggression by means of armed attack against any one of them, or against Laos, Cambodia, or South Vietnam

⁵⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, 8 August 1954, quoting officials at the State Department and the Pentagon. The new mood had been indicated at a press conference by Mr. Dulles on 23 July 1954; *The Times*, 24 July 1954.

⁵⁷ *Survey of International Affairs 1954* (London, R.I.I.A., 1957), p. 74.

⁵⁸ *South-East Asia Collective Defence Treaty, Manila, September 8, 1954* (Cmd. 9282), London, H.M.S.O., 1954.

which were designated for protection in a protocol to the treaty, as endangering their own peace and security, and would act to meet it according to their several constitutional processes.

2. In the case of threats other than by armed attack in the treaty area, the parties would consult immediately on measures for the common defence. But no action would be taken in the protocol states except at the invitation or with the consent of the government concerned.

The nature of the guarantee they were to receive under these provisions disappointed both the Philippines and Siam. In order to satisfy Filipino sentiment, the United States had assured the Philippines, before formal discussions began, that American forces would 'automatically react' if the Philippines were in danger of Communist aggression. But no such undertaking was contemplated for Siam, whose suggestion at Manila that Western troops should be stationed in Siam was turned aside.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Siam was the only one of the S.E.A.T.O. powers against whom, because of its proximity to the zone of recent operations, an immediate threat could be held to exist. Siamese anxiety had been expressed at the end of May in a request to the Security Council that the Peace Observation Commission of the United Nations keep the situation on the frontiers of Siam under observation. This had been considered by the Security Council on 16 to 18 June. Contemptuously, the Russians had vetoed it; nobody, they said, was threatening Siam.⁶⁰ The United States had hastened to reassure Siam by granting her an increase in military aid sufficient to raise the strength of her armed forces from 45,000 to 90,000,⁶¹ and other substantial assistance.

An article by Pridi Phanomyong, the Siamese statesman and wartime resistance leader, now acknowledged to be a political refugee in Communist China, was broadcast by Radio Peking as part of its campaign against the collective defence treaty on 30 July.⁶² This had contributed further to fears on Siam's behalf. A Siamese government spokesman said in Bangkok on 9 September that the government believed that aggression was imminent from a free Thai army, organized by Pridi in the Thai autonomous repub-

⁵⁹ See *Survey of International Affairs 1954* (London, R.I.I.A., 1957), p. 77.

⁶⁰ *U.N. Security Council 674th Meeting Official Record*, pp. 4-10.

⁶¹ *Survey of International Affairs 1954* (London, 1957), p. 291.

⁶² *The Times*, 31 July 1954.

lic set up eighteen months earlier by the Communist Chinese in Yunnan.⁶³ There were other reports of a resistance movement being recruited in Siam's nervous north-eastern provinces, and that its leader, Tiang Sirikhand, had been seen with the Communists in northern Laos.⁶⁴ The Siamese statesman Prince Wan said on 23 October that Siam was 'next on the Communist timetable'.⁶⁵ In the United States during November he asserted that thousands of Chinese who had lived in Siam were being trained in Yunnan.⁶⁶

Despite the American failure to react with a more specific guarantee for Siam, therefore, and although there was little evidence for the alleged subversive activity,⁶⁷ the anxiety of Siam and the security of the Siamese Mekong frontier were from the first serious preoccupations for S.E.A.T.O.; and from the first Laos was the protocol state which seemed most likely to need its protection.

The formation of S.E.A.T.O. was by no means the last of the consequences of the Indo-China War, but it marked an epoch. Communist China's support for the Viet Minh in the war itself had drawn in the United States to support France. Now they were also brought, together with their allies, to the defence of Siam against the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists who might seem to threaten her, across neutral Laos, to the north. Upon the old conflict of Siam and the Vietnamese was thus superimposed the modern confrontation of Communist China and the United States. Between the two lay the kingdom of Laos which the Indo-Chinese struggle had left divided as never before. The Viet Minh had used Prince Souphanouvong and the latent ethnic divisions in the country which French rule had failed to heal, to form a weak but credible nationalist movement, a Vietnamese mortgage on the neutrality of Laos. Unless the Pathet Lao could be integrated into the fabric of the nation, unless neutrality could be established and maintained, there was a danger that the Viet Minh would foreclose.

⁶³ *The Times*, 10 September 1954.

⁶⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 1954. Tiang Sirikhand, one of the war-time Seri Thai leaders, is said to have been murdered while under interrogation by the police under General Phao in Siam, *Bangkok Post*, 27 December 1957.

⁶⁵ *Survey of International Affairs 1954* (London, 1957), p. 290.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

ADDITIONAL NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

1. Kaysone was born at Savannakhet in 1925 of mixed Lao and Vietnamese parentage. He studied medicine at Hanoi University which he left in 1945 to join the Lao Independence Movement at Savannakhet. Having received military training in Vietnam, he served on the Viet Minh/Pathet Lao side in North Laos and became defence minister in Prince Souphanouvong's 'governments' of 1950 and 1953. A convinced Communist and long a member of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party, he is considered the most powerful of the Pathet Lao leaders.

2. See Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 71. From 1945 the Vietnamese-dominated Indo-Chinese Communist Party had sought to form a united front against the French in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. After its transformation into the Lao Dong Party in 1951, its policy included the formation of a federation of the three states, which the Vietnamese were determined to dominate. Brian Crozier, in 'Peking and the Laotian Crisis' in *China Quarterly*, 1961, p. 136, refers Communist ambitions in Laos and Cambodia back to the foundation of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party by Ho Chi Minh in 1930; these ambitions are of course as much Vietnamese as Communist.

3. B. B. Fall, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-4, deals with disagreements as to General Navarre's orders on this point. When all is said, it is clear that no show-down battle had been contemplated for 1953/1954. On this all authorities agree. It would appear that the general disregarded the spirit of his orders; however, it can at least be said that the French government was aware of this in ample time for action if it had had the will to disagree with him.

4. See R. P. Stebbins, *The United States in World Affairs 1954* (New York, 1956), p. 290, quoting a speech by President Eisenhower on 22 June 1954: '... it becomes absolutely mandatory to us, and to our safety, that the Japanese nation do not fall under the domination of ... the Kremlin. If the Kremlin controls them, all of that great capacity would be turned against the free world. ... And the Pacific would become a Communist lake.'

5. A hidden element in British and French reluctance to follow the American initiative in Indo-China may have been suspicion of American motives. The point was made by Walter Lippmann in the *New York Herald Tribune* on 8 June 1954: '... the interventionists ... have an unlimited objective—namely the overthrow of Red China. For this ... Dulles can never hope to organise a united front in Europe and Asia', or even, he continued, in the U.S.A.

6. The exact sequence of events is still not entirely clear. It appears likely, however, as Stebbins concluded in 1956 (*op. cit.*, p. 225), that the plan was dropped even before a definite 'No' was received from London. General Ridgway, the Army Chief of Staff, who was known to be opposed to it at the time, states in *Soldier—the Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York, 1956), pp. 275-7, that a full report he had sent to President

Eisenhower 'played a considerable, perhaps a decisive, part in persuading our government not to embark on that tragic adventure'. This is to some extent supported by the president's remark quoted on p. 94, that air intervention would not have worked.

