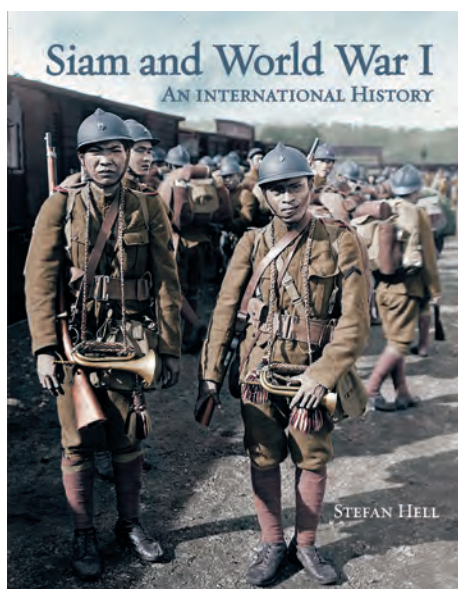


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Siam and World War I: An International History by Stefan Hell. Bangkok: River Books, 2017. ISBN: 9786167339924. 1,200 Baht.



In July 1917, Prince Charoon (Charoonsakdi Kritakara), head of the Siamese legation in Paris, was thrilled to learn that Siam had abandoned the neutrality it had maintained for the first three years of the Great War. He rejoiced in the decision to join Britain and France against Germany and the other Central Powers. The prince declared that there was “no doubt that this is our real opportunity of raising the Status of our beloved country” (140). The opportunity he envisioned was diplomatic and strategic. He saw in this move a chance for Siam to show its civilization as the equal to that of the Western European powers. The prince believed, as did many Siamese leaders of his generation, that such arguments about Siam’s exhibition

of Western norms, culture, and behavior were critical to maintaining the kingdom's independence in the face of Western colonial threats. Committing Western-style military units to a European war provided a great stage upon which to display those civilization markers to the colonial powers that had threatened Siam's sovereignty over the previous half century. It was not lost on the prince that those same "civilized" European nations were trying to annihilate each other's armies with increasingly horrific homicidal technology. But in hailing the opportunity to join the war, he knew the opportunity came with grave dangers and potential losses.

For the first years of the conflict, Siam's leaders chose neutrality for the safety it seemed to promise. They had seen the peril of crossing France and Britain in global affairs only a couple of decades earlier. Furthermore, many Siamese elites had positive impressions of Germany, admiring its material culture, schools, and the country's lack of territorial ambition in Southeast Asia. Most of Siam's leaders, including King Vajiravudh himself, had studied in one or more of the warring nations with several receiving military training there. They struggled to avoid being drawn in while representatives of the Allies and Central Powers in Siam pursued various schemes to undermine each other's standing in Southeast Asia. In the midst of economic disruption and sub rosa maneuvers, the royal court endured intense diplomatic pressure to take a side. Outrage over German submarines resuming unrestricted warfare to target civilian vessels, and the deaths of two Siamese princes in one such attack, compelled Bangkok to join Britain and France against Germany and Austria-Hungary. In pursuing a moral argument for choosing war, Bangkok advanced a similar argument put forward by the United States when it had abandoned its neutral stance a few months earlier.

Siam could have stopped with its declaration of war and followed a safe course. It could have contributed supplies, raw materials, and access to port facilities as aid to the exhausted British and French forces. But its leaders chose to pursue a more perilous track. They opted to move against Germany and its military assets in Siam. Immediately, they seized a dozen German ships harbored in Siam; and they imprisoned Germans, Austrians, and other citizens of the Central Powers living there. Then they volunteered to send special military units – an aviation detachment and logistical teams – to the front in Europe. And as Stefan Hell demonstrates in his superb study, *Siam and World War I: An International History*, they successfully navigated a course through a host of geopolitical dangers to emerge more firmly in control of the kingdom's independence. They laid the groundwork for a historical argument about Siam/Thailand's ability to fight successfully in Western-style wars. In the process of joining Britain and France, however, they may have revealed more about Thai chauvinist attitudes toward other Asian peoples than they had ever realized.

Hell's scrupulously researched and sumptuously illustrated history offers several interwoven tales of Siam's involvement in the Great War from multiple perspectives and subfields of history. It tells the story of a Southeast Asian kingdom that declared war on powerful European states during the height of the Western imperial era. It describes Siam's delicate diplomatic maneuvering while actively being wooed and resented by representatives from both the Central Powers and the Allies. It describes the experiences of some 1,300 Thai men who traveled across the globe to serve upon the frozen hellscape

of trench warfare's horrible final days. It includes the plight of European families who overnight became prisoners of war in Siam, and that of their Siamese counterparts who suffered—with some even perishing—in German confinement.

