Storm Over Laos

A
CONTEMPORARY
HISTORY

by

Sisouk Na Champassak

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BOOKS THAT MATTER

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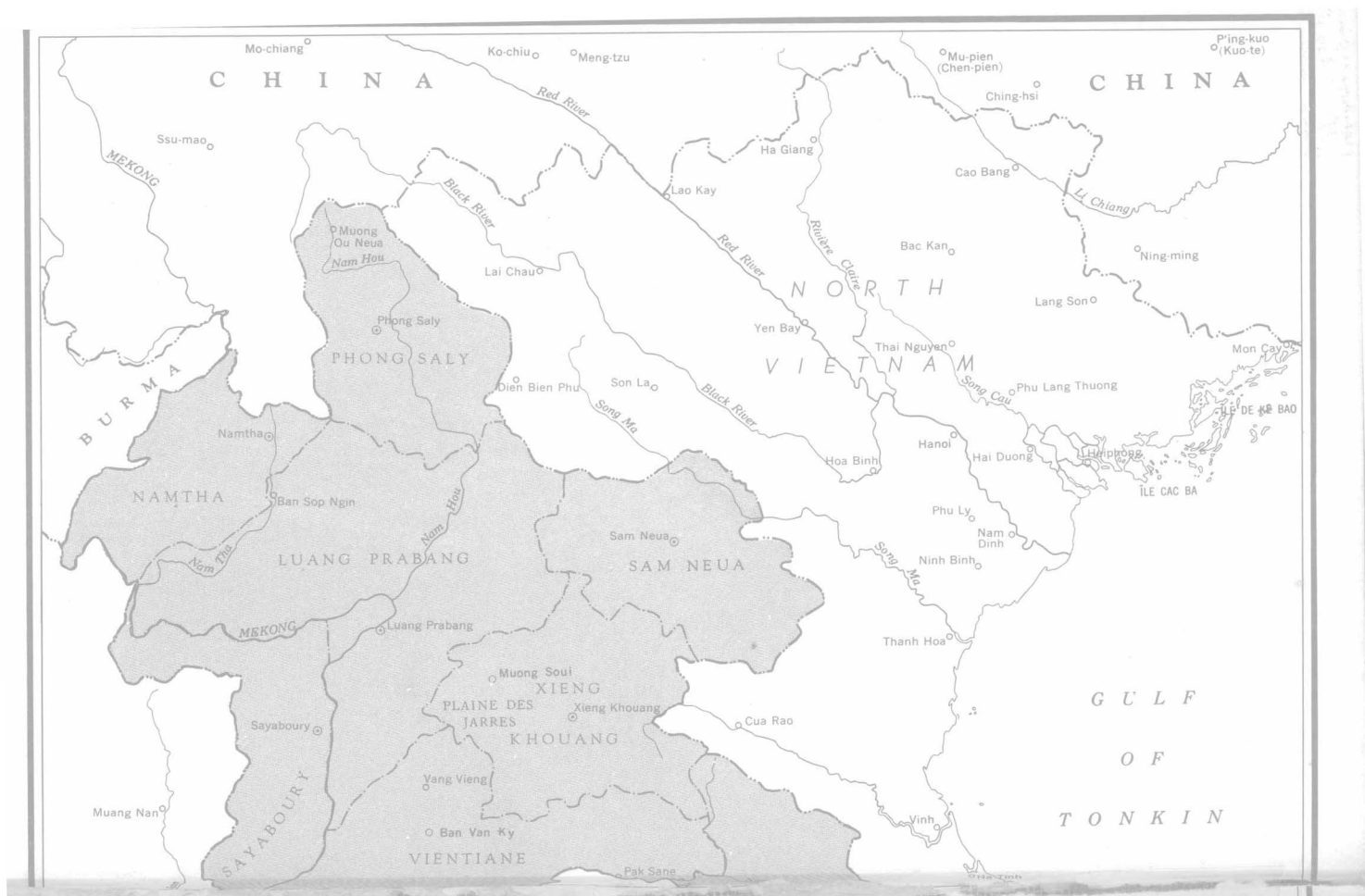
CHINA
Mo-chiang
Ko-chiu
Meng-tzu
Red River
Mu-pien (Chen-pien)
P'ing-kuo (Kuo-te)
Ching-hsi
CHINA
Ssu-mao
MEKONG
Ha Giang
Cao Bang
Black River
Lao Kay
Li Chiang
Muong Ou Neua
Nam Hou
Bac Kan
Ning-ming
Lai Chau
Red River
Riviere Claire
NORTH
Lang Son
Phong Saly
Yen Bay
Thai Nguyen
Mon Cay
PHONG SALY
VIETNAM
BURMA
Dien Bien Phu
Son La
Song Ma
Black River
Song Cau
Phu Lang Thuong
ILE DE KE BAO
Namtha
Hanoi
Haiphong
Hoa Binh
Hai Duong
ILE CAC BA
NAMTHA
Ban Sop Ngin
Nam Hou
Phu Ly
Nam Dinh
Sam Neua
LUANG PRABANG
SAM NEUA
Nam Tha
Ninh Binh
Song Ma
MEKONG
Luang Prabang
Thanh Hoa
Muong Soui
XIENG
KHOUANG
PLAINE DES JARRES
Xieng Khouang
GULF
OF
TONKIN
Sayaboury
Cua Rao
Yang Vieng
Muang Nan
Vinh
Ban Van Ky
SAYABOURY
VIENTIANE
Pak Sane
Ha Tinh


