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The War in Northern Thailand

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Introduction

FROM the legal, political, and ethical points of view, much turns on the precise sequence of events by which a war develops. Regrettably, by the time a conflict begins to attract the attention of scholars, it may be too late to reconstruct its origins. Participants die or disappear, records are lost or destroyed, memories fail, or false information is deliberately circulated. The resulting weakness of scholarly investigation then permits those with a vested interest in some particular view to rewrite history in keeping with their own peculiar demonology.

Such a process may now be taking place in Thailand. The limited anti-government violence which has occurred there since 1965 in the Northeast, and since 1967 in the North, seems likely to broaden in the coming years. The official account of this violence, given by the Thai government in Bangkok and its ally in Washington, comprises several elements: first, that the 'cause' of the difficulties in the North is external support and external manpower, especially as a result of Chinese 'designs'; second, that those opposing the government with violence are 'communists'; third, that there are no legitimate reasons for opposition to the Thai government; and finally, that the Bangkok government's military response in the North, while regrettable, is both necessary and appropriate to the nature of the challenge.¹

An examination of primary sources available within Thailand,

I wish to acknowledge the extensive cooperation provided by various Thai officials and government agencies in carrying out this research. Various present and former members of the United States Mission in Thailand were also helpful in providing fruitful suggestions for investigation. The research reported here was supported by a grant from Harvard University.

¹ For the official account see, for example, United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Kingdom of Thailand*, November 1969; and *The Communist Threat to Thailand*, a 'white paper' dated August 1967, produced by the South-East Asia Treaty Organization in cooperation with the Thai government. For a scholarly treatment of the international context of the violence in the North see Daniel D. Lovelace, *China and 'People's War' in Thailand, 1964-1969*, China Research Monographs No. 8, University of California Center for Chinese Studies, Berkeley.

particularly government archival data and interviews with participants themselves, reveals that the evolution of the conflict in northern Thailand is more complex than the official explanation of it. Regarding the first element above, we should note at the start that the use of the term 'cause' in historical analysis is an epistemological fallacy;² it is appropriate to ask, however, whether one of the conditions of the violence is external support and man-power. Here the evidence indicates that at least during the decade 1960–70, all of the anti-government activists in the North were Thai by geographic origin, though many of them received training abroad. As to whether the opposition arises from a commitment to 'communism', the evidence requires some distinctions to be made. Leadership from the senior levels of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) down to the level of community organizers is clearly 'communist' in organizational affiliation, but the motive for participation by the followers, that is, the actual rifle-carriers, is instead self-preservation and protection of a traditional way of life against what are seen as illegitimate encroachments by lowland Thai. The 'communist'–'anti-communist' dimension is thus the perception of both the communist leadership itself³ and of the government in Bangkok, while for the actual participants whose cooperation makes the anti-government movement effective, the effort is viewed as a racial conflict for the preservation of traditional upland lifeways. Third, we find that there are in fact many distributive conflicts over economic and political values, which the tribal participants see as legitimate grounds for opposition to the Bangkok government. Finally, the evidence reveals that the government's military response has contributed greatly to the disaffection in the North, increasing the number of armed opponents by a factor of five at least during the decade under study.

These conclusions are all the more credible for being drawn principally, as will be seen, from government files and personnel themselves.

Political and historical background

The northern region of Thailand (see Map 1) comprises roughly one-fifth of the territory of the kingdom, and at its closest point is only

² Morton G. White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), chap. 4.

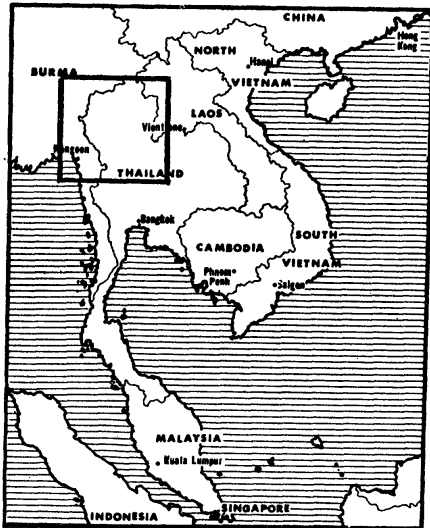
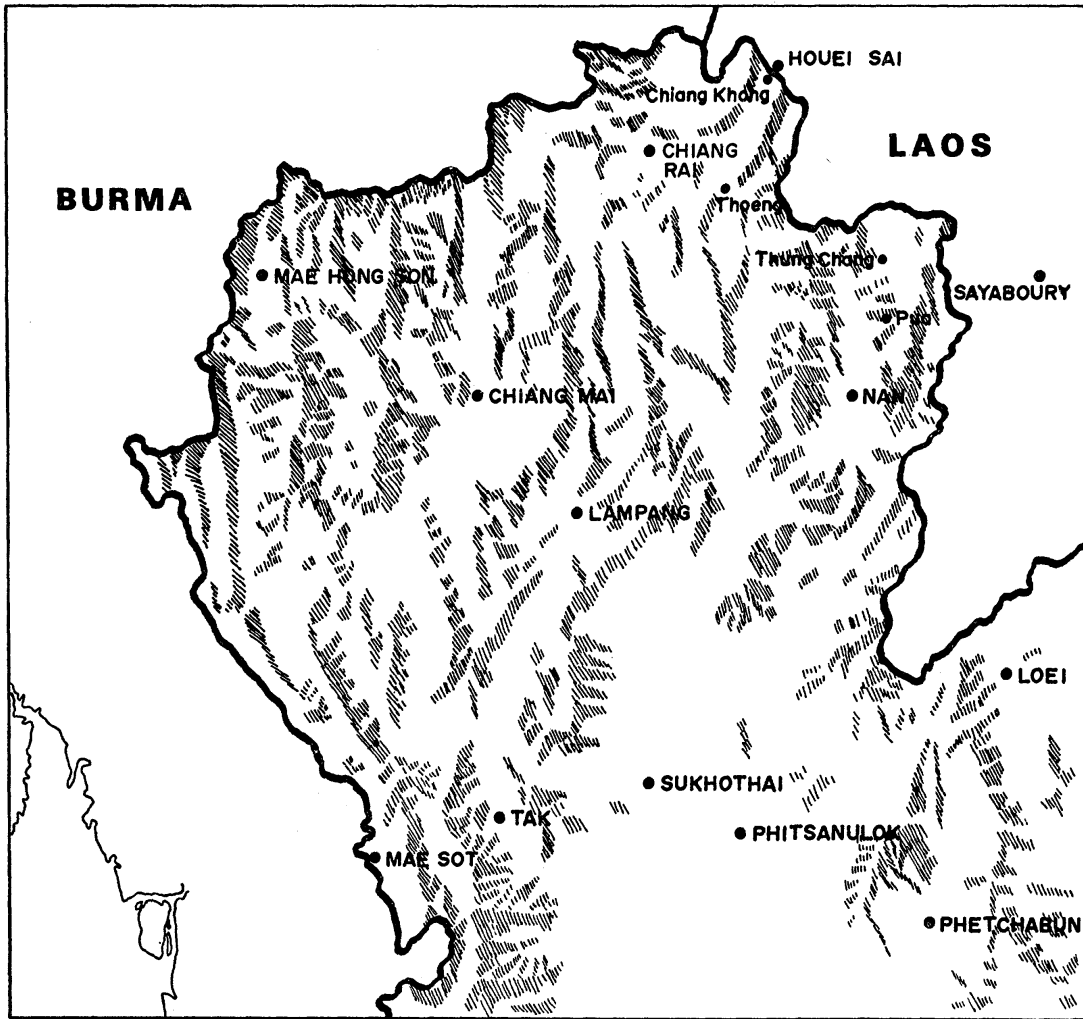
³ Thus the CPT claims public credit for leadership of the political and military struggle; see Lovelace, *op. cit.*, p. 56, citing statements in *Peking Review* 10:7 (10 February 1967), pp. 26–7, and New China News Agency, 16 September 1967.

60 miles from Yunnan province of southern China. The North consists of a series of mountain ranges stretching south from Laos and Burma, like the fingers of a hand, through Nan, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces, and then bending westward through Lampang and Sukhothai to merge in Tak province with the long mountain range extending the entire length of the Thai-Burmese border. The crests of these mountains, covered with teak forests of immense value, and ranging in height from 2,000 to 8,000 feet, form Thailand's northern border with Laos and Burma for a distance of 750 miles. Today's major cities in the North—Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Nan, Tak, Phitsanulok, Phetchabun—lie along the rivers running through the upland valleys formed by these mountainous fingers.

