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Parting Ways: Two Civil Wars amid the First Indochina War in Laos (1945–1954)

Ryan Wolfson-Ford*

This paper examines civil wars during the First Indochina War in Laos (1945–54). The first civil war emerged between those fighting for Lao independence, the Issara, and those continuing to defend French colonial rule after World War II, the loyalists. The second civil war broke out as the first one ended in late 1949. It was fought between the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the Pathet Lao. This new civil war was fought over the question of whether Laos was independent and would now be communist. By then the Cold War had begun to loom over the later years of the First Indochina War in Laos. While initially civil war came to Laos as political violence cutting across family, region, and ordinarily divided ethnic lines by 1949, some Lao saw it as a clash between two states, the RLG and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In reality, there were dueling "liberations" of Laos under way by this point, depending on which side one was on in the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war. Interstate war was enmeshed in bloody local civil wars, resulting in a double conflict. This became clear during the Pathet Lao-People's Army of Vietnam offensives of 1953–54, toward the end of the First Indochina War in Laos. In the aftermath, RLG leaders' visions of their civil war with the Pathet Lao became distorted by their own rising anti-communist and anti-Vietnamese nationalism.

Keywords: First Indochina War in Laos, civil war, Lao independence, Issara, Vietminh/Indochinese Communist Party in Laos

1 Introduction

One sees the origins of the first Lao civil war perfectly in a chance meeting in August 1945 between an Issara leader, Oun Sananikone, and a loyalist leader, Boun Oum, prince of the southern Champassak kingdom. Boun Oum argued that "independence must be given by France. We cannot fight for it ourselves. France is . . . a great power and will never . . . surrender." Oun disagreed. He advocated armed struggle to liber-

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ate what he saw as a free and independent Lao state. The debate continued into the night without any agreement being reached: "When morning came, we parted ways" (Oun 1975, 17).[1] The men's dispute foreshadowed the Issara-loyalist civil war that emerged, largely unnoticed, amid the larger First Indochina War. Civil violence began along starkly political lines cutting across family, region, and ordinarily divided ethnolinguistic groups over the question of independence after World War II. The civil war was fought between supporters of the Lao independence movement, the Lao Issara[2] —who were fighting to free Laos from French colonialism—and their opponents—who remained loyal to France, supported France's return after World War II, and tended not to advocate for Lao independence or refused to believe it was possible, whom I call loyalists. This resonates with David Armitage's observation on Roman civil wars: "they inevitably understood their most wrenching conflicts in definitely political terms, as clashes among citizens that rose to the level of war" (Armitage 2017, 31).

An examination of the Issara-loyalist civil war raises broader questions: What was the nature of the First Indochina War in Laos? Was it a civil war? Or was it just a "dirty colonial" war between the peoples of Laos and France? Most scholarly attention on Laos focuses on the Second Indochina War (1959–75), to the neglect of the First Indochina War (1945–54). The latter is viewed as an anti-colonial war for independence against French rule by "revolutionary nationalist forces in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos" (Stuart-Fox *et al.* 2023, 169).[3] From 1950 it morphed into an early conflict of the Cold War. Thus, it was both a war for decolonization and part of the Cold War. But the larger conflicts—the war for independence along with the Cold War—became enmeshed in local civil wars, creating a double conflict. While some scholars refer to the Second Indochina War in Laos as a civil war, it is less common for the First Indochina War in Laos to be referred to as one, and only in reference to the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war (Toye 1968, 53; Castle 1993, 17; Stuart-Fox 1997, 145; Evans 2002, 118; Tarling 2011, 7; Creak 2015, 87; Conboy 2021, 45).[4] Thus, I argue that the Issara-loyalist conflict was also a civil war, one that preceded and shaped the better-known RLG-Pathet Lao civil war. I bring this forgotten war to light with reference to memoirs and archival texts in Lao and French written by participants during and after the conflict on both sides of the Issara-loyalist divide. Previously some scholars referred to Issara as "rebels" fighting against the supposedly legitimate French restoration of colonialism in highly tendentious accounts of the conflict (e.g., Deuve 1995, 24, 29, 243, 280). But it was in the 1940s that the foundations for civil war were laid in Laos, a country riven by divisions (ethnicity, family, region, language) and home to over two hundred ethnolinguistic groups across remote, rugged, sparsely populated

territory about half the size of France.