7. Until the late afternoon of 20 July the French negotiators had hoped to avoid the mention of a date for the elections, and to leave this to be fixed by the International Control Commission when conditions were right. The final compromise between the Viet Minh demand for elections in six months and the French position, was suggested by Molotov (Lacouture et Devillers, op. cit., p. 268). The last-minute change from what the French had hoped to what they accepted seems to be reflected in the curious drafting of para. 7 in the final declaration of the conference:

... In order to ensure that sufficient progress in the restoration of peace has been made, and that all the necessary conditions obtain for free expression of the national will, *general elections shall be held in July 1956.*

As it stands, this is a *non sequitur*. The sentence would have read more naturally and have made more sense if, instead of the words italicized, it had contained some formula such as:

the date of the elections will be left to be fixed by the International Control Commission.

8. Mr. Dulles informed the French ambassador in Washington on 9 July that he feared the French would accept even the 12th Parallel as the line of partition in Vietnam. This would have brought the Viet Minh to within 100 miles of Saigon. M. Mendès-France was, however, negotiating for the 18th Parallel and finally accepted a line just below the 17th.

9. 'Since Dulles had been at least as responsible as ourselves', says Eden, 'for calling the Geneva Conference, this did not seem to me reasonable. I also feared that it might lead to difficulties at our final meeting, for the Chinese had indicated that they would insist upon signature of the final declaration by all the delegations.' Eden, op. cit., p. 142. Mr. Eden accordingly arranged with Molotov that the final declaration would have a heading in which all the participating countries would be listed, thus obviating the need for signatures. If this now seems a somewhat haphazard way of sealing an important international arrangement, it should be remembered that the overriding concern for most of the negotiators was to bring nine years of costly fighting to an end; this was achieved in the cease-fire agreements which had been signed in due form by the belligerents.

CHAPTER V

The Problem of Neutrality

THE role of neutral buffer between the peoples to the north-east and south-west of the Annamitic Chain, which Laos was now asked to assume, demanded an internal stability and strength that the kingdom did not possess. A buffer must absorb shocks from both sides. If it is to do this safely there must be no internal stresses.

Laos as formed by the French was unstable because it included mutually hostile ethnic elements closely connected with the populations it was required to separate. The dominant Lao valley people feared and disliked the Vietnamese, as did their Lao neighbours in north-east Siam. The hill folk in upper Laos, on the other hand, disliked the Lao and tended to look for support towards their close kinsmen across the border in North Vietnam, who themselves were not unfavourably disposed towards the Vietnamese, because the Viet Minh had taken pains to conciliate them. On the one side was the Lao-dominated government, on the other the highland Pathet Lao.

Laos could only achieve the stability essential for its new international role if the two factions could be reconciled. The task was not impossible; time, patience, and good faith were needed. But the external strains proved too great, the partisans too pressing. The Viet Minh were already using one side; Siam and the United States were soon involved on the other. It took from 1954 to 1957, with several false starts and nervous hesitations, for Laos to agree on the integration of the Pathet Lao into the life of the country. The degree of integration achieved, and the limited success of the Pathet Lao at partial elections which followed in 1958, then so alarmed the non-Communist side that the government which had brought the agreements about was replaced by openly anti-Communist rule. Inevitably, perhaps, the Pathet Lao returned to insurgency. By the middle of 1960 the rigging of general elections by a right

wing group which had meanwhile supplanted the new régime, had alienated even the moderates, and the country was sliding towards civil war. The confrontation between China and the United States was thus transferred from the conflict between Siam and the Vietnamese to the inner divisions of Laos.

* * *

At the Geneva Conference the Viet Minh had tried to assert that the Pathet Lao and Free Cambodian movements should be given the same status as themselves. The West was able to resist this claim, which rested on the Vietnamese and Viet Minh ambition to inherit French power in the whole of Indo-China. Neither the Pathet Lao nor the Free Cambodians were therefore seated at the conference. Rebel control of Cambodian territory was insignificant but Prince Souphanouvong was able to claim that the Pathet Lao needed Phongsaly and Sam Neua provinces as regroupment areas pending an internal Laotian political settlement. As the Viet Minh were in possession of the two provinces this claim had been conceded. The Laotian government stated in a declaration of its own that it was resolved 'to integrate all citizens, without discrimination, into the national community and to guarantee them the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms'¹ for which the constitution provided. It also undertook to arrange for special representation of Pathet Lao interests in the administration of Phongsaly and Sam Neua until the general elections scheduled for 1955 should complete the process of national reconciliation. These promises were brought into the general framework of the Geneva settlement.

In Laos itself, politics had changed but little since the return of Prince Souvannaphouma and his fellow-exiles from Bangkok in 1949. Political life was still dominated by a few families and its issues were narrow. Phoui Sananikone, head of an important Vientiane business family, capable, eloquent, moderate, with a long record of public service, had succeeded Prince Boun Oum as prime minister in February 1950. Prince Souvannaphouma was a member of Phoui's² government and in November 1951 himself

¹ *Further Documents relating to the Discussion of Indo-China at the Geneva Conference, June 16-July 21, 1954* (Cmd. 9239), London, H.M.S.O., 1954, p. 41.

² The use of given names to refer to individuals is normal in Laos, where family names have been general only since 1944.

formed an administration which included his old colleague in exile, Katay.

The prince had still been prime minister when the Viet Minh invaded Laos in 1953, he had negotiated the final independence conventions with France, and been in office during the Geneva Conference. It was to be expected that he would now preside over the integration of the Pathet Lao and of their leader, his half-brother Prince Souphanouvong, into the national life of Laos. Prince Souvannaphouma's policy was one of strict neutrality abroad and of reconciliation at home. He was little inclined to compromise with either Vietnamese or Siamese interests and regarded both nations with suspicion.³ He was not afraid of Communist domination through Pathet Lao power because he felt that, once reconciliation had been achieved, the civilizing influence of normal Laotian life would sift out and isolate the committed, hard-core Communists, of whom there were fewer than twenty.

This was not an unreasonable view. Souphanouvong was, after all, a Laotian royal prince, grandson of that Prince Souvannaphouma who had died defending the royal city in 1887. In spite of his obligations to the Viet Minh, his Communist indoctrination course in China, his Vietnamese wife,⁴ and his great days in the jungle, the fundamental interests of Prince Souphanouvong were no different from those of any other son of his father. Once he was back in a Laotian atmosphere and his day to day reliance on the Viet Minh was ended, there was a chance that the deeper interests would prevail.

Mr. Dulles had no sympathy with this point of view, and as the United States was now replacing France as chief contributor to the Laotian budget, his opinions quickly became an important political factor in Vientiane. He was deeply mistrustful of Prince Souvannaphouma and sought 'to improve upon the then Laotian government, i.e. to see the succession pass to one more sympathetic to his opinions'.⁵ In this he was helped by events, for in September 1954, just as Prince Souvannaphouma had successfully begun his difficult task, the stout-hearted Laotian defence minis-

³ E. H. S. Simmonds, 'Independence and Political Rivalry in Laos 1945-61' in *Politics in Southern Asia*, S. Rose (ed.), (London, 1963), p. 178.

