

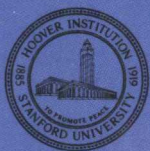
# Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985

MacAlister Brown  
Joseph J. Zasloff



HISTORIES OF RULING COMMUNIST PARTIES

HOOVER INSTITUTION



STANFORD UNIVERSITY

APPRENTICE

REVOLUTIONARIES:

THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT  
IN LAOS, 1930-1985)

MACALISTER BROWN

JOSEPH J. ZASLOFF

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APPRENTICE REVOLUTIONARIES: THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT IN LAOS, 1930-1985

*MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff*

# ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Agence France Presse
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CDNI	Comité pour la défense des intérêts nationaux (Committee for the Defense of National Interests)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service (refers to the daily reports for Asia and the Pacific, except where stated)
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
ICSC	International Commission for Supervision and Control
JPRS, TSEA	Joint Publications Research Service, Translations on South and East Asia
KPL	Khosan Pathet Lao (the official Lao news agency)
LPDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LPLA	Lao People's Liberation Army
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party

NLHS	Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front)
NPCC	National Political Consultative Council
PGNU	Provisional Government of National Union
PL	Pathet Lao
PRC	People's Republic of China
RLG	Royal Lao Government
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SPA	Supreme People's Assembly
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
U.S. AID	United States Agency for International Development
VNA	Vietnam News Agency
VWP	Vietnamese Workers' Party

## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure to introduce the eleventh volume in the Hoover Institution series on Histories of Ruling Communist Parties. Professors MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff have produced what is likely to stand as the definitive book on the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). In writing the first full analysis of this once clandestine revolutionary party, the authors have drawn upon their years of experience in the study of Laos and Indochina. They trace the roots of the LPRP to its antecedent patron, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930, and describe the faltering growth of the movement in Laos until World War II weakened the colonial claims of France. Following the Geneva Conference of 1954, 25 Lao veterans of the ICP secretly founded the Lao People's Party (March 1955) and later the Lao Patriotic Front. To reconstruct the early history of the party, the authors draw upon the French colonial archives, interviews with communist officials in Laos, and LPRP documents.

The title *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985* aptly describes the relationship between the secret leaders of the front, called the Pathet Lao, and their Vietnamese mentors. The Vietnamese senior partners guided the development of the party in Laos, helping to recruit its leaders, shape its ideology, and defend its base areas during a prolonged military struggle against the French, the Royal Lao Government, and their allies. With the victories of the communist movements in Vietnam and Cambodia during April 1975, the balance of forces in Indochina drastically changed, and the LPRP routed its adversaries from the government of Laos during the ensuing months. In December 1975 the party abolished the 600-year-old monarchy and proclaimed the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

*Apprentice Revolutionaries* provides a lucid account of the institutionalization of the Lao communist revolution after 1975. It shows how the party leaders shaped the new Lao political system after the model of the communist regime in Vietnam. In economic policies, despite their Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, they have at times proceeded pragmatically toward collectivized agriculture and the nationalization of commerce. With regard to foreign policy, the authors show that the Lao leaders operate within the confines of their "special relationship" with Vietnam. When Vietnam and China commenced military hostilities, Laos faced a serious turning of the road. The LPRP had little choice, notwithstanding past history, but to denounce Chinese "hegemonism."

Sparsely populated and economically and socially dormant, Laos did not present the classic preconditions for revolution 40 years ago, but its more powerful Vietnamese neighbor produced a revolutionary movement willing to lead all of Indochina. The case of Laos shows the growth of a weak and dependent communist movement into a ruling party, with all the preconceptions and constraints that such a process of revolutionary apprenticeship creates. This historic relationship will be intriguing to watch as the apprentice matures and the revolution recedes in time. The thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the tenth anniversary of its coming to power both occur in 1985, underlining the value of this thorough study of the communist movement in Laos from inception to consolidation in office. This book provides an indispensable background for any attempt to understand the future course of events and political evolution of the smallest and least coherent of the Indochinese states.