The genesis of the violence in this mountainous region must be understood against the background of the major southward population movements which have taken place over the past ten centuries into the mountains and plains of present-day Thailand, and which in fact continue to this very day. As a result of this complex of migrations the upland areas of Thailand now contain between 200,000 and 300,000 people belonging to several major ethnolinguistic groups.⁴ The diversity among the hill tribes makes generalization difficult, but it seems reasonable to say that the commonest attitude of the valley-dwelling Thai toward the upland peoples is one of distaste (though this is much less true toward the Shan, who are closely related to the Thai). Thai generally look down upon the upland peoples as primitive 'savages' of low cultural level and unappealing hygienic practices.⁵ This feeling of distaste arising from cultural dissimilarities is accentuated by the widely publicized slash-and-burn agricultural methods of the upland peoples. Many Thai feel that these agricultural methods, besides destroying

⁴ Estimates for hill-tribe populations vary widely, since tribal peoples have not been included in the decennial Thai census. The figure of 250,000 is cited in the US Army *Area Handbook for Thailand* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 63. Peter Kunstadter rightly points out the ambiguity in using the term hill tribe in Thailand, where one can find groups who violate ideal 'tribal' norms of language, literacy, economy or ecology; Peter Kunstadter, editor, *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 369.

⁵ An ethnocentric viewpoint to be sure. To some extent, the less than optimal hygienic practices of the tribal peoples are a consequence of the shortage of water in some upland areas. One of the hill tribes which will figure prominently in this account, the Meo, has had a long and at times glorious history, stretching back some fifty centuries at least. See Department of the Army Ethnographic Studies Series, *Minority Groups in Thailand* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1970), pp. 584-6.



MAP 1. *The northern region of Thailand*

valuable teak forests, also damage the natural watershed and lead to water-control problems in the valleys.⁶

The ambiguous legal position of upland peoples in Thailand also produces a potential for conflict. The issue of Thai citizenship for tribal peoples remains unresolved thus far, and the resulting ambiguity places a severe handicap on the hill-tribe peoples, in a number of respects. Because of this uncertain legal status the hill peoples are almost completely outside the political system of Thailand; likewise they cannot enter government service. Since Thai law provides (with certain exceptions) that only citizens may own land, the hill peoples similarly cannot obtain title to the lands they farm. Another provision of Thai law directs that upland forested areas are to be considered royal preserves, and thus the hill tribes, regardless of their citizenship status are, technically, illegal squatters. This is aggravated in turn by the swidden agriculture of the hill tribes mentioned earlier, and by the custom of several of the tribes to grow opium, which the Thai government is obliged by international agreement to suppress. The hill-tribe peoples for their part, however, view the Thai as leaving their proper place (the valleys) to invade the traditional upland home of the hill peoples to enforce a series of unreasonable restrictions against subsistence practices which the hill peoples have always carried on. The central government in Bangkok long ago realized the impossibility of strict enforcement of the forest and opium laws, and the explosive consequence of even the attempt;⁷ national policy has thus been to hold enforcement in abeyance until a solution could be reached to the problem of an alternative means of livelihood. Nevertheless, a minority of Thai officials extorts money from the hill tribes for technical infractions of the unenforced laws, leading to a fairly continuous low level of animosity between the hill peoples and certain Thai governmental organizations, particularly the Provincial Police and the Forestry Service. Until the last several years there was no more than this low level of friction; the valley-dwelling Thai disliked life in the mountains, and the hill peoples disliked life in the valleys; systematic contact was generally limited to mutually beneficial market transactions.

⁶ This has long been the conventional wisdom on swidden agriculture. However, a number of investigators have concluded that swidden methods, if properly carried out, and with a sufficiently long rotation period, do not damage the watershed and are the most productive practice for forested upland areas.

⁷ One official estimate in 1964 placed the annual tribal income from opium-growing at 60,000,000 baht, or US \$3,000,000 at the official exchange rate. *A Report on the Hill Tribe Welfare Programs*, compiled by the Border Patrol Police and delivered at a conference in the Spring of 1964, draft translation by Military Research and Development Center (Bangkok: mimeograph, 1967), p. 55.

Central government activities in the North prior to the outbreak of major violence

In the early fifties there was no government presence in the rugged forests which form Thailand's northern border with Laos and Burma. Upland peoples roamed back and forth at will from Yunnan to Burma to Laos to Thailand, without any reference to abstract national borders. In the interests of actualizing Thai sovereignty in the border areas not just of the North but also of other difficult border regions of the country, the Thai government in May of 1953 founded the Border Patrol Police as one operating division of the National Police.

To permit establishing friendly relations with the hill-tribe peoples who dominate the borders, the BPP decided to take no role in enforcing the opium or forestry regulations, or the numerous vexing taxes required of lowlanders for home brewing, gun registration, and the slaughter of livestock. As a more positive effort, the BPP also began a hill-tribe school program in 1955, the first service to the hill people by any governmental agency up to that time.

Police efforts in the North remained extremely limited until early 1963, partly for lack of a sense of urgency, and partly owing to intra-governmental conflicts in Bangkok. The police had been on the losing side of the 1957 coup in Bangkok, and the delicate internal power balance between the army and police in succeeding years had a negative impact on the attempt to innovate new programs among the hill tribes in the North.⁸ However, the unsettled situation in Laos, and persistent rumors of anti-government organizational activities among the hill tribes, led to a considerably expanded BPP program in the North in early 1963, which began with an intensive survey of the northern hill tribes.⁹ Individual villages were located and plotted by district and tambon and map coordinates, and aerial surveys were conducted to pinpoint target areas. From September through December 1963 two survey teams moved through eastern Chiang Rai and northern Nan provinces along the Laotian border to establish initial contact with Meo and Yao tribal people and select sites for the construction of short take-off and landing (STOL) airfields. During mid-1964 Meo and Yao

⁸ Frank C. Darling, *Thailand and the United States* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1965), p. 168. Some observers suggest that one element of the army-police competition is the control of the opium trade, discussed below.

⁹ The information in this and succeeding paragraphs is extracted from *The Hill-Tribe Program of the Border Patrol Police* (Bangkok: mimeograph, 1965), prepared by BPP advisory personnel for the conference on Southeast Asian tribes and minorities held at Princeton University in May of 1965.