⁴ Le Thi Ky Nam, daughter of a postal employee who was a Communist sympathizer; Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

⁵ Lord Avon, letter to *Sunday Times*, 19 April 1964.

ter, Kou Voravong, who was believed to be the strongest supporter of the policy of reconciliation towards the Pathet Lao,⁶ was assassinated in Vientiane. The murder has never been explained, but in the tumult of charge and counter-charge that followed, Prince Souvannaphouma resigned and national reconciliation became infinitely more difficult.⁷

A new government was formed in November under the forceful and active Katay, a man of middle class, partly Vietnamese origin, firmly attached to the traditions of southern Laos. Like many southerners Katay had a strong sense of the unity of the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong. He felt that the imposition of different régimes on the two river banks was unjust, and looked forward to the day when political differences could be reduced to a minimum. The links with Vietnam imposed upon Laos by France were contrary to tradition and geography, and must be replaced by the close relations with Siam and to a lesser extent Cambodia, which language and history dictated.⁸ Laos accordingly withdrew, as did Cambodia, from the joint Indo-Chinese economic arrangements negotiated with France in 1950, and the resulting budgetary deficit was covered by United States aid.

The new prime minister did not go so far as to advocate the union of Laos with Siam. He had returned from exile in Bangkok convinced that the Lao people of Siam were still treated as second-class citizens by the dominant Siamese.⁹ But he did share the Siamese view that the Pathet Lao represented a veiled threat from Vietnam to the Mekong valley. He had been among those who had expelled Prince Souphanouvong from the Lao Independence Movement in 1949 'because of his complete dependence on

⁶ Simmonds, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁷ However, the murder was 'obviously directed at the government as a whole' (*Survey of International Affairs 1954* (London, 1957), p. 95). Prince Souvannaphouma has said that his fall at this time was due to foreign interference (speech at Geneva Conference, 14 June 1961).

⁸ Katay, *Le Laos*, p. 92. See also *Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement d'indépendance nationale Lao* (Bangkok, 1948).

⁹ *Le Laos*, pp. 17-21. Mr. E. H. S. Simmonds has said: 'Hesitations about too close political involvement with Thailand had caused Laos to look askance . . . in 1955, at Thailand's "helpful" move to internationalize the Pathet Lao question by bringing up the matter at a S.E.A.T.O. meeting.' 'The Evolution of Foreign Policy in Laos since Independence', *Modern Asian Studies*, II, 1 (1968), p. 8.

foreign elements and powers',¹⁰ and the prince's subsequent activities had confirmed that verdict. Katay's natural reaction now was to draw closer to the Siamese, who were rapidly doubling their military forces with the help of the United States. He discussed defence and the promotion of trade and communications during a state visit to Bangkok in February 1955; he later set up a Thai-Lao trading association, and a Laotian defence mission visited Siam in October. The extension of the Siamese railway system to Nongkhay, eleven miles by road and ferry from Vientiane, which was completed at the end of the year, did more than anything else to consolidate the link.

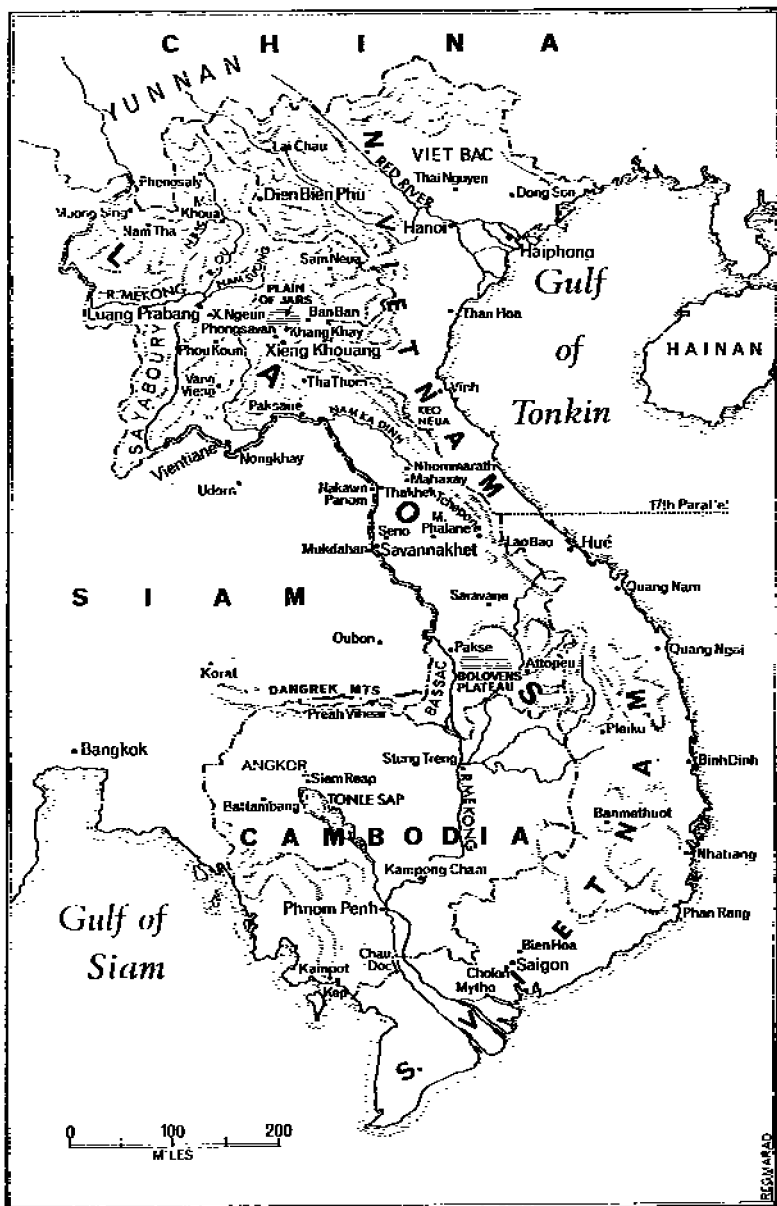
Transfer of government responsibility from Prince Souvannaphouma to Katay in November 1954 had meanwhile been followed by difficult negotiations with the Pathet Lao. Discussions between the two princes in August and September had been promising. The withdrawal of French and Viet Minh forces from Laos and the regrouping of the Pathet Lao in the two northern provinces had been completed in November. The French officers sadly left their Laotian units; some remained in the French military organizations allowed by the Geneva Agreement for training and defence purposes. The Pathet Lao had admitted on 4 November, in the last days of Prince Souvannaphouma's authority, that their administrations in Phongsaly and Sam Neua came under the authority of the government in Vientiane.¹¹

Prince Souvannaphouma was minister of defence in the new government; but the atmosphere was now quite different. The political talks which began at the Plain of Jars airfield on 3 January 1955 proved long and laborious. In March they were transferred to Vientiane and here they stumbled to a close. The chief issue was the right of the government to take over the administration of Phongsaly and Sam Neua provinces before the general elections due in August. Katay maintained that this was essential if the elections were to be properly run. The Pathet Lao argued, against the obvious intention of the Geneva Agreement, that the provinces were theirs until a full political settlement was reached. The talks were broken off by Katay at the end of April.

