

THAILAND & THE PACIFIC WAR, 1933 TO 1945

Section 1 The Military Gains Control

Section 2 Thailand at War



*The Pacific War
threatened Thailand's
sovereignty.*

MAIN IDEA

As a second world war threatened Asia in the 1930s and early 1940s, the military gained control of Thailand, changed the way Thais defined their nation, and formed an alliance with Japan.

Why It Matters Now

Questions about what it is to be Thai are still open to debate.

Historical and Political Terms

Totalitarian dictatorship is a form of government. Totalitarian nations are one-party states with a strong leader who has complete control of society. Hitler's Nazi Germany is an example of a totalitarian dictatorship.

State edicts are laws passed without debate in parliament.

Sovereignty is the right of a country to govern itself without interference by other nations.

Total war is a conflict in which the entire human and material resources of a nation are used. Civilians are just as much the target as military forces.

Great powers are nations that dominate international relations. Before World War Two, the Great Powers included Britain, France, Italy Germany the USA Japan and USSR.

Small powers are nations that have little influence over international relations. Thailand was a small power in the 1930s.

Nation building attempts to make people more patriotic and nationalistic.

Setting the Scene

- unprecedented: for the first time

- total war: a conflict in which the entire human and material resources of a nation are used

Japan brought total war to Asia.

- Allies: in the Pacific War the Allies included the US, Britain, Republic of China, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the Indian Empire

- guerrilla warfare: a type of warfare that avoids conventional fighting on the battlefield
- intensified: becomes stronger

- ambivalent: in two minds, uncertain

The Pacific War brought **unprecedented** death and destruction to Asia because combatants used every human and material resource to gain victory at any cost. War broke out when Japan invaded China in 1937 and in this first **total war** in Asia, civilians suffered dreadfully. Neither the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek, nor the Communists under Mao Zedong were able to drive Japanese forces out of China until 1945.



The war spread to the rest of Asia after Japan marched south to obtain resources like oil, minerals and rubber. With lightning speed, the Japanese navy attacked the US base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on 7 December 1941. Another stunning victory was achieved when

the British fortress at Singapore was overwhelmed by Japan forces in February 1942. When Japan sunk an **Allied** British, Dutch, Australian and United States fleet, it controlled a vast empire in the Pacific.

Japan justified its aggression by claiming that Asia should be for Asians and it called on people to support them. Leaders throughout the region reacted differently. In the Philippines and Malaya, the Japanese claim of “Asia for the Asians” was judged propaganda and local groups organized underground **guerrilla** units to fight the Japanese. In India, Gandhi demanded all British forces leave so Japan could be opposed by passive resistance. His “Quit India” campaign against Britain **intensified** and Gandhi and other independence leaders were imprisoned.

The situation in French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) was complicated by events in Europe. France was defeated by Germany in 1940 and governed by the Vichy regime. Hitler made sure that his orders were followed. He decided to give control of French Indochina to Japan because it was a member of the Axis Powers (an alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan). Ho Chi Minh, the communist leader of Vietnam’s freedom fighters, fought a guerrilla war against the Japanese and declared the nation’s independence when Japan surrendered in August 1945.

Unlike the Vietnamese, many Indonesians were **ambivalent** towards the Japanese. They felt little loyalty to the Dutch or sympathy when they were driven out. In 1942, nationalists like Sukarno cooperated with their new rulers because it seemed a good way to eventually gain national independence. (Sukarno would later become the president

of Indonesia.)The Japanese only wanted to exploit the country's rich natural resources and Japanese commanders even promoted an independence movement as a means of frustrating the **Allies'** efforts to reoccupy Indonesia. In August 1945, Sukarno declared independence, though it was not until 1949 that Dutch rule finally ended.

