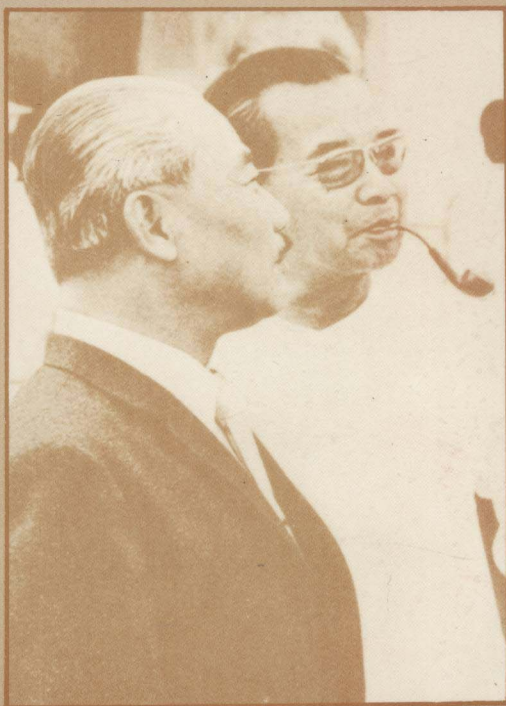


GEOFFREY C. GUNN

POLITICAL STRUGGLES

IN LAOS

(1930-1954)



ditions Duang Kamol

POLITICAL STRUGGLES IN LAOS (1930-1954):

**Vietnamese Communist Power and
the Lao Struggle for National Independence**

GEOFFREY C. GUNN



**Editions Duang Kamol
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ABBREVIATIONS

AIX	Aix-en-Province (all reference are to Laos series)
ALDL	Armée de Libération et de Défence Lao
AOM	Archives Nationales de France, Section Outre Mer
BEFEO	Bulletin d'Ecole Francais d'Extrême Orient
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service
FCP	French Communist Party
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
KMT	Kuomintang
LPLA	Lao People's Liberation Army
LPDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
NF	Nouveaux Fonds
NP (M)	Notes périodiques (mensuelles)
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PRO	Public Record Office
RC	Route Colonial
RLG	Royal Lao Government
SA	Service d'Action
SCP	Siamese Communist Party
SHM	Le Service Historique de la Marine
SHTM	Le Service Historique des Troupes de Marine
SLOTFOM	Le Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires de la France Outre-Mer
SOE	Special Operation Executive
SWB	Summary of World Broadcasts
VNQDD	Vietnam Quoc dan Dang. Vietnam Nationalist Party
VKCQHTL	Viet Kieu Cuu Quoc Hoi Thai Lao
VPA	Vietnamese People's Army
\$	Indochinese <i>piastre</i> unless otherwise stated.

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Orthography

I have attempted to modernize colonial era nomenclature. Thus Annamite becomes Vietnamese. No slight is intended if certain other ethnic designations of derogatory connotation have been retained for reasons of pure convenience.

Regretably there is no consistency in the rendering of Lao words, much less uniformity between the English versions of Thai and Lao. One problem in transcribing both languages is the difference between the written and pronounced versions. Equally the way I have rendered names in these languages may not be consistent with the individual's own Anglicised version.

With respect to Vietnamese words and names, I have generally — out of ignorance — adopted a simplified form, notably omitting all diacritical marks.

In rendering geographic names I have attempted to follow current English usage, taking the English version in preference to the French. My apologies if anomalies still abound.

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INTRODUCTION

This work is a history of the origins of nationalism and communism in Laos and seeks to determine the relationship of domestic and international factors in the Lao revolution in the period 1930 — 1954. Two intertwining themes are emphasised. The first is the implantation and adaptation to the local environment of a foreign revolutionary doctrine, Marxism-Leninism, and the second concerns the emergence and transformation of Lao nationalism under *Viet Minh* auspices into a force for national liberation.

This categorisation raises difficulties relating to Laos' historically subordinate position vis-à-vis Vietnam (and Siam) and its peripheral position within the French colonial Indochinese Union. Aside from the ethnic minority rebellions which first confronted the French in 1901, eight years after the conquest of the country, and in the absence of expressions of modern Lao nationalism before the 1940's, anti-colonialism in Laos first appeared, in ethnic terms at least, as Vietnamese anti-colonialism. During the 1930's, when Leninist doctrine first made its entrée into Laos, its bearers were entirely Vietnamese, although one of their objectives, to be sure, was the destruction of French power in Laos. It was not until the mid-1940's that indigenous Lao nationalists as well as the ethnic minorities, whose rebellions had previously remained devoid of positive political ideology and social programmes, embraced the military methods and political doctrines of the *Viet Minh* as a strategy for national and social "liberation".