As mentioned earlier, there were two civil wars in Laos during the First Indochina War: the 1945–49 civil war driven mainly by Issara-loyalist violence between those advocating for independence and those willing to aid France's return, and after 1949 a civil war between the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the newly formed Pathet Lao. While the former was fought over Lao independence and decolonization as sovereignty fragmented, the latter was over whether Laos was already independent or whether independence remained incomplete—and also whether Laos would be communist—a question of modernity and politics entwined within the emerging Cold War. On the ground, the second civil war began spreading via joint RLG-French pacification campaigns amid rising conventional war. As US and People's Republic of China (PRC) aid and weapons poured in, the conflict grew in scale and intensity, becoming more organized as military power expanded and became more internationalized with US and PRC involvement (Shu 2021).[5] Local agency was critical and can be seen in the various forms of nationalisms present in Laos during the conflict. For their part, the Issara were driven by a potent nationalism developing since at least the 1930s that was anti-French and anti-Vietnamese and at times supported by Thailand, the latter of which started a war in 1940–41 to reclaim Lao territories lost to France in 1893. The loyalists were no less nationalist,[6] while some Vietnamese in Laos ardently supported the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) (Raffin 2005, 226; Wolfson-Ford 2020, chap. 10, 177).

The intensity of the Issara-loyalist civil war may be seen in the number of families torn apart by the conflict, including famous families like the Sananikones. Yet this did not preclude outbursts of violence within the Issara and their allies, such as the Lao-Vietnamese ethnic violence in 1945–46 (Wolfson-Ford 2023). Lao-Vietnamese contests for power in Laos contributed to the dissolution of the Issara in 1949 as well as the new RLG-Pathet Lao civil war. After 1949, civil war was seen by RLG leaders to have morphed into a clash of postcolonial nation-states as the RLG-DRV conflict boiled over, thereby distorting the nature of the conflict. Toward the end of the First Indochina War, RLG leaders became blinded by a potent anti-communist nationalism fed by anti-Vietnamese sentiment. The RLG-Pathet Lao civil war continued unabated after 1954 under the guise of pacification as RLG leaders sought to liberate areas of their country from "communist imperialists." Meanwhile, some Vietnamese in Laos rallied to the Vietminh/Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), which had a base in Northeast Thailand and a presence in major Lao cities as well as mining operations, and later joined the Pathet Lao "liberated zones" established with DRV aid. Finally, there were various people of different ethnolinguistic groups that were strongly anti-

French or anti-Lao or anti-Vietnamese. In 1945, when war broke out, Laos was rife with conditions for civil war and widespread civil violence, including targeted, selective killings (settling personal feuds or rivalries) and larger, indiscriminate collective group killings (Kalyvas 2006). This situation was exacerbated by the fragmentation of sovereignty amid rule by Japanese, Thai, Guomindang (GMD), UK, French-loyalist, Issara, Vietminh/ICP, and after 1949 RLG and Pathet Lao powers.

This paper shows the domestic roots of the First Indochina War in Laos, which like the Cold War can be traced to two local civil wars: the Issara-loyalist conflict and the RLG-Pathet Lao conflict. In both civil wars one key issue was the role foreign influence should play in the imagined newly independent and sovereign postcolonial Lao state. In the Issara-loyalist civil war the question turned on France and the DRV, while in the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war it largely concerned France, the United States, the DRV, and the PRC. Another key issue was nationalism and competing visions of the new Lao nation. Which was the right path: the Pathet Lao's more ethnically diverse leadership and support for ethnic and gender equality, with Vietnamese and Chinese support; or the RLG's ethnically Lao-centered approach, with French and US support? Or should the country reject both options and follow a neutral path to avoid any war, forgoing foreign aid in favor of economic autarky (Sidwell 2020)? Along with these considerations, there were questions concerning what form of modernity should be embraced and what political system should be adopted. Amid questions of sovereignty and independence, the civil wars also highlighted questions of who belonged in the new postcolonial Lao state. Did Lao belong in a country where more than half the population was not ethnically Lao? Did non-Lao belong in a state named after the Lao majority? Did Vietnamese belong, and so should Laos become part of a greater post-French Indochina? Did Thai belong, and was Laos part of a greater Thai state? Who belonged, and who was foreign? Individual actors struggled with these and other questions as local bloody civil wars became enmeshed with the internationalized double conflict that became the First Indochina War in Laos.

