



**THE THAI
RESISTANCE
MOVEMENT
DURING
WORLD WAR II**

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Introduction to the First Edition	ix
Author's Introduction	xviii
Political and Military Developments Leading to World War II	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1
Formation of the Thai Resistance Movement	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	15
The Resistance Groups Struggle to Achieve Contact, 1942–1943	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	31
Infiltration into Thailand, 1943–1944	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	59
Building the Resistance Base, 1942–1945	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	80
Consolidation, War Plans, and Victory, 1945	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	103
Analysis and Conclusions	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	130

CONTENTS

Appendices

1. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Thailand Operation First Deployment Group, 1943	137
2. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Thailand Operation Second and Third Deployment Groups, 1944 ...	139
3. Special Operations Executive (SOE), Thailand Operation First Deployment Group, 1943	140
4. Deployment of Thai OSS and Force 136 Agents in the Thai Resistance Movement	142
5. Roster of Thai Participants in the Thai Resistance Movement	146
Notes	155
Bibliography	165
Index	169

LIST OF MAPS & FIGURES

MAPS

1. Japanese Invasion Routes into Thailand, 7-8 December 1941	8
2. Thai Agent Infiltration Routes, Spring 1944	66
3. Thai Agent Infiltration Locations, Summer/Fall 1944	74
4. Location of Resistance Teams with Only Thai Members	110
5. Infiltration Routes of Allied Intelligence Officers, Summer 1944	112
6. Location of American Teams in Support of the Resistance	115
7. Location of British Teams in Support of the Resistance	116
8. Organizational Coverage of the Thai Resistance Movement	120

LIST OF MAPS & FIGURES

9. Resistance Tactics Planned during Allied Offensive ... 123

FIGURES

1. Allied Agent Radio Communications Network
in Thailand 71

2. Organization of the Thai Underground,
December 1944 83

3. Organization of the Japanese Siam
Garrison Army 90

4. The Thai Underground Functional Staff 106

5. Estimated Size of Selected Guerrilla Units... .. 107

6. Americans Who Served with the Thailand
Resistance Movement 113

7. British Who Served with the Thailand
Resistance Movement 114

CHAPTER ONE

POLITICAL AND MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS LEADING TO WORLD WAR II

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In 1941 Thailand was a quiet yet apprehensive country. World War II had started two years earlier in Europe, while Japan's Pacific empire had conquered much of East Asia. Thai leaders, whose nation was the only Southeast Asian country not colonized by a European power, observed with concern as the Axis developed. France, England, and the Netherlands were either overrun by invading German forces or hard pressed to survive. The Thai, surrounded by colonial possessions ruled from Europe, observed with concern as neighboring countries became involved with their European masters in the war.

The British-ruled countries of Burma and Malaya formed Thailand's southern and western borders. The French Indochina territories of Laos and Cambodia, already dominated by Japan, bordered Thailand on the east. Other countries in the region also owed allegiance to Europe: Ceylon, India, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Netherlands East Indies. Geography alone suggested that Thailand could not remain untouched by the war. To land-starved Japan burdened with war costs in China and Manchuria, Thailand's surplus rice was a tempting asset.

Thailand always has been fiercely proud of its history of national sovereignty, and its ability to maneuver among the major colonial powers in the region while remaining independent is well known.

The country had not hesitated to exercise a local version of balance-of-power politics to preserve its independence. In retrospect it was reasonable to expect that Thailand would pursue the same political maneuvering in the shadow of World War II.

MARSHAL PHIBUN'S POLITICAL DOMINANCE

Thailand politically approached war with a new internal system of government untested in international affairs. Less than a decade before, the 1932 coup d'etat had abolished the absolute monarchy and replaced it with a constitutional monarchy. The new system, although democratic on first view, was in effect a personal dictatorship under the prime minister, Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram.

In the aftermath of the 1932 coup d'etat the Thai military moved rapidly to fill the psychological and political void formed by a major change in the government. Phibun led the military faction of the "Promoters" who overthrew the traditional system of Thai government. Pridi Banomyong, a brilliant liberal economist, led the civilian faction. While the two men and their supporters had cooperated during the 1932 coup d'etat, as time passed the military and civilian factions moved farther apart. By 1938 the military had gained almost unlimited power and Phibun's accession as the prime minister marked the end of effective civilian leadership. Pridi and several of his supporters remained active in the government but overall civilian influence in governmental affairs declined rapidly. The decades of struggle for leadership between Phibun and Pridi are an intriguing element of modern Thai history.

Phibun as prime minister and Pridi as minister of finance were the most dominant figures in the Thai government. The two men and their respective supporters automatically considered the impact on internal political powers of all major decisions and changes in Thailand. The approach of World War II was no exception. Events that surrounded the decisions by Phibun concerning wartime policies, and the formation of the Thai resistance movement to oppose those policies, must be considered in the context of the personal power status of the two giants of the Thai political scene.