Scarcely a week earlier, in the Afro-Asian Conference at Ban-

¹⁰ Speech by Phoui Sananikone at the Geneva Conference: Cmd. 9186, p. 116.

¹¹ *First Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos* (Cmd. 9445), London, H.M.S.O., 1955, p. 45.



Indo-China after 1954

dung, China and North Vietnam had given assurances that they would not interfere in Laos. "The settlement which is due to take place between the Royal Government of Laos and the "Pathet Lao", by virtue of the Geneva agreements', said the North Vietnamese prime minister in the written agreement that followed, 'is a question of internal order which the Royal Government of Laos and "Pathet Lao" are entirely free to solve in the best way possible in the higher interests of the country and people of Laos.'¹² This evidence of international sanction gave Katay some confidence in dealing with the Pathet Lao. He now decided to proceed with elections and began to move more troops into Sam Neua province. He appeared to believe that if the Laotian army could be sufficiently strengthened he would be able, if not to suppress the Pathet Lao, at least to intimidate them and reach a political balance in which they would be easier to control.¹³ Army pay had been substantially augmented in January. In July Katay concluded a new economic agreement with the United States; the scale of direct American military aid was increased and the process of expanding the army from fifteen to twenty-five thousand men began.

The expansion of the Laotian army, which the French had thought of merely as the future police force of the country requiring a maximum strength of twelve to fifteen thousand men, produced insoluble problems of leadership. The army had in theory been independent since 1950 but most of its officers and N.C.O.s had been French. The filling of the gaps created by the departure of the French in 1954 had already strained the Laotian cadre to the maximum of its capacity and experience. Lack of leaders, and even more of seasoned leaders, now became acute, for there was no educated class from which the necessary numbers could be drawn. The resulting deficiencies lasted for years.

There was in fact a serious difference of opinion within the United States administration over military expansion in Laos.¹⁴

¹² G. McT. Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference* (Cornell University Press, 1956), p. 27.

¹³ See Simmonds, *loc. cit.*; "The Katay Government prepared to take a firm line with the Pathet Lao, but . . . was afraid of what might occur if it were successful." Dulles had said of it during a visit in February 1955: "If it suppresses the Communists within it will be struck by the Communists from without." This was indeed part of the problem.

¹⁴ See *United States Aid Operations in Laos: Seventh Report by the Committee on Government Operations, June 15, 1959*, Washington, 1959, p. 8.

The State Department supported the build-up for political and economic reasons; it was a means of consolidating the verges of the S.E.A.T.O. system; furthermore, aid administered in the form of army pay reached more people more quickly than aid in any other form. But the American military authorities saw no reason for increasing the number of soldiers. They did not consider that the Laotian army had any role to play in mutual defence and agreed with the French as to its size and function. Their judgement was to be amply vindicated; it was not military but political action that was needed.

Faced with what looked like determination on the part of Katay, the Pathet Lao had on 6 June called on the government to stop the despatch of troops against them in Sam Neua, to postpone the elections and resume political talks.¹⁵ The elections were duly put off until December and further negotiations commenced in July; however, Pathet Lao insistence on major changes in the electoral law and on retaining control of the provinces they considered theirs led to the suspension of these talks on 5 September.¹⁶ A meeting between Katay and Prince Souphanouvong at Rangoon in October brought about a new cease-fire in Sam Neua, but subsequent discussions in Vientiane were terminated on 4 November.¹⁷ There was clearly no basis of confidence between the two sides. Only the patient mediation of the International Control Commission had kept the dialogue going at all.

The general elections therefore took place in December 1955 in the ten provinces held by the government, without Pathet Lao participation. None of the four parties involved gained an outright victory and, when the new Assembly met, Katay found himself without the two-thirds majority then required for the formation of a new government.¹⁸ His strong measures had brought the kingdom no nearer to peace and it was Prince Souvannaphouma who was eventually able to muster the necessary parliamentary support. On 20 March the prince pledged himself once more to bring about

¹⁵ Cmd. 9630, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Third Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos* (Cmd. 314), London, H.M.S.O., 1957, pp. 5-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ This rule was modified after the crises of 1956 and 1957. A simple majority is now required: *Laos*, C.O.I. pamphlet R3706, February 1958, p. 7.

national reconciliation.¹⁹ He had most of his work to do again, but in spite of many obstacles and open Siamese and American disapproval, it was done, perhaps with the help of Soviet influence.²⁰ In August 1956 Prince Souphanouvong came to Vientiane; mixed military and political committees were set up and on 28 December there was an agreement in principle on the basis of neutrality, guaranteed democratic freedom, and peace. Supplementary elections would be held to give the Pathet Lao a chance of representation in the Assembly, and in the meantime there would be a coalition government.²¹

Fears in the United States of a 'conquest by negotiation'²² on the part of the Communists, now began to affect opinion in Laos, where the American ambassador, as he was later to admit, was already struggling to prevent a coalition.²³ The first three months of 1957 saw an intensive agitation led by Katay who had just returned from the United States, against the excessive demands of the Pathet Lao and the dangers of Communism. Mutual suspicion returned. In March talks on the implementation of the agreement were adjourned because, said Prince Souvannaphouma, of Pathet Lao intransigence,²⁴ and at the end of May the prince resigned when the Assembly gave him a qualified vote of confidence, that is, 'it approved of the results so far achieved, but it expressed its dissatisfaction with the protracted negotiations and the closeness with which Souvannaphouma and Souphanouvong were associating themselves'.²⁵

After a prolonged crisis, when neither Katay nor the left-wing leader Bong Souvannavong had been able to form a government, Prince Souvannaphouma returned to power in August, making the

¹⁹ Cmnd. 314, pp. 52-53.

²⁰ *Survey of International Affairs 1955-56* (London, R.I.I.A., 1960), p. 274.

²¹ Cmnd. 314, pp. 66-67.

²² E. H. S. Simmonds, 'A Cycle of Political Events in Laos' in *The World Today*, 1961, p. 59. Americans had been talking of this danger as early as January 1957.

²³ *United States Aid Operations in Laos: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, Eighty-Sixth Congress, First Session*, Washington, 1959, p. 195: 'I struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition'.

²⁴ Broadcast, 8 April 1957; *Laos*, C.O.I. pamphlet R. 3706, p. 12.

²⁵ Roger M. Smith, 'Laos' in *Governments and Politics of Southeast Asia*, G. McT. Kahin (ed.), (Cornell, 2nd edn. 1964), p. 543.

strength of his own stand against Pathet Lao pretensions clear.²⁶ The negotiations were resumed and there was signed on 12 November a detailed political and military settlement, the Vientiane Agreements.²⁷ On 18 November Prince Souphanouvong handed over the two northern provinces and swore allegiance for himself and his party to the king of Laos. Next day, together with his associate Phoumi Vongvichit, he entered a government of national union headed by Prince Souvannaphouma.