RICHARD F. STAAR  
SERIES EDITOR

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## PREFACE

In fifty perilous years the communist movement in Laos developed from a tiny band of resident Vietnamese recruited by the Indochinese Communist Party to an indigenous ruling party with a special relationship to its Vietnamese mentors. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which came to full power in December 1975, has a fascinating history, full of fateful turns and tactics, that has been largely obscured by its clandestine nature and revolutionary discipline. The party behind the Lao Patriotic Front (the Pathet Lao) was laid bare by Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff in 1969, and portions of the civil war were recorded by a variety of journalists, scholars and participants, but no full-scale treatment of the party's origins, development, struggles for power, organization, and rule has heretofore been offered.

Faced with such an intriguing story and such a historical gap we decided to essay a truly comprehensive study of the ruling communist party of Laos. It was time to build upon the wartime research and writing and to seek out new sources and objectivity. Ten years after the communist seizure of power, the secret party, the secret war, and the party in power can be more fully recorded.

Beyond the lure of filling scholarly lacunae, we also felt it important to retrace the growth of the "special relationship" between the Lao communist party and its Vietnamese senior partners. The apprentice Lao party, founded in 1955, has been tightly aligned with its Vietnamese comrades throughout its history. Vietnamese mentors helped to recruit the LPRP leadership, shape the clandestine party, erect a front, and develop an army. Notwithstanding the success and consolidation of these efforts, many area observers continue to suspect the Vietnamese party of harboring designs for an ultimate Indochina

Federation. A full study of the evolution of the present relationship should lend more depth to the analysis of this proposition.

The question is of more than idle concern, since projections of Vietnamese ambitions are so often invoked by Southeast Asian states and their great-power collaborators when confronting the issue of who should rule in Kampuchea. The Lao communists stand in striking contrast to their Kampuchean counterparts in the old Indochinese Communist Party, who were overtaken and eliminated by a new generation of radicals, the Khmer Rouge, a group that was stridently independent of Hanoi. The contrast between the Vietnamese communists' successful partnership with a Lao satellite party and their bitter conflict with the Khmer revolutionaries needs careful study, which this history will facilitate.

Beyond the contrast between the two Indochinese apprentice parties, the record in Laos reveals the uncertain viability of Marxist-Leninist ideology in one of the world's poorest small countries. Ten years in power is not a conclusive test of economic development strategy, but the LPRP's experience with Vietnamese models and Soviet-bloc assistance permits some instructive observations.

Lessons of another sort await our judgment with respect to the revolutionary struggle conducted by the LPRP against the Royal Lao Government. The ultimate seizure of power followed a pattern quite unlike the military triumph of the mainline forces in Vietnam or of the Khmer Rouge guerrillas in Kampuchea. The final blows in Laos were struck by revolutionary uprising committees, aided by pressure from nearby Lao liberation army units and North Vietnamese forces, which together sent the Royal Lao elements into disarray. The degree to which the Lao culture made possible this bloodless denouement needs to be examined, since the episode presents an intriguing lesson in revolutionary strategy.

A joint authorship probably warrants a word of introduction, even though the collaboration is long established. Joseph J. Zasloff first encountered Vietnam during a two-year Smith-Mundt lectureship in Saigon in 1959 and 1960, and he subsequently conducted a number of studies for the Rand Corporation in Vietnam and Laos, culminating in his two books on the Pathet Lao. Starting in 1973 MacAlister Brown joined Zasloff in writing a series of journal articles and a book on U.S. foreign policy toward Indochina. The authors jointly visited Laos in July 1974 and December 1980, as well as the Lao communities in Paris in 1977 and in Washington, D.C., on numerous occasions. Occasionally the authors have engaged in separate writing and field investigations in Laos (Brown in 1980 and 1984) and refugee camps in Thailand (Zasloff in 1980 and 1984).

