

History of Laos to 1945

The Lao state dates only from 1945. The idea of a separate Lao nationality was formed during the 19th century, when western ideas of national identity reached South-East Asia, and when the Lao-speaking peoples were being squeezed between two expansionist powers, [Siam](#) (Thailand) and [Vietnam](#). The current borders of Laos were created by [France](#) in 1893 and 1904. Today the official **history of Laos** is traced back to the Kingdom of [Lān Xāng](#), which was founded in 1353. But in reality the Lao share a common history with the Siamese and other people of the [Tai](#) language group, and Lān Xāng was only one of a number of Tai kingdoms in a region which had a broad linguistic and cultural unity before the arrival of outside powers.

Contents

- [1 Early history](#)
- [2 The Kingdom of Lān Xāng](#)
- [3 Siamese domination](#)
- [4 The creation of Laos](#)
- [5 French Laos](#)
- [6 The Crisis of World War II](#)
- [7 Sources](#)
- [8 External links](#)
- [9 See also](#)

Early history

The Tai (also spelled Dai) are a linguistic group originating in southern [China](#), which includes the Lao, the Siamese, the people of the [Shan](#) region of north-eastern [Burma](#), the [Zhuang](#) people of [Guangxi Province](#) in [China](#) and the [Tho](#) and [Nung](#) people of northern [Vietnam](#). Under pressure from the expansion of the [Han Chinese](#), the Tai began to migrate into South-East Asia during the first millennium AD. They displaced earlier peoples (including the [iron age](#) culture who made the great stone jars from which the [Plain of Jars](#) in central Laos takes its name). The [Mekong River](#), which flows through what is now Laos, was a major migration route, but the strength of the [Khmer Empire](#) ([Cambodia](#)) prevented the Tai from dominating the Mekong Valley. Instead the main area of Tai settlement was further south in the [Chao Phraya](#) Valley, where they formed a series of kingdoms ancestral to modern Siam and Thailand.

During the first millennium AD the Tai peoples were loosely organised in small entities known as *muang* or *mandalas*. They were heavily influenced by the more advanced cultures around them: the Khmer to the south-east, and the [Hindu](#) cultures of [India](#) to the west. Most of the Tai were converted to a form of Hinduism, traces of which can still be seen in Lao religious practice today. Between the 6th and 9th centuries AD [Buddhism](#) was introduced into the Tai-speaking lands, probably via Burma, and became the dominant religion. But the Lao retain many [animist](#) religious practices from the pre-Buddhist era.

As the Tai peoples became established, they divided into a number of linguistic sub-groups. These included the Tai-Lao, who during the 11th and 12th centuries AD spread along the middle Mekong Valley and across the [Khōrāt Plateau](#) (now the [Isan](#)

region of north-eastern Thailand). Their advance down the Mekong was blocked at [Champāsak](#) by the Khmers, who built the great temple at [Wat Phū](#). The Lao in turn divided into further groups, based on where they lived in relation to the river. These were the Lao-Lum (Lao of the valley floor), the Lao-Thoeng (Lao of the mountain slopes) and the Lao-Sūng (Lao of the mountain tops). This latter group included various linguistic minorities only distantly related to the Tai. The Lao-Lum, having the best farming land and the best access to river transport, became the wealthiest of the Tai-Lao peoples. These divisions have haunted Lao history and still exist today, with many Lao-Thoeng and Lao-Sūng people having only a tenuous loyalty to a Lao-Lum dominated state.

The rise and fall of various early Lao states is now recorded only in myth. The earliest historically identifiable Lao leader is [Khun Lô](#), who probably conquered the [Luang Phrabāng](#) area from non-Tai people in the 12th century. Because the Mekong is divided into three distinct navigable sections by rapids, between Luang Phrabāng and [Viang Chan](#) (Vientiane) and between Viang Chan and [Savannakhēt](#), these three towns became the centres of three distinct Lao-Lum *mandalas*. This pattern was disrupted by the [Mongol](#) invasion of 1253, when part of [Kublai Khan](#)'s army advanced down the Mekong to attack the Khmers. In the wake of the Mongol withdrawal a new kingdom were founded by the Siamese at [Sukhothai](#), which was later succeeded by a more powerful Siamese state with its capital at [Ayutthaya](#) (founded in 1351). The kingdom of [Lān Nā](#), based at [Chiang Mai](#) and containing both Siamese and Lao elements, was also founded at this time.

