THAILAND AND THE FALL OF SINGAPORE

A FRUSTRATED ASIAN REVOLUTION

NIGEL J. BRAILEY

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Thailand and the Fall of Singapore

About the Book and Author

Focusing on the period between 1932 and 1968, this comprehensive study bridges the gap between recent political studies and available historiography, which generally conclude with the 1932 revolution. Dr. Brailey discusses the 1942 Japanese capture of Singapore that dragged a reluctant Thailand into World War II—a war Thai leaders believed was irrelevant to their national interests. He argues that this country, which had launched one of the East's earliest nationalist revolutions, had its political development reversed for a quarter century by the arrival of Japanese troops. Ironically, the Japanese presence in the region enabled most of Thailand's neighbors to promote their own development through decolonization. Dr. Brailey demonstrates that Thailand, once freed from post-war trauma, achieved a level of political freedom unsurpassed in Asia without seriously compromising its stability.

Nigel Brailey teaches Eastern Asian History at the University of Bristol. He is the author of several studies of post-1700 Thai and Burmese history.

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To my "Thai Family,"
Somsap, Bui, and Morn

Preface

Citizens of a world power like the United States, which has never, in modern times, faced total loss of independence and sovereignty, are perhaps not best placed to appreciate the dilemmas of smaller countries that have had to live with such a prospect over many decades.

By contrast, although by virtue of its empire built up in the nineteenth century, Great Britain was long able to maintain a facade of power; by the twentieth, within the North Atlantic world at least, she was clearly in decline. As early as the Siam crisis in the 1890s, French critics were deriding her as a "Great Power with Nerves." The 1914–18 first phase of the European civil war left her patently weakened. And in 1940, invasion and conquest actually seemed to threaten.

But still, for lack of any real challenge, her empire survived in unprecedented, world-spanning extent. In consequence, when the collapse came so soon on the heels of crisis in Europe, it was the more shattering. And it was a collapse, it did occur in Asia, with decolonization in Africa following just as a matter of course, and it was the worse for being prompted not by any traditional Western imperial rival, but by an Asian power, Japan, heralded by its capture of Singapore, the British bastion in the East, in February 1942, using Thailand as its springboard.

This volume is concerned only in passing with that story. Swiftly reduced once again to a mere European polity amongst many, Britain's involvement with Thailand, like most of Asia, thereafter became only occasional. And if the United States was largely to resume Britain's former role in the East post-1945, the focus here is on a positive process, the emergence of a new Thailand in the context of a new Asia.

For long even this seemed a pious hope. Thai development was deeply hampered by the legacy of experiences between 1941 and 1945, and while other Asian nations were emerging from colonial rule against the background of broader, pan-Asian, non-aligned ideals, Thailand hung back, avoiding such associations, fearful of again risking its basic survival, and increasingly dominated by a security-conscious leadership. Involvement with America's Vietnam venture seemed only to exaggerate the trends, and increase the risks when the United States finally accepted failure and withdrew from Vietnam.

However, in the longer perspective, this crisis-point now seems to amount to the best thing that ever happened to the modern Thailand, and to her neighbours also. By 1970, early pan-Asianist non-alignment was of course

virtually dead, along with most of the post-colonial euphoria in Asia. But it was a situation that stimulated Thailand at last to assume what was arguably her natural lead as the only ever-independent part of Asia's Balkan Southeast, in promoting group solidarity amongst the states of the region. Burma and Indochina have remained excluded from this arrangement, but the rest have probably secured thereby a greater autonomy of outside interference, and certainly a greater more positive role in world affairs than ever before, while Thailand itself has become an increasingly free polity. This is the hopeful scenario with which this book finishes, and on which Thailand and its ASEAN partners, notwithstanding temporary economic setbacks, can realistically hope to build.