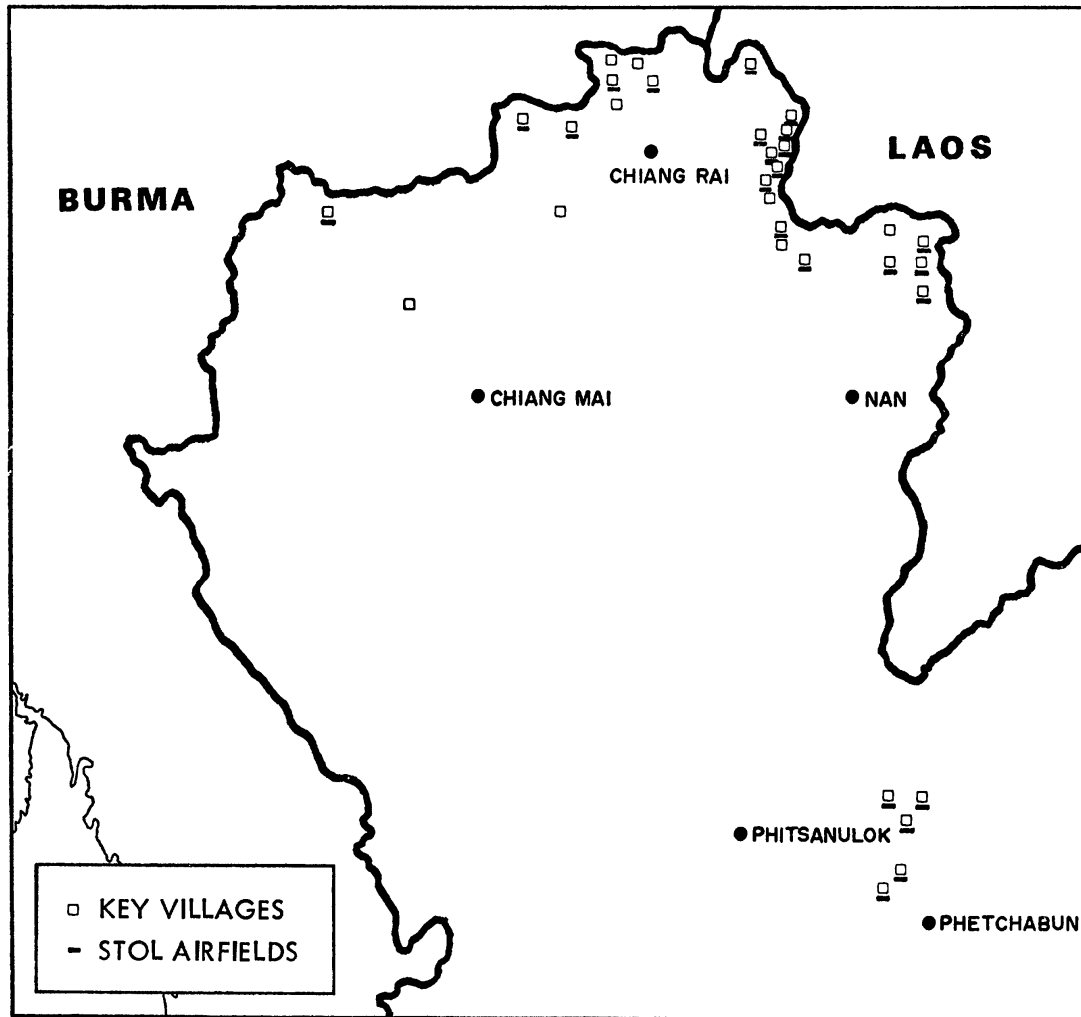
in Phitsanulok and Phetchabun provinces farther south were contacted, and in late 1964 the program was extended to Lisu, Lahu and Akha areas of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces.

The program established by the BPP under this new effort consisted of several parts. After initial contact STOL airfields would be constructed by the villagers in those areas too remote to be reached conveniently by foot. BPP personnel would then select five young men from each village for training in Chiang Mai, the principal city of the North and headquarters of BPP Area V.¹⁰ These individuals, after receiving agricultural, veterinary, and medical training, would then return to their villages to work among their own people. BPP teams would visit the villages from time to time to provide more professional advice, bring in new seeds or replace exhausted medical supplies, and seek information on activities hostile to the Thai government. A number of villages had a more permanent BPP presence, with a full-time school and dispensary as well. Such 'key village' locations were selected for their dominance of local terrain, their position astride major trails and routes of communication, and the relative importance of their tribal leaders. By early 1965 there were thirty-two such key village locations (see Map 2).

As friendly contacts increased between BPP and hill peoples, more and more rumors of anti-government organizing activity came to the ears of the BPP leadership, and possibly on this account some shift of emphasis took place from a 'once over lightly' approach to a more permanent base in the villages. Three major development centers were begun in early 1966, at Kang Haw in Nan province and at Huai Khu and Huai Farng in Chiang Rai province. Sentiment within the BPP increased for developing an armed capability among the hill tribes, and in March 1967 the BPP presented a briefing to the Thai National Security Council showing a bleak outlook unless affirmative action was taken. Two specific BPP proposals were to develop armed self-defense units among the hill tribes and to make arrangements with Laotian authorities to employ friendly Meo from Laos for operations in northern Thailand. No action was taken on either proposal.¹¹

¹⁰ BPP Area V consists of the four northernmost border provinces of Nan, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son, as well as the non-border provinces of Phrae, Lampang and Lamphun.

¹¹ Details cited here are taken from the periodic contractor reports to the United States Operations Mission, Thailand, by the Bangkok office of Development Consultants International, Inc., the contractor firm which provided advisory assistance to the Border Patrol Police under funding through USOM. These are available in the United States Operations Mission library in Bangkok.



MAP 2. 'Key village' locations

Anti-government activities in the North prior to the outbreak of major violence

It is surely an indication of the weakness of the central government's organization among the hill tribes of the North that the first decade of anti-government activity there is shrouded in rumor and contradiction, with reports available to the government only through third parties. This section reports the author's collation of the different accounts of this period provided by three different Thai agencies.¹²

Apparently the first anti-government activities in the North identified with communist leadership were directed not against the authorities in

¹² The Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC), representing army sources; the BPP, representing upland police sources; and the Police Special Branch, responsible for the general surveillance of anti-government activities in Thailand.

Bangkok but against those in Vientiane. According to one source¹³ a considerable number of Meo tribesmen (perhaps around 400) were recruited from the Chiang Rai-Nan-Phetchabun area between 1957 and 1959, to serve with the Pathet Lao in Laos. They were recruited with the promise that they would 'meet their king and serve him'.¹⁴ Some of these individuals reported that they took part in a major Pathet Lao attack on Xieng Khoang (apparently the one in January 1961). They returned to their home areas in Thailand in 1962 and became 'ordinary citizens', taking no further part in military activities. The fact that these individuals received training and then served in Laos, and then returned in 1962 after the Geneva Accords terminating

¹³ Chaowarit Sae Yang, a Meo from Kang Haw village in Nan province. Chaowarit is one of the best-educated Meo in Thailand, having received five years of formal schooling. In 1964 he was recruited into the BPP training program described in the previous section, serving until 1968. The information cited here was based on his conversations with fellow Meo who had taken part in these Pathet Lao activities in Laos, as recounted to the author in personal interviews during August 1970.

¹⁴ The communist leadership early made the decision to focus initial organizational activities on the Meo tribe, because of the long history of martial activities by this tribal group. The Thai government in turn has made a parallel decision, and so much of the discussion following will deal with the Meo tribe.

The first written references to the Meo record their presence in China in the 40th century B.C. During most of the period from the 27th century B.C. until recent times there has been fighting between the Meo and the Chinese within China. In the seventh century A.D. the Chinese destroyed a strong Meo kingdom which had been established in the fifth century A.D., and it is apparently from this period that the legends of the return of the Meo king originated. (*Minority Groups in Thailand*, pp. 584-6.)

There are approximately 50,000 Meo in Thailand, the largest single tribal group. However, the vast majority of Meo still live in southern China, numbering between two and four million according to different estimates. There are also some 223,000 Meo in northern Vietnam, 50,000 in Laos, and a small number in Burma. (*Ibid.*, 575.)

On Meo character, one source writes 'Although Meo history has been characterized by centuries of oppression and disruption (first in China, later in Vietnam and Laos), the Meo have maintained a strong feeling of independence and a fierce resistance to their oppressors. They have often demonstrated that no matter how difficult their plight as refugees may be, they are able to overcome these disadvantages. Generally speaking, the Meo have unusual initiative [and] adaptability, and an ability to organize themselves.' (James T. Ward, 'US Aid to Hill Tribe Refugees in Laos', in Peter Kunstadter, *op. cit.*, p. 298.)

Another source, speaking principally of the Meo, adds a different perspective: 'In general, the hill tribes do not exhibit any aggressive or warlike tendencies; it seems that their prevailing attitude tends to be rather to live peacefully and independently. If they feel annoyed, their first reaction is seemingly to retreat into the deeper parts of the jungle. In emergencies, to be sure, they would fight back as they have done throughout their history. Such an emergency could be occasioned by, for instance, a belief that their basic means of existence are seriously threatened.' (*Report on the Socio-Economic Survey of Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand* [Bangkok: Department of Public Welfare, 1966], pp. 36-7.)

the violence there, seems to indicate that this first group was not recruited with the intention of working against the Thai government. However, the recruitment of these individuals for activity outside Thailand may have been responsible for the occasional rumors of communist-led activity in the North prior to 1960.

Activity among the hill tribes specifically focused on Thailand can perhaps be related to the 1960 decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) to adopt a new strategy of takeover based on a rural Mao-style uprising, rather than the previous, and unsuccessful, strategy of urban, parliamentary, and intellectual-oriented action.¹⁵ Apparently in consequence of this decision the Central Committee in 1962 established four regional branches, for the North, the Northeast, the Central region, and the South. Widespread reports of communist-led organizational activity in the North begin to appear at this time.