In response, the Tai-Lao rulers of Luang Phrabāng (which was then called Xiang Dong Xiang Thong) formed a new state which, while still nominally subject to the Mongol rulers of China, became the leading force among the Lao peoples. From about 1271 this state was ruled by a dynasty called the Phrayā. In about 1350 a prince of this dynasty, [Fā Ngum](#), fled the court with his father after a dispute and sought refuge with the Khmers at [Angkor](#), where he married a royal princess. In 1353 he returned at the head of an army (presumably with Khmer aid), captured Xiang Dong Xiang Thong and founded a new Lao state which covered the whole Lao-speaking Mekong valley. This was Lān Xāng, the Kingdom of a Million Elephants.

The Kingdom of Lān Xāng

Over the next decade Fā Ngum sought to bring all the Lao under his authority. He conquered most of the Khōrāt Plateau, as well as territory in what is now north-western Vietnam. The Khmer court considered him to be a Khmer vassal, but he succeeded in establishing Lao rule over Champāsak and perhaps as far south as [Stung Treng](#) in what is now northern Cambodia. His wife is credited with introducing [Theravada Buddhism](#), which had been brought to Siam by missionaries from [Sri Lanka](#) in the 13th century, and from there spread to the Khmer Empire. In 1368, however, Fā Ngum's wife died, and shortly after the Mongol dynasty in China was overthrown. These events broke two key relationships sustaining Fā Ngum's power, and in 1373 he was overthrown as a result of a court intrigue and replaced by his son Unheuan, who took the name [Sāmsaentai](#) ("Lord of 300,000 Tai").

Lān Xāng was not a state in the modern sense of the word. The king at Xiang Dong Xiang Thong directly ruled and taxed only the town and surrounding area. The lords

of the constituent *mandalas* raised their own taxes and ruled as they saw fit. Their duties to the king were to pay an agreed tribute, attend the court for major ceremonies, and raise their local forces to support the king when he waged war. Thus Lān Xāng was a loose [feudal](#) federation rather than a centralised kingdom. This gave it great flexibility, but also meant that its coherence depended on the personal and religious authority of the king. For half a century after Sāmsaentai's death in 1416 there was a series of weak kings, and the prestige of Lān Xāng declined. By the 15th century all the Tai peoples faced challenges from their increasingly powerful neighbours, the Vietnamese to the east and the Burmese to the west (the Ayutthaya Siamese had extinguished the power of the Khmers in 1431). In [1479](#), for reasons that are unclear, the Vietnamese under their great king [Le Thanh Tong](#) invaded the Lao lands, and sacked Luang Phrabāng.

In response, king [Vixun](#) (reigned 1501-20) took two important steps to shore up the throne. First he ordered that the chronicle of royal history known as the *Nithān Khun Bôrum* (Story of King Bôrum) be written down, providing an important source of legitimacy for the dynasty. Second he brought to Lān Xāng from Angkor a precious gold image of the [Buddha](#), known as the [Phra Bāng](#) or Holy Buddha Image. (The traditional belief is that the image was cast in [Sri Lanka](#) in the 1st century AD and later presented to the Khmer kings. The current view is that the statue is of Khmer origin and dates from the Khmer Empire period.) These two steps emphasised that the king of Lān Xāng ruled both by hereditary right as the descendent of the legendary King Bôrum, and by his accumulated [merit](#), the key concept in Buddhism.

