

British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 2, September 2024

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ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 13 September 2024

Citation: Nipaporn Ratchatapattanakul, 'War Cemeteries and the Thai-Burma Railway: The Construction of Collective Memories of the Asia-Pacific War in Thailand', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.2 (2024), pp. 81-99.

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War Cemeteries and the Thai-Burma Railway: The Construction of Collective Memories of the Asia-Pacific War in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The Japan-Thai Pact of Alliance and Thailand's declaration of war on Britain and the USA created ambiguity in later memories of the Second World War in Thailand. This article investigates the formation of a Thai collective memory of the war between 1945 and 1963. It argues that the construction of Prisoner of War (POW) cemeteries, the reopening of the Thai-Burma railway, the publication of anglophone and Thai memoirs during this period became the foundation for the establishment of a narrative directed toward Thai nationals and foreign tourists, that positioned Thailand as a country undefeated in war.

Introduction

Between 15 and 22 October 1963, Queen Juliana, Prince Bernhard, and Crown Princess Beatrix of The Netherlands undertook a state visit to Thailand. A significant event in the official schedule was Princess Beatrix's visit to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery (Don Rak Cemetery), and the Chungkai War Cemetery also in Kanchanaburi, where she laid wreaths in tribute to deceased POWs. This episode marked a distinctive moment, possibly the first instance of high-ranking members of a royal family traveling to Allied war cemeteries in Thailand. The Dutch Royals performed an act of remembrance that was common in global commemorations of the Second World War. Less than one week later, on 27 October, King Bhumibol, Queen Sirikit, Princess Ubon Ratana, and Prince Vajiralongkorn embarked on a train journey from Bangkok to visit the Sai Yok Waterfall, located at Nam Tok station, the

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DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i2.1814](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i2.1814)

terminus of the Thai-Burma railway. The royal family's train excursion was captured in a seven-minute newsreel and broadcast nationwide over the following week. The newsreel vividly portrayed the scenic landscapes along the Thai-Burma railway, featuring landmarks such as the bridge over the river Kwai and the Wang Pho Viaduct. Upon disembarking from the train, the Royals warmly acknowledged the awaiting crowd, and expressed admiration for the natural beauty surrounding them.¹ The Thai royal outing played a pivotal role in introducing the Thai-Burma railway as a tourist route to the public consciousness. Tourism was not the only goal of the royal excursion, King Bhumibol (reign 1946-2016) was eager to re-establish the role of the Royal Family which had diminished after the introduction of constitutional monarchy in 1932. He thus travelled across the country visiting rural communities and engaging in Buddhist practices. A major part of the King's visit involved stopping at Kanchanaburi to take part in the Kathin merit-making ceremony at Thewa Sangkharam Temple. During the war, this temple served as one of many cremation sites for the large number of Asian labourers who died during the construction of the Thai-Burma Railway.² The site is only 800 metres away from the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery. However, unlike his Dutch counterparts, the King's trip did not engage in war commemoration.

Although the Thai-Burma railway and the war cemeteries share the same historical background, the meanings of the visits by the Dutch and Thai royal families were quite different. The Dutch royal family acknowledged the Thai-Burma railway in light of its war-time significance, while the Thai royal family viewed it simply as a tourist or commercial initiative or a means to engage with the Thai population. Thai national press reports also avoided associating the railroad with its historical roots. However, the two late October royal visits in 1963 share some common imagery, and we can see overlapping uses as a commemorative space and tourist attraction. In the prelude to the short newsreel war cemeteries are noted, not for their wartime significance, but rather to highlight the Thai-Burma railway's readiness to welcome visitors beyond the relatives or friends of POWs. Instead, it underscored the region's beauty, and the convenience of the railway, creating and promoting a narrative that disassociated Thailand from its past collaboration with Japan.

This article discusses the emergence of the construction of collective but also competing memories of the Asia Pacific War in Thailand as highlighted by the two royal visits. The immediate post-war period saw the rise of Southeast Asian nationalism, a changing order in Asia, and new complex regional and domestic

¹Film Archives of Thailand (hereafter FAT), D1-02271-53, 'The royal family visited the Waterfall in Kanchanaburi province by train', Thai Television Channel 4, 1963.

²National Archives of Thailand (hereinafter NAT), BK Sungsut 2.6.6/8, 'Japan wants to buy land in Tha Maka Village', Kanchanaburi, 25 November 1943 to 18 March 1944.

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dynamics. Scholarship has tended to focus on the period from the 1980s, when war-related tourism flourished with the post-war period between 1945 and 1963, which was marked by the construction of memorial sites in Kanchanaburi, being marginalised.³ Previous studies suggest that the collective memories embodied in Kanchanaburi's war-related tourist destinations are somewhat fragmented.⁴ Certain narratives have received substantial emphasis, such as the atrocious treatment of POWs by Japanese guards, while others are overlooked, such as the fate of the Asian labourers.⁵ Based on previously unused historical records from the National Archives of Thailand and Film Archives of Thailand, this article argues that three main events influenced the creation of collective memories: the construction of Allied war cemeteries in Kanchanaburi, the reopening of the Thai-Burma railway, and the circulation of non-fiction works on the war. These events will be analysed to answer the question of how these collective memories were constructed and what foundational narratives have enabled these shared memories to persist. The negotiation processes and mutual responses of the diverse participants will be analysed to gain an understanding of the formation of collective memories in the case of transnational memorial sites.