Uttaradit
Nam Heung
Dan Sai
Udon Thani
Muang Nakhon Phanom
Thakhek
Dong Hoi
Muang Sakon Nakhon
Se Bang Fai
Se Noi
DEMARCATION LINE
Muang Phitsanulok
Bo Ho Su
Quang Tri
Tchepone
Savannakhet
Pha Lane
Hue
SAVANNAKHET
Se Done
THAILAND
Maha Sarakham
Se Bang Hieng
SOUTH
SARAVANE
VIETNAM
Muang Nakhon Sawan
Chaiyaphum
Muang Yasothon
Se Done
Saravane
Mae Nam Po Sek
Muang Ubon
Mae Nam Mun
Warin Chamrap
Pakse
Se Kamane
Mae Nam Chao Phraya
Nakhon Ratchasima
Surin
Lop Buri
Attopeu
CHAMPASSAK
ATTOPEU
Sara Buri
MEKONG
Ayutthaya
BANGKOK
Se Khong
Bo Kham
Samut Prakan
Chachoengsao
Ban Aranyaprathet
Poipet
CAMBODIA
Samut Sakhon
GULF OF SIAM
Chon Buri
Stung Treng
Siem Reap
Boundaries and names are not necessarily those recognized by the U.S. Government.
TONLE SAP
Base 26716.1 5-58
0 25 50 75 100 Miles
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THE SIGNING OF THE 1957 AGREEMENTS. IN THE CENTER, PRINCE SOUPHANNOUVONG *(left)*, LEADER OF THE PATHET LAO, AND PRINCE SOUVANNA PHOUMA *(right)*, THEN PRIME MINISTER.

Preface

This book is an account of events that have weighed heavily on the destiny of my country since 1945, events I have personally lived through. For 16 years now, the Kingdom of Laos has experienced insecurity and war, yet international public opinion has never been clearly informed about the nature of the struggle going on, the fight of the people of the Kingdom of the Million Elephants against aggression by the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam. These transgressions started under the cover of a so-called "liberation" of the countries of former French Indochina and were later carried on in the name of an ideological crusade.

Concentrating especially on the time since the Geneva Conference of July, 1954, I have attempted to relate these events and to analyze them without prejudice or passion, despite my personal involvement (sometimes on the spot, sometimes from a distance). When His Excellency Katay Don Sasorith was Prime Minister, I was his *Directeur de Cabinet* and representative of the Royal Government to the International Control Commission. I have served His Highness Prince Souvanna Phouma as Secretary General of the Council of Ministers. In the government of His Excellency Phoui Sananikone, I was Minister for Information and Youth. I took part in all talks and negotiations with the leaders of the Pathet Lao from the time contact was first made at Plaine des Jarres in January, 1955, up to the Conference of Vientiane in August, 1956, and was present at the meeting of Katay Don Sasorith with Prince Souphannouvong at Rangoon.

My aim is not to justify the policies of any one man who has

come to power since Laos became independent, but to show the various stages of what I can only call the advance of international Communism on its road to the conquest of Southeast Asia. And I want to point out the many difficulties of a small country, born of the ambiguity of Geneva, wedged between two antagonistic camps in a zone of tension and pressures. It is my fervent hope that those Lao who have gone astray will soon rejoin our community so that together we may build a united Laos, neutral and independent.