Thanks are due especially to David Wyatt for first introducing me seriously to modern Thai history, and to the following for reading and offering stimulating comments on different sections of the book in this or earlier forms: Louis Allen, Apichart Chinwanno, Esra Bennathan, Sir Andrew Gilchrist, Kullada Kesboonchu, Peter Oblas, and Winai Pongsripian. I am also grateful to Professor Michio Morishima for valued help in interpreting Japanese war aims and plans in Southeast Asia in 1941; to Mr. Ewart Escritt for allowing me access to his papers at the Imperial War Museum dealing with the Burma-Siam Railway; to many students I have taught at Bristol over the years, particularly those who participated in my seminar course of the same name as this book; and to the British Academy and the apparently now doomed British Institute in Southeast Asia for part-funding two visits to Thailand, in 1980–81 and 1984. Particularly helpful has been the recent appearance of the works by Benjamin Batson and Thak Chaloemtiarana, including the latter's monumental *Thai Politics 1932–57* collection of documents in association with Charnvit Kaset-siri and Thinaphan Nakhata.

This is a book focussed heavily on sources in Western languages, albeit many in translation and/or not widely available, which is appropriate because it is substantially a study of Thailand's relations with the West, and Western attitudes to Thailand. In addition, however, Thai government records since 1932 have always been kept largely closed to Western researchers, and it is to be hoped that the tone of this book will in some respects help allay understandable Thai apprehension regarding interpretation of the period. In romanizing Thai words and names, the attempt has been made to be consistent in adopting the form most conducive to recognizable pronunciation, but it should be stressed that just as "th" is pronounced as "t" (as in Thai), so "ph" is pronounced as "p" (as in pot, or pan), not as "f" (as in the "Philippine" Isles). And traditionally, sums in *baht*, the Thai currency, are preceded by the abbreviation Tcs., short for the old *ticals*.

