
I.

Indochina and Thailand in World War Two: An Overview of English-Language Scholarship

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The Japanese Occupation of Indochina and Thailand has not received extensive scholarly treatment in English, for at least two reasons. First, the English-speaking academy has by and large tended to be most interested in studying the American role in the region, a subject which only really begins to take on significance at the very end of the war. Second, few Anglophone Southeast Asianists read Japanese, so that their ability to chronicle the Occupation from a Japanese perspective is limited. That said, the period 1940–1945 is certainly recognized as tremendously important, whether as the waning period of French colonialism in Indochina and of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhrum’s power in Thailand or as the backdrop for postwar political struggles. This paper will attempt to provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the English-language scholarship on wartime Indochina and Thailand.

Indochina

As is well-known, the French colony of Indochina and the independent Kingdom of Thailand were occupied militarily by Japanese forces, but the sovereign governments were left in place—in Thailand throughout the war and in Indochina until the Japanese *coup de force* of 9 March 1945. (For translations of Japanese scholars’ studies of the beginnings of the occupation see Hata 1980 and Nagaoka 1980). Consequently, the wartime narrative for Indochina is one of a triangular relationship among Japanese, French, and local nationalists.

To my knowledge there is no monograph in English devoted to wartime Indochina; Tarling 2001 is an overview of the entire region. Arguably the best synthesis is the relevant section of Arthur Dommen’s massive work (Dommen 2001). Although the Japanese Occupation represents less than one chapter in the entire book, it is covered by a detailed narrative that gives attention to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Dommen has done original research in the American and French archives and draws on a wide variety of secondary sources, particularly from France, as well as the “Magic” translations of decoded Japanese messages. His study, although somewhat light on analysis and using only Western-language sources, provides a core narrative for the wartime period. One of the few other studies which covers all of Indochina, though in much briefer terms, is Smith 1978a.

Turning specifically to Vietnam, the gold standard for scholarship on this period is of course David Marr’s *magnum opus Vietnam 1945*, which is a comprehensive study of the entire Occupation through the August Revolution. Marr’s work is particularly important for tracing the complex narrative of the

Revolution itself and breaking it down into its various diverse and sometimes conflicting components. He also provides a balanced treatment of the other strands of Vietnamese nationalism which were not linked to the Việt Minh. His account of the Việt Minh/Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) during the war is not likely to be eclipsed unless future scholars have greater access than he did to Party archival documents for the years in question. Other important studies such as Huỳnh Kim Khánh 1982 and Duiker 2001 draw mainly on French rather than Vietnamese archives, but nevertheless they constitute valuable contributions to the history of the ICP. Marr's latest work (Marr 2013) and that of Stein Tønnesson on the 1945–46 period (Tønnesson 1986, Tønnesson 2010) are important “sequels” to the war-time studies; for an overview of the early months of the August Revolution see Smith 1978b.

The non-Communist political elements in Vietnam tend to be overshadowed by the ICP, both because of the latter's wider base of support and because so much writing about this period becomes excessively teleological, with the victories of August 1945 and May 1954 shaping the narrative for earlier years. Vũ Ngự Chiêu (1986 and 1992) and the present author (Lockhart 1993) have attempted to compensate for this by looking at the conservative royalists and particularly the Bảo Đại-Trần Trọng Kim government which held power in the final months of the war. Although the royalists, including Bảo Đại himself and his powerful minister and royalist apologist Phạm Quỳnh, ultimately backed the wrong horse in the conflict between the French and the ICP, their role in Vietnam's political evolution under colonialism was not negligible, and as Marr 2013 has shown, the Trần Trọng Kim regime was more significant than was previously recognized in laying the foundations for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Ngô Đình Diệm is to some extent a link between those conservative nationalists (whom he briefly joined in power during his tenure as an imperial Minister in 1933) and those whose loyalties came to lie more with the Japanese. Several scholars have focused on what we may call the “pro-Japanese” elements among Vietnamese nationalists, which included the important Southern religious sects Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo as well as several prominent individuals like Diệm. Kiyoko Kurusu Nitz has utilized Japanese sources to study the dynamics of the relationships between Japanese military and civilian elements and various Vietnamese nationalists (Nitz 1983 and Nitz 1984). Trần Mỹ-Vân (1996, 1999, 2003, 2005) is particularly interested in the Cao Đài, both in their own right and in terms of their sympathy for Cường Để, the royal pretender to Bảo Đại's throne who had enjoyed Japanese support for decades but ultimately failed to displace him even in March 1945 when Japan could have given him an opportunity to do so. (These events are also studied in detail in Shiraishi 1992). These studies are particularly valuable because they provide a clearer analysis of Japanese objectives and actions than scholarship which relies heavily on French sources. Diệm himself, however, remains a rather enigmatic figure during the Japanese Occupation. A recent detailed study of the Ngô Đình family by André Nguyễn Văn Châu (2015) includes discussion of Diệm's activities during the wartime period, but the accuracy