In accounting for the *Viet Minh-Pathet Lao*¹ successes in the military campaigns of 1953-54 the study raises the question as to whether they can be accounted for by strictly internalist developments as revealed by class analysis, or whether exogenous factors were more important in the development of a mass insurrection. Likewise in accounting for the failure of the communist opposition strategy in Laos during the 1930's, the question is raised as to whether or not the communists managed to make themselves relevant in the Lao context. Not only does this demand an

appreciation of the objective social and economic conditions in Laos — a very specific social formation, and far removed from Vietnamese realities — but leads me to scrutinize the major theoretical *prises de position* of the leading protagonists of Marxism-Leninism in Indochina — the Third International (Comintern) or Stalinist faction and its local bearers, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), and the Fourth International or Trotskyist tendency. Rather than viewed as constants, strategies and tactics promoted by these factions evolved through time with reference to major international developments, local conditions in Indochina and in response to each other.

Clearly, in Laos as in Vietnam, to achieve political legitimacy and to pursue the Party's social mission, a delicate political balance had to be struck between the national struggle and proletarian internationalism (Khanh 1982:21). As the revolutionary protagonist in Laos during the 1930's, the ICP, however, revealed by its actions that it had not only divorced itself from the masses but had subordinated the national struggle to the dictates of internationalism as promoted by the Comintern and its local agents, most especially during the period of "ultra-left" struggle between 1930-1935. A further problem that had to be confronted by the Party concerned the definition of an ethnic minorities policy and a nationalities policy that also set out the role of Laos and Cambodia within the Indochinese Federation then promoted by the ICP.

With reference to official Lao communist texts, the relationship between the Lao revolution, the Indochinese revolution and the world revolution was expressed in 1980 in these terms:

All manifestations of chauvinism and big-nation nationalism are foreign to Marxism-Leninism and to proletarian internationalism.... The Lao revolution is an integral part of the Indochinese revolution and of the process of contemporary revolution.... The international line of our Party consists before all to pursue without discontinuity the work of consolidation and reinforcements of the alliance bloc of struggle uniting the three brother peoples of the peninsula on the basis of coordinating the interests of the Lao revolution with those common to the three countries and with a combination of ardent patriotism... (Kaysone 1980:145-149)

It is apparent, then, that the tensions between Laos' place within a communist federation of Indochina and the claims that "internationalism" might make upon the Lao Party, nation and people have no place in official doctrine, but are viewed as ideologically reinforcing in an *ex post facto* sense. Similarly, colonialism, neocolonialism and international capitalism are portrayed by the Party as class enemies of the Indochinese revolution.

The question which imposes itself is whether the problematic stated as dogma is matched by the historical evidence. On the way to diplomatic victory and international recognition at the 1954 Geneva Conference, did the *Pathet Lao*, as the theoretical apotheosis of Lao mass peasant revolutionary nationalism, compromise the autonomy of their "national" revolutionary project by entering into alliances with foreign patrons? Or even if a trade-off was involved in that arrangement, what greater claim to legitimacy did the French-sponsored "bourgeois" nationalist project represent?

The foregoing also implies another more fundamental tension, between the "social" or "democratic" struggle — which pits class against class, poor against rich — and the "national" struggle missions of the communist opposition to the French. While the national struggle was relegated a subsidiary status in the Trotskyist programme for permanent revolution, the ICP promoted the theory that the social struggle and the national struggle were "closely linked" (Nguyen Xuan Lai, 1976:56) or "interpenetrated" (Kaysone 1980:61). Clearly, the correct identification of the leading social contradiction will influence revolutionary tactics and strategy. Failure to identify the predominant contradiction or locus of exploitation correctly could, on the contrary, jeopardize the entire revolutionary project. The question which imposes itself is, then, given the historical and social reality in colonial Laos — did a revolutionary situation develop in a way propitious for exploitation by the Party? Insofar as history has validated the Party's victory can this be attributed to an analysis which would rather link this success to a national liberation strategy that owed nothing at all — rhetoric aside — to the social revolution project? Or in terms of the national struggle project, have the Lao managed to uphold their independence within the revolutionary alliance with their Vietnamese mentors and their Khmer comrades-in-arms?

While eschewing that geopolitical reductionist argument which would view landlocked Laos as inexorably the object of its neighbours irridentist ambitions — this view belittles the virility of Lao history and culture — it is certainly the case that political choices in Laos have often been delimited by facts of geography. Primordial in this respect, as numerous observers of Laos have underscored, is the lowland-highland division, matched also at the level of ethnicity with the Mekong and its affluents the heartland of the Lao and the mountainous hinterland the homeland of the various ethnic minorities. While the Mekong also serves as the major north-south link in Laos, unlike the Annamite Chain, the natural divide approximately separating Laos from Vietnam, it has not historically served as a barrier to external — particularly cultural — influences. While the internal borders thrown up by colonialism in Indochina did not remove the mountainous hinterland as a sanctuary for anti-regime

rebels in the traditional sense, it was the imposition of the Mekong as an external political boundary separating, in the main, the Lao of French Laos from the Lao of the *Isan* (northeast of Thailand) that was of major geo-political consequence in the evolution of modern Lao history.