Background and Context

The Thai government's wartime collaboration with Japan remains a controversial topic in Thai academia. These controversies on collaboration emphasise the relationship between the Thai government and Japan after the 1932 Revolution, and especially in military relations after 1939. These trends are explained as a means of lessening the influence of the British, who long supported Thailand's monarchical regime.⁶ On the

³See Apinya Baggelaar Arrunnaporn, 'Atrocity Heritage Tourism at the "Death Railway"', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 100 (2012), pp. 257-268; Joan Beaumont and Andrea Witcomb, 'The Thai-Burma railway: asymmetrical and transnational memories', in Christina Twomey and Ernest Koh (eds), *The Pacific War: Aftermaths, remembrance and culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 67-87; John Lennon, 'Kanchanaburi and the Thai-Burma Railway: disputed narratives in the interpretation of War', *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 4,1 (2018), pp. 140-155.

⁴For example, see Apinya Arrunnaporn, "Interpretation management of atrocity heritage of the 'Death Railway' of the River Kwai and its associations" (PhD dissertation, Silapakorn University, 2008); Rinna Takudrua, 'War museums in Kanchanaburi: the reconstruction of memory' (MA thesis, Thammasat University, 2014); Lennon, 'Kanchanaburi and the Thai-Burma Railway'.

⁵For example, Kazunori Hashimoto, 'Constructing the Burma-Thailand Railway: The War Crimes Trials and the Shaping of an Episode of WWII' (PhD dissertation University of London, 2022).

⁶See Charivat Santaputra, *Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946*, (Bangkok: International Studies Center, 2020); Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Prawat Kanmueng Thai*, (Bangkok: Dokya, 1995); 83

other hand, the history of collaboration with Japan between December 1941 and August 1945 has been studied very little compared to its importance. The restriction of archival access to key agencies such as the Supreme Command Headquarters, the Parliament, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a significant reason why studies remain limited. Thus, the question of whether Thailand cooperated with Japan on a voluntary or forced basis continues to be scrutinised. In the immediate post-war years, narratives of Japanese coercion and the anti-Japanese movement emerged as primary themes in Thai literature. Thailand's former enemies were also willing to overlook collaboration in favour of creating friendly relations. This was despite Thailand's role in the broader war – starting with Japan's invasion after the Pearl Harbour attack and concluding with Thailand's peace declaration in August 1945.

On 7 December 1941 just as the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbour, the Japanese Ambassador in Bangkok demanded a right of passage for Japanese troops through Thai territory. When this was denied, the Japanese Southern Area Army invaded Thailand. After a brief resistance, Bangkok ordered a ceasefire and signed an agreement sanctioning passage of the Japanese troops to then British controlled Malaya and Burma. A few weeks later, the Thai government, led by Prime Minister and Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram, negotiated with the Japanese 15 Army to conduct Japan-Thai joint military operations. On 21 December, Japan and Thailand signed an offensive and defensive alliance, and on 25 January 1942 Thailand declared war on Britain and America. Responding to the threat posed to British Malaya and Burma by Thailand's alliance with Japan, the British government announced that a state of war existed but made no official declaration of war. Britain's Dominion, Australia, however, declared war on Thailand on 3 March 1942 because Thailand provided bases for the Japanese army.⁷ The USA simply decided to ignore Thailand's declaration of war and continued to regard Thailand as enemy-occupied territory.⁸

Thawee Thirawongsesi, *Samphanthapap thang kan mueng rawang Thai kap Yipun*, (Bangkok: Thai Wattanapanich, 1981); Somchoke Swasdiruk, 'Military Relation between Thailand and Japan in the War of Greater East Asia 1941-1945' (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1981).

⁷"Australia and Siam," *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, March 12, 1942, p.6.; John Gooch, 'The Politics of Strategy: Great Britain, Australia and the War against Japan, 1939-1945', *War in History*, 10, 4 (2003), pp. 424-447.

⁸See Charivat Santaputra, *Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946*, (Bangkok: International Studies Center, 2020), p. 306-308.; and Nicholas Tarling, 'Atonement before Absolution: British Policy towards Thailand during World War II', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 66, 1 (1978), pp. 24-25.

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In November 1943, Thailand signed the Greater East Asia Joint Declaration formally aligning itself with the Axis powers. In exchange, Japan ceded four states in northern Malaya and two states in eastern Burma to Thailand. Japan also granted the Thai government control over most administrative matters, excluding airfields, highways, and railroads. Thailand operated under martial law during this period, placing both military and civilian activities under the command of the supreme military leader, Phibun Songkhram. The Thai government supervised all activities within its territory, including the oversight of a camp for 300 civilian internees, consisting of internees from Britain, America, and the Netherlands. Individuals of Asian descent, even though nationals of these three countries, were not deemed enemy nationals by either the Thai government or Japanese forces in Thailand.⁹

The handling of military prisoners depended on whether Japanese officials or Thai authorities had captured them. The majority of POWs in Thailand were imported by the Japanese military from occupied territories. These POWs were employed as labourers to construct infrastructure for the Japanese army; the most well-known projects being the Thai-Burma railway and the airfield in Ubon Ratchathani province. The construction of wartime infrastructure was primarily the responsibility of Japan, but the Thai government also provided support. For example, in building the Thai-Burma railway, Japan was responsible for construction, and managing POW camps. However, if prisoners escaped, Thai authorities were responsible for their tracking, apprehension, and return to the Japanese military.¹⁰

The division of tasks in this manner meant that Thai authorities received a certain amount of information on POWs such as data regarding the number of POWs arriving at the endpoint of the railway route at Ban Pong Station in Ratchaburi Province. However, once POWs entered Ban Pong construction camp, they immediately fell under the authority of the Japanese military, which controlled the area and restricted Thai officials and locals from entering without permission. This demarcation of responsibilities between the Japanese military and Thai government was implemented to prevent clashes between officials from both sides. This separation of authority was essential in marking the boundaries of war-related memory sites along the Thai-Burma railway route.¹¹