For a time all seemed to go well. In spite of undisguised American and Siamese disapproval of the Vientiane Agreements,²⁸ the United States did not stop their economic and military aid. Prince Souphanouvong proved an efficient and honest Minister of the Plan. He would, he said, follow a policy of co-operation with the United States, since Laos needed aid 'not for several years but for several decades'.²⁹ He instituted monthly accounting and monthly progress reports in his department, a thing previously unheard of, and took a particularly keen interest in the United Nations' project to harness the Mekong for the benefit of the Mekong states. Demobilization of the Pathet Lao, some three thousand regulars and three thousand auxiliaries, proceeded.³⁰ Three-quarters of them went back to their villages, while the fifteen hundred chosen for integration into the national army were grouped into two battalions which were stationed at Xieng Ngeun and on the Plain of Jars. The Pathet Lao leaders settled down in Vientiane. They became leaders of a political party, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (N.L.H.S.). Normality began to work on them as Prince Souvannaphouma had foreseen.

It remained to hold the supplementary elections which would provide for representation of the new party in the Assembly and so complete the process of national integration begun at Geneva. Twenty additional parliamentary seats were created for this purpose and the elections were fixed for May 1958. At the end of 1957, as he considered the dangers of these elections, the American

²⁶ *Fourth Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos* (Cmnd. 541), London, H.M.S.O., 1958, pp. 44-51, the prince's investiture speech, 8 August 1957.

²⁷ Texts in Cmnd. 541, pp. 59-61.

²⁸ Sisouk Na Champassak, *op. cit.*, p. 60. See also D. E. Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia* (Cornell, 1965), p. 145.

²⁹ Oden Meeker, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

³⁰ Cmnd. 541, p. 153.

ambassador to Laos, Mr. J. Graham Parsons, had feared that the manifest failure of past United States' aid to cater for the needs of the rural population might play into the hands of the Pathet Lao.³¹ He therefore inaugurated a crash programme of rural aid, Operation Booster Shot, over ninety simple rustic projects which he hoped might counteract anti-American election propaganda in the villages. The programme, which cost less than a tenth of total American aid to Laos in 1958, was extremely successful. Never before had United States' aid in any quantity reached the countryside. The ambassador was confident of a heavy election defeat for Prince Souphanouvong.³²

Electoral battles in Laos had, however, hitherto been fought in terms of family or personal rather than political rivalries. The four traditional parties saw no need to sink their differences, and duly nominated eighty-four candidates for the twenty new seats and one vacant seat that were to be contested. In consequence the N.L.H.S., with its electoral ally, the left-wing Peace Party, won thirteen of the seats with only thirty-two per cent. of the votes.³³

The significance of these figures was lost in the ensuing uproar. The left wing had gained a spectacular victory. Those who had watched their single-minded efforts were not surprised; for political penetration of the rural districts of Laos was not difficult, it was only new. When the Pathet Lao, backed by the Viet Minh, first arrived in Sam Neua they behaved with propriety, with respect for tradition, and with the utmost friendliness as far as the people were concerned. Their soldiers were well-disciplined and orderly like the Viet Minh themselves. They removed the provincial and district administrators who were appointed by the government, making the most of local feeling against domination by the Lao. Some of these men they 'executed' after summary trials before

³¹ Over the period 1955-63, less than 1 per cent. of aid funds was spent on improving agriculture, an activity that provided the living of 96 per cent. of the population: Dommén, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

³² *United States Aid Operations in Laos: Seventh Report by the Committee on Government Operations, June 15, 1959* (Washington, 1959), pp. 45-47.

³³ E. H. S. Simmonds, 'Independence and Political Rivalry in Laos 1945-61' in *Politics in Southern Asia*, S. Rose (ed.), (London, 1963), p. 181. Mr. Dommén, whose work is otherwise so detailed, fails to mention this figure.

'people's tribunals'.³⁴ Where they removed unpopular village headmen, they were careful to replace them by election in accordance with custom.

The new leaders—all, of course, Pathet Lao sympathizers—would first seek to revive and deepen the traditional socialism of the villages. The pooling of labour to clear forest, the co-operation of neighbours in house-building, and the allocation of agricultural produce from the common fields according to size of family were already normal. It was also normal for the village and district headmen to have their perquisites, their percentage of the taxes collected and labour requisitioned. Some had taken more than others; some had 'made their harvests on the backs of the people',³⁵ some had insisted on the *droit de cuissage* when they were on tour.³⁶ It was often easy for the Pathet Lao to improve on the traditional system from the villagers' point of view.

Inevitably labour still had to be requisitioned; but now, in addition to the wearisome road-making and portering, some of the common effort was directed to the building of schools and medical centres, benefits which had an impact out of all proportion to their cost because they had rarely been available to the hill people in the past. Promising children were taken to North Vietnam or China where they would be given schooling in their own languages and whence they would return, some to teach in the new schools, others to act as political cadres, all ready to explain that the new benefits were due to the Pathet Lao and their disinterested friends the Viet Minh.

This was an adaptation of the classic method of population

³⁴ For example, the acting governor of Sam Neua and the district officer of Xieng Kho were murdered in this manner: Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

³⁵ A traditional phrase for the misuse of perquisites. In 1861, when the explorer Henri Mouhot was crossing Siamese Laos on his way to Luang Prabang, he met a Siamese official who was about to make his fortune (or so he thought) out of requisitioning labour for the transit of a sacred white elephant through his village. He explained the system, which was to requisition more labour than was needed and then to release some of the labourers on payment of a fee which he kept. 'It is called', he said, 'making one's harvest on the backs of the people. Have you not, respected stranger, a similar saying in your language?' H. Mouhot, *Voyages dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos*, F. de Lanoye (ed.), (Paris, 4th edn., 1883), p. 276.

³⁶ Gentil, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

control used by Mao Tse-Tung and Ho Chi Minh to obtain a solid basis of support for a people's army. It needed no sinister pressures on the easy-going Laotian, no threats of cruelty.³⁷ The people were simply being governed intelligently for the first time. The tragedy was that the government could offer no competition. Sam Neua, with its traditional dislike of Lao domination, with its leaning towards and easy access to North Vietnam, and with a hill-Thai population that had suffered more than most from political instability both before and after the arrival of the French, was particularly fertile ground for the Pathet Lao. Furthermore Souphanouvong generally, Sithone Khamadam and Faydang within the Kha and Meo communities, were leaders in the old tradition; the influence all three exerted was to some extent founded on genuine popularity.