2 The First Lao Civil War (1945–49): Issara-Loyalist War

To understand the Issara-loyalist civil war, consider the different paths presented by 1945: Japanese cooperation, Thai or Vietnamese confederation, French loyalism, or Issara independence turning on a "greater Laos" incorporating Northeast Thailand and seeking to undo the Franco-Thai partitioning of Laos at the Mekong River in 1893. Those choosing different paths—and the various futures and visions of the

nation they implied—fell into civil war over which path should be taken, and none more so than the Issara and their opponents, the loyalists. When the Issara returned to Laos in August 1945, after five years' exile in Thailand, the question of independence suddenly took on a prominent role and fueled civil war. On their side, loyalists fought to restore French colonial rule. They had already joined their French allies months earlier to resist Japan's coup on March 9, 1945, ousting Vichy France from Indochina. Loyalist Luang Prabang King Sisavang Vong (r. 1904–59), under duress, declared Lao independence belatedly on April 8, 1945; his son Crown Prince Savang Vatthana had been taken hostage to Saigon for mobilizing people to fight the Japanese in mid-March (Toye 1968, 65). The loyalists remained loyal to France after Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, not joining the Issara or their allies who established independent Lao governments from August 1945 to May 1946. They were aided by UK forces disarming the Japanese south of the 16th parallel, while GMD forces disarming the Japanese north of this line protected the Issara. King Sisavang Vong sanctioned France's return on August 30, 1945, which was opposed by Lao authorities in Vientiane, led by Prince Phetsarath and Vientiane Mayor Khammao Vilay, who declared independence on August 17 and blocked French officials from reclaiming power on September 1. When Phetsarath was removed from his post by Sisavang Vong on September 7, Issara youths stepped in to declare independence again on October 12, 1945, and deposed the king on October 18. The Issara defended their rule of Laos until Pakse, Savannakhet, Thakhek, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang fell to loyalist-French forces in January–May 1946.

2.1 *Issara-Loyalist Civil War: A Local Conflict Embedded in the First Indochina War*

The Issara went to war to remake society and break down the colonial order created by France and defended by the loyalists, who favored French aid and protection. There were Issara-loyalist armed standoffs and clashes in Vientiane and Thakhek in September 1945 before arriving GMD forces compelled French-loyalist withdrawal. Battles erupted between the "black army" (named for the color of the Issara uniforms), reinforced by Oun Sananikone's Seri Lao men, and loyalist-French forces (Sila 1975, 37–39). The Issara army, allied with Vietminh/ICP forces, won its first battles in scrappy encounters against larger, better-armed loyalist-French forces in October–December 1945 and even took Xieng Khouang for a time. But fighting in January 1946 led to serious Issara-Vietminh/ICP losses, and Pakse was lost. Only in March did loyalist-French forces attack in force, taking Savannakhet and Thakhek on March 1–21, the latter in a bloody engagement. Loyalist-French atrocities occurred indiscriminately, targeting women and children during the Battle of Thakhek (Sila 1975, 40;

Pholsena and Suriya 2024).

The Issara unleashed revolutionary violence, deepening the civil war with the loyalists. This ranged from physical violence to killings, threats, denouncements, denial of food, jailings, and exiling. At the revolution's zenith (October–December 1945), Issara hunted down and rooted out opponents, threatened death to anyone dealing with the French, and jailed opponents (Deuve 1995, 114–116, 119, 123). Martial law was declared in November 1945. The staunch loyalist Bong Souvannavong was jailed for six months (Sithat 1960). One Issara participant, Nhouy Abhay, recalled that "All pro-French people . . . went into hiding" as they were "watched, threatened, worried. . . . I myself narrowly escaped prison" (Nhouy 1947). This all happened in late 1945, when France had barely any presence in Laos (especially central and northern Laos). Some Lao joined the Issara to avoid punishment for acts committed under Japanese occupation: "they could only shout 'Death to French,' destroy and ransack with the Viet Minh" (Nhouy 1947). Nhouy referred to those who had no opinion and were simply trying to survive in rapidly changing life-and-death circumstances:

> During the truly troubled times that we lived through, when armed people alone had authority—and absolute authority—there is no doubt that individuals without faith or honor took advantage, under threats easy to imagine, to bully, steal or satisfy their jealousy or their hatred against peaceful inhabitants. (Nhouy 1947)

Finally, Vientiane was surrounded and fell on April 25, 1946, after 16 days of fighting between the Issara and French-loyalist forces (Sila 1975, 48). The Issara army was not defeated but escaped north to Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang before melting into the countryside, only to return as guerrillas, stoking war for years. In the battles before April 1946, loyalist-French units had few French soldiers; most of the soldiers were from Laos.

The French-loyalist reconquest of Laos in mid-1946 succeeded in driving many Issara-Vietminh/ICP forces into exile in Thailand and reestablished French colonial rule signified by an August 1946 *modus vivendi* granting Laos some autonomy and leading to a new constitution in May 1947. These developments distracted from the continuing civil war among Laos's inhabitants as the loyalist-French continued hunting Issara enemies during and after reconquest. As Armitage noted, "To call a war 'civil' is to acknowledge the familiarity of the enemies as members of the same community: not foreigners but fellow citizens" (Armitage 2017, 11–12). The Issara-loyalist civil war even pitted members of the same family against one another, like the Sananikones of Vientiane: Oun, Pheng, and Oudone were Issara, while the brothers

Phoui and Ngon were loyalists. Nhouy from the southern island of Khong and his cousins were Issara, but his brother Kou was a loyalist. Issara Prime Minister Khammao Vilay's son-in-law headed anti-Issara loyalist propaganda in Paksane. Even King Sisavang Vong's nephew Tiao Sisoumang joined the Issara, while Phetsarath's younger brother Souvannarath was the loyalist prime minister in 1947. And Khammao himself was the king's son. In one case, two princes of Luang Prabang—Chao Sing Nat and Chao Chanthavong—were arrested as Issara and died in jail even though their older brothers, Souvannarath and Kindavong, were cabinet members of the loyalist government in power (Khamman 1973, 188). Oun Sananikone, not without reason, lamented his distaste for killing fellow Lao and even withdrew from Savannakhet without a fight on March 1, 1946, to avoid shedding Lao loyalist blood (Oun 1975, 27, 41). Phetsarath tried to restore order by decree on September 1, 1945, urging calm and warning of "bloody reprisals" by "extremists and xenophobes," but to no avail (Deuve 1995, 292–293).

Even among the Issara and their allies there were outbursts of other forms of civil violence, especially Lao-Vietnamese ethnic violence.[7] The Issara made strange bedfellows when allying with the DRV on October 30, 1945, against France. This stormy alliance was secured only after overcoming Lao-Vietnamese violence in April and August 1945. In August, the Vietminh/ICP tried to seize power in Vientiane and other Lao cities before the Issara could gain momentum; elsewhere, Vietnamese tried to annex parts of Laos to a new (greater) DRV (Goscha 2012, 76, 83–90; Shu 2021, 127, 131–132; Wolfson-Ford 2023).[8] In October, Oun Sananikone witnessed Lao-Vietnamese fighting in Savannakhet. Even before coming to Laos, he had already ordered killings of Vietnamese spies and rice thieves in Thailand to protect his Seri Lao soldiers. In one case, he described a request by his lieutenant, (future general) Phoumi Nosavan, to "shoot more than forty Vietnamese we had imprisoned," but Oun was talked out of committing the massacre by a Vietnamese woman who was a new mother and spoke Lao (Oun 1975, 16–17). In Thakhek and Savannakhet, Oun took power from local Vietnamese by threatening the destruction of a hundred thousand Vietnamese living in Northeast Thailand via his links to the Thai military. Outnumbered and outgunned by Vietnamese in both cities, Oun was not above using genocidal threats to seize power.