Although the Thai government officially collaborated with Japan, there were dissenting voices from within, notably M. R. Seni Pramoj, the Thai Ambassador to the USA, who immediately expressed his disagreement with the Thai government's alignment with

⁹NAT BK Sungsut 2.11, Box no. 1/1, no. 1/2, and no. 2. 'Documents related to the Prisoners of War and Internee'.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

Japan on 8 December 1941. This opposition became the starting point for the 'Free Thai' movement. Meanwhile, some individuals within the Thai government, led by Pridi Banomyong, the regent of Thailand, established the 'Underground' movement to resist Japan, along with Phibun. Both movements tried to coordinate with the governments of the Allied Powers. However, the governments of the Allied Powers, especially Britain and the USA, had differing opinions on both the Free Thai movement and the Underground movement. Opinions changed after 1943, when American-trained 'Free Thai' agents contacted the 'Underground' headquarters in Bangkok. The 'Free Thai' and the 'Underground' were from then able to provide the Allies with valuable intelligence on Japanese military and political activities and were able to liberate a number of British and American POWs.

On 16 August 1945, one day after Japan's surrender, the Thai Regent Pridi proclaimed a peace declaration with the approval of the USA and Britain. This was a first step in the Thai struggle to return to the pre-war status quo. It also provided significant impetus for the creation of a collective memory between Thailand and the Allied powers. Britain and America were aware that the post-war Thai government, was composed of leaders of the resistance, and they attempted to leverage their war-time record to negotiate additional benefits. This included resisting the return of territories acquired during the war from French Indochina, as well as evading accountability for Thailand's wartime involvement. Britain adopted a straightforward approach given the greater damage to British companies and nationals during the war and demanded reparations. The USA preferred to negotiate and to preserve Thailand's pre-war status. During this period, the USA became the most influential external actor on the Thai government and helped to erase the history of Thai collaboration with Japan.¹²

On their part, the Thai political elite explained collaboration with Japan on the basis it was done under duress. This constructive narrative of collaboration shares some similarities with the French in Southeast Asia who sought to assert their victimhood and claim reparations from Japan.¹³ However, unlike France, Thailand did not demand

¹²See Herbert A. Fine, 'The Liquidation of World War II in Thailand', *Pacific Historical Review*, 34, 1 (Feb. 1965), pp. 65-82.; James V. Martin, Jr., 'Thai-American Relations in World War II', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 22, 4 (1963), pp. 451-467.; Nicholas Tarling, 'Atonement before Absolution: British Policy towards Thailand during World War II', *The Journal of the Siam Society*, 66, 1 (1978), pp. 22-65.; and Eiji Murashima, 'The Commemorative Character of Thai Historiography: The 1942-43 Thai Military Campaign in the Shan States Depicted as a Story of National Salvation and the Restoration of Thai Independence', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 4 (2006), pp. 1053-1096.

¹³Beatrice Trefalt, 'The French Prosecution at the IMTFE: Robert Oneto, Indochina and the Rehabilitation of French Prestige' in K. V. Linggen (Ed.), *War Crimes Trials in the*

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reparations. Indeed, Thailand agreed to pay reparations to the Allied powers according to the peace agreements with each country. The Allied powers allowed Thailand to set up internal war crimes tribunals, thereby preventing it from being prosecuted at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. The collaboration between Thailand and Japan was officially nullified within two months of Japan's surrender, when the Thai government annulled six agreements and arrangements related to cooperation with Japan signed between December 1940 and October 1943.¹⁴ Although the Allied powers did not emphasise Thailand's history of collaboration, crafting an appropriate narrative about this collaboration remains important within Thai society, especially considering domestic politics and the changing order in Asia.

Initial War Narratives in Thailand

After the war, the European colonial powers, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands struggled to maintain their authority in the face of growing popular demands for independence. Meanwhile, the United States increased its role and influence in the region with Thailand acting as a significant base. Internal political turmoil within Thailand, such as the death of King Rama VIII in 1946 and power struggles between political parties, the military, and the police saw factional groups vying to align themselves with the United States. Following a decade of political conflict, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, a supporter of Phibun's 1947 coup d'état, seized power in his own coup d'état in October 1958. Both conservative and critical Thai studies acknowledge that the United States and King Bhumibol supported Sarit's regime. Thailand's relationship with the United States influenced the construction of a shared collective memory between Thailand and the Allied countries and set the stage for their post-war relationship.¹⁵ POWs would form a major aspect of this collective memory.

Wake of Decolonization and Cold War in Asia, 1945-1956: Justice in Time of Turmoil, (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 51-67.

¹⁴Supinya Niwaswat, 'Japan's Grant Aid to Thailand from 1954 to 1989 and the Trend of Increasing Cultural Aid to Thailand: A Case Study of the Japan Studies Center, Institute of East Asian Studies, Thammasat University' (MA thesis, Thammasat University, 1992).

¹⁵Most of the leaders of these factional political groups have been significant figures in the domestic political arena since the 1930s. After the war, each group tried to construct a narrative to explain their reluctance to collaborate with Japan or their willingness to collaborate with the Allied Powers. See Sorasak Ngamcachonkulkid, *Free Thai Movement and the political conflict within the country between 1938-1949*, (Bangkok: The Institute of East Asia Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1992), and Suthachai Yimprasert, 'Political Movement against Field Marshal Pibulsonggram's Regime, 1948-1957' (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1989).

