

Thailand's Secret War: The Free Thai, OSS, and SOE during World War II

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By E. Bruce Reynolds. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 462 pages, photos, bibliography, index.

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In terms of resources, the China-Burma-India Theater was a forgotten operational area in the Second World War. Yet, the CBI—or, as it was punned, Confused Beyond Imagination—was an active test bed for often-competing Allied intelligence agencies. These intelligence organizations enmeshed themselves in local, inter-service, and international politics, and nearly defeated themselves through these efforts before they could even begin to wage war upon the Japanese. As Reynolds shows, however, once the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its Free Thai group overcame various obstacles in their path, they proved very effective in Thailand, in contrast to the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and its smaller group of Free Thai.

Following a few brief hours of resistance just prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Thailand, unique among nations in Southeast Asia in that it had always remained independent, agreed to cooperate with the Japanese. On 25 January 1942, Bangkok went a step further and declared war on the United States and the United Kingdom. Washington ignored the

declaration as one pressured by the Japanese, but London was determined to make Thailand pay, possibly through postwar territorial concessions on the Malay Peninsula. London's punitive stance colored its view of the Free Thai movement throughout the war. Compounding this problem for the UK effort was the US stance of staunch anti-imperialism and unwavering support for China, which also was interested in gaining influence in postwar Thailand.

Within the CBI, the newly formed OSS was trying to establish and assert itself independently of the SOE. It faced its share of troubles, in large part due to having to carve out a place for itself in a theater already characterized by staunch rivalry between the US Army, under Gen. Joseph Stillwell, and the US Naval Group, China, under Capt. Milton Miles. Adding to these teething troubles were the complexities of cooperating with the (Nationalist) Chinese—and their intelligence faction headed by Tai Li—through the Sino-American Co-Operative Organization (SACO). Initial attempts to operate from China proved disastrous for the fledgling OSS Free Thai group. Only by eventually basing the group with OSS Detachment 404 in Sri Lanka did Washington succeed in finding a location from which the Free Thai could successfully operate.

Unlike SOE, the OSS gained a helpful domestic political partner in the Department of State, which supported OSS activities regarding Thailand. Because there was practically no US interest in Thailand at the time, the Department of State had little competition from other US agencies and more freedom in creating a consistent US policy toward Bangkok than the UK had. Although the Free Thai never engaged in a large scale uprising against the Japanese, the OSS had guerrilla-training programs in place and clandestine radio stations relaying intelligence back to the Allies. In effect, the OSS had placed itself in a position to undermine the Japanese occupation of Thailand.[1]

With *Thailand's Secret War*, Reynolds proves that he is a dean among scholars of intelligence in the Far East during the Second World War. His exhaustive archival research and exploitation of untapped sources have produced a landmark work that is geared towards serious students of both intelligence and the Second World War in the Far East.

[1]To learn more about the OSS in Thailand, see *Into Siam: Underground Kingdom* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1945), a memoir by Nicol Smith, who was

the OSS liaison officer for the Thai group. For a scholarly work on China, consult Maochun Yu, *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

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