Issara rule ended as internal cracks emerged and allies failed to stay true. Nhouy called the Issara an "amalgam" of Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, and Lao, writing it "was made up of disparate, heterogeneous, sometimes opposed elements, mutually suspicious of each other" (Nhouy 1947, 7). He added that Vietminh/ICP were active in Vientiane and claimed they pushed events forward, as did local Chinese. The Issara-

DRV alliance was betrayed, according to Sila Viravong, on March 6, 1946, as the DRV negotiated a truce that left the Issara to fight France alone, resulting in Issara defeats at Savannakhet, Thakhek, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang and forcing Issara exile to Thailand (Sila 1975, 40–41). There were efforts to revive the Issara-DRV alliance, such as a spring offensive in 1947 and DRV loans to the Issara, but the DRV also began creating a separate force to fight the French in a Laos more firmly under its control—first in October 1946 in Vinh as the Lao Issara Committee of the East and then in August 1950 as the Lao Issara Front (better known as the Pathet Lao), auguring a new stage of war.

3 The Second Lao Civil War (1949–54): The War to Liberate Laos

While 1950 marked a turning point in the war in Vietnam when the DRV gained support from the PRC, in Laos the moment came on October 24, 1949, when Issara leaders accepted a French-loyalist amnesty and returned to Laos—all except Phetsarath, who returned only in March 1957, and Souphanouvong, who instead presided over the formation of the Pathet Lao—a DRV cocreation—in August 1950 (Rathie 2017, chap. 2, 29). The break between Souphanouvong and the Issara was as important as the DRV becoming a major war power with PRC aid. Out in the field with the guerrillas, Souphanouvong grew apart from the Issara leaders in Bangkok, whom he saw as increasingly out of touch. In March 1949 he resigned, protesting against all he had done to continue the anti-French war—secure weapons, build fronts in the east (with DRV aid) and south, convince Sithone Kommadam and Khamtai Siphandone to join—to the point that Souphanouvong felt he was the real patriot since he was the only one actually risking his life and enduring daily sacrifices for the cause (Brown and Zasloff 1986, 339–361). He condemned the Issara for not knowing how to carry out a revolution. In response, Katay Don Sasorith laid out several charges of misconduct (military and financial). He complained that Souphanouvong had never reported his activities to the Issara leadership nor shared information on troops. He accused Souphanouvong of being pro-Vietnamese while noting that the other Issara had never been informed of the exact nature of Issara-DRV agreements. Finally, Souphanouvong condemned Katay's recent pamphlet calling for Laos to be a US-allied anti-communist base as harming Issara-DRV relations. He also criticized Katay for having Vietnamese blood and so, in Souphanouvong's view, not being a true Lao patriot. Katay was, if anything, proud of the pamphlet, taunting Souphanouvong that he had yet to write anything better. Thus, as one civil war ended, another erupted, this time over the completeness of

Lao independence but also over the issue of whether Laos would be communist. The Cold War cast its shadow over the last years of the First Indochina War even as it rekindled civil war in Laos.