Hell traces the international and national with great detail and rewarding analysis. He also provides an interesting account of the transformation of Siam into a proxy battlefield between the European belligerents. Among the book's more interesting sections are descriptions of how Germany sought to use Siam as a base for fomenting unrest among Indians in British colonial units in Burma. Their efforts failed to spark Indian mutinies and, instead, antagonized Siamese leaders struggling to remain neutral.

Hell builds upon earlier works of the Rama VI period by offering a more sophisticated treatment of Siamese diplomacy before, during, and after the war. He provides multi-perspectival accounts of events in Europe and Siam that have hitherto received inadequate attention. His study is a worthy elaboration of the period as described in such landmark studies as Walter F. Vella's *Chaiyo!* Decisions made regarding Siam's grandest foreign policy venture fell to many of the princely leaders surrounding the king. Hell's focus on the contributions of Princes Chakrabongse, Charoon, Devawongse, Paribatra, and Mahidol gives English-language readers a view into the biographies of these important figures normally only found in Thai-language histories. His study is especially good on the role that two Thai leaders – Prince Chakrabongse and Prince Charoon – played in shaping Siam's response to the dangers and opportunities that the war brought about. In addition to official government sources from archives in Bangkok and London, the author draws upon hitherto inaccessible materials such as secret memoranda and family correspondence, and even some royal diaries. The endnotes are a treasure trove for scholars of the period.

The volume is beautiful. While it might seem strange to characterize a history of one of the modern era's ugliest events in such terms, the book's numerous and varied illustrations enliven the text and vivify its descriptions (including its uglier episodes). The volume is lushly illustrated with photographs on nearly every page, with posters, postcards, tickets, pamphlets, and other historical ephemera interspersed throughout. All images are reproduced sharply, with many getting big layouts. Historians and casual readers will find their examination fruitful and satisfying.

There are multiple wars underway in Hell's study, and not all of them are martial or even visible. In addition to the military conflict raging on battlefields and at sea, there are battles fought over civilization markers within the words of diplomatic cables, in the exchanges of civilian prisoners, and in the hearts of the participants. French racist attitudes are starkly evident in cables to Paris that praise the Thai seizure of German vessels in the Chaophraya River despite "the childishness of the Siamese even when the most serious matters are concerned" (94). In another telling incident, a British engineer's assault of two Siamese soldiers in Bangkok is answered by Prince Chakrabongse issuing a statement asserting that "Respectful and good manners *must be mutual*" [*italics original*] (138). And to reinforce his point, he dispatches a Siamese cavalry unit to parade noisily outside the British expatriates' club as its members gather for their daily cocktail hour.

Hell's study makes it clear that Siam was fighting a war over its humanity. But in trying to make a strenuous argument that will be understood in British and French

psyches, they come close to parroting a similarly racist view. To demonstrate to Western eyes that Siamese air units and logistics crews are the equal of British and French troops, they must suggest Siamese superiority to the Asian peoples subjugated by the European imperialists. Siam's leaders go to great lengths to distinguish their soldiers from the many thousands of unskilled Chinese and Vietnamese workers brought to Europe by their colonial masters to serve as "coolie labor." Siam's refusal to allow the expeditionary units to sail aboard ships carrying Vietnamese and Chinese, for example, carries the appearance of disdain for their fellow Southeast Asians. In one section of Hell's study, Prince Charoon struggles with the subtleties of disabusing the French of their attitudes toward all Asians without explicitly expressing the same racist position while he plans the composition of the Siamese military delegation. In his cables back to Bangkok, he insists that Siam's French-speaking interpreters carry the rank of commissioned officers with the reminder that "the general belief among the French [that] we are the same as Annamites must be dissipated" (147). In trying to speak to the French, the Siamese end up sounding like them.

The freshest section of Hell's study concerns the adventures of these Siamese soldiers in Europe, a story told better here than anywhere else. His account of their time in Europe makes for engrossing reading. Descriptions of the Thai troops' efforts to adjust to the harsh environment of the front lines are both heart-wrenching and, at times, humorous. Despite their woolen uniforms and long coats, they are unable to abide the unfamiliar assault of Europe's damp autumn and stinging winter. The unfortunate soldiers must also get by on meager rations and haphazard sleeping quarters. Compounding their discomfort is the growing menace of the influenza pandemic as it grows ever more virulent. Despite the Siamese sacrifices, their allies offer little gratitude.