Nigel J. Brailey

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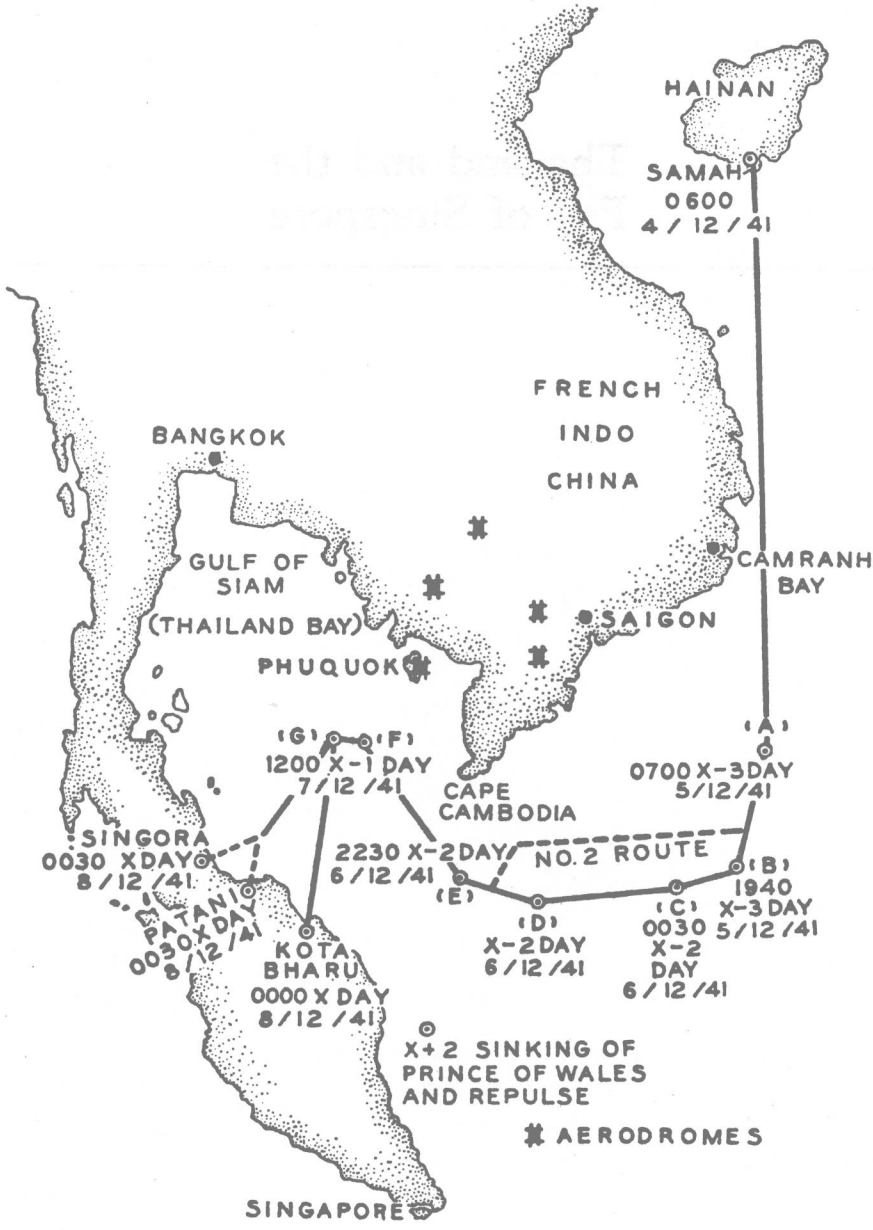
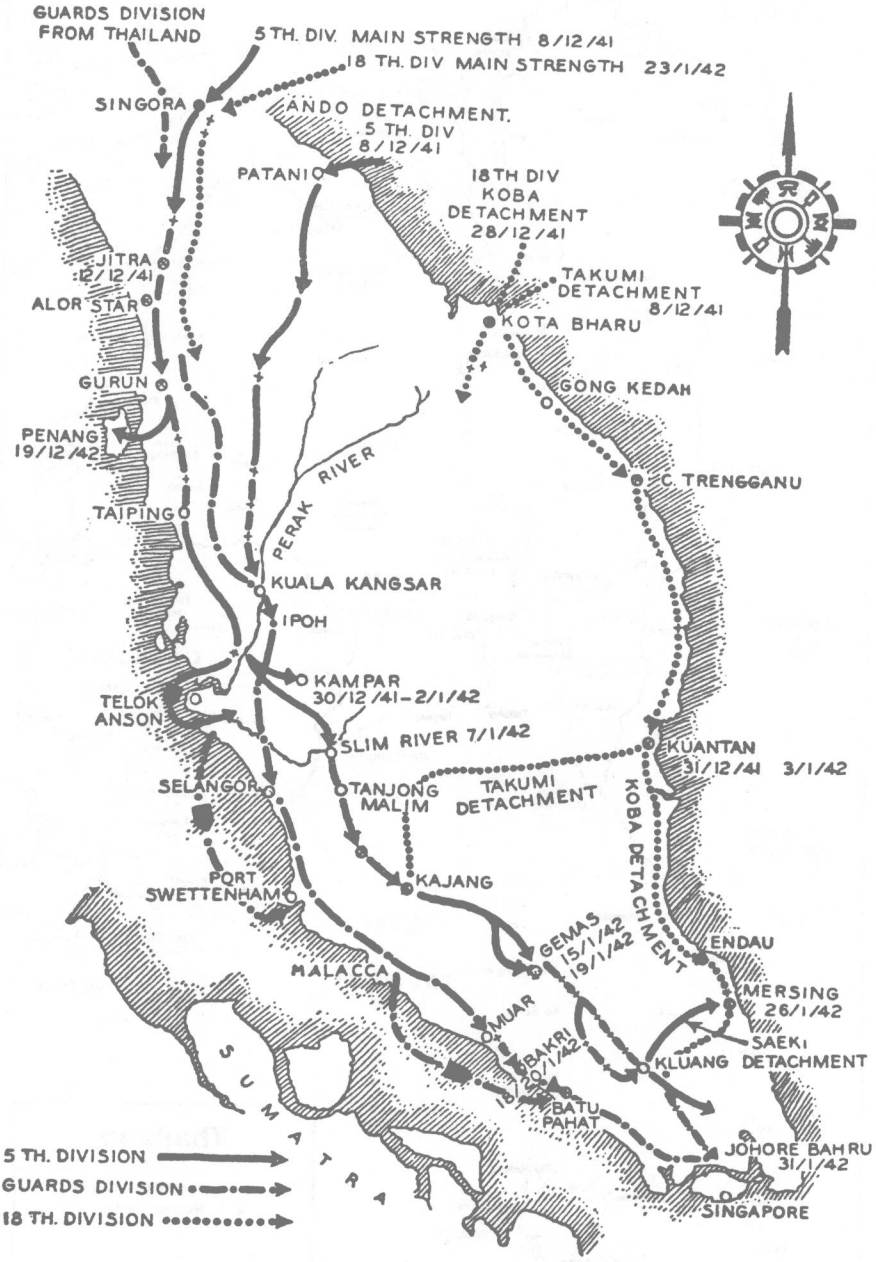