Chronologically, the first communist recruitment of tribal peoples specifically for work in Thailand, so far as can be learned from Thai intelligence agencies, apparently occurred in 1962. Interrogation of a CPT Central Committee member captured in 1967¹⁶ revealed that the course at the Hoa Binh training school in northern Vietnam which began in July 1962 contained a total of 68 students, including Thai, Sino-Thai, Vietnamese from Thailand, and a small number of Meo from Loei in the tri-province area of northern Thailand.¹⁷ As a result of BPP patrolling in the Mae Sot district of Tak on the western border of Thailand, it was learned that a group of approximately twenty Meo from Phetchabun had returned from training at Hoa Binh in early 1964.

¹⁵ The exact date of the shift is uncertain. There are reports that the Central Committee authorized the change in 1960, and this may have been responsible for the 1960 appeal by the Central Committee, relayed by New China News Agency, to the Thai people to form a 'broad patriotic front' against the Thai and American governments. According to a captured document, 'Theory of Revolution in Thailand', the CPT called a national meeting in February 1961, to decide on a new policy, and this meeting decided (1) to set up a 'patriotic and democratic front' and (2) to prepare the conditions for a policy of armed struggle. Cited by Colonel Wichien Sungpriwon, in *Countering the Seizure of State Power by the CPT* (in Thai), a thesis submitted to the Thai Army War College, February 1970. If the practice of the CPT follows that of neighboring parties (and in view of the close relations between them there is no reason to suppose otherwise) then this national meeting was probably a convocation simply to approve of what the Central Committee had already decided in 1960.

¹⁶ Phin Bua-on, a long-time Party member who had studied at the Marx-Lenin Institute in Peking; cited in Wichien Sungpriwon, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ The tri-province area, consisting of Phitsanulok, Phetchabun and Loei, gains its name from the intersection of the three province boundaries near the northern edge of the Phetchabun range in Thailand.

On its return, this group, in training for nine months, split up into teams of three to four men each to conduct low-key propaganda activities among the approximately eleven Meo villages in Mae Sot. In view of the nine-month training period and the arrival in Mae Sot in early 1964, the recruitment of these people must have occurred in Phetchabun sometime in early 1963. These police reports indicated that some Meo trained outside the country also stayed in Phetchabun to propagandize. During 1965 the BPP also learned that the first groups of Meo recruited in Mae Sot, totalling 45 men, were sent out of the country for training, first in Sam Neua in northeastern Laos, and then at Hoa Binh. By 1965 the Meo were conducting weapons training in addition to propaganda in the Mae Sot area.¹⁸

The next reported recruiting activity took place in Nan province to the north of Phetchabun in 1965. According to the detailed police report, a group of Meo from Long Tong village¹⁹ in Sayaboury province, Laos, crossed into Nan sometime in 1965 and spread out in groups of two and three to conduct propaganda and recruiting in Thung Chang district. They helped Meo villagers harvest rice and opium, told of the re-establishment of a Meo state with a Meo king, and offered training outside the country. They were apparently successful, since a defector later reported that two groups of Meo from Nan had proceeded to train in Vietnam. The first group, which also included several lowland Thai, completed training and returned to Nan in November 1966. During the same month a second group of Meo, including two women, departed for Vietnam. Police reports from Nan province in 1965 also listed weapons training being conducted in Pua district. Instructors were Chinese and Thai, with Meo translators from Long Tong village in Laos.²⁰

In Chiang Rai province to the north of Nan, police reports indicate that the first activity began in 1966 with the arrival of two ethnic Thai to begin propaganda in Tab Taw tambon, Thoeng district. The reports record that these two gave out a 'very good quality medicine' which led tribal people to trust them. Building on this trust the two

¹⁸ Police reports cited throughout this study were consulted by the author at the BPP Area V headquarters in Chieng Mai and the Area VI headquarters in Tak.

¹⁹ Located at QBo22995 according to the grid system employed on US military maps.

²⁰ Although this report read 'Chinese', the apparent meaning was Sino-Thai, the ethnic origin of many anti-government cadres in the North. At no point in the research did any Thai governmental source confirm the presence of any operatives in the North who were not native to Thailand, with the problematical exception of the Meo, who move back and forth across mountain borders in disregard of abstract international boundaries.

Thai persuaded an undetermined number of Meo to go outside the country for training.

Because of the increasing volume of reports of Meo tribal people leaving the country for training in Laos and Vietnam, police authorities decided to conduct an identification program to determine who was living along the Laotian border. In February of 1967 three BPP platoons began the identification project, working independently at various locations, with the mission of identifying all the tribal people in the villages along the Laotian border, southward from Chiang Khong near the northernmost tip of Thailand. One such platoon was operating near the Htin²¹ village of Huai Poo Lai,²² in Thung Chang district of Nan, on February 17 when informed by the assistant village chief that 'strangers' had come into the village asking to buy rice. The police platoon then entered Huai Poo Lai and followed the 'strangers', an armed band of about 14 men, engaging them near Doi Pha Liang.²³ In this engagement one policeman was killed. Another platoon of police was then called in, resulting in a second firefight, this time with no casualties. In both engagements the 'strangers' escaped unharmed. These engagements near Doi Pha Liang were the first violent incidents in the North directly attributable to organized anti-government forces, as opposed to occasional previous sniping against government officials intent on extracting bribes from the hill people. These engagements also produced the first government combat casualty in the North. It is significant also that they occurred in response to a systematic Thai penetration of a customarily autonomous tribal area.

Further and more portentous engagements were not far off. On 19 February the police received a report from the chief of Nam Pan²⁴ village, Thung Chang district, that three individuals, including one 'Mr Serm', were actively propagandizing in the area. A police platoon of some 30 men was sent into the area on 26 February and was immediately engaged in a brief armed clash near Nam Pan,²⁵ wounding and capturing the 'Mr Serm' reported earlier. Later in the day another clash took place nearby, resulting in the death of one unidentified individual, who had on his person one AK-47 rifle, one English-Chinese dictionary, and four Thai language books of the writings of Mao Tse-tung.

²¹ A Mon-Khmer tribal group with between 12,000 and 35,000 people in northern Thailand, principally in Nan province. Frank M. Lebar, Gerald C. Hickey and John K. Musgrave, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1964), p. 128.

²² QB057439.

²⁴ PB7954.

²³ Huai and Doi mean stream and mountain respectively.

²⁵ PB741516.

It is certainly significant that despite two years of reports of anti-government organizational activity in the North (and in reality at least five years of such activity) these were the first physical confrontations to take place, and Serm was the first and for some time the only operative to be captured. Nevertheless Serm alone, because of the story he told, produced an awful sinking spell in Bangkok.²⁶

Serm was born and raised in Bangkok of Chinese parentage, and he followed the practice of many overseas Chinese by travelling to China during the 1950's to obtain an 'authentic' Chinese education. In mid-1964 he was recruited by the branch of the Chinese Foreign Ministry responsible for operations in Thailand. Under the sponsorship of the Thailand Patriotic Front,²⁷ Serm was given three months of 'refresher' Thai language training, and then sent for an additional six months of political and military training at Phu Tho not far from Hanoi in northern Vietnam. Serm reported that there were approximately a dozen other individuals in this group, the first of a series in a program under the Thailand Patriotic Front to train Thai and Sino-Thai for reinfiltration into various regions of Thailand. The group received additional training in Peking at the close of 1965, and then travelled to Laos. Serm spent the year of 1966 in Laos receiving 'on the job training' in civic action, propaganda and combat missions.

Serm set foot on Thai soil for the first time in many years during the second week of February 1967, and was assigned to a team headed by a former Thai army sergeant who had served with the Pathet Lao for some time before beginning to work in northern Thailand. The other members of the team were a northeastern Thai who had also spent time with the Pathet Lao, two other Sino-Thai like Serm, and two local Meo to serve as guides. The mission of the team was to establish friendly relations with Meo villages along the border, gradually develop and expand a political and military apparatus in these villages, and finally to exclude completely any influence of the government in Bangkok. Serm indicated at the time of his capture that there were perhaps ten such teams operating in the two provinces of Nan and Chiang Rai alone.

Having been captured in only his second week back in Thailand, Serm hardly succeeded in the mission for which he was sent, but he did succeed in confirming the fears of high police officials that there was a serious CPT organizational and training effort going on in the North,

²⁶ The information in the following paragraphs was provided to the author by the Police Special Branch officer who spent several months interrogating Serm.