While the issue of POWs dominates anglophone accounts of the Second World War in Thailand, the demarcation of areas of responsibility between the Japanese military and Thai government meant the Thai population was relatively unaware of Allied POW stories. Furthermore, first-hand information was limited to the local communities residing along the railway route from Malaya to Ban Pong in southern Thailand and the construction route of the Thai-Burma railway. Because of the clandestine nature of wartime railway construction and Thai official collaboration, Thai literature on POWs was mainly relegated to works translated from English which then became a source for disseminating information to post-war Thai readers. Thai documentary and film makers also relied on these English-language sources when recounting stories about Thailand's role in the war. Journalistic accounts were published in Thai shortly after the Allied powers accepted that Thai personnel accused of war crimes could be judged through a national tribunal.¹⁶ Following the acquittal of all accused by the Thai war crimes court in March 1946, literature on Thailand's war experience became widely published. Most literature drew extensively from information provided by high-ranking government officials and politicians or featured interviews with key political figures such as Phibun and Pridi. They also included memoirs from Seni, founder of the Free Thai movement in America, and accounts from Chamkat Phalangkun, a prominent member of the Underground. Adopting a news documentary style, these met the needs of Thai readers seeking a convincing and perhaps reassuring narrative of the war.

Between 1945 and 1963, approximately twenty non-fiction books related to the war in Thailand were published. Some were journalistic accounts based on interviews with high-ranking Thai politicians and officers. Others were autobiographies penned by prominent officers. Four books – *Railroad of Death*, *Into Siam*, *Interview with the Field Marshal*, and *X.O. Group* – stand out for their prompt publication just one year after the war and their impact as significant sources in relation to creating a popular narrative. These four books feature positive accounts of key figures and highlight the camaraderie between the Thai and the Allied powers, serving as a framework into which later works could insert details. A first book example is Josiah Crosby's *Siam: The Crossroads* from 1945.¹⁷ Crosby, a British diplomat had served as the British Minister in Bangkok from 1934 to 1941, and left Bangkok in August 1942 in a POW exchange. He explained how the war came to Thailand and why it joined forces with Japan and then declared war on Britain and the USA. Crosby argued that Thailand did so as it was unable to resist the Japanese military and did not receive any assistance

¹⁶Suphot Dantrakun, 'Introduction', in Committee for Organizing the Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Pridi Banomyong, Statesman and Elder Statesman, *Testimony in a War Crimes Court: Historical Documents*, (Bangkok: Pridi Banomyong Institute, 2002), pp. 1-25.

¹⁷Josiah Crosby, *Siam: The Crossroads*, (London: Hollis & Carter, 1973).

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from the Allies. Even though it never received a Thai translation, Crosby's defence of Thailand's wartime record was widely referenced in Thai media and academia.

Two books that did receive a translation and popularity were John Coast's 1945 *Railroad of Death* and Nicol Smith and Blake Clark's 1946 *Into Siam; Underground Kingdom*.¹⁸ *Railroad of Death* was the first book written by a former POW who worked on the Thai-Burma Railway and covers Coast's experiences from capture until the end of the war.¹⁹ Coast's unit had arrived in Singapore on 29 January 1942, shortly before its surrender to Japanese forces. He was transferred from the POW camp at Changi in Singapore to toil in the Thai-Burma Railway construction camps. Though he was a Senior Officer, Coast's accounts paint a vivid picture of the POW experience showing a keen awareness that the life of ordinary soldiers was much more challenging and difficult. He also emphasised the presence of many forced labourers from Java and Malaya on the railway and viewed them as enduring the harshest living conditions of all those involved. From his account we can also get an impression of the interactions between POWs and the local community. What little money the POWs had allowed them to open a lifeline to local traders. Coast frequently cites a Mr. Boonpong as someone who improved the lives of POWs. Boonpong was a Thai merchant responsible for procuring food and supplies for the Japanese Army, and assisted prisoners by lending them money in exchange for collateral, such as pens and cigarettes, and by selling them goods at reasonable prices.²⁰ These interactions were limited to camps located in flat or inhabited areas but offered at least some positive accounts of Thai people once translated for a local readership.

Nicol Smith's memoirs, co-written with Blake Clark, came from a perhaps more competent pen, Smith was a former travel writer and officer of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).²¹ Smith, had been selected for covert operations along the borders of China, Burma, and Thailand due to his extensive experience of travelling between Burma and Southern China, even having published an account titled *Burma Road*. Smith along with twenty OSS-trained Free Thai officers, who were Thai students on King's scholarships in the USA were sent to Thailand to work on radio communication operations. This mission was very dangerous because the Thai Ambassador Seni was unable to provide a definite answer regarding whether they would find a safe haven for Smith and the Free Thai officers. Their team successfully entered Thailand in early 1945 residing at the headquarters of the internal underground resistance movement

¹⁸Nicol Smith, Blake Clark, *Into Siam underground kingdom*, translated. So. So. Suwong, (Bangkok: Thaikasem, 1947).

¹⁹John Coast, *Railroad of Death*, translated. So. So. Suwong, (Bangkok: Luang Suwet Suphakit, 1980).

²⁰Coast, *Railroad of Death*.

²¹Smith and Clark, *Into Siam*.

in Thailand. Even though there were around 120,000 Japanese soldiers based in Thailand, Smith led a relatively comfortable life made possible as the resistance leadership included individuals with connections to high office including Pridi Banomyong who was simultaneously regent and leader of the Free Thai Movement. Smith and his group remained undetected until after Japan announced its surrender on 15 August 1945. Both Coast and Smith's books were bestsellers when first translated into Thai in 1947 by Sin Suwong, a former military doctor of the Thai Army, who did so under the pen name So. So. Suwong. The sympathetic descriptions of Thai people and emphasis on acts of resistance helped to colour a positive memory of Thailand's war experience.

