

*Siam and the League of Nations: Modernisation, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy, 1920–1940* by STEFAN HELL (Bangkok: River Books, 2010). ISBN 978 974 9863 89 3 (soft)

This book has grown out of a doctoral thesis by the author at the University of Tübingen. It deals with the making of foreign policy of Thailand in the period between the end of the First World War and the start of the second. The global context of that period was one of transition from war to peace, the rise of Nazism in Germany and Communism in Russia, the Great Depression in the capitalist economy of the West, and the stirrings for independence in the colonies of Europe in Southeast Asia.

In Thailand itself, it was also a period of transition, from the absolute monarchy of King Vajiravudh, or Rama VI, to the constitutional monarchy of King Ananda Mahidol or Rama VIII, after the People's Party revolution of 1932.

The book covers the relations between Siam, as it then was called, and the League of Nations, the new, post-World War I forum of multilateral relations among countries. According to the author, it was “the first great experiment of a standing multilateral organization with global authority...the League stood for a new world order which it was to guarantee by facilitating peaceful resolution of international conflicts, increased cooperation among states, a broader body of international law and a new form of open diplomacy.” (p. 12)

The focus of the book is on “the

extraordinary multilateral dimension of Siam’s foreign policy between 1920 and 1940 and, from the League’s perspective, on the unique case of the organisation’s only independent Southeast Asian member state.” (p. 13)

The main conclusion of the author, presented in the final chapter, is that “the foreign policy and domestic modernization of the Kingdom of Siam during the 1920s and the 1930s had a distinct multilateral dimension as a result of Siam’s membership in the League of Nations.” (p. 237)

The book contains a systematic exploration of the themes of Siam becoming a member of the League of Nations (Chapter 1) and Siam at Geneva (Chapter 2), then goes on to examine the role of Siam in the League in the fields of Opium Control (Chapter 3), Public Health (Chapter 4), Human Trafficking (Chapter 5) and Collective Security (Chapter 6), followed by the author’s conclusions in Chapter 7. Tej Bunnag, a former minister of foreign affairs and longtime member of the Siam Society, has written a foreword.

Stefan Hell’s treatment of the subject is excellent. Thorough scholarship as a hallmark of Germanic academic practice is evident all the way through, with easy-to-read “side notes” at the side of the page, rather than footnotes, hence not disrupting the flow of the text.

What we learn about from the book, beyond the mere recounting of events, is the difficulty in practicing diplomacy by a small country in the face of the “great powers”. In those times, colonial dreams were still very much alive, and Siam’s

problems with the main protagonists in the League (the winners of WWI) were not to be addressed on the multilateral stage. Revision of the so-called “unequal treaties”, as Bunnag mentions, ultimately depended on Thai legal reform, but both he and this reviewer concur that Siam’s membership and participation in the League of Nations also contributed to the successful outcome. The “unequal treaties” with Western powers, dating from the Bowring Treaty of 1855, were revised “in a remarkably smooth and overall non-confrontational fashion.” (p. 240)

Much of the book deals with events that have been overtaken by history. Of the subjects that are discussed in the chapters, opium control, public health and human trafficking are still on the international development agenda. They are interesting in that they showed how these issues were already creating awareness among the developed countries, and how far the world still has to go. But the truly historical part, on collective security, is now really history. The big issue was Siam’s abstention in the vote to condemn Japan for its invasion of Manchuria in 1933. Stefan Hell gives an excellent account and a comprehensive analysis of the decisions leading to the instruction by the by-then post-monarchical government of Siam to abstain on the vote.

Who would benefit from reading the book? To this reviewer—as a layman in the field of international relations and Siamese historical studies—first of all, it is the details of the Siamese conduct of foreign policy during the period

that is most interesting, because they are perhaps difficult to find elsewhere. We learn about the work of princely diplomats, Prince Charoon and Prince Wan, for instance, how they represented the Siamese government at the time. More generally, I think the students of international relations would benefit from the detailed discussions on the various multilateral issues that were dealt with as part of the League of Nations activities. Many of them remain relevant today, even if the world has changed dramatically since the days of the League of Nations.

Finally, this reviewer agrees with Bunnag about the inclusion of the old photographs and facsimile of documents. They are delightful.

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