- unique: only one of its kind

Siam was the only sovereign nation in Southeast Asia and it therefore faced **unique** challenges during this period of war. By the late 1930s, Phibun dominated the government and he was very impressed that Japan could **transform** itself into a modern nation able to rival the Europeans. Phibun also wanted to build a new nation and he looked to Japan as an example. Though Phibun admired Japan, his nation had forged strong links with Britain and the United States. As war became inevitable in the region, Phibun realized that his small nation was in grave danger as it could easily be caught in the middle of a conflict for control of the Pacific.

- transform: change



This propaganda poster was published after Japan invaded Manchuria in 1932. It depicts Chinese, Manchurian and Japanese children celebrating their newly found brotherhood.

Section 1

The Military Gains Control

After Boworadet's defeat in 1933 Thailand's new military leaders became more powerful. (See *The Thai Revolution*) Phibun was leader of the junior officers and he was appointed minister of defense in 1933 as a reward for saving the country from a counterrevolution. He built his support in the military and was able to defeat Pridi in the struggle to become Siam's third prime minister in 1938. Phibun's cabinet was made up of military men and over 30% of the nation's budget was spent on the armed forces.

- absolute monarchy: a form of government; the king or queen's power is not limited by a constitution or parliament

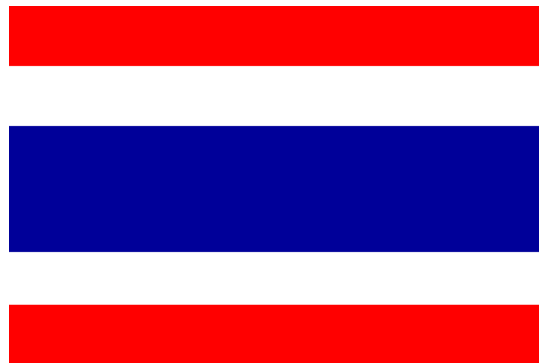
- martial: warlike

- state edicts: laws made without debate in parliament

Thailand's new flag symbolized the three essential components of the nation: white for Buddhism; blue for the monarchy; and red for the the blood of the Thai people.

Phibun wanted the Thai people to have a good standard of living within a nation that was modern, cultured, progressive and respected by all the civilized countries of the world. To achieve this goal, Phibun began a program of nation-building to change the thoughts and habits of ordinary citizens. He wanted the Thai people to give their loyalty to the nation and not to the old **absolute monarchy**. To achieve this he promoted the idea that the Thai race had always valued their independence. Histories of the Thai people published in this period claimed they had originally moved from northern Asia to the Chaopraya River basin to escape domination during the 1300s. Over the following centuries, Thais successfully defended their freedom from the Khmer, the Burmese and the Europeans. In these histories, Thais were described as a **martial** race united by common language and a determination to remain free.

From 1939, he began to issue a series of **state edicts** to build Thailand into a modern nation. The first edict changed the country's name to Thailand to better represent the Thai race. Other edicts required Thais to respect the flag and learn their new national anthem. This anthem emphasized sacrifice, unity and noble patriotic deeds. More edicts followed: Thais should buy local products; speak the dialect of central Thailand; exercise regularly; eat well; maintain personal hygiene and look after the aged. Phibun also wanted Thais to adopt the greeting of



sawatdee to discourage the use of the foreign "hello", and to add khrap and kha as polite forms of address. He even introduced the famous Thai noodle dish of phad thai to compete with Chinese food. Thais were also ordered to wear modern clothes, shoes and hats and husbands had to

kiss their wives good each morning. Though some of Phibun's ideas were mocked, he believed his strong military leadership was essential for Thailand's survival. He constantly reminded the people that their nation would never be great and respected unless they were patriotic, civilized and self-disciplined.

As Phibun built his new nation, he grew concerned about the Chinese living in Thailand. Others rulers before Phibun has also been troubled by the large numbers of Chinese migrants. From 1882 to 1940 for example, over 1 million Chinese migrants arrived and though many planned to stay only a few years, others wanted to remain. In the 1930s attitudes were hostile and Phibun introduced anti-Chinese laws. Many Chinese-owned banks, schools and newspapers forcibly closed.