Phibun believed that totalitarianism was the ideological wave of the future. Germany and Japan were dominant powers in the world, while Western-style democracies appeared weak and ineffectual.¹ Phibun had no qualms about embracing a dictatorial philosophy with military strength and nationalism as its cornerstones. He felt that strong dictatorship was the most efficient way for a developing country to achieve progress. Donald E. Nuechterlein has described Phibun's philosophy of leadership:

Phibun was determined that Siam must break out of its backwardness and achieve a larger role in Asian affairs. [He] looked to Germany and Japan . . . as models for Siam's future.²

Japan was more than willing to extend friendship to Thailand. Thailand's geographic and political position in Southeast Asia, and the bounty of its agricultural economy, were not overlooked by Japan's leaders. Japan took an overt step toward gaining Thai favor by supporting Thailand's claims for portions of French Indochina. The support climaxed on 11 March 1941 when the two countries signed an agreement returning to Thailand two enclaves in Laos and much of northwestern Cambodia. This action gave Thailand control of the entire west bank of the Mekong River above Cambodia, which had been part of Laos, as well as much of Battambang province in Cambodia. It was the first major step in the process by which Thailand became indebted to Japan.

As 1941 drew close to the fateful month of December, Prime Minister Phibun found himself and his country drawn closer to the Japanese orbit. He seemed alert to the nature of the Japanese threat to Thailand but was powerless to act.³ His awareness was demonstrated in part by his last minute requests for military equipment and arms to both the United States and England. But by late 1941 neither of these two countries had the capability nor the inclination to help Thailand.

THE JAPANESE ULTIMATUM AND INVASION OF
THAILAND

In late 1941 the Thai National Assembly, perhaps realizing that the country was threatened, took several steps to resist the growing power of the Japanese and to assert some degree of determination. As early as September 1941 the National Assembly passed laws curtailing the number of Japanese who were entering Thailand ostensibly as tourists but in reality as advance military cadres. Thai troops were sent to the Indochina border where Japanese troops had massed in both Laos and Cambodia. The National Assembly also passed a law that made it the duty of all Thai people to resist any invasion with arms, economic power, or any other means, including destruction of crops and animals to prevent their capture and use by an enemy.⁴

Throughout the first week of December 1941 officials in Bangkok grew more certain that Japan had embarked on a policy to enlarge the war. High-level discussions in the Thai Cabinet speculated over the action Thailand should take either to counter Japanese expansion or to coexist with it. Virtually every knowledgeable official agreed that Japan was certain to attack the British and Dutch colonial territories in Southeast Asia. Thai officials also agreed that Thailand had no chance to conduct a successful diplomatic or military defense against Japanese military forces if Japan decided to attack their nation. Discussions in the Cabinet therefore centered on the complex issue of Thailand's options in the areas of coexistence and on the preservation of Thai sovereignty and independence.⁵

Mom Ratchawong (M.R.) Seni Pramoj later recalled Phibun's description of Thailand's foreign policy in the text of a statement released in the United States:

Before I left Bangkok on my mission to this country . . . I asked the Prime Minister point-blank to tell me what was the foreign policy of Thailand. Were we pro-Japanese, pro-English, pro-American, or pro-anything? He replied that we were not pro any other country in particular. We were pro-Thailand.⁶

This statement indicates that Phibun was determined to maintain independence no matter what actions he might have to take. Phibun was later described in terms ranging from patriot through traitor, but a review of events leading Thailand into World War II shows that he had at heart the best interests of his country and people.

On 7 December 1941, at 10:30 P.M. (all times and dates cited are Thailand time) the Japanese ambassador to Thailand told the Thai foreign minister, Direk Chaiyanam, that Japan had declared war on the United States and England. He further informed the Thai minister that Japan did not consider Thailand to be an enemy country. However, he "requested" the right of passage for Japanese troops through Thailand into Burma and Malaya. He stated that such permission would be taken as a sign of friendship. Despite the late hour the Thai Cabinet was meeting to consider the increasingly dangerous situation facing Thailand. The Japanese ambassador actually called Direk out from the Cabinet meeting to hand him the Japanese note. The initial Japanese "request" was summarily rejected by the Thai Cabinet.⁷

On 8 December at 2:00 A.M., less than two hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces began landing in Thailand.⁸ The Fifth Division, Twenty-fifth Army, landed at the cities of Pattani and Songkhla and on the island of Ko Samui in southern Thailand. The Guards Division, Twenty-fifth Army, landed small elements at Samut Prakan at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River south of Bangkok. The bulk of the Guards Division entered the country overland from Cambodia at the town of Aranyaprathet.⁹

Prime Minister Phibun was not in Bangkok when these events occurred. He was on an inspection trip to military camps in eastern Thailand and western Battambang province and was therefore not available to make decisions. In his absence nobody had the authority to pass orders to Thai military and police forces. Considering the crisis facing Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia, Phibun's absence from Bangkok at such a momentous time could not have been by accident. Apparently Phibun was trying to avoid or postpone making any immediate decisions on Japanese demands. In any case, he designated the deputy prime minister, Police General Adun Adundecharat, to preside over the Cabinet but did not give