The source material for this slowly gestating book can be readily appreciated by a glance at the bibliography. In addition to the worthy shelf of wartime

studies by journalists and witnesses of many nationalities, the propaganda tracts of the contending parties, the congressional testimony and investigations, and the U.S. government documents published in the Pentagon Papers, we have been able to tap more unfamiliar sources. The extensive interviews conducted in Laos for the Langer-Zasloff project on the Pathet Lao in 1967 remain a rich source of information on the early stages of the Lao Patriotic Front. For the earliest stages of the communist activity in Laos, the monthly reports of the French administration and security police, which can be found in the overseas section of the French National Archives, are a revealing but not yet fully opened source of information. For the most recent period, the daily output of the party press and radio, so faithfully recorded by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, is indispensable. In addition we have been able to discuss the policies of various ministries of the Lao People's Democratic Republic during interviews in Vientiane arranged through the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Lao government publications and official speeches have been made available to us, and we have interviewed a veteran party member and editor on matters of history and organization. In addition to countless consultations with Laos-watchers in the diplomatic communities in Washington, Bangkok, and Vientiane, we have also interviewed refugees from Laos in camps in Thailand, as well as in France and the United States.

To accomplish our goal of comprehensiveness we have concentrated first on the revolutionary party in its colonial period and its postcolonial struggle for power. The second part of the book addresses the party's organization and policies as the ruling force in the nation since 1975. In 1985 the once secret party is commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of its founding and the tenth anniversary of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Perhaps this book can contribute to the evocation of those signal events by etching the background and subsequent chronology more clearly for the outside observer.

In preparing a book manuscript over a period of six years we have been favored by the attention, expertise, and critical judgment of friends, colleagues, and officials too numerous to permit a full acknowledgment. Persons with knowledge or experience to contribute to our quest have been almost unfailingly generous, in a sort of community of effort by those familiar with the complexity and ambiguities of the Lao historical experience. We hope that all those who have touched that experience will find their concern for the welfare of Laos renewed by the light we have cast upon its beleaguered history. Our rendition of that history will not meet the expectations and understanding of all our readers, but if we stimulate countertheses or interpretations that prove more durable than our own we shall be grateful for the endless process of historical refinement.

Although the persons who have aided us cannot be adequately catalogued, we can express our special thanks for support in our work and travel which has

been provided by the Hoover Institution; the Williams College Faculty Research Fund; the Fulbright and Smith-Mundt Scholarship Programs; the John F. Kennedy Foundation in Thailand; and the Asian Studies Program, the University Center for International Studies, and the Provost's Development Fund of the University of Pittsburgh.