As I write these lines, the die is not yet cast, but it seems justified to say that there is some hope, thanks to the ceaseless efforts of Great Britain to negotiate with the Russians since January, 1961. Invitations for an enlarged Geneva Conference in which 14 nations are to take part and which is to begin on May 12, 1961, have gone out at the same time that a cease-fire is being negotiated.

But has the time really come when one can have fruitful discussions with those who are willing to sacrifice the Kingdom to their own ideologies? A great many problems will have to be solved before the proposed date of the conference: An effective control would have to be set up for the cessation of hostilities, and a government would have to be formed, one based on national unity, capable of representing the interests of the country at Geneva. The question before us is clear: Will Laos advance along the road to independence and the much-yearned-for neutrality, or will it be sacrificed to appeasement?

Sisouk Na Champassak
May, 1961

To my country, to my family, to the youth of Laos—
and to the memory of my friend Dr. Tom Dooley—
for a neutral and independent Laos, for understanding
and reconciliation among all Lao.

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Peaceful Laos

Laos, Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, and Cochinchina formed French Indochina. Of these five countries under the French protectorate, only Cochinchina had colonial status, but all were supervised by the Ministry of Colonies on Rue Oudinot. Direct government by Governors General was established in all five countries, with only a few essentially ceremonial traces of the royal authority being preserved.

Having become a French protectorate through the treaty of 1893, Laos was under the shadow of "French Peace" until March of 1945. While His Majesty Sisavang reigned over his own province of Luang Prabang, the rest of the territory was administered by the French Residencies, subject to the orders of the Resident Superior in Vientiane. The latter, in turn, received orders from the all-powerful Governor General at Hanoi. This was the era of the proconsuls.

Laos, the realm of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol, was without history and without enemies, lost in the heart of

Indochina, and almost unknown to the rest of the world. Only foreigners who had visited the country publicized it, remarking on the indolence of the population and the charm of the landscape.

Captain Cupet, a friend of Auguste Pavie, who secured Laos for France, reports: ". . . a privileged corner where customs have retained an exquisite simplicity. Naturally, my affection went out to this Laotian people, so gentle, so peaceful, and so trusting, who are always happy, even during the worst times."

Another visitor, talking about the gaiety of the Lao, said: "In Laos, there are festivities for birth, festivities for life, and festivities for death; festivities, festivities, nothing but festivities. . . ."

Laos had been known as Lan-Xang since the time of Fa Ngum (1316-1374, reigned 1353-1373).

The vast kingdom of Lan-Xang reached its peak in the reign of Souligna-Vongsa. This king received the first European visitor, a Dutchman named Van Wustof, who arrived in the city of Vientiane on November 3, 1641. The meeting has been vividly described:

". . . Van Wustof and his companions were welcomed by a tumultuous throng of soldiers whose horses and elephants were covered with gilded draperies and precious stones. The audience was held near the gold-covered pyramid of That Luang. Souligna-Vongsa, surrounded by his entire court, was in a large temple where he had the newcomers sit on mats, under the gallery. The next day, dances, battles, and games on the water were held along the shore in their honor; Souligna-Vongsa, carried on a golden chair, was present and took a seat on a balcony overlooking the river. In the evening, more than 200 blazing canoes descended the Mekong River. The river seemed to be on fire."*

Internal struggles and attacks by neighboring states gradually exhausted the powerful Lan-Xang. Its people emigrated to Siam,

* *France-Asie* (Saigon, Vietnam), special issue, "Présence du Royaume Lao," 1956.

Cambodia, and even Burma. Thus, when Pavie induced the French government to take an interest in Laotian affairs, all that remained of the ancient kingdom was the little state of Luang Prabang, and it was succumbing to a Siamese attack and the raids carried out by HO hordes—the famous Black Flags as well as others from Yunnan.

Laos was total desolation: the small population that remained after the massacres and the deportations to the Menam basin had sought refuge in the forests. The towns were ruins; only the toppled pagodas buried under the banyan trees and lianas suggested the magnificence of the past.

Through the efforts of the untiring Pavie (whose book *La Conquête du Coeur* tells how France "conquered without a battle and was victorious without victims") and his companions, France succeeded in preserving most of the inheritance of the valorous Laotian kings. With the "French Peace," life returned to Laos, but slowly, very slowly. Around 1930, a quick census showed a total of a million inhabitants in an area half the size of France, or about 95,000 square miles. These numbers indicate a rather oppressive combination of factors for the French administration.