Of importance too was the success of the Viet Minh in conciliating the hill-Thai and other tribesmen across the border in Tongking, by methods similar to those which the Chinese were using in Yunnan. The Viet Minh have defined their country as 'one nation composed of several peoples', and have guaranteed the mountain folk the right to preserve their customs, languages, and systems of writing. 'As in other poly-ethnic states of the Soviet bloc, the approach to the minorities has gone beyond the realm of theory and has given the D.R.V.N. a competitive advantage over all its neighbours who still persist in a forced-assimilation policy.'³⁸ The Pathet Lao enjoyed the same advantage in competing with the Laotian government for the allegiance of the hill peoples. 'To the many ethnic minorities' in Laos, says Mr. Field, 'the government symbolised only the oppressive, exclusive ambitions of the Lao majority. Despite the exaggerated claims of the nationalist politi-

³⁷ For what is nevertheless alleged to have happened see Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81. Dommen's account is however based partly on refugee statements included in the case presented by the Laotian government to support its allegations of Viet Minh intervention in Laos in 1959. The other side of the story is in Burchett, *Mekong Upstream* (Berlin, 1959), pp. 259-64. On balance it is probable that comparatively little violence was used; but if this is so the reason was that violence was not needed to achieve the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao aim.

³⁸ B. B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (London, 1963), p. 141. See also Professor Fall's 'Problèmes des états poly-ethniques en Indochine' in *France-Asie*, Mar.-Apr. 1962; a particularly clear statement of the problem in so far as it affects Vietnam is to be found in the same author's *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966* (London, 1966), pp. 190-6.

cians . . . they had few contacts in the villages and commanded practically no respect among the minorities.³⁹

The Vientiane Agreements had begun a new, open phase of Pathet Lao activity. For this there were now many agents, recruited in the north and trained with Viet Minh assistance. Their task was simple, for they were peasants themselves. An agent would come and stay in a village, helping unpretentiously with village tasks and exuding goodwill. This in itself was something new. When government officials visited a village—as a senior Lao officer said of the French—they got the best girls, the best pigs, the best chickens. . . . When a Vietnamese agent reaches a village he doesn't take the most beautiful girls or the chickens or the pigs. He stays outside the village and helps work in the fields and harvest the rice.⁴⁰

In the absence of any government presence to counteract his activity the agent could often win over the village headman or, if he proved obdurate, secure the election of someone else. When he had done this it was not difficult to make it dangerous for government officials to visit the village or frustrate their efforts if they did so.

If an agent needed to reinforce his arguments he would sometimes arrange for villagers to visit Vientiane, now a sprawling conglomeration of villages containing 70,000 people, or one of the other Mekong towns, so that they could see for themselves how the new riches of the country were being spent. For not only was aid not reaching the villages, it was also being shamelessly wasted in the towns:

Corruption and extortion in the customs, banking, foreign trade, police and other administrative departments were commonplace. Black-market deals in American aid dollars reached such proportions that the Pathet Lao needed no propaganda to turn the rural population against the townspeople. The Chinese of Hongkong and Bangkok and a few Lao officials profited from the American aid. . . .⁴¹

The poor Laotian stood helplessly by and the Pathet Lao reaped the harvest.

³⁹ Field, *op. cit.*, p. 54. See V. Thompson and R. Adloff, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia* (Stanford, 1955), p. 210, for the use the Viet Minh/Pathet Lao made of gaps left by departing French administrators.

⁴⁰ Oden Meeker, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁴¹ Sisouk Na Champassak, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

In these circumstances, the thirty-two per cent. of the votes secured by the Pathet Lao and Peace Party in the partial elections of May 1958 certainly showed no runaway trend towards Communism. Had the number of seats won matched the proportion of votes obtained the result would probably have been accepted as reasonable. The imminent reality of the thirteen new left-wing deputies in an Assembly of fifty-nine was, however, a severe blow to the government and the West. The United States authorities were particularly shaken. A Congressional inquiry into the administration of American aid in Laos was uncovering mismanagement and corruption. Mr. Parsons himself had told the inquiry that the Pathet Lao defeat he predicted in the elections would be 'value for our aid money'.⁴² Now it suddenly seemed that there had been no value for money at all.

Action was urgent, for the Congressional Committee on foreign aid was to sit in June. It was essential that the administration should be able to convince the Congress of its will and capacity to stop abuses and to arrest the progress of the Pathet Lao, if it was to escape a cut in its aid programme. On 30 June, however, Prince Souvannaphouma's government with its two Pathet Lao ministers was still in office. In the face of mounting Congressional criticism of the aid programme, United States economic aid, now amounting to all but a fraction of the Laotian budget, was suspended. The pretext was the need for monetary reform; the purpose was to force Prince Souvannaphouma out of office.⁴³

It had seemed at first as if the prince would be able to satisfy his critics. He had already created a united parliamentary front against the left, the Rally of the Lao People, in which he had the support of thirty-six out of fifty-nine deputies in the new house. He had encouraged the formation outside the Assembly of the 'Committee for the Defence of National Interests', an anti-Communist organization of the younger, better educated officials and army officers who had hitherto played little or no part in politics. He had also declared that, now elections had been held, the International Control Commission had completed its task in Laos. This led to its withdrawal in July in spite of the dissent of its Polish

⁴² *United States Aid Operations in Laos: Seventh Report by the Committee on Government Operations, June 15, 1959* (Washington, 1959), p. 47.

⁴³ Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 110. See also speech of Prince Souvannaphouma at the Geneva Conference, 14 June 1961.

member who saw it as providing a measure of protection for Pathet Lao interests.⁴⁴ The West was glad to see it go.

The prince had, however, underestimated the anxiety of the Americans and Siamese about the danger of a Communist takeover, and had never gained their confidence. The Committee for the Defence of National Interests, the C.D.N.I., which had possessed it from the first, was now used against him. In the manoeuvrings that followed the inauguration of the new Assembly, 'allegedly with the enticement of monetary bribes distributed by the P.E.O. and C.I.A., a sufficient number of deputies were persuaded to block Souvanna's reappointment'.⁴⁵ On 6 August the prince gave up the attempt to form a new government and on 18 August Phoui Sananikone returned to power. His cabinet included four members of the C.D.N.I. but the two Pathet Lao members of the previous administration were of course excluded. Prince Souvannaphouma went to Paris as ambassador, Prince Souphanouvong became chairman of the new Assembly.

The Swing to the Right

M. Phoui Sananikone is one of the two or three Laotian politicians capable of holding his own in the world of statesmen. He had done this as head of the Laotian delegation at Geneva in 1954, scorning Pathet Lao pretensions and firmly standing his ground, and he now took office as prime minister for the second time. His task was to prevent further gains by the Pathet Lao and to secure a resumption of American aid.

He made an energetic start. Besides proceeding immediately with the financial reforms which were to restore the flow of American cash in October, he declared war on corruption and prolonged the hours of work in government offices. There were changes in ambassadorial posts and in governorships of provinces. 'Communist sympathisers and long time fellow travelers of the

⁴⁴ It adjourned *sine die* on 19 July 1958. Its important contribution to the 1957 settlement has yet to be fully acknowledged.

⁴⁵ Roger M. Smith, 'Laos in Perspective' in *Asian Survey*, Jan. 1963, p. 63. The Programs Evaluation Office (P.E.O.) was an organization staffed by soldiers out of uniform, set up in 1958 to administer U.S. military aid. It was commanded by a Brigadier General of the U.S. Army whose name had been removed from the current Army List in order to conceal his status. *New York Times*, 9 January 1962.