Route of the invasion convoy. Reprinted by permission of J. Constable & Co. from Tsuji Masanobu, *Singapore: The Japanese Version* (London, 1962).



The Malayan campaign of the 25th Army. Reprinted by permission of J. Constable & Co. from Tsuji Masanobu, *Singapore: The Japanese Version* (London, 1962).

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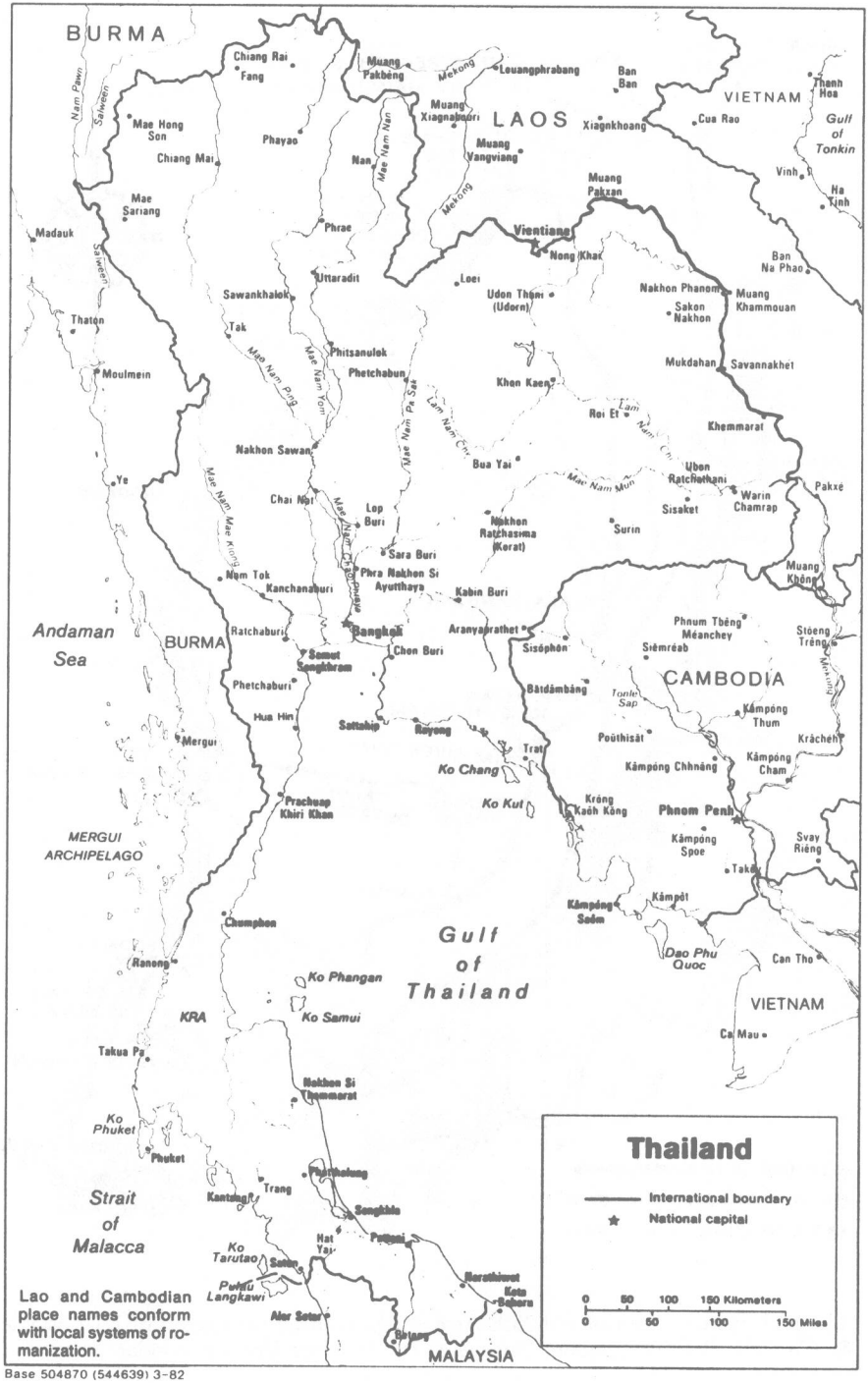