After Vixun's death, two strong kings, [Phōthisālarāt](#) (1520-48) and his son [Xētthāthirāt](#) (1548-71) maintained the strength and prestige of the kingdom. In 1558, however, the first of a series of major Burmese invasions took place. The Burmese sacked Chiang Mai, ending the independence of Lān Nā, and devastated the western areas of Lān Xāng. In response, Xētthāthirāt formed an alliance with Ayutthaya, and in 1560 he moved his capital down the river to Viang Chan, which was both more defensible and closer to Siamese aid. Here he built a great new temple, the [Ho Phra Kaeo](#), where he installed the ancient and revered [Emerald Buddha](#) (rescued by the Lao from the fall of Chiang Mai) as a new symbol of his reign. The Phra Bāng was left behind at Xiang Dong Xiang Thong to protect the city, which was now renamed Luang Phrabāng ("great Phra Bāng").

In 1569 the Burmese struck again, capturing Ayutthaya and leaving Lān Xāng exposed. The Burmese briefly occupied Viang Chan in 1570, but after a few months Xētthāthirāt was able to drive them out, leaving his prestige higher than ever. But the following year he attempted an invasion of Cambodia, in the course of which he was killed and his army dispersed. This disaster left Lān Xāng defenceless against the Burmese, and for the next 60 years Lān Xāng was a Burmese vassal, sometimes under direct occupation. There were several periods when there was no king at all, and the Lao seemed doomed to be absorbed by the Siamese or the Burmese.

But in 1637 [Surinyavongsā](#), the greatest and last king of Lān Xāng, claimed the throne and re-established the independence of the kingdom. He established cordial relations with the Siamese King [Narai](#) at Ayutthaya, and this alliance was strong enough to ward off the Burmese and the Vietnamese for many years. Under his rule the kingdom became increasingly prosperous, and Viang Chan was endowed with many temples

and palaces (of which few survive). The city became a great centre of Buddhist scholarship, with monks coming from Siam and Cambodia to study in its [wats](#) (schools).

It was during the reign of Surinyavongsā that the first Europeans saw the Lao lands. A [Dutch](#) merchant, [Gerritt van Wuysthoff](#) arrived by river from [Phnom Penh](#) in about 1641. His account attracted the attention of the [Jesuits](#), who were always keen to be the first to claim the souls of newly-discovered peoples. The first missionary, [Giovanni-Maria Leria](#), arrived soon after van Wuysthoff's return, and he stayed for six years, learning the language and studying the religion and customs of the Lao. Most of our knowledge of Lān Xāng in its later years comes from Leria's records. He won few converts to Christianity, but he did succeed in making the outside world aware of the wealth of the Lao kingdom.

Two circumstances combined to bring about the fall of Lān Xāng. Surinyavongsā had only one son, whom he caused to be executed for adultery. On Surinyavongsā's death in 1694, therefore, there was no heir, and a battle for the throne broke out into which Lān Xāng's neighbours were soon drawn. The second factor was the kingdom's isolation. Both the Siamese and the Vietnamese had been in contact with the Europeans much longer than the Lao, and had acquired firearms, while the landlocked Lao could not trade directly with the Europeans. Divided and leaderless, they were no match for the Siamese with their guns and European advisers. Vietnam (under [Trinh Can](#)) sent an army into Lān Xāng and so did the [Ayutthaya kingdom](#) under king [Pettratcha](#). After a decade of warfare and anarchy, Lān Xāng was broken up in 1707 into its three constituent parts, with Siamese vassal kingdoms at Luang Phrabāng, Viang Chan and Champāsak. Viang Chan and Champāsak paid tribute to the Vietnamese as well as the Siamese - a fact of considerable importance later.

Today official Lao historiography describes Lān Xāng as a Lao national state, and thus the direct ancestor of modern Laos. This view needs considerable qualification. There was no real distinction between the Siamese, the Lao and other Tai-speaking people before the 19th century. Their culture and religion were almost identical and their languages closely related. The kings of Lān Xāng were Lao-Lum, but the peoples under their rule spoke a variety of languages, including Siamese, Khmer and various Lao-Thoeng, Lao-Sūng and other minority languages. The Lao-Lum treated the upland Lao not as fellow-countrymen but as inferiors, referring to them as *khā* (slaves) and *maeo* (savages). The basis of the kings' authority was dynastic and religious, not ethnic or national. When necessity required, they paid tribute to Siamese, Vietnamese, Burmese or Chinese rulers with equal alacrity. As will be seen, it was only after the fall of Lān Xāng, when the Siamese had absorbed some European ideas of national superiority and imposed a semi-colonial rule on the Viang Chan Lao, that a Lao national consciousness began to appear.