²⁷ Officially founded on 1 January 1965, in Peking.

and that the level of activity had already outpaced Bangkok's limited and thus far explicitly non-military activities among the hill tribes. It should be noted that at this time there was a very serious military effort going on to suppress the violence which had broken out in July 1965 in the northeastern region of Thailand. The sudden and unexpected outbreak of violence in the Northeast, and the rapidity with which the opposition had fielded some 3,000 guerrillas there, had produced a sense of crisis in Bangkok. Although at this time in early 1967 there were estimated to be only between one hundred and two hundred armed and active anti-government operatives in all of the North,²⁸ there was nevertheless the anxiety that violence might suddenly erupt just as it had in the Northeast.

The beginnings of major violence

Following the violent clashes leading to the capture of Serm a period of quiet settled over the North. In succeeding months only one major incident took place, but it is illustrative of the tensions underlying hill tribe-lowlander relations. Accounts of this incident vary with the organizational affiliation of the source, but all agree that the result was the burning of the Meo village of Huai Chom Poo²⁹ by police officials from Thoeng district of Chiang Rai province, in the early days of May 1967.

Several foreigners closely associated with the government effort in the North independently reported that the burning of Huai Chom Poo grew out of a series of extortion attempts by local government officials in Thoeng district. According to their swidden agricultural practice the Meo of Huai Chom Poo began, probably in February 1967, to fell trees in the vicinity of their village.³⁰ After a period of drying, the trees and brush were burned, and the resulting smoke apparently attracted the attention of local Thai officials. One of them arrived to demand

²⁸ In a briefing given by General Saiyud Kerdphol of CSOC, reported in the *Bangkok World* on 4 March 1968, the number was estimated at 130.

²⁹ PB385632.

³⁰ The reader should note that there are actually two villages named Huai Chom Poo. One, a Thai village, is located in the western foothills of the ridgeline running along the eastern side of the Thoeng-Chieng Khong road. The second village, inhabited by Meo tribesmen, was on the eastern side of the ridgeline, up in the hills. There are several such pairs of villages, one Thai and one tribal, with the same name. Because of the exhaustion of the land tribal villages must move from time to time. Thus it is unlikely for any but the most recent maps to give an accurate idea of the location of tribal village locations in the upland areas of northern Thailand.

payment for not reporting the burning to higher authorities, and as was customary was paid off by the Meo. Later a second official arrived independently of the first, the foreign sources reported, and he too was paid off. Word then finally reached the Provincial Police office in Thoeng district, and a delegation was sent to extract yet a third payment (though without knowing that it was in fact the third). This move was an ill-advised one, for the patience of the Meo had worn thin, and the reception was a violent one.

The official police report of the violence at Huai Chom Poo omits mention of any extortion attempts, but it does record that on 8 May 1967, a fifty-man group of Thai hiked to Huai Chom Poo, arriving at 2.00 p.m. They found no men, and only a few old women, in the village. The latter said that all the men had gone to the neighboring village of Pa Daeng, and a Thai officer then told them to instruct their men to come to the village of Yang Hom (near the Thoeng–Chieng Khong road in the valley) to discuss the tree-cutting. On the way back down to the valley the group was attacked by the Meo, resulting in the death of one man, the wounding of four others, and the capture of three more. Early the next day another group of 64 policemen set out from Thoeng, arriving and surrounding Huai Chom Poo at about noon. The Meo then opened fire and the fighting went on for the next 2½ hours. Finally the Meo withdrew, allowing the three captured men to escape. Although the report did not say so directly, it was apparently at this point that the village was burned by the police. A short time later a third group of police was sent in, who completed the job of destruction by burning the remaining huts, killing the animals, and destroying stored grain. The Huai Chom Poo area then quieted down, but the police kept numerous patrols in the area.

The next scene in the drama of the North requires the introduction of a new cast of characters: the Kuomintang. These remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's 49th Division, still living in Burma and northern Thailand, played an important, though completely unwitting, role in the evolving war in the North. Forced out of Yunnan by the communist victory in 1949, the 49th Division created such international complications that large numbers had to be evacuated by air to Taiwan in 1953 and in 1961. Those who declined repatriation were officially disowned by all parties, and have remained so ever since. Their numbers, variously estimated at between 3,000 and 6,000, apparently remain constant over time due to continuing recruitment by the KMT leaders. Three groups exist, two in northern Thailand and one in Burma. The first, known locally as the Third Army (or sometimes Division), is headed by

General Li Wen Huan, and is based at Doi Than Ngob³¹ in Chiang Mai province, directly opposite Burma. The second, known as the Fifth Army, is headed by General Tuan Shi Wen, headquartered at Doi Mae Salong³² in Chiang Rai province.³³ The third group, headed by General Chang Chi Fu, was formerly based at Hin Taek in Mae Chan district of Chiang Rai province, but after a falling out with his comrades-in-arms General Chang moved his men to Burma some years back. Of Sino-Shan origin, General Chang (also known by the Shan name of Khun Sa) reportedly has a quasi-officer status in the Burmese Volunteer Defense Forces, which permits him freedom of action in limited areas of Burma. His men live and operate in the Shan areas from the three-border intersection of Burma, Laos and Thailand northward to the Yunnan border.³⁴

These three KMT armies make their living from the sale of opium grown by Shan, Meo and other tribal groups in Yunnan, Burma, Laos and Thailand. Each KMT group has a recognized area of responsibility, and as an opium shipment arrives in its area the owners must pay a tax for the 'protection' provided by the heavily armed KMT against 'bandits' reported to disturb those who have not taken appropriate precautions. As the opium travels southward by caravan and reaches the tri-border region, it may either go east to be flown out of Houei Sai or one of the dozens of smaller airstrips in northern Laos, or west to travel down the Thai-Burmese border to the Gulf of Siam, where it is taken out by boat.

The KMT units are permitted to stay in Thailand with the understanding that they will remain inconspicuous. This requires, for example, that their troops keep to the upland areas, and that the generals wear civilian clothes when visiting their homes in Chieng Mai and Bangkok. There are apparently several reasons why the KMT are permitted to remain. First, they provide a marketing mechanism for the opium grown by the hill tribes in Thailand. Although the Thai government is obliged by international agreement to eradicate opium production within its borders, it has judged that sudden efforts to do so, without providing an alternative cash crop for the hill tribes, would have

³¹ NB9495.

³² NL3831.

³³ A series of interviews with General Tuan were published in *The New York Times* on 8, 9 and 10 September 1966. Further information on the KMT, in connection with opium smuggling, was published in *The Times* on 11 August 1971. See also Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

⁴ The names of two other generals, Ma Ching-ko and Pu Then Yen, appear from time to time.

catastrophic repercussions in the North. Until such an alternative can be provided the KMT perform a necessary, if distasteful, economic function. Second, the KMT are a costless and decidedly anti-communist force, at home in an upland environment, which the political leadership in Bangkok has viewed as an asset in the rugged border regions so close to communist areas of Laos and China. Third, the KMT are useful for keeping order among the hill tribes, which is beyond the capability of the Thai police apparatus. For example, a newspaper article dated 4 August 1969, reported that 60 armed Kachin tribesmen had crossed from Burma into Chiang Dao district of Chiang Mai province and that

When the Kachin rebels arrived in Thailand the Third Division of the KMT, who live on Thai soil adjacent to Burmese territory, were kept on the alert in order to prevent them from creating any undesirable incidents.³⁵

In July of 1967 there occurred a bizarre breach of the understanding which permits the KMT to remain in Thailand: the so-called Opium War, widely if not always accurately reported in the Thai and international press at the time.³⁶ The Opium War arose because of the decision of Khun Sa to avoid payment of the customary 'taxes' to his fellow generals on an enormous shipment of opium prepared for caravan movement in early July and to be flown out of Laos from the airport at Houei Sai.³⁷ The shipment, consisting of 10,000 joys³⁸ or almost 16 tons, was valued at \$500,000 in Chiang Mai prices, and a staggering sum of money on the international market. To avoid payment, Khun Sa decided to send the caravan of 500 horses directly across the Mekong from Burma into northern Laos, instead of through northern Thailand and then to Laos. The KMT Third and Fifth Armies sent a heavily armed party of 1,000 men to intercept Khun Sa's caravan at Ban Don Chai, one kilometer east of Ban Khwan, a short distance north of Houei Sai.