3.1 *PRC Victory and Internationalization of the First Indochina War*

Souphanouvong's 1949 schism with the Issara to forge the Pathet Lao was presaged by earlier events as the DRV created a new force it could more easily control: the Lao Issara Committee of the East. This was formed by the DRV Administrative Office for the Frontier (under the command of Tran To Chanh, who was fluent in Lao) in October 1946 in Vinh from the ashes of Issara defeats by loyalist-French forces (Goscha 2011, 28–29, 103, 114, 238).[9] This force operated along the Lao-Vietnamese border at Con Cuong and was run by the ICP inter-zone IV leader Chu Huy Man (Goscha 2011). Thus, the DRV once again turned to confrontation with the Issara and a nascent Lao state, as it had in August 1945 and March 1946, rather than allying with them to fight the common French foe. This happened well before the Issara accepted a Franco-Lao amnesty in October 1949 and was connected to looming prospects of war with France in late 1946. The DRV sought a force in Laos more willing to comply, which the Issara resisted. This new force under the DRV, eventually called the Pathet Lao (Lao Homeland), was less ethnically Lao centered; it included communists in Laos who were nearly all Vietnamese,[10] and different ethnic groups under anti-French leaders (e.g., the Hmong leader Faydang Lobliayao and Alak[11] leader Sithone Kommadam). It also had such Lao members as Souphanouvong, Sisana Siane, Singkapo Sikhotchounlamali, and Phoumi Vongvichit as well as lesser-known individuals with connections to Vietnam, including Kaysone Phomvihane and Nouhak Phoumsavan.[12] Kaysone joined a secret Lao-Vietnamese liaison group in early 1946 at Ho Chi Minh's request and then led the ICP-created Northern Laos Assault Team in February 1948 before joining the ICP in July 1949; he went to the ICP's Second Party Congress in 1951 as the Laos representative and was given the task of forming a Lao Communist Party, which was not created until March 1955 (Goscha 2011). Some hint of the Pathet Lao's changing nature was given by a participant at the organization's founding meeting in August 13–15, 1950, in Tuyen Quang, where he, as a longtime Issara, did not recognize anyone in the room (Nakhonkham 2003, 38). As ragtag as the Pathet Lao seemed, it did eventually go on to defeat the first postcolonial Lao state, the RLG, and establish the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. This government continues to rule Laos until today. The goal of the Pathet Lao was to complete the Issara's unfinished independence bid. Luckily, the Pathet Lao had a powerful ally, the DRV. As the First Indochina War in Laos progressed after 1950, it gradually evolved into a conflict over

fragmented sovereignty between states: the RLG and the Pathet Lao's proto-state, but also the DRV and France. It became more internationalized as the US and PRC intervened. This was clear during the DRV-Pathet Lao "invasions"/"liberations" of Laos in March and December 1953; whether one called them an "invasion" or a "liberation" depended on which side one was on in the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war, showing how it was by that point a double (inter-/intra-state) war.

3.2 *Showdown between Indochina and DRV-Associated States in Laos*

The Issara disbanded on October 24, 1949, and rejoined their loyalist brothers, facilitated by "return centers," to rally around the newly independent RLG as one civil war folded into another (Deuve 1995, 270, 278). The question of whether the RLG was actually independent at this point was at the center of the new RLG-Pathet Lao civil war. Before October 22, 1953, this was more of a claim used by RLG Lao and returning ex-Issara than a fully realized manifestation. The decision to return was not easy: some Issara took weeks to decide, and not everyone returned. Nhouy wrote in 1947 to persuade France to negotiate with the Issara, warning that if it refused, resistance would spread like cancer. France and King Sisavang Vong issued an amnesty on July 28, 1947. They also made concessions, including a new agreement on July 19, 1949, that stated "Laos is an independent state" within the new French Union and granting the RLG "the right to raise an Armée Nationale Laotienne" (Deuve 1984, 21–22; Conboy and Morrison 1995, 3). This agreement was part of Léon Pignon's efforts to create Associated States of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia centering on monarchies. The RLG joined the French Union in January 1948 just as the DRV sought to create a competing Indochinese alliance including the Pathet Lao. On this basis many Issara leaders returned to Laos on October 24, 1949. Thereafter, RLG independence was commemorated annually as having been on July 19, 1949—though French efforts to grant Laos independence on July 14, 1949, France's Bastille Day, were stymied by the Lao delegation, which delayed signing by five days. Indeed, the RLG held an independence ceremony on April 13, 1950, during the Lao New Year, at the National Assembly to celebrate the transfer of power. On this occasion Prime Minister Boun Oum declared, "We have come of age, attained independence" (Creak 2015, 84–85). Yet Boun Oum, as a major loyalist leader, resigned his post to placate returning ex-Issara.

France continued to infringe on RLG sovereignty by retaining control of the RLG Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Defense, Immigration, and Finance; and hundreds of French advisers remained. Those spoiling to fight for complete Lao sovereignty, those who were forced across the border into Vietnam by French reconquest, or those who did not want peace with loyalists could join the Pathet Lao-DRV alliance. Mean-