The first non-fiction book about the war written by a Thai author is Malai Chupinit's *Ban tuk Chom Phon (Interview with a Field Marshal)*, published in October 1945.²² Malai was a prominent Thai journalist and novelist known for his literary contributions during the 1930s to 1950s. He was a significant public figure after the 1932 Revolution, an event that marked the end of absolute monarchy in Thailand and a transition to a constitutional monarchy. He was well acquainted with high-ranking government officials during the 1930s and 1940s, including Phibun and Pridi, key figures in the group that carried out the 1932 Revolution although he held increasingly distinct and differing political views within a few years of the Revolution. Malai explained that the purpose of the interview with Phibun on 8 October 1945, which is the focus of the book, was to provide Phibun with an opportunity to explain his various policies and decisions during his tenure as wartime Prime Minister. The interview segments were gradually published in daily newspapers and later published as a collected volume. The early content focused on interrogations and the first war crime allegation against Phibun, which led to his arrest and detention about one week after the interview. For example, questions included why Phibun decided to align his policies with Japan during the war and why he declared war on Britain and America. Phibun responded to these questions by emphasising that the implementation of these policies was a matter of considering national security, which was a direct responsibility of the military and his area of expertise. Issuing orders for the Thai military to fight against the Japanese, knowing in advance that they could not win, was considered inappropriate from the perspective of the commanding officers. Answering why he declared war against Britain and America, he explained that he had no choice due to Japanese coercion.²³

One year after the publication of *Ban tuk Chom Phon*, in June 1946, Malai published *X.O. Group*. This was the name Pridi used to refer to the Underground movement he led. In the beginning, Pridi used the name to coordinate with high-level officials from Britain, America, and China because, at that time, there were several groups within

²²Nai Chantana (Malai Chupinit), *Ban tuk Chom Phon*, (Bangkok: Krathom P.L., 2001).

²³ *Ibid.*

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the country that had come together to resist Japan. Towards the end of the war, all these groups united under his leadership and were collectively referred to by the Allied forces as 'the Underground.' The book was written with the objective of documenting the facts about the Underground's operations and focused on transmitting information about the Japanese military in Thailand to the Allied forces. The book was compiled from information obtained from the daily records of high-ranking members of the Underground and interviews with high-ranking members, particularly Pridi. Signifying the impact of English language sources, Malai cited information from Crosby's *Siam* and Smith's *Into Siam*. Literature that focused on the construction of the railway or Thai resistance, was popular and cross-referenced in Thai media to create a public memory of the war as one of resistance to Japanese rule and humanitarian assistance to the Allies.

Agreements with Allies & Constructing the War Cemeteries

Further to popular literature, peace negotiations with Allied nations, particularly Britain and Australia, had a significant impact on integrating the treatment of POWs into post-war Thai memory as these resulted in agreements on the care of war graves. It took over five months of negotiating between Thailand, Britain, and Australia, and US intervention, to reach two agreements. First, the *Formal Agreement for the Termination of the State of War between Siam (Thailand) and Great Britain and India* (hereafter, the 1946 Formal Agreement), signed in Singapore on 1 January 1946. This was subdivided into categories including restitution and readjustment, security, commercial and economic collaboration, civil aviation, and war graves. The subsection specifically addressing war graves consisted of only one article (Article 17), which stated that the 'Siamese Government' agreed with the governments of Britain and India for the mutual upkeep of war graves, with the aim of establishing permanent, future care of British, Indian, and Thai war graves in their respective territories.²⁴ Thailand also agreed to provide assistance to the remaining Australian POWs interned in the country, to collaborate in the apprehension of war criminals, and to maintain Australian war graves. Second, Thailand and Australia signed a peace agreement in Bangkok on 3 April 1946. Article II of the agreement stated that 'the Government of Siam undertake to enter into arrangements acceptable to the Government of Australia

²⁴The government changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand in mid-1939 to mark the rectification of unequal treaties signed with thirteen nations. However, the new government reversed the country's name to Siam shortly after the war. This decision was taken to lessen allegations that the Thai government had pursued expansionist policies or Pan-Thaism, which was a significant reason for collaboration with Japan and waging war against France and Britain.

for the upkeep of Australia[n] war graves and for the establishment and future care of Australian war cemeteries in Siam.²⁵

In compliance with these two agreements, the Kanchanaburi war cemeteries became cultural sites to commemorate the war from an Allied perspective. The initial task of constructing war memorials involved gathering information on deceased individuals and the locations of their graves. Former POWs were brought from Singapore to work on data collection of the construction of the Thai-Burma railway, even undergoing military personnel data training. Padre H. C. Babb, a former British chaplain and member of the voluntary team searching for graves, recorded that in early September 1945, members of the Australian, British, and Dutch Army graves services arrived in Bangkok. They compiled the collected data, including information from the Japanese side, through the Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees (RAPWI) offices. Thirteen volunteers committed to stay on and assist with war memorial work in Thailand through the following year and locate and document the graves of thousands scattered along the railway line. The voluntary team set out on a survey mission from Nakorn Pathom Province, Thailand, the starting point of the railway, all the way to the end of the line in Thanbyuzayat, in British controlled Burma.²⁶

Efforts to locate graves during the first few months were chaotic because Britain, Australia, and the Netherlands were each attempting to coordinate directly with Thai authorities. This situation ended when the Allied nations agreed to allow Britain to take responsibility for the Allied War Graves Cemeteries in Thailand. The Netherlands, which had not been at war with Thailand, agreed to allow Britain to act as the representative for the care of war graves of Dutch and Javanese POWs who died in Thailand. When the H. Q. British Troops, Siam withdrew its forces from Thailand in October 1946, the coordination of these matters was passed to the British Embassy.²⁷ Initial data collection by this team was completed by October 1945. In December 1945, they began the process of exhuming remains from graves and relocating them to a new site prepared near Kanchanaburi railway station, today it is the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, and was completed the following year. The war graves at Chungkai Hospital Camp, totalling 1,200 graves, were preserved in their original location.²⁸ In mid-1948, the Imperial War Graves Commission divided

²⁵Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and the World War II*, (Bangkok: Sri Panya, 2017), pp. 642-648.