of his account is difficult to assess.¹

One aspect of the Japanese Occupation which has only recently begun to receive focused scholarly attention is the serious famine which hit Tonkin in the final months of the war. Although the famine always appears in accounts of wartime Indochina, it has usually been as a backdrop for the Việt Minh's rise to power. Beginning with Tabuchi 1992 and Bùi Minh Dũng 1995, several scholars have studied the famine in detail, both its consequences and its causes. Two chapters in a 1998 edited volume (Nguyễn Thế Anh 1998 and Furuta 1998) look at the topic from different angles, and most recently Gunn 2014 has revisited the topic in the context of the August Revolution. These studies are important reminders that the history of the Occupation is not just a political one and that even without the military clashes and brutal prison camps that characterized the Japanese presence elsewhere in the region, the human costs were still significant. A more general study of the wartime economy is Lê Mạnh Hùng 2004.

Although the Vichy regime which governed Indochina during the Japanese Occupation has not received much attention from Anglophone scholars in its own right, a few important studies should be noted. Raffin 2005 is an extensive study of the mobilization of youth in colonial Indochina and its long-term implications. Jennings 2001 looks at Vichy Indochina in comparative perspective, while Jennings 2004 and Freud 2013 study Pétainist ideology as it was reshaped in the colonial context. While the Japanese play only a background role in these works, they are present nevertheless insofar as their presence in Indochina shapes French policies and dealings with their colonial subjects.

Finally, although the Americans do not play a prominent role in the events of the Japanese Occupation, their contacts with the Việt Minh out in the jungle do bring them into the narrative. The best-known account of these contacts is Patti 1980, who was directly involved in the events of 1945. Spector 1985 is also useful for an overview of US military activities in Indochina during the final months of the war. What we may call the real "paper trail" of American involvement, however, does not begin until several years after the end of the Occupation.

If the scholarship on Vietnam during the Japanese Occupation is sparse, that covering Cambodia and Laos during the same period is even more so. For Cambodia, this was a period when the ICP was still relatively quiescent and a few ethnic Khmers were just beginning to emerge among its largely Vietnamese membership. The relevant chapters of Kiernan 2004 remain the most valuable study of the Cambodian Communists during the war, along with Heder 2004, an important book which has so far received considerably less scholarly attention than it deserves. There is unfortunately virtually nothing written by Cambodian revolutionaries during this period, so that all of the original sources are filtered through French or Vietnamese perspectives. Nevertheless, those sources go a long way in helping us to reconstruct the embryonic revolutionary movement in wartime Cambodia, which became the Khmer

¹ Châu bases his book on what he says are extensive interviews with the principal actors in these events, notably Diệm's elder sister, but because he has almost no citations or footnotes for the numerous conversations he reproduces in his account, it is impossible to ascertain their veracity, and the book often reads more like a historical novel.

Issarak.

Under the Japanese those Cambodians who had links to the ICP (the future core of the Khmer Issarak) were considerably less active and influential than the public intellectuals linked to the French-supported Institut Bouddhique and the important publication *Nagara Vatta*. The most famous of these intellectuals was of course the Vietnamese-born Son Ngoc Thanh, who became one of Sihanouk's many *bêtes noires*—a bitter rivalry which began during the Japanese Occupation and heightened during the interregnum between March and August 1945. These events are covered in Chandler 1986 and Osborne 1994, but the full story has yet to be told. (An account of the so-called “Umbrella War” protests of 1942 is available in Bunchan 1982). Monash University holds a collection of Thanh's private papers, and hopefully these will be exploited more fully by scholars to give a more detailed picture of this important political figure's rise to power.

For Laos, too, the history of the Japanese Occupation is really multiple histories of different groups. The core group of prominent nationalists was even smaller than was the case in Cambodia, and most of them held some position under the colonial regime—the most famous being Prince Phetsarath. At the same time, the ICP was quietly building a base of support among the Vietnamese immigrant communities, with the influence (though not the presence) of Phetsarath's half-brother Souphanouvong. The two strands of nationalism became rather tenuously intertwined during the months between the Japanese *coup de force* and the French reoccupation of Laos in early 1946, when virtually the entire nationalist leadership fled across the Mekong to exile in Thailand.