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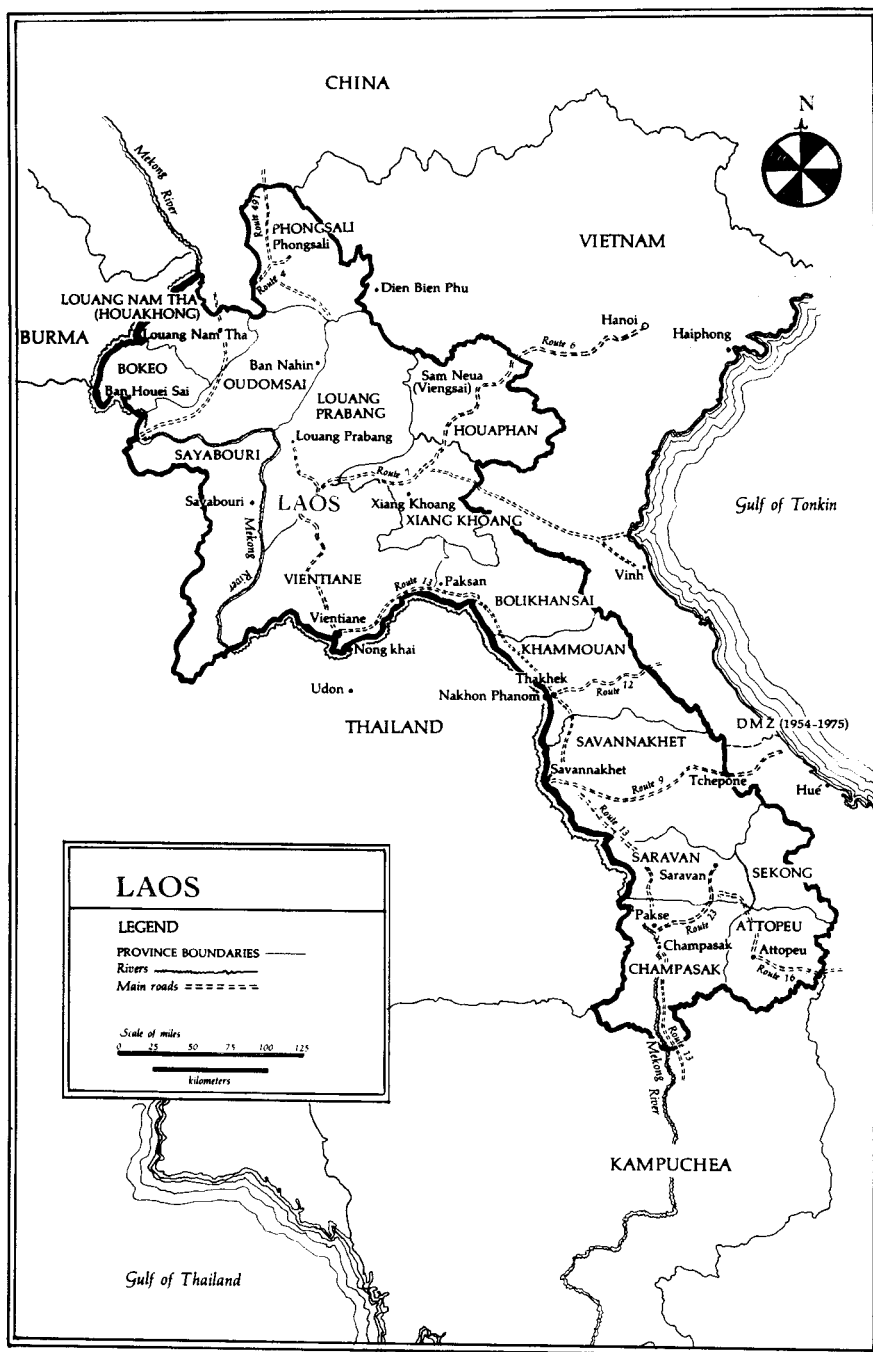
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PART I



# THE REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE FOR POWER





# 1 LAOS: THE HERITAGE

## PEOPLE AND ECONOMY

In the rugged heart of Southeast Asia, nurtured by the Mekong River, Lao kingdoms have held sway since the fourteenth century. In December 1975 this tradition ended abruptly with the resignation of King Savang Vatthana and the proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This bold move by a previously clandestine communist party to govern the ill-defined Lao nation faces heavy burdens created by geography, history, ethnology, and economics.

The landlocked area embraced by contemporary Laos extends from the Mekong River's left bank through the narrow valleys of its eastern tributaries, over upland plains and plateaus, and into heavily forested mountains whose crests, up to ten thousand feet, serve roughly as the border with Vietnam. In all this stretch of land, 700 miles (north-south) by 275 miles (east-west), barely three million people lived in 1971, at a density of only 33 persons per square mile. Pressure on the land and urban poverty have not been problems in Laos, even though the cultivable areas are narrowly confined to valley bottoms or are crudely carved by slash-and-burn technique on the mountainsides.

A more significant problem created by topography in Laos has been the confinement of settlements; the result is a lack of coherence and communication, elements that a nation state requires if it is to function effectively. What roads the country acquired with the advent of motor transportation were provided by the French, with their limited colonial and commercial interests in mind. No railroad was ever constructed, and no bridge was attempted over the Mekong into Thailand, but French colonial routes were laid down using moun-