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PART TWO
RENEWAL

Introduction

On 15 February 1942, Lt. General A. E. Percival, British GOC Malaya, surrendered "Fortress Singapore" to General Yamashita Tomoyuki of the Japanese 25th Army, one of Japan's star commanders.[1] It was little more than two months since the latter's forces had landed in southern Thailand and N.E. Malaya in the early hours of 8 December 1941.

Most Western literature recognizes the two most important consequences of this surrender compared to which, from the Japanese point of view, Pearl Harbor was really just a sideshow.[2] Firstly, for some three years, the Japanese largely secured the main purposes behind their gamble in entering the war. These were access to essential oil supplies from the Dutch East Indies, captured soon after Singapore (in place of American oil, embargoed by Washington in July 1941), and a defensible southern perimeter to their Eastern Asian autonomous economic zone, known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The second major consequence was that, notwithstanding the eventual defeat of Japan in August 1945, the whole Western political and economic imperial world order was substantially undermined. At the end of the war, Singapore, with Malaya, was restored to British control, but only temporarily. And the return also of the British to Burma, the Americans to the Philippine Islands, the Dutch to Indonesia, and French to Indochina, was in most respects even briefer.[3] This was connected with Britain's decision to evacuate the hub of the Western imperial system in Asia, India, in 1947, but this in turn was largely a sequel to the blows to her prestige in the East delivered by the Japanese in the first half of 1942, principally the capture of Singapore. As the trend towards decolonization gathered pace, it spread also to Africa and other parts of the world, such that already by 1971, the number of states represented at the United Nations had grown to 132 from the original fifty-one founder-members in 1945, and the balance between Western (both non-Communist and Communist) and non-Western nations had been quite transformed. And at the same time, in a world hitherto principally comprised of great empires, great power status was now to be restricted merely to the two huge, territorially continuous, and essentially unitary states, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Of course, for Western scholars, and in particular those in European countries such as Britain, stripped of their empires and thereby also much of their influence, neither of these two consequences bears much appeal. Accordingly, they are not much dwelt upon. Instead, Churchillian-style

sentimental regret for past power tends to alternate with post-Churchillian self-delusion regarding Western willingness to foster colonial self-determination post-1945. Both responses require continued belief in the rectitude of the victors' justice dispensed to the leaders of defeated Japan and its allies in 1945–47, and the most jaundiced analysis of the motives behind 1930s Japanese expansionism. And for as long as it has remained possible to view the Japan of this period in isolation, as the only sovereign state in Eastern Asia driven by expansionist inclinations hostile to Western power, and while the Japanese themselves have remained afflicted by the disaster of their defeat in 1945, and convinced that recovery could only come through new links forged with their conquerors rather than a renewal of older ones with their Asian neighbours, such negative interpretations have seemed likely to persist.

Now, however, there are signs of a new mood in Japan, backed even by Mr. Nakasone, its current premier, prompting a willingness after all to dispute the meaning of 1945. This is largely a by-product of the economic development of Japan to a point at which respect for the West, bar only America and the Soviet Union, has reached a new low, but which also represents a continuity with Japanese development up to 1941, only temporarily disrupted thereafter by war and defeat.