These events are not well-studied, to say the least. The most detailed account of the various movements remains Gunn 1988, which relies mainly on French archival sources. Ivarsson 2008 provides the best study of the moderate nationalists linked to the French, and the recent book by Simon Creak (2015) includes useful information on the wartime period. For Phetsarath a more or less autobiographical account exists (3349 [1978]), along with the article by Ivarsson and Goscha 2007; another leader's story is in Oun 1975. As this author has pointed out (Lockhart 2003), the Lao-based activities of the ICP during the Japanese Occupation are more or less ignored even in official Lao histories of the period, most probably because they were minimal. The future core of a separate Lao party was only just being recruited and trained, and even the more active mobilization taking place among the Vietnamese communities may have been sporadic and limited in scope.

There remain two serious gaps in our knowledge of wartime Cambodia and Laos. The first relates to Thai influences on their nationalism during the wartime period. In both countries Bangkok offered an alternative point of reference for local nationalisms which needs to be studied in more detail. Ivarsson 2008 takes this into consideration, but mainly on the Lao side. Goscha 1999 examines connections between Thailand and Indochina, but primarily in terms of Vietnamese revolutionaries. Murashima 2005 lays the overall groundwork for this task, which needs to be continued. The second gap relates to the contacts between Cambodian and Lao nationalists and the Japanese. A few fragments of information can be found in Sasagawa 2015 and Kikuchi 2015, but much research remains to be done in either Jap-

anese or English. Although evidence suggests that these contacts were less important than they were in Vietnam, more thorough inspection of Japanese sources is needed to flesh out the story.

Thailand

The narrative of Thailand's political developments during World War II is also divided into two chapters, but there are two important differences with the history of the Indochinese countries. First of all, the division is not between Communists and non-Communist nationalists, but between pro- and anti-Japanese factions. Second, whereas in Vietnam and Laos the separate strands of the narrative come together in 1945, when developments following the Japanese defeat bring the two sets of actors onto the same political stage, in Thailand it is the opposite case. The story begins with a single regime which includes both Field Marshal Phibun and his political rival Pridi Phanomyong, and over the course of the war the fallout from the Japanese presence splits them into two separate factions, each with its own agenda. As the war drags on, Phibun's decision to jump on the Japanese bandwagon becomes an increasing liability, while Pridi builds his own political and military network, the Free/Seri Thai, with close ties to the Allies. In mid-1944 the two men experience a dramatic reversal of fortunes, and Phibun temporarily falls from power while Pridi's faction emerges on top.

The majority of scholars examine wartime Thailand through English and Thai sources. Book-length studies include Brailey 1986, Kobkua 1995, Stowe 1991, and Thamsook 1977, along with the important articles by Batson (1974), Charnvit (1974), and Thamsook (1978). In this scholarship the main focus is the twists and turns of the relationship between Phibun's and Pridi's factions, and the Japanese presence is little more than a backdrop for these developments. Studies focusing on Pridi and the Seri Thai include Haseman 2002, Sorasak 1991, and Wimon 1997. Thak 1978 also provides a number of important primary sources, though again the main focus is the Thai actors, not the Japanese.

Only two Western scholars have demonstrated the linguistic abilities to utilize both Japanese and Thai sources. E. Thadeus Flood, before his untimely death, produced a dissertation (Flood 1967) and an article (Flood 1969) focusing on Phibun's decision to ally himself with Japan. The most important scholarship has come from E. Bruce Reynolds, who has produced two monographs, one (Reynolds 1994) concentrating on the Phibun government's relationship with the Japanese and one (Reynolds 2005) focusing on Pridi and his cooperation with the Allies. Reynolds has written on several other aspects of the Japanese period in Thailand, including the Chinese community (Reynolds 1997), a topic which Murashima 2002 has studied as well. Few Thai scholars of this period are able to use Japanese sources; one exception which deserves mention is Kamon 1988.

Conclusion

The history of Indochina and Thailand during World War Two is a short one but both significant and eventful. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, new agents and forces appear on the scene, while existing leaders and movements also gain strength. The complex bilateral relations between Thai and Japa-

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nese, added to the triangular relationship among French, Japanese, and Indochinese actors, produce a complex story with many different episodes. A few of these episodes are understood relatively well, but for many of them our knowledge remains superficial, and the boundary between scholars who read Japanese and those who do not remains significant. Hopefully continued international academic cooperation among scholars with access to different sources will allow us to fill in as many of the remaining gaps as possible.

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