²⁶Rod Beattie, *The Death Railway - A brief history of the Thailand-Burma Railway*, (Kanchanaburi: T.B.R.C Co., Ltd, 2015), p. 153.

²⁷NAT. [I] MT 3.1.4.1.10/86, 'Reconstruction of the British Cemetery in Chiang Mai and Lampang', 25 April to 28 December 1946.

²⁸Rod Beattie, *The Death Railway*, p. 153.

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responsibility for maintaining allied war graves cemeteries in former British colonial territories in South Asia and Southeast Asia. The former India and Southeast Asia District was divided firstly into the India and Pakistan District, headquartered in New Delhi, and the Southeast Asia District, headquartered in Penang. Thus, cemetery maintenance in Thailand was further complicated, now requiring coordination between these two districts.²⁹

The Thai government engaged in discussions with the British government to ensure the full implementation of the 1946 Formal Agreement. The one remaining challenge that the Thai government had not successfully addressed related to war graves. Negotiations had been ongoing since Thailand received the initial draft of the war grave-related agreement from the British Embassy in 1948. The key point of contention was which countries fell under 'His Britannic Majesty.' Negotiations resulted in the removal of Canada, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, and Pakistan from the agreement. The period of war in the initial draft was also stated as spanning 1939 to 1945. The Thai government wished to amend this to 1941 to 1945. However, the British government did not agree as it would not align with the regulations of the Imperial War Graves Commission. Negotiations concerning land rights for the cemeteries and its protective margins were the longest, spanning from 1946 to 1953.³⁰

Between 1946 and 1954, the Allied War Graves Cemeteries in Kanchanaburi underwent significant expansion. Allied war graves from various other Thai cemeteries, not only along the railway track, were relocated to Kanchanaburi between 1946 and 1951. The Thai government mandated provincial committees to locate graves, leading to discoveries in Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim cemeteries in Bangkok, and private properties in Nakhorn Pathom and Ratburi Provinces along the railway route. Additionally, graves in the southern provinces were interred in the Commonwealth War Graves in Penang.³¹ With relocation and consolidation

²⁹NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.1.10/91, 'Allied war cemeteries', 22 October to 10 November 1948.; NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.1.10/93, 'The international military cemetery operations in Kanchanaburi', 14-20 October 1949.; and NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.10/100, 'The agreement on war graves between Thailand and Imperial War Graves Commission', 12 January 1954 to 10 June 1958.

³⁰NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.10/90, 'The management of land for England to use as a cemetery', 10 June 1948 to 8 July 1949.; NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.10/97, 'The Imperial War Graves Commission wishes to undertake construction at the cemetery in Kanchanaburi and Chungkai', 12-19 January 1954.; and NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.10/100.

³¹NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.10/83.; and NAT [1] MT 3.1.4.10/95, 'Permission is requested to exhume the bodies of British soldiers buried in the civilian cemetery in Bangkok', 14 May to 19 September 1951.

completed, the final peace negotiations could commence. Once a consensus summary on the agreement regarding war graves was reached, the Thai government signed the termination of the 1946 Formal Agreement in early 1954. Subsequently, in August 1954, Thailand and Britain signed the 'Agreement between The Government of Thailand and The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Australia, and India regarding war graves. Meanwhile, the Netherlands exchanged memoranda concerning guidelines for Netherlands' POW war graves in the event of Britain terminating its agreement with Thailand. After this, there was no further transfer of soldier bodies or names into the Allied War Cemetery at Kanchanaburi. Changes since then have involved only the decoration and upkeep of the cemetery.³²

As mentioned above, during the war the USA considered Thailand to be territory occupied by the enemy. However, when the Thai government decided to collaborate militarily with Japan in mid-December 1941, American citizens were treated as enemy nationals and were detained in camps in Bangkok alongside British, Australian, and Dutch internees. Hundreds of Americans were captured as POWs by the Japanese military and Thai authorities; however, their number was relatively small compared to British, Australian, and Dutch POWs. Preferring repatriation to establishing war cemeteries, the remains of US POWs were sent back to the United States. This accounts for the absence of monuments associated with the US in Kanchanaburi.

The transfer of Allied war graves that were previously scattered to Kanchanaburi War Cemetery impacted war memory in Thailand, focussing the war narrative solely on the Thai-Burma railway.³³ In an early alignment between war commemoration and tourism, even before completion in 1954, relatives and friends of the dead had begun visiting the Kanchanaburi war cemeteries.³⁴ Travel during these early days was challenging because Kanchanaburi Province was not yet equipped to provide accommodation for foreign visitors. The British embassy, therefore, sought permission from the Thai government to construct a certified guesthouse for visitors within the vicinity of the cemeteries, creating a space for visitors to stay while in the province.³⁵ Even though the Thai-Burma railway reopened in 1949, rail travel was less efficient than other available options. To cater for the rising number of overseas visitors,

³²NAT [I] MT 3.1.4.10/100.

³³The only remaining Allied war graves outside Kanchanaburi are at the Bangkok Protestant Cemetery, which are intermingled with those of civilians.

³⁴NAT [I] MT 3.1.4.10/94, 'The Royal Embassy of the United Kingdom requests permission to proceed with the construction of the residence of the caretaker buried in the War Cemetery where he rests', 3 August to 28 December 1950.

³⁵Ibid.