Siamese domination

What saved the Lao was the arrival of European colonialism in the region. This is a point that the current official history of Laos, with its emphasis on the later anti-colonial struggles, prefers not to mention, but there is no denying that the end of Siamese rule over parts of the Lao lands and creation of a Lao state were the work of the French, and were a by-product of the rivalry between the French and the British

colonial empires. Unlike the Dutch and Portuguese, these powers were not content to trade with the states of South-East Asia - they sought territorial control. Burma, which had been the terror of the Tai peoples for centuries, was annexed by British India in stages between 1826 and 1885. Vietnam, the other traditional power in the region, succumbed to the French, with a protectorate established over southern Vietnam and eastern Cambodia in 1862 and over the rest of Vietnam in 1883.

These developments spelled trouble for Siam, which found itself caught between two aggressive colonial powers. Under the modernising kings [Rama IV](#) (1851-68) and [Rama V](#) (1868-1910), Siam sought to make itself a modern state able to defend its independence, but the borders of its ramshackle, multi-ethnic empire were not defensible. The 1883 treaty with the Emperor of Vietnam gave the French the right to control all territories which were or had been tributary to the court of Huế, and not surprisingly they chose to interpret this very broadly. Most of the Lao lands had at one time or another been nominal tributaries of Vietnam, although this had frequently meant nothing in practice. The French imposed a European conception of statehood on these feudal relationships, and from them concocted a territorial claim to all of the former kingdom of Lān Xāng.

The principal French agent in this was [Auguste Pavie](#) (1847-1925), who had already spent 17 years in Vietnam and Cambodia furthering French interests when he was appointed French vice-consul in Luang Phrabāng in 1886. Pavie was also a noted explorer and scholar with a genuine affection for the Indochinese peoples, whom he saw as being liberated from ignorance and feudalism by an enlightened France. He regarded the Siamese rulers of the Lao lands as corrupt and oppressive. When Luang Phrabāng was attacked by Tai tribespeople from the hills, and the Siamese representatives fled, it was Pavie who organised the defence of the town and rescued the elderly King [Unkham](#). The king was so grateful that he asked for French protection in place of Siamese rule. Pavie was unable to arrange this, although he did bring about the annexation of the Tai-speaking [Sipsông Chu](#) area to French Vietnam. Pavie called his building of French goodwill in Laos the "conquest of hearts," but ultimately it would require force to evict the Siamese.

By 1890 the French authorities in Hanoi, backed by a powerful party in the French Parliament, were determined on the annexation of the whole of Siam, with the detachment of Laos seen only as the first stage. In 1892 Pavie was appointed French Consul-General in Bangkok, and demanded that the Siamese accept French "commercial agents" in the main Lao towns, from Luang Phrabāng to Stung Treng. Pavie argued that France should demand a protectorate over all the Lao lands on both sides of the Mekong. This, he argued, would so weaken Siam that its full annexation could soon follow. Fully aware of what the French were up to, Siam rushed troops and administrators into the Lao lands, but its infrastructure was not well developed enough for it to take a really firm grip on such distant provinces. Furthermore Rama V's belief that the British would support him in any clash with the French proved unfounded.

In July 1893 minor border clashes led to an armed confrontation, with French gunboats sailing up the Chao Phraya to threaten Bangkok. Faced with such threats, Siam capitulated, and France established a protectorate over everything east of the Mekong. In 1904 there was a further clash, largely manufactured by the French.

Again the British did not come to Siam's defence, and again Siam was forced to back down, ceding two strips of land west of the Mekong: [Xainaburī](#) in the north and Champāsak in the south. At the same time Stung Treng was moved from Laos to Cambodia and some modifications made to the border between Laos and Vietnam. These changes established the Lao borders as they have been ever since.