Pathet Lao were dismissed from government service',⁴⁶ although some of them had been appointed under the Vientiane Agreements. Ngo Dinh Nhu, infamous brother of the ill-fated South Vietnamese president, paid an official visit to Vientiane in September. There was talk of a law against Communism. 'As far as peaceful coexistence is concerned', said Phoui, 'we shall clearly inform neighbouring countries that we shall coexist with the Free World only.'⁴⁷

After the implementation of the monetary reforms on 10 October, however, the new régime began to run into difficulties. In addition to the left-wing critics in the Assembly, there were those whose vested interests had been affected by the new measures which included devaluation and the abolition of the widely abused system of import licences. The proposed anti-Communist law was put aside and Phoui became more cautious. The opposition showed itself on 31 October, the day on which the Assembly was due to go into recess. A motion was carried by 22 votes to 20 for the prolongation of the session. The royal speech of adjournment was nevertheless made and the Assembly broke up. During November the political crisis gradually intensified, and by the beginning of December Phoui felt that his government was in danger. There was talk of a *coup d'état* by army officers and others who affected to regard the strength of the opposition as proof of the ineffectiveness of the government, and even of the C.D.N.I. itself, against the left wing. Alarmed by the rumours, about two hundred members of the Pathet Lao took refuge in North Vietnam.

It is tempting to connect the events which followed with the parallel political developments in Siam. A year earlier Marshal Sarit had ousted his two main rivals for power in that country, had installed a government of his own choosing, and had departed almost immediately for medical treatment in the United States. In October 1958 he was completing his convalescence in Great Britain when a new political crisis arose in Bangkok. On 19 October the marshal suddenly returned to Siam, dismissed the government, and assumed full powers himself. The reason he gave for his action was the existence of a Communist threat, internal and ex-

⁴⁶ Sisouk Na Champassak, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁴⁷ Quoted by B. B. Fall: 'The Laos Tangle' in *International Journal*, 16 February 1961, p. 142.

ternal.⁴⁸ An immediate sequel was the arrest of seventy Vietnamese in north-east Siam on grounds of Communist subversion.

According to reliable reports, nobody really believed that there was 'even a trace of Communist danger' in Siam.⁴⁹ The crisis was essentially economic and it was partly due to the cut of about one-third in American aid to Siam in 1958. One of the means being adopted to put the economy back on its feet was, however, 'a veiled ultimatum to the United States to increase its aid'. Hence the allegations, which were far from convincing, of Communist activity in the north-east.

Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, a relation of Marshal Sarit, had also spent the year 1957-8 in the West. He had returned to Laos in August 1958 from a course at the *École Supérieure de Guerre* in Paris. Phoumi was not popular with his contemporaries in the army, who suspected his past association with the left, and he was not given the influential military post to which he is believed to have aspired. By December he was among the officers whose political ambitions were thought to have been aroused by the turn of events.

The fears of a *coup d'état* in Vientiane proved groundless. Colonel Phoumi did not seize control. There occurred instead a series of incidents, mysterious at the time, which led through reaction and counter-reaction to much the same result a year later. On 15 December 1958 a Laotian military patrol was fired on when visiting the district of Huong Lap, a remote region on the frontier with North Vietnam some fifteen miles north of the Lao Bao Pass through the Annamitic Chain east of Savannakhet. It was a most sensitive area because so close to the demilitarized partition zone between North and South Vietnam. The frontier had been disputed even in French colonial days, when Huong Lap had been governed as part of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had appropriated it after the departure of the French; no Lao official had ever visited it and no Laotian military post had ever been established there, although it appeared to be part of Laos on the map. To the few who knew these facts, the hostile reception of the Laotian patrol can have come as no surprise.

On 27 and 31 December, the North Vietnamese alleged that Laos had violated their border at Huong Lap. The Laotian

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 21 October 1958.

⁴⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 3 November 1958.

government denied this and countered with charges that the North Vietnamese themselves had occupied three Laotian villages in the area. There was renewed talk in Vientiane of a *coup* by anti-Communist officers and officials. Prince Souphanouvong called for the reactivation of the International Control Commission. On 11 January the prime minister, Phoui Sananikone, stated that the frontier incursions were connected with the internal political situation and that the Pathet Lao were actively planning insurrection. On these grounds he obtained from the Assembly, on 14 January 1959, emergency powers for twelve months, a measure by which the Assembly 'virtually divested itself of legislative powers for the period'.⁵⁰ He also protested to the Secretary General of the United Nations against North Vietnamese interference in Laos.

In presenting the Huong Lap incident as a clear case of aggression by the Viet Minh, Dommen comments that 'accusations of ground violations are a characteristic tactic employed by Asian Communists when they are preparing their own military initiatives'.⁵¹ However, it was not the Viet Minh who followed up the incident at Huong Lap, where the trouble died down as quickly as it had arisen. The sequels came in Laos and Siam. In Laos the government was remodelled on 24 January 1959 to include Colonel Phoumi and two other army officers, a definite move further to the right. In Siam on 29 January Marshal Sarit promulgated an emergency constitution, justifying his action in part by renewed references to the danger in the north⁵² which, thanks to the furore in Laos, must certainly have seemed more credible than it had done in October.

Phoumi, who had in other days been chief of staff to Prince Souphanouvong, now became the dominant right-wing influence in the Laotian army and government. To the Siamese backing he already enjoyed, he soon added the powerful support of American agencies who came to regard him as the future strong man of Laos, although the American ambassador was to say a few months later that Phoumi 'was using anti-Communism, through the device of

⁵⁰ E. H. S. Simmonds, 'Independence and Political Rivalry in Laos 1945-61' in *Politics in Southern Asia*, S. Rose (ed.), (London, 1963), pp. 183-4.

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 115-16.

⁵² D. A. Wilson, *Politics in Thailand* (Cornell, 1962), p. 34.

the C.D.N.I., to further his personal ambitions'.⁵³ By June 1962 there was little doubt, as will be seen later, that Phoumi had sometimes manufactured and frequently exploited military incidents for political purposes. Whether or not the encounter at Huong Lap on 15 December 1958 was accidental, it appears to have been exploited to the advantage both of Phoumi and of Sarit.

At the beginning of 1959 a Nationalist Chinese consul had been installed in Vientiane and the South Vietnamese legation there raised to the status of embassy. These developments had inevitably given offence to North Vietnam and China, who had been persuaded by Prince Souvannaphouma in 1956 to drop their requests for diplomatic representation in Laos. The prince had pointed out during visits to Peking and Hanoi that the Nationalist Chinese were not represented in his country and that the exchange of legations between Laos and South Vietnam was a relic of pre-independence days which did not justify a similar exchange with Hanoi.⁵⁴ The reaction of the north, Peking, and eventually Moscow, to the Laotian crisis of January 1959 could therefore only be to back Prince Souphanouvong's demand for the return of the International Control Commission.