On 26 July the Laotian garrison commander at Houei Sai flew to Ban Khwan and instructed (or perhaps pleaded) with the more than

³⁵ *The Northerner News* (in Thai), Chiang Mai, 4 August 1969, reproduced in English in the Northern Thai Press Summary, American Consulate, Chiang Mai. Some observers have speculated that there may be reasons of a more personal nature inducing senior Thai leaders to permit the KMT to remain in Thailand.

³⁶ The information reported here is collated from the official Thai police reports and from data supplied by Dr Robert W. Kickert, an anthropologist working with the Akha in Chiang Rai province at the time of the Opium War.

³⁷ Some sources note that Khun Sa's decision was forced by a confiscatory increase in the 'tax' demanded by his fellow generals.

³⁸ One joy equals 1.6 kilograms.

1,500 men present not to fight. The Thai-based KMT groups demanded five million baht (\$250,000) as the price of peace. Khun Sa, still in Burma, radioed his men on the scene not to agree, and on the 29th a major battle ensued. Khun Sa's men, badly outnumbered, soon ran low on ammunition and radioed back to their headquarters for resupply. The boat carrying the weapons and ammunition unfortunately ran aground on the Thai side of the Mekong on the 30th; the weapons confiscated by the Thai, including mortars and 3.5 inch rocket launchers, give some idea of the nature of the battle that was fought. On the same day General Oun Rathikone, then commander of the Laotian armed forces, ordered the KMT to be bombed, and at noon four T-28's bombed one and all at the site of the still-raging battle. The KMT troops fled, leaving the sixteen tons of opium to be picked up by Laotian soldiers and brought to Houei Sai.³⁹ On 2 August the KMT sent three representatives to Chiang Khong to meet with a representative of General Oun for the return of the opium, but no emissary from General Oun appeared. However, three days later the Houei Sai garrison commander delivered a letter to the KMT ordering them to leave Laotian territory by 29 August.

It is now that this bizarre episode began to have consequences for Thailand. The vivid appearance of some 1,500 battling KMT troops tarnished the fiction that no KMT remained as organized units, and an undesirable degree of publicity began to focus on the North. Police reports record that on 19 August some 700 KMT troops crossed the Mekong into Thailand, bringing with them 100 horses, 300 carbines, two recoilless rifles, and 70 machine guns. Thai officials attempted to disarm them, but the KMT refused to be disarmed, and rode off in 18 busses to their base at Mae Salong. A few days later, in order to refurbish the international fiction that Thailand was being 'invaded' by foreigners, the Thai army dispatched three companies to Chiang Khong, and later one company to Chiang Saen and one battalion to Chiang Rai.

Apparently to take advantage of this fortuitous presence of the Thai army in the North, the Laotian and Thai army staffs agreed in October to conduct a joint operation, with the Laotian Force Armée Royale (FAR) sweeping westward through Sayaboury province in Laos, adjacent to Nan and Chiang Rai provinces in Thailand. The Thai

³⁹ The police reports indicate that the Thai-based KMT suffered 70 killed, 80 wounded, and 50 missing; Khun Sa reportedly suffered 80 killed, 20 wounded, and 20 missing, plus all of the opium. Some 80 Shan chiefs and merchants, co-owners with Khun Sa of the 16 tons of opium, were conveniently machine-gunned to death in a lumber mill on the banks of the Mekong.

part of the plan, dated 24 October, provided that the Border Patrol Police were to establish fourteen points along the Thai-Lao border to detect those driven across the border by the FAR sweep in Sayaboury to the east. In this they were to be supported by units of the Thai Third Army now deployed in the North. Those crossing the border were to be intercepted or else driven back across the border into the arms of the FAR.

The results of the joint operation were hardly what had been anticipated. In accord with the plan, the BPP deployed small groups to 14 border locations to observe movements along the trails linking the two countries, and on 30 October suffered their first casualties at Doi Pa Sang Luang in eastern Nan. As more and more individuals were driven across the border, BPP casualties increased, amounting to some 10 per cent of the BPP line strength in the four border provinces of Area V during the months of November and December 1967. This in turn led to the deployment of the army to the upland areas, and as soon as this occurred the whole situation took a much more ominous turn.

The BPP who had previously been responsible for operating in the upland areas of Thailand were specially trained and equipped for jungle operations, had individuals who spoke the tribal languages, and employed small-unit tactics which emphasized patrolling and engaging opponents outside of village complexes. The army, on the other hand, had not been trained for small-unit jungle operations, and had no hill-tribe language capability. Consequently, as soon as deployed the army forces began to suffer very heavy casualties, principally from sniping and booby traps. The problem was aggravated by the army's preferred tactic of napalming entire villages suspected of harboring enemy personnel.⁴⁰ Another tactic also had the effect of creating enemies where formerly there were none: the enforced resettlement of entire villages to the valleys, with all who remained considered as 'communists'.⁴¹ The result of this was a very substantial refugee movement from the upland areas of Nan and Chiang Rai adjacent to Laos, with many of fighting age remaining behind to snipe and lay traps for the Thai army forces. This was made easier by the Thai army tactic

⁴⁰ Several incidents of this indiscriminate bombing and napalming are described in a series of articles in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* issues of 7 March, 11 April and 25 April 1968. The bombing of villages was reported frequently in the Bangkok papers until news of operations in the North was banned in late 1969.

⁴¹ For example the *Bangkok World* reported on 18 April 1968, that 'The Government has issued orders to the hill tribes to come down to live in the settlements. Those who refuse to do so will be regarded with "suspicion" and suppression operations will be taken against them'.

of moving in large formations and of sweeping ahead of its line of march with mortars, thus warning all out of its way but at the same time betraying its route of advance.

The army deployment to the upland areas had several other consequences as well. First, the greatly increased number of hill-tribe individuals driven into cooperation with the communist-led cadres made a number of BPP positions untenable.⁴² Second, the scope of BPP operations, both of a developmental and of a suppressive nature, was greatly limited in those areas where the BPP was not driven out, owing to a command change under which it became necessary for each local BPP commander to clear movements in advance with the relevant army outpost commander. Since large areas were now reserved for bombing or for sweep operations,⁴³ the level of BPP activity was greatly reduced.

In June of 1968 the army adopted more defensive tactics in the upland areas to reduce the extremely heavy casualties they had been suffering, and the situation stabilized in Nan and Chiang Rai, but with the army now bogged down in a static and exposed position, and subject to surprise attacks and sniping as before. Moreover, some 4,000 refugees had been created in the two provinces, and large numbers of those who had not moved into the refugee camps were now fighting to oppose the army occupation of the upland areas. The despairing official report of one police advisor summarized the views of many, both Thai and foreign, at the time:

RTA [Royal Thai Army] reaction to the insurgency problem in the North has created a situation which could rapidly lead to new dimensions of warfare in Thailand. The policy of population evacuation, bombing of villages, and establishment of refugee centers which are not supported has created an area covering large portions of five districts which are denied to government forces. In four months the BPP have lost their physical presence in 15 key villages, 12 schools, and three development centers which were all inhabited by hill tribe people friendly to the BPP. Couple this with the tactics of the RTA which have produced almost 500 government casualties as against almost *no confirmed CT* ['communist terrorist'] casualties, and the CT movement is riding high on propaganda of their infallibility. It will soon become apparent to the hill people that their best chance of survival lies on the side of the CT who have been helping them.⁴⁴

The King himself, who has long had an active and informed interest

⁴² According to figures provided by CSOC there were 19 violent clashes in the North in 1967, 108 in 1968, and 112 in 1969.

⁴³ See, for example, the article 'RTAF Bombs Meos as Army Moves', *Bangkok Post*, 11 December 1968.

⁴⁴ Development Consultants International, Inc., report.

in the tribal peoples, spoke out with unusual force against the army's approach to the situation. A UPI release from Bangkok, reprinted in many newspapers on 18 March 1969, reported:

King Bhumibol Adulyadej Saturday repeated and expanded criticisms of the government's handling of communist-backed tribal guerrillas in North Thailand. It was the second time in recent weeks the King, normally silent on political problems, has publicly criticized the government's handling of the tribal revolt. His remarks seemed to indicate growing concern among the Bangkok elite that the government's heavy reliance on military suppression including Vietnam-style operations backed by armor and air support were causing the insurgency to grow rather than decline.