Numerous observers of Laos have remarked upon the politically fragmented nature of the country, a reference to the resilience of local and primordial loyalties and the presence of ethno-linguistic diversity, geographical divisions and the paucity of communication links. Lao nationalism, I will argue, as with the experience of other former colonial countries, and in contrast to post-feudal European nationalism, defined itself most forcefully and explicitly in anti-colonial terms. This is not a completely satisfactory explanation, however, as Laos and its peoples share certain common historical traditions and even uphold some collective memories of statehood. If modern and pre-political boundaries do not precisely coincide, the majority Theravada Buddhist *Lao Loum* (lowland Lao) peoples are nevertheless bearers of a rich tradition and culture, as expressed in literature, art, music, architecture, etc. The fact that the Lao peoples of the *Isan* region of Thailand share this cultural patrimony with the Lao east of the Mekong further complicated definitions of nation, more especially since these peoples have at various points in time been subject to a political tug-of-war between the Lao and the Thai states, fundamentally arising out of the entirely arbitrary political boundary imposed by the colonial power between the two countries.²

The problematic can be restated to emphasise the inseparability of basic economic and social conditions to the genesis of and definition of Southeast Asian national movements. Jacoby argues that the gradual awakening of national impulses in Southeast Asian agrarian settings occurred in response to the introduction of Western economic methods and the disintegration of the old village economy. Thus the development of the national idea as a permanent force matched the establishment of bonds of economic dependence under colonial regimes. The introduction of a money economy, he continues, actively accelerated the process of the withering away of the village community and time-honoured authority relations which sustained it (Jacoby 1949:246-6).

The political scientist Karl Deutsch contends that "nationalities" or "people pressing to acquire a measure of effective control over the behaviour of their members" turn into nations "when they acquire the power to back their aspirations". A nation state comes into being, he continues, when these members are successful in putting a new or old state organisation into their service (Deutsch 1953:104-5). The process whereby pre-national peoples enter into political communities with their fellows, he terms, "social mobilisation":

...the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and peoples become available for new patterns of socialisation and behaviour (Deutsch 1961:494).

In Laos, as we will see, it was the political hiatus opened up by the Japanese intervention during the Second World War that set the pre-conditions for indigenous mass nationalist mobilisation along the lines indicated by Deutsch.

In his doctoral study on the formation of the Lao state, the Lao scholar, Vongsay Kithong, raises the question “was there a pre-existing Lao nation at the time of the French or was it simply an arbitrary creation of the latter?” His response was that the development of a Lao national entity and a Lao national consciousness through history was self-evident, indeed a phenomenon not overlooked by “sensitive foreigners”. The foregoing notwithstanding, he continues, the sentiment of belonging to a national community and a national consciousness alone is not sufficient to create for a nation the kind of juridical acknowledgement acceptable on the international plane. Accordingly, he argues, to the pre-existing socio-political order and national consciousness should be added elements of a more technical order, such as state organisation, the definition of a national territory congruent with precisely defined boundaries as well as the existence of political themes determining the domestic and international behaviour of the country (Vongsay Kithong 1967:passim).

To be sure, as early French administrators, explorers, adventurers and traders in Laos were well aware, the King of Luang Prabang was not just one among other *chaomuong* (lords) in the northern region of Laos. A study by the French explorer-administrator, Auguste Pavie, of the Royal chronicles put at his disposal in 1867 demonstrated to interested French parties that the King of Luang Prabang upheld an unbroken genealogy back to the founding of the Kingdom of Lan Chang Khao (the million elephants and the white parasol) in 1383. Indeed, Lao as well as Chinese chronicles reveal that Luang Prabang had paid tribute to the court in Peking since the Ming dynasty, while imperial Chinese envoys had been received in Luang Prabang. Vongsay's assertion notwithstanding, there was in Laos no analogous notion to that in Vietnam of obligation to or love of the country *ai quoc*, as it is rendered in Sino-Vietnamese. Nor was it therefore possible in Laos for an analogous class of “patriots” to emerge as in Vietnam in the early twentieth century, such as those anti-colonial mandarins or literati who imbued this traditional notion with new content.

While in Vietnam those promoters of nationalist alternatives to the communist opposition were also repressed by the colonial order as subversive, in Laos no nationalist competitors to the communists developed — or were allowed to develop — before the 1940's, leaving