The French expansionists, urged on by Pavie, now wanted to press on and demand the Lao-speaking lands on the Khōrāt Plateau, but at this point the British intervened. Having gained control of Burma and [Malaya](#), they preferred to maintain Siam as a buffer state between their empire and the French, rather than allow the French to annex all of Siam. By 1909 the situation in Europe had changed, and France decided it needed a British alliance against the rising power of [Germany](#). Paris therefore decided that empire-building in Siam was no longer worth the risks of a clash with British interests.

The aborted French grab for control of all the Lao lands thus created the current Lao borders, which became permanent when Britain opposed any further French advance into Siam. But it also created the predicament which has faced the Lao people ever since. If the French had not interfered at all in Siam's internal affairs, the Lao would probably have been quietly absorbed into a greater Tai-speaking Siamese state. If on the other hand France had succeeded in detaching all the Lao lands from Siam, there might today be a major Lao state, a true reconstruction of Lān Xāng on both banks of the Mekong, with perhaps 20 million people. Instead, the Lao state today has 6 million people, of whom only half speak Lao as their first language. The Isan region of Thailand, meanwhile, contains 15 million Lao-speakers (the language is now officially called "[North-East Thai](#)", but it is almost identical to standard Lao). With the recent large migration from Isan to Bangkok, there are now more Lao speakers in Bangkok than in Viang Chan, the Lao capital. The Lao are almost unique in this lack of congruence between their geographical distribution and the borders of what claims to be their nation state.

French Laos

Having failed in their grand plan to annex Siam, the French lost interest in Laos, and for the next fifty years it remained a backwater of the French empire in Indochina. Officially, the Kingdom of Luang Phrabāng and the Principality of Champāsak remained protectorates with internal autonomy, but in practice they were controlled by French residents. King [Sīsavāngvong](#), who became King of Luang Phrabāng in 1904, remained conspicuously loyal to the French through his 55-year reign. The rest of the country was at first divided into two regions, Upper Laos and Lower Laos, each controlled by a Commandant, based in Luang Phrabāng and [Pākxē](#) respectively. Later the country was divided into eleven provinces, each with a French resident. In 1898 all the Lao lands were put under the general supervision of a Resident-Superior, based in Viang Chan (which the French spelled Vientiane) and answerable to the French Governor-General in Hanoi. Security, customs and communications were controlled from Hanoi, and therefore much neglected in the Lao lands, which had a low budget priority. The local authorities handled health, education and justice, and were expected to fund their own operations from local revenue.

The French inherited a territory which was depopulated and demoralised by years of warfare and disorder: in 1910 there were only 600,000 people in Laos, including many Chinese and Vietnamese. To establish order, a local militia, the Garde Indigène, was established, comprising a mixture of Lao and Vietnamese troops under French officers. Banditry was suppressed, slavery abolished, and the Lao-Lum aristocracy's practice of demanding labour service from Lao Theong and Lao Sūng peoples was stopped. Vietnamese clerks were brought in to provide administrative support to the very small number of French officials who ran the country - in 1910 there were only 200 French in the whole country. Vietnamese and Chinese merchants arrived to repopulate the towns (particularly Viang Chan) and revive trade.

The French took over the head tax previously collected by the Siamese, but since French officials were less corrupt than the Siamese had been the amount collected increased. The Lao were also made universally liable for labour service, fixed at ten days per head per year, although exemption could be bought with a cash payment. The Lao-Lum much resented this imposition, seen by them as fit only for upland Lao and slaves. Vietnamese and Chinese were exempt from labour service, but paid a higher head tax in cash. Further revenue was gained by making opium, alcohol and salt state monopolies. Nevertheless the administration in Laos was always short of money, and development, particularly in the uplands, was very slow.