The King, speaking to about 3,000 students and teachers at the College of Education, said 'There are very few Meos who are really reds. If we make mistakes the whole Meo tribe will turn red and cause incessant trouble for us later'. He said he thought the use of force was self-defeating in the long run, and warned government officials to use more 'discretion in carrying out suppression operations'. The King also called on the government to start telling the truth about the seriousness of the problem, rather than to continue to hand out propaganda that serves only narrow political interests.

The latter reference was apparently to the frequent government claims of large numbers of Vietnamese, Chinese and Lao troops involved.

Of the three major areas of violence in the North, the Nan-Chiang Rai area was thus the first to 'go up in flames'. The other two, the Mae Sot area of Tak, and the tri-province area, were not far behind. Recruiting and training efforts by returnees from Vietnam had reportedly begun, as noted earlier, in 1963, but for four years there had been no violent contacts, no sightings, nothing in fact but continual stories from friendly tribesmen to the BPP that propagandizing and training were occurring. This was in spite of the opening of three schools by the BPP in the eleven Meo villages of Mae Sot, an extensive civic action program, and frequent patrolling. It thus came as a complete surprise when a routine patrol, returning to its base camp at Mae Lamao village from Nu Ky village, was ambushed on 24 December 1967 by an undetermined number of Meo tribesmen. Of the 17 BPP in the patrol three were killed. None of the Meo were killed or captured, and there was never any indication why the Meo had chosen this time to initiate violence in the Mae Sot area.

In response to this ambush the governor of Tak, in early January 1968, ordered the BPP Area VI commander⁴⁵ to begin intensive patrolling in all of the Meo villages of Mae Sot. These patrols then

⁴⁵ Area VI comprises the provinces of Loei, Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, Uttaradit, Tak, Kampanghet, Uthai Thani, Nakhon Sawan, Phichit and Sukhothai.

met new ambushes in every one of the eleven Meo villages they visited. Two schools, at Pa Wai and Pa Kha, had to be closed in January, as did the school at Mae Lamao in April. With the coming of the rainy season at the end of April the violence fell off, due to the total withdrawal of the BPP from the contested areas of Mae Sot. No army troops were sent in, and thus from the end of April 1968 the only people working full-time with the Meo of Mae Sot were those trained at Hoa Binh in northern Vietnam. Thus, again, violence followed a greatly expanded Thai penetration of a formerly autonomous area.

Less information is available on the background to the violence in the tri-province area, the third major scene of fighting in the North, because of an incident of the police–army rivalry mentioned previously. The police leadership early judged that the tri-province area would be a crucial one because of its strategic location dividing the Northeast from the North. Any attempt to isolate the various regions of the country, by working south along the Phetchabun Range which divides the Khorat Plateau from the Central Plain, would logically begin here. This would be aided by the fact that the tri-province boundary lies just south of Phu Miang in Laos, the site of a major communist base camp and training area. Infiltration of men would thus be easy southward down the ridgeline connecting Phu Miang with the tri-province boundary area.

Because of the likely future importance of this area the BPP began the first school in the tri-province area at Phaiyab in 1961, and in cooperation with the Public Welfare Department a major development center at Phu Lomlo⁴⁶ nearby. Considerable sums were devoted to expanding the number of schools in this area and to agricultural training for the tribal people. These efforts were accelerated when reports began to come in of a relatively small group of foreign-trained Meo (the numbers 20 and 22 frequently appear in police reports) propagandizing and training in the tri-province area. In 1966 word was received from the army that in the interests of security all the hill tribes in the three provinces (perhaps some 4,000 at the time, composed of Meo, Yao and Lahu) were to be moved into the development center at Phu Lomlo. The BPP argued that this would not be successful, that it would alienate many of the peaceful residents, and that it was not an effective response to the 20 or so foreign-trained Meo. Over BPP objections the plan was carried out, with three consequences: many of the hill tribes refused to move; conflicts between hill people and government officials became

⁴⁶ Also called Tap Berg, at QU263720.

exacerbated; and BPP personnel were withdrawn, cutting off government intelligence of what was happening in the tri-province area.

Government officials were thus unprepared when violence suddenly erupted in the tri-province area. The first incident was the assassination of the village chief at Ban Pa Wai, Nakhon Thai district, Phitsanulok on 30 September 1968, followed during the next six weeks by two more attempted assassinations of village officials.⁴⁷ Then, on the night of 20 November, began the first of a series of attacks, lasting for a period of two weeks, which brought on a massive reaction by the army, disruption of tribal life over three provinces and, as in the Nan-Chiang Rai area, the driving of large numbers of tribal people into the jungle where they cooperated with the original very small number of foreign-trained activists.

The first attack, on the 20th, was targeted on a hill-tribe self-defense unit organized by the army and located at the village of Huai Sai Tai. The next incident was an ambush, apparently the first to occur in the tri-province area, of a Public Welfare Department team in a jeep near the Phu Lomlo development center. This occurred during the daytime on 27 November near the development center, with one of the three in the jeep killed and the other two wounded. Then, in the early morning hours of 2 December, a major attack began on the development center itself, pinning down the dozen BPP soldiers inside. Police reinforcements were sent in by helicopter, and these too were pinned down for seven days, until the siege was lifted by a Thai army force which had to fight its way through roadblocks and ambushes to reach the scene of battle at Tap Berg.

Events in the tri-province area now followed the familiar pattern established earlier in Nan and Chiang Rai. Army forces numbering some 600 to 700 men deployed to the upland areas with the intention of separating the 'good' from the 'bad' hill people; as soon as the troops approached, the villagers fled into the forest. Within a short time only some 500 tribal people remained in refugee centers; the remainder of the approximately 8,000 tribal residents of the tri-province area⁴⁸ had fled into the forest where, according to police reports, many of the young men were now cooperating with the hundred or so communist-led tribal activists now working in the tri-province area. The army employed its earlier tactics of bombing and napalming of villages, and, as

⁴⁷ Information in these paragraphs was provided to the author by Richard Virden in an interview in August 1969. At the time of the incidents Virden was employed by the United States Information Service in nearby Phitsanulok.

⁴⁸ Owing to continuing immigration from Laos this area increased considerably in population from the 1960 period.

in Nan and Chiang Rai, suffered extremely heavy casualties while fighting in terrain for which it had never been trained or equipped.⁴⁹

Thus once the limited violence was begun in the tri-province area, the pattern which had been established in Nan and Chiang Rai repeated itself: a conventional army deployment, accompanied by bombing and napalming of tribal villages; depopulation of large areas and the creation of a substantial number of refugees; the driving of younger members of the tribal communities into the forests where they cooperated with communist-led activists in operations against Thai troops; aggravation of pre-existing lowlander–uplander conflicts; and the stabilization of violence and social disruption at a high level. More generally, we note that the violence in each case occurred in response to a greatly expanded ethnic Thai presence, frequently disruptive, in a previously tribal area.

The harvest of a decade

After detailed attention in the Thai and the international press following the initial deployment of army forces, the situation in the North largely dropped from public attention, partly owing to a government policy of minimizing coverage of the fighting.⁵⁰ However, in view of the seriousness of the situation, the BPP in 1968 was permitted to initiate a hill-tribe paramilitary village defense program. This program, like all earlier ones, was focused primarily on Meo and Yao, but in some areas such as Mae Sot it proved impossible to recruit Meo into the program because of the depth of Meo–Thai hostilities arising out of earlier governmental suppression operations as well as the long-standing political and economic conflicts mentioned previously. The army continued to employ napalm, artillery, mortars and aerial bombing

⁴⁹ One report indicated that in the first six weeks of the deployment, army forces suffered 75 killed and 200 wounded. *Time* carried a story on 20 January 1969, placing total forces at 1,000 and casualties at 10 per cent. The *Bangkok Post* of 5 January 1969 reported the use of napalm in the tri-province area. The article, reporting an interview with Deputy Defense Minister Dawee Chullasap, noted that ‘High-ranking military officials agreed to the new measure because the use of rockets and artillery were not effective, since the terrain there was forested and inaccessible’.