In addition, only Thais could sell food, cut hair and drive taxis. To qualify for Thai citizenship, Chinese applicants had to **renounce** loyalty to China, speak Thai and educate their children at Thai schools.

• renounce: deny

Dealing with the Chinese in Thailand was easy compared to knowing what to do about Japan. At first, Japan's rise to power was admired and many cheered when they defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. It showed that Europeans could be defeated and that Asia might rid itself of foreign empires. Japan's successful modernization was impressive and by the 1920s it was a world power. Admiration changed to concern when this power was used to build an empire in Manchuria. As tensions grew in Europe, Japan's invasion of China in 1937 heightened fears that a second world war was close. Phibun was forced to make decisions of great importance if the new Thailand was to survive.



This poster described how the modern Thai citizen should dress and was published in the 1930s. Do you think a government has the right to tell people how to dress?



Phibun

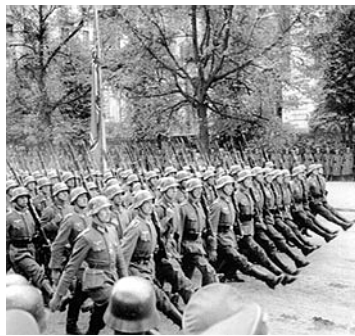
History Makers

Phibun Songkhram's rise to power was a remarkable achievement for the son of a durian farmer. With Napoleon as his hero, the young Phibun joined the army and won a scholarship to study artillery in France. In 1927, he attended the first meeting of the People's Party in Paris. He became defense minister in 1934 after defeating Prince Boworadet's counter-revolution. His reputation grew especially after he numerous assination attempts. He became prime minister in 1938 and started a campaign to make Thailand a modern nation. His decision to form an alliance with Japan eventually brought about his downfall and he resinged in 1944. He was tried as a war criminal but only spent a few months in jail. He took no part in politics in the immediate postwar period. The crisis that followed the mysterious death of Rama VIII in 1947 gave Phibun the opportunity to return to power. He was prime minister once again until 1957. Throughout his career Phibun argued that only the army could provide the strong leadership needed to build a nation and guide it through times of crisis. His slogan was: "Your country is your house; the army is its fence." Though Phibun was branded a military dictator, he did not completely abandon democracy during his two periods in power. Overthrown in a coup in 1957, Thailand's longest serving prime minister fled to Japan and died there in 1964.

Section 2 Thailand at War

Germany, Italy and Japan built empires by conquering other nations and dominating them politically and economically. Hitler promised to unite all Germans and make his nation great again. He rearmed Germany and laid plans to unite with Austria and conquer Czechoslovakia and Poland. Mussolini wanted a new Roman empire to control the Mediterranean and one of his first moves was to attack Abyssinia. In 1937 Japan attacked China and threatened the European empires in Southeast Asia.

Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 began the Second World War in Europe.



- small power: a nation that has little influence over international relations

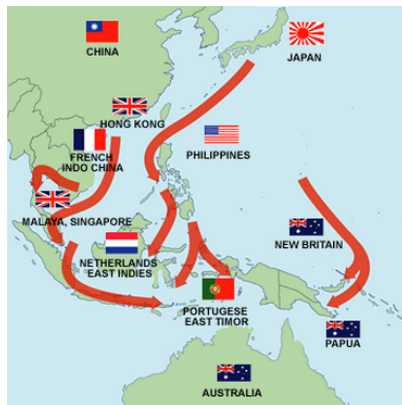
Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 started the Second World War. In lightning speed Germany became the master of Europe. War in the Pacific grew inevitable as Japan threatened the British in Malaya and Burma, the Dutch in Indonesia, the French in Indochina and the Americans in the Philippines. Though Phibun admired Japan he grew fearful that Thailand would become a battleground. As a **small power**, he could not influence events but he skillfully maintained good relations with Japan on one side and the Western powers on the other. When Japan invaded French Indochina, US President Roosevelt cut off oil shipments to Japan. Hoping to stay out of any conflict between these great powers, Phibun declared Thailand's neutrality.