On the whole the Lao found French rule preferable to Siamese rule, and this ensured that for some time there no organised resistance to their presence. In 1901, however, a revolt broke out in the south, led by a Lao Theong called [Ong Kaeo](#), a self-proclaimed *phū mī bun* (holy man) who led a messianic cult. This revolt was not specifically anti-French or Lao nationalist in character, but attracted wide support and was not effectively suppressed until 1910 when Ong Kaeo was killed. One of Ong Kaeo's lieutenants, [Ong Kommadam](#), however, survived and went on to become a Lao nationalist leader in later years. After the Chinese revolution of 1911, there was also trouble in northern Laos as Chinese warlords and bandits carried their fights across the ill-defined border and as Lao Sūng peoples with links to China were drawn into the conflict. French attempts to regulate the opium trade also provoked resistance in some areas. In 1914-16 there was a Hmong rebellion known as "the madman's revolt" after its leader, a [shaman](#) called Pāchai. Later Lao official histories portray all these disturbances as "anti-colonial struggles," but this is an exaggeration.

The favourable comparison between French rule and Siamese rule led to a considerable re-migration of Lao from the Isan area to Laos, boosting the population and reviving trade. The Mekong valley towns such as Viang Chan, Savannakhēt and Paksē began to grow, although they remained majority Vietnamese and Chinese. Agriculture and trade also revived. The French hoped to divert Lao trade down the Mekong to [Saigon](#), but they were unable to compete with the quicker and cheaper trade route through Bangkok, particularly once the Siamese railways reached the Mekong in the late 1920s. This gave Siam a continuing economic importance to Laos even after Siamese political control had ended: a fact which has not changed. The French proposed a railway over the mountains to Vietnam, but capital for this project was never forthcoming from Paris. The French did however build the most important road in Laos, National Route 13 from Viang Chan to Paksē (more recently it has been extended north to Luang Phrabāng). But economic development remained slow. There was some tin-mining and some coffee-growing, but the country's isolation and

difficult terrain meant that it never became profitable from a colonialist point of view. More than 90% of the Lao remained subsistence farmers, growing just enough surplus produce to sell for cash to pay their taxes.

Most of the French who came to Laos as officials, settlers or missionaries developed a strong affection for the country and its people, and many devoted decades to what they saw as bettering the lives of the Lao. Some took Lao wives, learned the language, became Buddhists and "went native" - something more acceptable in the French Empire than in the British. With the racial attitudes typical of Europeans at this time, however, they tended to classify the Lao as gentle, amiable, childlike, naive and lazy, regarding them with what one writer called "a mixture of affection and exasperation." They had no belief that the Lao would ever be able to govern themselves, and were slow to establish a system of western education for the Lao. The first secondary school in Viang Chan did not open until 1921, and only in the 1930s did the first Lao students get a higher French education in Hanoi or Paris. Gradually a network of primary schools spread through the lowland areas, and by the 1930s literacy rates among the Lao Lum had increased considerably. But the upland areas, where people spoke either Lao dialects or non-Lao languages, remained untouched.

Among the first Lao to get advanced western educations were three aristocratic brothers, sons (by different mothers) of [Chau Bunkhong](#), the *uparāt* (hereditary vice-king) of Luang Phrabāng: these were Prince [Phetxarāt](#) (1890-1959), Prince [Suvannaphūmā](#) (1901-84) and Prince [Suphānuvong](#) (1909-95), who were later to dominate Lao politics for many years. Phetxarāt graduated from the École Coloniale in Paris and was the first Lao to study at [Oxford University](#). Both Suvannaphūmā and Suphānuvong graduated in engineering in France. Suvannaphūmā also studied classics and read Latin and Greek as well as [Pali](#): becoming the very model of a French scholar-politician. It is a standard observation of post-colonial history that enlightened colonialism brought about its own demise by creating a class of western-educated intellectuals who then became leaders of anti-colonialist movements. The French education of men like Phetxarāt, Suvannaphūmā and Suphānuvong would seem to confirm this in the case of Laos, but in fact all were essentially Lao aristocrats first and nationalist intellectuals second, even though Suphānuvong eventually became the figurehead leader of the Lao [Communists](#). Laos never produced a figure like [Pol Pot](#), a fully formed French Marxist ideologue.

The real French contribution to Lao nationalism, apart from the creation of the Lao state itself, was made by the oriental specialists of the [French School of the Far East](#) (École Française d'Extrême-Orient), who undertook major archaeological works, found and published Lao historical texts, standardised the written Lao language, renovated neglected temples and tombs and in 1931 founded the Independent Lao Buddhist Institute in Viang Chan, where Pali was taught so that the Lao could study their own ancient history. The restoration and preservation of the cultural glories of Luang Phrabāng is a lasting tribute to French scholarship and endeavour.