⁵⁰ According to a UPI dispatch from Bangkok reported on 7 January 1969 in *The New York Times*:

General Saiyudh Kerdphol asked the nation’s newsmen Monday to suppress news of Communist attacks in the northern provinces. The General, chief of staff of the rebel-suppression command, said news of the attacks could lead the people to believe that the Government could not provide security.

from T-28's to clear villages reported to harbor hostile individuals, and these tactics led to an increasing number of hill-tribe refugees, rising from 6,000 or more in June 1968, to 9,000 in January 1969, to more than 10,000 in mid-1970.⁵¹ By mid-1972 this number had reached some 15,000.

Estimates of the size of the anti-government hill-tribe organization in the North varied from agency to agency, but a collation of reports of various Thai agencies in the field in 1970 revealed a total of about 2,000 men under arms, consisting of 600–650 men in Chiang Rai, 700–800 in Nan, 150 in Uttaradit, 200 in Mae Sot, and the remainder in the tri-province area.⁵² One of the most interesting aspects of the hill-tribe organization is that although the actual weapons-carriers were members of various tribal groups, the leadership from CPT Central Committee down to the equivalent of platoon level consisted of Thai and Sino-Thai cadres.⁵³ The CPT had thus moved into the political and military organizational 'vacuum' left by the Thai government and had established its own hill-tribe supra-village apparatus. The ethnic composition at the lowest levels was still mainly Meo and Yao, though there was some reported Karen participation on the western border.

The gradual constriction of Thai military operations in the North forced the halting of several road construction projects in Chiang Rai, Nan and Tak, and permitted the establishment of a 'liberated zone' in Pua district in the northeastern section of Nan. Government operatives were also effectively excluded from the Meo areas of Tak province and from the major Thai-Lao border ridgelines. Far more ominous to the government leadership, however, was the pressure which the movement was placing on ethnic Thai communities in the foothills. In Nan, Chiang Rai, Lampang and Chiang Mai there were assassinations of ethnic Thai village leaders who opposed the movement's propaganda and organizational activities, as well as reports of the establishment by communist cadres based in the hills of various farmers' groups and cooperatives. On 8 June 1970 three Thai employed by the United States Information Service were shot on the valley road 3 miles from the city of Chiang Klang in Nan; on 15 July the first fatal ambush took

⁵¹ Development Consultants International, Inc., reports. Since tribal peoples are not included in the decennial Thai census there are no confirmed tribal population figures by province. However, some idea of the magnitude of the refugee population compared to tribal population may be gained from the following tribal population estimates: Chiang Rai, 40,000; Nan, 28,000; tri-province area, 8,000.

⁵² CSOC order-of-battle information in Bangkok carried only 820 for the North.

⁵³ With the exception of the Mae Sot area, in which no Thai or Sino-Thai cadres were reported.

place on the Thoeng–Chieng Khong road in Chiang Rai province; and in late September the Governor of Chiang Rai himself was assassinated near Ban Saew in Chiang Saen district. Police reports indicated that the CPT organization in the major valley towns of the North, such as Chieng Mai, was operating in close conjunction with the upland hill-tribe organization, and that well-developed intelligence and courier networks under CPT operated between the valleys and the hills. Among government officials there was widespread agreement that no present or contemplated program would be sufficient to overcome and reverse the anti-government hill-tribe movement, and thus these officials viewed their present role, with some regret, merely as chronicling the gradual disappearance of Bangkok's presence from large areas of the North.

Conclusion

Prior to the outbreak of major violence in the North there existed latent conflicts between the Thai and upland peoples because of the distributive inequalities maintained by the authorities in Bangkok between Thai and upland tribal peoples, such as the exclusion of tribal peoples from the lowland political system, the inability of upland village leaders to achieve vertical mobility, and therefore some kind of a personal stake, in Thai police, military or administrative structures, and the non-acceptance by Thai authorities in Bangkok of tribal land rights and agricultural methods. These latent conflicts were for a long time not actualized, however, because of the simple lack of extensive physical contact between the lowland and upland cultures. We should note that these distributive inequalities were not necessarily the result of any malice by the Thai against the tribal peoples; rather they were appropriate and completely understandable policies in an earlier period of limited contact. By the mid-1960's, however, population growth, improved communications, and the increasing strategic importance of the area turned the impact of earlier policies of Thai solidarity and exclusivity into issues of active conflict.

The Communist Party of Thailand began working in the organizational void left by the failure of Thai authorities in Bangkok to establish a supra-village political and military structure which would motivate the voluntary cooperation of the hill peoples. The success which the CPT had in this organizational effort was based on promises of redressing the distributive inequalities suffered by upland peoples

within the Thai state: promises such as tribal autonomy, freedom to pursue swidden agricultural methods and opium culture, security of land tenure; education of a type unobtainable under the Thai authorities in Bangkok; and freedom from petty harassment and extortion by Thai officials. Then, partly through deliberate provocations and partly through the fortuitous occurrence of the Opium War, Thai military forces were deployed to upland areas against the tribal peoples, frequently using indiscriminate methods of violence. There is credible evidence that the communist leadership, knowing of the structure and tactical doctrines of the Thai armed forces, anticipated and desired this military deployment.⁵⁴

Once extensive contact began between Thai and tribal peoples in the upland areas, two things occurred. First, the latent conflicts were actualized; and second, new conflicts resulting from indiscriminate violence by the Thai armed forces were superimposed on the pre-existing distributive conflicts. As a result, there was a rapid escalation of the violence, as well as of armed opposition to the Thai. During the first two years of military operations in the North there took place anywhere from a five to a twenty-fold increase (depending on whose figures are used) in the number of tribal individuals under arms against the Thai. The army deployment also had the effect of shoving aside many of the earlier programs which were ameliorating the situation of potential conflict between lowland and upland cultures, and of creating a large number of tribal refugees, estimated in 1972 at more than 15,000. This depopulation of the upland areas was necessitated by the Thai inability (or more accurately unwillingness) to develop strong political/military organizations among the tribal peoples, in turn a consequence of the strongly discriminating distributive system maintained by the Thai authorities in Bangkok.

Returning to the official perceptions noted at the start of this paper, we see that government personnel on the scene, and government archival data, do not fully agree with the official view disseminated to international and domestic audiences. These sources agree that anti-government leadership was affiliated with the Communist Party of Thailand, and that fraternal parties in Laos, China and Vietnam assisted the CPT to the extent of training, advice and propaganda (but not personnel). Mass participation, however, where it existed,

⁵⁴ In his article on the Thai bombing of Meo Maw in the 25 April 1969 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, John Thomson records that the guerrilla band told the residents of Meo Maw when they arrived that in a few days the Thai would bomb the village. Thai officials, receiving reports of the presence of the guerrillas in Meo Maw, then in fact proceeded to bomb it.

was based not on attachment to 'communism' but on protection of traditional lifeways and a desire for advancement of a type not permitted by the authorities in Bangkok. We thus conclude that whether or not the anti-government movement would have existed in the absence of such limited external support as it received, a necessary condition for its existence was a matter strictly internal to Thailand: the distributive inequalities maintained by the Thai government between Thai and tribal peoples. We see also that a necessary condition for the rapid growth of the movement in the North was the government's policy of indiscriminate violence.

In summary, then, three elements stand out in the evolution of the war in northern Thailand: first, a series of latent distributive conflicts between Thai and upland peoples; second, catalytic activities among the tribal peoples, led by the CPT from bases in Laos, and assisted to the extent of training by fraternal parties in Laos, Vietnam and China, which provoked Thai authorities into a suppressive response in the North; and third, the counterproductive nature of the suppressive response, which led to a rapid escalation of violence in the North, and to a far greater number of armed opponents than had existed prior to the suppressive response. The second element of this triad, the continued ability of the CPT to operate from bases in Laos with assistance from nearby countries, is a geopolitical fact which cannot be undone. The prognosis for the future then, depends on the wisdom of the Thai response in focusing on the first and third elements: the distributive inequalities maintained by the current system, and the counterproductive nature of the suppressive response inherent in current military doctrine and organization. Should the policies of the 1960's be continued, an escalatory spiral may lead to a situation such as that in Laos today: intensive bombing, violent disruption of traditional lifeways, mass population resettlement, establishment of a permanent state of dependency by the resettled tribal peoples, and continuous warfare in what could otherwise be an area of peaceful and productive cooperation between lowland and upland peoples.