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accommodation in, and access to Kanchanaburi would have to be improved.³⁶ The creation of infrastructure around commemoration also opened up spaces for the development of tourism.

Reopening the Railway, Fame, and Reconnecting with the War Cemetery

In 1954, after the Thai government had completed the payment of reparations, Thailand's collaboration with foreign nations flourished. Additionally, the USA's increasing involvement in the Vietnam War after 1954 benefited Thailand as the country served as a main base for this mission. During the early years of the Cold War, Thailand endeavoured to construct itself as a cultural nation to protect its position in the international post-war system. The Tourist Authority of Thailand was established in 1960 to fulfil this objective, in addition to direct economic aims.³⁷

Indeed, economic potential had been a major factor in Thailand's desire for a role in the construction of the Thai-Burma railway in 1942. Thailand was initially responsible for constructing the railway within its borders and estimated that it would take approximately eight years. Due to Japan's desire for completion within a year to serve as a military transportation route into Burma at a time when its naval routes were being heavily attacked, Thailand and Japan negotiated and agreed that Thailand would be responsible for building the railway for a 60-kilometer section from Nong Pladuk Junction to Kanchanaburi. The remaining section, approximately 350 kilometres from Kanchanaburi to Thanbyuzayat, became the responsibility of Japan. Japan began official construction work on this project in late August 1942.³⁸ Between November 1942 and October 1943, a force of about 60,000 prisoners of the Imperial Japanese Army with a much greater number of around 180,000 laborers conscripted from throughout Southeast Asia was mobilised to construct the railway over a stretch of 412 kilometres from Ban Pong in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma.

When the war ended, the British military took control of the railway line. The final task of the railway within British Burma was to transport captured Japanese soldiers into Thai territory. Some Japanese POWs were assigned the task of dismantling the railway line in British Burma to salvage the materials for other construction projects.

³⁶NAT ST 0701.9.10.9/4, 'Minutes of the 9th/1954 meeting of the Tourism Authority of Thailand committee', 14 September 1954.

³⁷Matthew Phillips, "Oasis on a Troubled Continent": Culture and Ideology in Cold War Thailand' (PhD dissertation, University of London, 2012). See Porphant Ouyyanont, 'The Vietnam War and Tourism in Bangkok's Development, 1960-70', *Southeast Asian Studies*, 39, 2 (2001), pp. 157-187.

³⁸Ichiro Kakizaki, *Scramble for Rails: Japanese Military Transport on Thai Railways during World War II*, (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2020), p. 88.

The line within Thailand, however, remained intact.³⁹ The Thai government successfully purchased the railway from Britain for £1.25 million in October 1946 to bring the railway back into commercial use. However, the economic utility of the railway diminished with the post-war decline of the British colonial economy in Southeast Asia. This negatively impacted, the timber concession agreement between British firms and the Thai government in the Tenasserim Division, which began in the 1880s and was set to expire in 1954. The USA came to Thailand's aid in 1949, proposing that the Thai government construct a dam in the Tenasserim, as the topography of this mountainous region provided the potential for a large dam for hydroelectric power. This resulted in 1964 in Thailand's first hydroelectric dam in the mountains sourcing the Kwai River.

However, the greatest benefit of the railway remained tourism. A portion of the original Thai-Burma railway line reopened in mid-1949, covering only 53 kilometres from Nong Pladuk Junction to Kanchanaburi station. As a result, not only international but also Thai tourists added the Allied War Cemeteries to their itinerary of Kanchanaburi province which also included popular natural attractions such as waterfalls, forests, and caves. The origins of this new travel destination for Thai tourists can be connected not only to the re-opened railway but also to a popular Thai action film released in 1950, named *Saming Pasak*. This film was directed by Wasan Sunthonpaksi, who also features in the title role. It is a story of love, revenge, and frantic pursuit through the Thai countryside, with scenes set in the border region of Thailand near Myanmar. Saming goes to Kanchanaburi to evade his enemies and is able to sustain himself through skills useful in its timber industry. Saming and his friends disembark from the train at Kanchanaburi station and, confident of their safety, proceed to visit the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and the Bridge over the River Kwai.⁴⁰ The cemetery's appearance on the silver screen, attracted hordes of Thai fans to the site who were perhaps keener to retrace Saming's steps than to pay their respects to the Allied war dead.

In April 1952 the railway was reopened all the way to Nam Tok Station (Sai Yok Waterfall Station). Because the stretch from Wang Pho to Nam Tok was still not safe for commercial railway operations, passenger cars were only available from Kanchanaburi to Wang Pho. For the segment between Wang Pho and Nam Tok, there were only open freight cars. Travel conditions were spartan, and passengers who wanted to continue their journey to Nam Tok could do so without an additional fare because the railway would not guarantee their safety.⁴¹ The popularity of the train

³⁹Asai Tokuichi, 'Tai men tetsudō hoi', *Shinchiri*, 10, 4 (1963), pp. 1-31.

⁴⁰Manassak Dokmai, 'Mr. Wasan Sunthonpaksi' *Saming Pasak: Thai films in the post-World War II era*, *Film Archives Newsletter*, 6, 35 (2016), pp. 15-17.

⁴¹Asai Tokuichi, 'Tai men tetsudō hoi', p. 30.