The French stimulation of Lao culture and historical studies created a new Lao intellectual class, which was soon led by Phetxarāt, a gifted scholar. Phetxarāt is today remembered as a nationalist, but at first he was the leading Lao collaborator with the French. In 1923 he was appointed Indigenous Inspector of Political and Administrative Affairs, making him the highest ranking Lao in the country. He

worked to increase the number of Lao in administrative positions and to reduce the role of the Vietnamese, whom the Lao disliked much more than they did the French. Phetxarāt and other leading Lao favoured French rule because it protected them from the Siamese and Vietnamese. It was only when French power and prestige were broken that the Lao elite turned against the French.

The Crisis of World War II

Laos might have drifted along as a pleasant backwater of the French Empire indefinitely had not outside events impacted sharply on the country from 1940 onwards. The fall of France to the [Nazi German](#) invasion was a profound shock to Lao faith in France's ability to protect them. The greatest threat to Laos was now Siamese [irredentism](#). In December 1940 Marshall [Phibun](#)'s military regime in Bangkok attacked French Indochina with the covert assistance of the [Japanese](#), seizing western Cambodia, and reclaiming Xainaburī and Champāsak, which been part of French Laos since 1904. The [Vichy French](#) authorities allowed Japan to base troops in Indochina, though not at this stage in Laos. The fear of being left exposed to Thailand (as Phibun had renamed Siam) and Japan led to the formation of the first Lao nationalist organisation, the Movement for National Renovation, in January 1941, led by Phetxarāt and supported by local French officials, though not by the Vichy authorities in Hanoi. This group wrote the current Lao national anthem and designed the current Lao flag, while paradoxically pledging support for France.

These matters rested until the liberation of France in 1944, bringing [Charles de Gaulle](#) to power. This meant the end of the alliance between Japan and the French administration in Indochina. The Japanese had no intention of allowing the Gaullists to take over, and in late 1944 they staged a military coup in Hanoi. French Gaullist units fled over the mountains to Laos, pursued by the Japanese, who occupied Viang Chan in March 1945 and Luang Phrabāng in April. King Sīsavāngvong was detained by the Japanese, but his son Crown Prince [Savāngvatthanā](#) called on all Lao to assist the French, and many Lao died fighting with the French resistance against the Japanese occupiers.

Prince Phetxarāt, however, opposed this position, and thought that Lao independence could be gained by siding with the Japanese, who made him Prime Minister of Luang Phrabāng, though not of Laos as a whole. In practice the country was in chaos and Phetxarāt's government had no real authority. Another Lao group, the Lao Sēri (Free Lao), became agents of the Thais, which also meant supporting the Japanese. A further complication was the arrival of substantial numbers of Vietnamese forces loyal to the Communist leader [Ho Chi Minh](#). Although the official Communist line at this time was unite all forces against the Japanese, the Vietnamese hated the French and so supported Phetxarāt's government.

In August 1945, just as the country was dissolving into a multi-sided civil war, Japan suddenly surrendered to the Allies. In Laos as in all the newly-liberated capitals of East Asia, there was a scramble to fill the power-vacuum. The main contenders were the Gaullist French, whose guerilla forces were holding out with Lao assistance in several parts of the country, and a new Lao nationalist group led by Phetxarāt, the [Lao Issara](#) (also meaning Free Lao). The nearest Allied army was the [Chinese Nationalist](#) army in southern China, and this force was supposed to march south and receive the

Japanese surrender. The [United States](#) was officially opposed to the re-establishment of French rule in Indochina, and the British could be expected to be unhelpful. But the French had no intention of giving up Indochina without a fight.

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External links

Jon Fernquest (2005) "[The Flight of Lao War Captives From Burma Back to Laos in 1596: A Comparison of Historical Sources.](#)" SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2005, ISSN 1479-8484

See also

[History of Laos since 1945](#)

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