Laos is an enclave without a seacoast and thus not easily accessible; the Mekong river, the principal waterway, contains rapids and impassable waterfalls. The neighboring countries of Annam and Cambodia, on the other hand, were capable of immediate and easy exploitation; moreover, these countries were better developed and enjoyed a superior economic system. Nevertheless, Laos survived these disadvantages.

France introduced into Laos many of the elements of Western civilization, but since the existing native culture was allowed to flourish, the Western ideas remained embryonic. Many schools were built, as were some dispensaries and several sections of road. Three or four sloops carried the mail between the small towns from Vientiane to Khong and, where it is possible to navigate, along the large river. But in general, Laotian life continued at the traditional leisurely pace, to the satisfaction of the dreamers, the

poets, and the indolent. Everything was in harmony: the beautiful *phou-sao* . . . but let's hear what Roland Mayer says about these women in his book *Laos*, for he knew better than anyone else how to appreciate them.

"Take the fairest one, the patrician woman of Luang Prabang as she walks unhurriedly toward the pagoda in the shade of the flamboyant trees: the tall silhouette, the proud, enticing gait, the daring chignon decked with orchids or little gold chains, heavy jewelry of cut stones dangling from all her limbs, the mysterious smile of the Buddha on her face, the shoulders of Diana, the breasts of Pallas Athenae, the thighs of Venus, yet the ankles and feet like those depicted on patterned Egyptian cloth. When the race began, the *phou-sao* must have had her head carved in India, her bust in Greece, her feet in the land of the Pharaohs . . ."

Yes, everything was in harmony: the beautiful *phou-sao*, the lilting music of the *kené*, the moonlit nights, the lovers' lanes full of twilight and poetry, the festivals, the flowers, nature itself. . . . Everybody said: "They are happy the way they are; we must not change anything. They demand nothing. Let us leave them in their sweet dream." And the French in Laos, each in his own way, entered into that spirit. Life was truly exquisite: in the offices, matters were generally handed over to Annamite secretaries, who had flocked into the government services and established themselves between the French and the Laotian authorities. As a result, the Annamites became the masters.

The reputation of the Lao became more and more fixed. Here are a few samples:

A comment taken from the *Atlas des Colonies Françaises:* ". . . The Lao are Buddhists with a strong mixture of animistic beliefs. Their religious sentiments account for great freedom in their customs. They are friendly people, hospitable and opposed to hard work." And a little earlier in a passage about the Thai in general: "All of them are indolent . . . yet, the Lao are even more indolent."

But to those who got closer to their life the truth is quite dif-

ferent: "The odd part about all this," Charles Rochet writes in his book *Pays Lao*, "is the fact that the Lao works. He even works a lot; he only does not have that reputation. As *Tartarin* says: 'If a man has the reputation of being an early riser he can sleep until noon.' The fact is that the unfortunate Lao has the reputation of sleeping until noon. If he got up at dawn—and the poor devil does—people would still say he slept late."

In a country with a closed economy, the people have to do everything themselves: build their houses, make their tools and clothes, work their land, raise their cattle . . . There are no stores, no workshops, no factories. The smallest object is made by hand. It would be interesting to see how those critics who call the Lao lazy might handle themselves under such conditions.

Since the Lao had acquired this reputation, more and more labor was called in from the overpopulated areas of the Tonkin delta and northern Annam. This policy was so frantically pursued by certain government officials that the Lao seemed likely to take the place of the Khas in the mountains and jungles in another fifty years. Already changes could be noticed: the dark tunics and conical hats of the imported laborers appeared everywhere in the little towns along the Mekong river, particularly in the markets. Confronted by this influx of other peoples, the Lao withdrew from the towns into the suburbs, from the suburbs into the country. Their elite watched this peaceful and legitimate process of colonization with heavy hearts. But what could be done? The Lao are pacifists. Submission to authority and Buddhist resignation are deeply rooted in their nature. The French, on the other hand, did not particularly care whether the Lao disappeared as long as they could obtain cheap, docile labor.

This practice went on until the Japanese invasion of Indochina and the support of the Siamese roused the French and the Lao from their stupor. Under the government of Luang Phiboun Song Kham, the Siamese entertained a vast ambition: they aspired to nothing less than the formation of a Thai Empire. And as they already saw themselves the masters of every-