- stalemate: neither side wins

On the eve of war in Asia, Phibun took the opportunity to settle a long running dispute over Thailand's borders with French Indochina. Thai nationalists claimed that France occupied land along the Mekong River that belonged to them. They demanded that France give back these 'lost territories' so that Thailand would have a natural border with Cambodia along the Mekong River. (See *Maps of Thailand*) Diplomatic efforts failed and armed conflict between Thai and French military forces broke out along the Mekong River in January 1941. Though successful on land, the French sunk the cutter Thonburi and a **stalemate** followed. Japan stepped in to settle the dispute. Though Thailand received some land it had to pay compensation to the French. (See History Up Close)

Despite Thailand's policy of neutrality, Japan attacked on the same day that it bombed Pearl Harbor -- 7 December 1941. Thai military forces tried to defend the nation and over 100 Thais were killed. Thailand was no match for the military might of Japan, and Phibun ordered a cease-fire to save further loss of life. At first, the invaders

only wanted the right to transport their troops through Thailand on the way to attack British Malaya. Phibun however decided to form an alliance with the Japanese who appeared certain to conquer Southeast Asia after their spectacular victories over the Europeans. The Thai Cabinet decided to sign the Thai-Japanese Pact of Alliance on 11 December 1941. In January 1942 Thailand declared war on Britain and the United States and though the United States did not respond, Britain, New Zealand, the Indian Empire and Australia declared war in return. Thailand was Japan's only ally in Asia and Phibun's decision remains a controversial issue in Thai foreign policy.



Japan launched a series of coordinated attacks on the colonial possessions of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and the United States as well as China, Thailand and Australia.

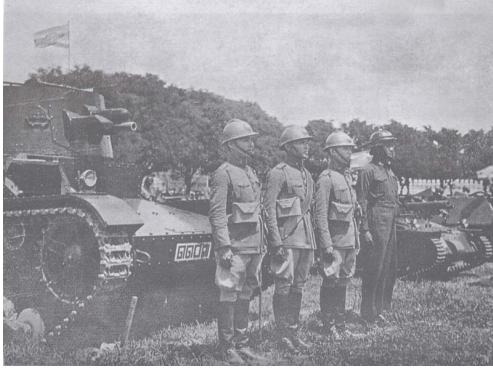
History Up Close

Thailand's border dispute with France on the eve of the Pacific War united the Thais under Phibun's nationalistic leadership. Siam controlled Laos and Cambodia before the French invaded Vietnam in the 19th Century, but to save the Thai heartland, King Chulalongkorn gave up these territories. Thailand and France were not happy neighbors.

On January 16 1941, the French Foreign Legion was ready to invade while the French navy prepared its attack on the smaller Thai naval forces. To France's surprise, the Thais took the initiative and invaded Cambodia and Laos forcing the French to retreat. Thailand now occupied Basaak and Luang Prabang in Laos and Sisophon in Cambodia. Unfortunately for the Thais, the cutter, Thonburi, was caught by surprise and sunk by the cruiser La Motte Piquet.

On January 24 a ceasefire was called between the Thais and the French forces. Japan tried to help the two powers reach a peaceful solution. This failed and Japan imposed its own terms on the two parties. Neither the Thais nor the French were happy. Thailand received a small piece of land in Laos and Battambang, Sisophon and Siemreap (except for the ruins of Angkor Wat) in Cambodia. Thailand had to pay the French compensation.

Despite disappointments Phibun built Victory Monument and staged a grand celebration honoring the returning troops. The province of Siemreap, which in Khmer means "Defeat of the Siamese", was renamed Phibunsongkham. For the first and only time in Thai history, Thailand had defeated a European colonial power.



Thai military forces were modern and well equipped for combat during the border dispute with France. Victory on land was not however matched by victory at sea.



By 1943 American military and industrial power turned the tide of war against Japan. Thailand realized that it had chosen the wrong side in the conflict and members of the government assisted the Allies secretly. Phibun was removed from power in July 1944 and civilians lead the government in the final months of the Pacific War.