And the "development" here referred to is not confined to Japan. It applies to much of the rest of Eastern Asia also, making it alone, or with the American Pacific coast, a potential replacement for the North Atlantic as the hub of world affairs. In 1984, the total value of trans-Pacific trade for the first time exceeded that of trans-Atlantic trade. Thus it now behooves the West, for the sake of future adjustment to the way the world is changing, to recognize that such development has its roots in understandable Asian resentment of Western pre-eminence pre-1945, also not confined to Japan. For evidence of this resentment it is not necessary to turn to the anyhow fanciful if not in many respects mythical stories of early struggles for self-determination in colonial territories. As already indicated, these movements owe so much of their ultimate success simply to Japanese military intervention and destruction of the Western colonial order.

But there is one Eastern Asian society, Thailand, that does not bear this debt.[4] So far known mainly in the context of 1941–45, and only very indirectly, as the location of much of the Burma-Siam or "Death" Railway, built at great cost by Allied and other POWs and forced labour of the Japanese, it is high time that it was given greater attention simply in the strategic sense. In 1941–42, Thailand served as the indispensable springboard for Japan's expansion into Southeast Asia, including the capture of Singapore.

However, of most significance are Thailand's broader political attitudes following its watershed revolution a decade earlier, in 1932. Arguably, if ultimately unable to realize the complete political autonomy or neutrality that it would have preferred, its history over that decade marked it out as a natural ally of Japan in a common crusade against Western domination. And if this natural identity of interest has been largely obscured by postwar

Thai policy, or represented as a thing of the past in the same fashion as many modern Japanese represent their country's policies of the 1930s, the alliance which was its product in 1941, and Thailand's consequent qualified identification as another "aggressor" country, can be held substantially responsible for most of her political problems since.

The case for the strategic significance of Thailand for Britain's loss of Malaya and Singapore stems from the long and continuing importance of the Isthmus of Kra. This narrow neck of land, at one point only sixty miles across, connects the Malay Peninsula to the Indochina Peninsula proper. Though always through history an obstacle to maritime communication that helps to explain the rise of a whole series of crossroad port-states to its south: eighth- to twelfth-century Sumatran Srivijaya,[5] fifteenth-century Malacca, and nineteenth- to twentieth-century Singapore, it nonetheless offered rapid enough access between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea to any prepared briefly to disembark. In consequence, it was the focus of prolonged conflict between the Burmese and Thai for control of its transshipment routes into the nineteenth century, in the seventeenth, also arousing a first phase of competing British and French interest.[6]

By the 1820s, Britain was established in Singapore, but in the 1860s, Kra attracted renewed French interest in an effort to offset the British entrepot. The French proposed to organize an expedition to view an eclipse of the sun from the peninsula, now controlled by Bangkok, but were outwitted by King Mongkut (1851–68) of "King and I" fame, who took his own expedition in its place.[7] However, in the process, he contracted an attack of malaria which quickly killed him. The early years of his son, Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), saw even the great de Lesseps, long before his Panama scheme, recruited by other French interests to design a Kra canal. And although this too was frustrated by Thai suspicions, the idea of a canal was revived at regular intervals thereafter by different non- or anti-British interests, aiming to neutralize or bypass Singapore. Following their annexation of Laos in 1893, the French were again active, and might thereby have established a stranglehold over the whole of the old Siamese kingdom. In the 1930s, and again very recently, encouraged by the Thai, they were succeeded by the Japanese.[8]

During the 1930s, the strategic aspect was already being modified in an entirely novel way, consequent on the advent of air travel. This at once raised land-based facilities to a premium at the expense of sea-lanes. The Thai from a very early stage latched on to the importance of this new form of transport, to the extent that their sole active contribution to the war in Europe before it concluded in November 1918, having entered it soon after the United States in 1917, was an air squadron. Bangkok's international airport at Don Muang dates back to the same period. And since 1945, thanks to air travel, Bangkok has steadily encroached on Singapore's previous domination of traffic through Southeast Asia.[9] The introduction of longer-range aircraft has played a major part in this trend,

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