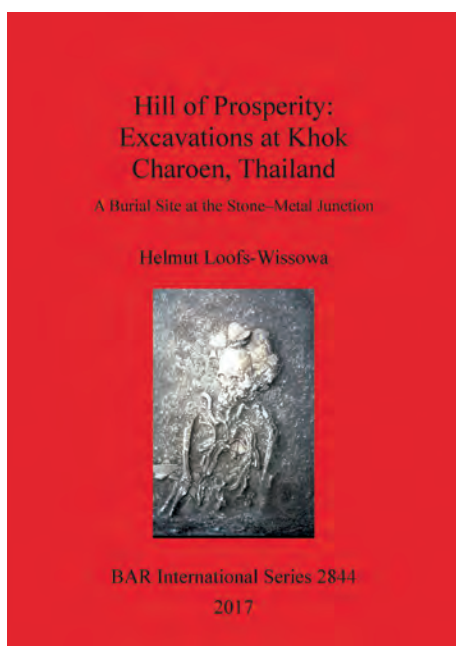
In the anecdote that begins this volume, a unit of Siamese soldiers hopelessly lost on the backroads of the French countryside face starvation when French troops repeatedly refuse to share their rations. The Siamese are spared only after stumbling upon a group of American soldiers who offer food and directions. Many of the Siamese soldiers who traveled to France came to hate the French even more than they had when Siam was neutral. The French reputation for haughtiness that most of the Siamese troops had known only through political rhetoric is confirmed by rude treatment from many French allies. In one telling episode, a French interpreter, already disappointed to be eating with a Siamese unit, refuses to pass bread to them during the meal because "it wasn't part of [his] duties" (180). Things get worse when the French aviation officers entrusted to teach the Siamese airmen begin ordering them around. Prince Charoon's letter to King Vajiravudh lays bare the problem in simple terms. "Of course our men resent it greatly & simply hate the French now," he writes in one dispatch. "I am deeply sorry that this is the result which is quite opposite of what our intention should be & that of Your Majesty's policy" (189).

Prince Charoon described the expeditionary force as a "bit of show." Its real military value to the Allies on France's Western Front is debatable, but, as the author makes clear, its political value to Siam is undeniable. Despite the depravations and deaths among its expeditionary forces, Siam's gamble was successful. Its entry into the Great War helped the country regain its full sovereignty by using participation and the subsequent

peace talks to leverage an end to extraterritoriality. Equally compelling is the author's demonstration of the enduring idea of Siam's First World War victory that continues to reverberate in Thailand's collective memory. His study concludes with an exploration of the monuments, memorials, histories, organizations, and films dedicated to Siam's Great War adventure. The conclusion makes clear that Siam's short experiences on the European battlefields and negotiating tables in 1918-19 have cast a long shadow over Thailand's leadership, armed forces, and citizenry in the century that followed. Stefan Hell's excellent study should be labeled "required reading" for anyone interested in a full and nuanced account of this important chapter in the kingdom's history.

Richard A. Ruth

Hill of Prosperity: Excavations at Khok Charoen, Thailand. A Burial Site at the Stone-Metal Junction by Helmut Loofs-Wissowa. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2017. ISBN: 9781407315065. £73.



Many foreign archaeologists have excavated prehistoric sites in Thailand, and too few have published a final report. It is, therefore, a rare pleasure to find that the excavations at Khok Charoen, that took place half a century ago, have now been described in this important volume. Khok Charoen (KC) is one of the few Neolithic sites in Thailand to have been excavated, and still stands as one that has furnished a large assemblage of human burials matched by more recent fieldwork at Khok Phanom Di, Ban Non Wat and Nong Ratchabat in Supanburi. The site lies on the eastern edge of the Bangkok plain, just north of Chai Badan. A series of low mounds that bisect two streams, it appears to have been a cemetery, for despite test pits and at least three major areas opened by excavations, very little evidence has been forthcoming for where the Neolithic inhabitants lived, save for

the occasional post hole and non-mortuary potsherds.

This report, therefore, concentrates on the mortuary record identified in three different parts of the site. Each interment from KC III is described: the sex and age of the dead individual, the orientation and the associated mortuary offerings. These are illustrated with black and white photographs and sketches of each burial, with each grave labelled and described in the text. Some burials were virtually devoid of associated artefacts, but others were relatively wealthy. Burial 6 from area III, for example, involved an adult