Though the economy had been devastated by years of war and Bangkok bombed, Thailand escaped the destruction experienced by other countries in Southeast Asia. As the war came to an end, however, Thailand's new civilian leaders feared the country would lose its sovereignty and be occupied by the Allies.

When the war ended in August 1945, Seni Pramoj the Thai Ambassador in Washington and Pridi tried to avoid punishment for waging war with Japan. They would become the new civilian leaders of Thailand in place of the disgraced military. Though Britain and Australia wanted to punish Thailand for its wartime collaboration, the US government did not believe that the Thai people were willing allies of the Japanese. US Secretary of State James Bryan explained the American position on Thailand:

Primary Source

During the past four years, we have regarded Thailand not as an enemy but as a country to be liberated from the enemy. With that liberation now accomplished, we look to the resumption by Thailand of its former place in the community of nations as a free, sovereign and independent nation.

James Bryan, quoted by Songsri, *Thai-British-American Relations during World War Two and the Immediate Postwar Period, 1940–46.*

Thai leaders had successfully avoided severe punishment and occupation. The price, the return of all territories it has obtained during the war, a payment in rice as **compensation** to the British and

- compensation: payment for damages

a change of the country's name back to Siam seemed a small price to pay. The formal peace treaty was signed on January 1 1946. Though Thailand's new civilian leaders had maintained the nation's sovereignty, great challenges lay ahead in the new world order created out of the devastation of the Pacific War.



Phibun

Interpreting History

Historians have interpreted Thailand's decision to align with Japan differently. One view is that Thailand was forced into the alliance and therefore an unwilling partner to the Japanese. The decision to sign the Pact of Alliance is described as another example of Thailand's unique 'bamboo diplomacy', its ability to bend with the wind to survive any storm. This same approach was used by Siamese kings to avoid colonization in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In contrast, other interpretations argue that Thailand wanted the Pact of Alliance. Japan's impressive rise to power cast a spell over Phibun and his military government who subsequently jumped on the Japanese bandwagon to keep their power and gain more lost territories. News of Japan's stunning successes convinced him that it would soon be master of the Pacific, and he seized the initiative by seeking an alliance. From Phibun's perspective, Thailand's alliance with Japan was the best way to save the Thai people and the new nation that he had built. He believed that he had to show his loyalty to the Japanese so he declared war on the United States and Britain on 25 January 1942.

After signing the alliance, Phibun hoped that Thailand and Japan could be partners and Japan did give control of border areas of Burma and Malaya to the Thais. On the other hand, Phibun was disappointed when Japan treated Thailand like an occupied state. Japan was not as brutal as it was elsewhere in Asia, but it still exploited Thai resources for its war effort.

Phibun's decision to align with the Japanese was not supported by all Thais. Pridi resigned from the government and to keep him out of the way, Phibun appointed him regent for the infant King Ananda who was living in Switzerland. Pridi used his position to organize resistance to the Japanese within Thailand. Seni Pramoj, the Thai ambassador to Washington, organized Thais living in the United States. In August 1944, men and equipment were parachuted into Thailand and direct radio contact made with the Allies. These resistance groups were known as the Seri Thai (Free Thai). Though they planned to openly attack Japanese forces in Thailand, Japan surrendered first.



Phibun built Victory Monument to commemorate Thailand's only victory over European military forces.

Phibun and representatives from Japan and Germany celebrate the completion of Victory Monument.



Review

Terms and Names

1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance in the context of Thailand at War: totalitarian dictatorship, state edicts, sovereignty, great powers, small powers, nation building, Phibun, Pridi.

Main Ideas

2. In what ways did Phibun try to change Thailand?
3. Why did Phibun form an alliance with Japan?

Critical Thinking and Writing

4. To what extent was the decision to align with Japan in the nation's best interests?
5. After the Pacific War, Phibun was charged with war crimes. Write a letter to the *Bangkok Post* giving your opinion about Phibun's innocence or guilt.