

Plaek Phibunsongkhram

Extended Biography

You may wish to share this biography with students, or just to read it for your own information.

The Twentieth Century placed Thailand squarely between larger antagonistic powers. Thailand's name changed back and forth from Siam, referencing the ancient kingdom that produced its monarchy, to Thailand, derived from *Muang Thai* meaning "land of the free." In 1939, the name of the country was officially changed to Thailand by Plaek Phibunsongkhram, or "Chomphon Por" as he was popularly known, the Prime Minister. In 1946 the name was changed back to Siam by Pridi Phanomyong, the civilian post-World War II Prime Minister. Then, after a 1947 coup put Phibunsongkhram, or "Phibun" as he was called in the West, back in power he changed the name back to Thailand in 1949. This vacillation between names and the irony that the one meaning "land of the free" was officially adopted under a military strongman, Phibunsongkhram/Chomphon Por/Phibun, is potentially illuminating of the uncertainty of the era within the country and the attraction of military rule within that uncertainty.

But what's in a name? Or three? Plaek Phibunsongkhram was born around 1897 in Changwat, Nonthaburi Province. He went to Buddhist schools before training at a Paris military academy and then joining the army and working his way up to become a junior officer by 1932. He also became a leader among the "Promoters", who were officers and civil servants, that led a successful coup to end the absolute monarchy of what was then Siam. In 1934, Phibunsongkhram became the Defense Minister and campaigned for a stronger military. In 1938 he became Prime Minister. The very next year he changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand, further distancing the national culture from its ancient monarchy.

As World War II commenced in Southeast Asia, Phibunsongkhram led the government as Prime Minister. He was also a Field Marshal thereby living up to the nickname that would largely replace his own given name among Thais, "Chomphon Por", roughly "the Marshal." Think "Judge Judy." "Chomphon Por" was swayed by early Axis victories in Europe and saw the Japanese as a powerful ally against China. With the war as a pretext he became a military dictator. Phibunsongkhram's militarism paid some early dividends. With Japanese support Thailand expanded to reclaim former territories in Cambodia and Laos. These victories made Phibunsongkhram very popular.

Phibunsongkhram used this popularity to push a cultural project of Thai nationalism and further consolidate his power. The features of this nationalism were the sentiment of "Thailand for the Thai", anti-Chinese propaganda, and the desire to adopt and improve western "civilization." The project manifested in interesting and sometimes enduring ways. Belying the rabid anti-Chinese propaganda of the era, Phibunsongkhram adopted and adapted a Chinese noodle dish, called it Pad Thai, and declared it the national food. Legally declared it so. This was perhaps his most enduring legacy. He also made laws, called the *Rattha Niyom*, or Cultural Mandates, requiring western style clothing such as hats, saluting the flag, memorizing the national anthem, and speaking Thai. Again, these were laws not suggestions.

When it came to adopting military dictatorship, Phibunsongkhram looked to the fascist regimes of Germany and Italy as examples. When it came to adopting western style "civilization" and using it against the west, Thailand looked to Japan as an example. A good illustration of this is the building of the "Death Railway" during the war. This railroad, a national symbol of progress, was built through the forced labor of civilians and Allied prisoners of war. As it was being built, people could see westerners forced to submit to Japanese and Thai soldiers. When all was said and done approximately 90,000 civilians and 12,000 Allied Prisoners of war had died in the project.



All of these mandates and deaths did not go uncontested. Neither did what was increasingly looking like a Japanese occupation of the country go ignored. In 1942, when Thailand declared war on the Allies, the Ambassador to the United States refused to deliver the declaration of war. His name was Seni Pramoj and he became a leader of the Seri Thai, or Free Thai, movement. With the help of the United States he armed over 50,000 Thais. As the Allies began winning the war and the Seri Thai grew stronger and more popular, Phibunsongkhram was removed from office and exiled to Japan in 1944.

But during the Cold War, allegiances shifted again. In 1948, Phibunsongkhram's military and cultural authoritarianism found new currency against an old enemy and he served once again as Prime Minister until 1957. "Phibun's" fierce anti-communism made him popular with the United States, as well as Thais who feared being conquered by nearby China and its allies. He served once again as Prime Minister from 1948-57. Phibunsongkhram supported the United States in the Korean war and the French in Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam). In 1955, he toured the United States and Britain. In 1949, he again changed the name of the country back to Thailand, which it remains today. By 1957, the public and the monarch had had enough of the longest serving Prime Minister in Thai history and he was exiled again. He lived out the last seven years of his life outside the country and died in Japan.