Phoui Sananikone not only rejected this demand, but stated on 11 February that Laos had fulfilled her obligations under the Geneva Agreement, and that she could no longer be bound by the limitations on foreign military aid which she had accepted at Geneva pending a political settlement in Vietnam, and had confirmed less than a year earlier.⁵⁵ The prime minister's reference was to a Laotian declaration on the military status of the country, which contained the following undertaking: 'During the period between the cessation of hostilities in Viet Nam and the final settlement of that country's political problems, the Royal Government of Laos will not request foreign aid, whether in war material, in personnel or in instructors, except for the purpose of its effective territorial defence and to the extent defined by the agreement on the cessation of hostilities.'⁵⁶ The agreement on the cessation of

⁵³ Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-8.

⁵⁴ Prince Souvannaphouma, 'Le fond du problème', in *France-Asie*, Mar.-Apr., 1961.

⁵⁵ Letter of Prince Souvannaphouma to the International Control Commission, 31 May 1958: Cmnd. 541, p. 122.

⁵⁶ Cmnd. 9239, p. 42.

hostilities had provided that apart from the French training and defence establishments with a permitted total of five thousand men, no reinforcements of troops or military personnel from outside Laotian territory were to be allowed at all.⁵⁷ It could therefore be argued that even if the Laotian government now felt itself free to ask for military aid, it was a breach of the cease-fire agreement if, for example, American military personnel were sent.

While the United States State Department at once supported Phoui's statement, the Communist bloc interpreted it as a denunciation of the Geneva Agreement. Their protests were redoubled when the Americans responded to a Laotian request for technical assistance by bringing into Laos eighty Filipino military technicians and establishing a training section in the Programs Evaluation Office. The Soviet Union, in a note to Britain, charged the Americans with openly inciting the Laotian government to violate the Geneva Agreement. Russia suggested that the two co-chairmen should request the International Control Commission on Laos to resume its work as soon as possible. After a number of exchanges the Soviet suggestion was rejected.⁵⁸

Meanwhile the Laotian government had decided to bring to a head the question of integrating the two Pathet Lao battalions into the national army, a matter which had long been held up by disagreements on the number of Pathet Lao officers to be accepted and on their ranks. In April the government agreed to accept the 105 officers nominated by the Pathet Lao and named 11 May as the day on which formal integration would take place.

It is not hard to imagine how, from the Pathet Lao point of view, it seemed that a dangerous situation was beginning to arise. Their first set-back had been the departure of the International Control Commission, one of whose main duties had been to prevent discrimination or reprisals against them. Freed thereafter from international checks, and under increasing pressure from the right, the government had then abandoned the neutral policy of the Vientiane Agreements on the basis of which Sam Neua and Phongsaly provinces had been handed over by the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao

⁵⁷ Article 6, Chapter II of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Laos: Cmd. 9239, p. 20.

⁵⁸ *Documents relating to British Involvement in the Indo-China Conflict 1945-1965* (Cmd. 2834), pp. 135 ff. See also *Survey of International Affairs 1959-60* (London, R.I.I.A., 1964), pp. 286-7.

then lost their representation in the administration. Finally, all possibility of their working through the Assembly had been deferred by the prime minister's assumption of emergency powers. The Pathet Lao were being forced back into insurgency.

Now Prince Souphanouvong probably knew, for there are few secrets in Laos, that the government's agreement to accept 105 of his officers contained a trick. Sisouk Na Champassak, the Secretary of State for Information at the time, makes this clear: 'Once the agreement was reached, the weapons surrendered, and the two battalions scattered throughout the country, the commissions could be nullified by demanding, for example, that the new officers pass examinations appropriate to their rank'.⁵⁹ As the educational standards of these men of the jungle were low—for few of the hillmen had been to school—they could be expected to fail.

At a time when he was no longer a member of the government, when he had lost his voice in the Assembly and when his followers were being subjected to increasing pressures, Prince Souphanouvong was thus to be deprived of the last elements of his military independence. It would appear that the two battalions had instructions not to accept integration on 11 May unless the prince or his military commander Colonel Singkapo were present. Singkapo was not invited, and in spite of a last-minute invitation the prince did not attend. On this and several other pretexts the two units refused integration.

The government decided to use force. Prince Souphanouvong and the three other chief Pathet Lao leaders were placed under house arrest, and, after an ultimatum, the two battalions were surrounded in their camps by government forces. On 17 May Prince Souphanouvong agreed to order his men to accept the government terms and one battalion did so. The other did not wait. On the night of 18 May the whole seven hundred men, complete with their families, their chickens, pigs, household possessions, and arms, slipped out of their camp on the Plain of Jars and followed a long-planned route to an isolated valley near the North Vietnamese border some forty-five miles away.⁶⁰ The

⁵⁹ Sisouk Na Champassak, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁶⁰ B. B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Harrisburg, 1961), pp. 301–2 gives a graphic account of the escape of this battalion. A substantial part of the other battalion decamped in August. The arrangements for guarding it had been poor.

Singkapo to make contact with the new government and had promised co-operation.³¹ Accordingly, at the beginning of October, the prime minister announced the opening of talks with the Pathet Lao in Vientiane on 11 October, and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

These moves, coming so soon after the reoccupation of Sam Neua by the Pathet Lao, albeit in the name of Prince Souvanna Phouma, caused profound disquiet in Washington. On 7 October the United States suspended financial aid to Laos³² and five days later Mr. Parsons arrived in Vientiane. He made it 'unmistakably clear that the resumption of American cash-grant aid to Souvanna Phouma's government depended on the attitude Souvanna Phouma took towards pending political questions, most urgent of which was the negotiations with the Pathet Lao',³³ already in progress.

Prince Souvannaphouma refused to break off his talks with the Pathet Lao, nor did he accept Mr. Parsons' other suggestion that the government be moved to Luang Prabang. The arrival of the Russian ambassador designate with an offer of Soviet help on 13 October, however, made it impossible for Parsons to apply decisive pressure even if he had wished to do so, and he left unscathed on 14 October. 'I would have liked to meet Mr. Parsons,' said the smiling Russian, 'but he left in such a hurry.'³⁴

Three days later the American ambassador was able to persuade

³¹ Burchett, *The Furtive War* (New York, 1963), p. 188. The contact point was about twenty miles north of Vientiane. The Pathet Lao had been broadcasting support for Prince Souvannaphouma since 24 August when their station opened.

³² There was some confusion between various U.S. authorities on the suspension of aid, which was announced by a military spokesman and then at first denied by the American embassy in Vientiane. The immediate reason for the action may have been the belief that some of the arms (from stocks provided by U.S. aid), distributed by Kong Lae for the defence of Vientiane against Phoumi in August, had found their way into Pathet Lao hands and that the U.S. was thus indirectly arming Communists.

³³ Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 159. R. M. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 64, states that Parsons threatened the termination of U.S. aid unless the talks were broken off. The State Department denied this. Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, p. 298, says Parsons applied 'intense pressure on Souvanna to forsake neutralism, accept Phoumi and make Laos a bastion of freedom again'.

³⁴ B. B. Fall, 'Reappraisal in Laos' in *Current History*, XLII (Jan. 1962).