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journey to the Sai Yok waterfall likely increased when Prime Minister Phibun, in office again from 1948, travelled by train to the waterfall station in 1953. This journey was recorded in a 23-minute documentary entitled *Family and the Train*, with the triple goal of promoting the Thai-Burma railway as a tourist route, to demonstrate the government's sound judgement in purchasing the line, and to present Phibun as a modern family man. This documentary focused specifically on the beauty of the scenery during the journey and the waterfall itself, without delving into the historical background of the railway.⁴²

In tandem with its growth in domestic popularity, the Thailand-Burma railway became of international interest with the publication of an English translation of Pierre Boulle's novel *Le Pont de la rivière Kwaï* in 1952. Five years later the novel was adapted into the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, bringing further attention to the construction of the railway and its associated wartime hardships. Filming started in 1956 using locations in Ceylon and featured a cast of actors portraying Thai individuals who assisted Allied POWs attempting to escape from Japanese forces. Four renowned Thai actors were selected to play small roles in the film, but the pivotal role went to Bongsebrahma Chakrabandhu, a member of the royal family with no prior acting experience. Chosen for his adept English and leadership qualities, both acquired while studying at Britain's Imperial Service College and the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He portrayed a village headman assisting Allied POWs. This fictional role overshadowed his real-life war-time role, managing a camp for Allied civilians and POWs in Bangkok. The inclusion of Thai actors and a Thai royal naturally generated interest, leading to extensive press coverage in Thai magazines before the film's release in 1957. In interviews in Thai Press, Chakrabandhu spoke of his experience of the filming and acting but not of the film's historical background or his own war experience.⁴³ Columbia Pictures Corporation's News Release Number 28 introduced Chakrabandhu as one of the featured actors but perhaps to his chagrin it highlighted his real-life role during wartime as a commander of prisoner of war and civilian internment camps. In a more positive note, the release also mentioned Chakrabandhu's clandestine involvement in the Free Thai Movement, where he assisted in the return of downed allied fliers and managed British underground agents.⁴⁴

⁴²FAT D2-02263-3, 'Family and the Train', directed by Prasit Singhanavik, 1953.

⁴³Bongsebrahma Chakrabandhu, *Photos and Biography of Lieutenant Colonel M.R. Bongsebrahma Chakrabandhu*, (Bangkok: Bongsebrahma Chakrabandhu, 1971), p. 90-108.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 93. By the end of the war, Chakrabandhu held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Thai Army. Later, he served as a traffic manager for Pacific Overseas Airlines (Siam) Ltd. Subsequently, he worked as the advertising manager for the Shell Company of Thailand Limited. During the production of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*,
97 www.bjmh.org.uk

The Bridge on the River Kwai was a huge hit, claiming seven Oscars in 1958. It generated such a growth in tourism to Kanchanaburi that local residents renamed their stretch of the river, formerly the Mae Klong, to Kwae Yai.⁴⁵ This film marked a turning point, reconnecting the separate narratives of the POWs preserved in war cemeteries and the Thai-Burma railway, which had diverged for over a decade after the war. In large part due to the film's influence, it became clear that the construction and maintenance of Allied war cemeteries in Kanchanaburi served testimony to the story of the brutalities associated with the building of the railway and turned the bridge into a memorable image for viewers. The movie's noted longevity, still a regular staple of post-Christmas dinner broadcasts in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand has helped to maintain the railway in both anglophone and Thai public memories of the war.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Reopening the railway enhanced access to the war cemeteries and the River Kwai Bridge for Allied veterans and visitors. The royal visits of 1963 were a prelude to the full opening of the region to general visitors. For early post-war tourists, who were mainly Thai, the connection between the story of the Thai-Burma railway and the war cemeteries was not automatic although suitable narratives for these war-related sites were steadily established later in popular accounts of the war. The immediate post-war period and domestic political turmoil led Thailand to seek a new image prompting the management of memories related to the war in Thailand. The shared memories during the first decade after the war were characterised by a focus on Thailand's post-war status as a country that was not a defeated Japanese ally but one that had resisted and provided assistance to the USA and Britain. This was reflected through the construction of Allied war cemeteries, the reopening of the Thai-Burma railway, and the circulation of non-fiction works on the war. Rather than being separated, it is now common for a trip along the Thai-Burma railway to include a simultaneous appreciation for the region's natural beauty and war commemoration.

The circulation of non-fiction books in the Thai reading market served as the platform for disseminating stories about the camaraderie between Thai soldiers, civilians, and police officers with the Allied forces during the war. These narratives highlighted the relationships and partnerships that formed during the conflict, contributing to the post-war memory and identity of Thailand. Non-fiction books and film played a crucial role in shaping the foundational narratives for Thai people that defined the meaning of

he was initially asked to assist as an advisor but ultimately ended up taking an on-screen role.

⁴⁵John Beaumont and Andrea Witcomb, 'The Thai-Burma Railway', p. 70.

⁴⁶David Boggett, 'Notes on the Thai-Burma railway Part I: "The Bridge on the River Kwai"-The Movie', *Journal of Kyoto Seika University*, 19 (2000), pp. 111-133.

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the Allied war cemeteries and Thai-Burma railway. The combination of a focus on resistance and commemoration of fallen Allied prisoners shaped the collective memories of Thailand's role in the war and its post-war identity. The construction of the Allied War Cemeteries, managed by the Allies, was carried out under an agreement between the Thai government, Great Britain, India, and Australia. This agreement stipulated the collective burial of the deceased at two cemeteries in Kanchanaburi. This shifted narratives of the Asia Pacific War involving Thailand from other areas to centre on Kanchanaburi. However, the narratives of the war limited to the setting in Kanchanaburi, were not yet ready to circulate among general visitors. The reopening of the Thai-Burma railway as a tourist attraction in the early 1950s made a significant contribution to the establishment of this narrative. While the initiation of these shared memories was decentralised and lacked an official organisation, the driving force of the tourism industry, targeted by the Thai government as a means to generate income from the Western market, led to the reconnection of the war cemetery and the railway. This allowed the narratives to take a shortcut, bypassing certain, uncomfortable but key events in the storyline, such as Thailand's own war-time drive for territorial expansion.