while, ex-Issara went on to form a new political party which demanded full independence and won elections in 1951, leading to an ex-Issara, Souvanna Phouma, becoming RLG prime minister (1951–54) for the remainder of the First Indochina War. Khammao Vilay, the former Issara prime minister, became minister of justice. Many ex-Issara would fight to defend against the 1953–54 Pathet Lao-DRV offenses, seeing the Pathet Lao not as their own independence movement gone awry but as a thinly veiled disguise for DRV invasion of a newly independent postcolonial Laos. As the scale of RLG-Pathet Lao conflict grew, RLG leaders asked whether the war had ceased to be a civil war and become a conventional interstate war. In this respect, the DRV "invasions" of Laos in 1953–54 were seen as a turning point at the end of the First Indochina War as the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war was overshadowed by the conventional interstate RLG-DRV war, which for some dominated Lao history until 1975. In reality, there were dueling RLG-Pathet Lao "liberations" of Laos under way. There were hints of this already in October 1945, when Oun Sananikone, greeting a Vietminh/ICP military delegation led by Souphanouvong, rejected offers to form a Lao liberation army saying Laos was already liberated (Oun 1975, 35–36).

The civil war did not die out but pivoted to the RLG-Pathet Lao conflict, ramping up in intensity as military power grew more organized (Creak 2015, 85–93). Issara military power before 1949 was woefully limited by the lack of any effective international sponsor. As Jean Deuve (1995, 145) noted, the Issara had "practically no weapons" before 1949. They had DRV aid—when not quarreling with the DRV or Vietminh/ICP in Laos. They had some Thai aid, but most support came from Northeast Thailand in the form of men, weapons, and funds. The GMD offered vital defense in Savannakhet, Thakhek, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang, staving off loyalist-French reconquest until March–May 1946. GMD forces even offered to train Issara in southern China and to rejoin Tai areas of southern China to Laos, playing upon the idea of a "greater Laos," if the Issara would fight France (Murashima 2017, chap. 18). This program operated briefly in 1948 but ended after training only thirty people. Thailand blocked it, fearing independent Issara military forces. Thailand had aided the Issara since July 1940, but after Phibun's coup in November 1947 Thai authorities looked on the Issara as dangerous separatists who sought to break Northeast Thailand away from Thailand to form a greater Laos; and some Issara allies were slain or arrested in Thailand. Lastly, the Issara gained arms in August–September 1945 as Japan departed Laos. Their military power increased vastly from 1949 as the Issara rejoined the loyalists in a renewed RLG; and they gained political power as some ex-Issara (Souvanna Phouma, Katay Don Sasorith) became prime ministers.

Thus, after 1949 military force in the First Indochina War in Laos became more

organized and grew with foreign aid: French and increasingly US. But civil war also become more widespread in rural areas, whereas in 1945–46 it had seemed more focused on urban areas. A case in point is the 1953–54 "invasions"/"liberations" of Laos by DRV Pathet Lao-People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)-Pathet Lao units. The March–May 1953 attack at Luang Prabang and the December 1953–February 1954 assault at Thakhek led to widespread violence and destruction. During and after the assaults, RLG leaders denied there was any civil war at all; they claimed, as Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma said in April 1953, that their enemies were only foreign fanatics[13] with no ties to Laos. While this rhetoric was useful to drum up nationalism and spread anti-communism, it distorted the nature of the war. In parallel, French and RLG leaders sought to create partisan forces from 1950, spurring new civil violence under the guise of pacification.[14]

3.3 *Birth of RLA/Franco-Lao Pacification as Civil Violence*

The Royal Lao Army (RLA) was a hasty creation born on March 23, 1950. In late 1949 what became the RLA (then known as the Armée Nationale Laotienne) began operating in conjunction with Lao units of the Forces Terrestres d'Extrême Orient (FTEO). FTEO Lao units were first formed in November 1945 by then Lieutenant-Colonel Boucher de Crèvecoeur as part of the French reconquest of Laos. He created four Batallions de Chasseurs Laotiens (incorporating two Compagnies Chasseurs Laotiens created in 1941) (Conboy and Morrison 1995, 2–4). RLA units were first formed at the end of 1949 as two 600-man Battalions d'Infanterie Laotienne. At this point RLA forces were little different from FTEO Lao forces as they still had French officers and followed French orders (Conboy and Morrison 1995). And the RLA was deeply divided among former Issara guerrillas and loyalists serving in the FTEO as Issara-loyalist tensions simmered under the surface. There were also serious conflicts between Lao and French officers as competition between RLA and FTEO forces for new recruits "eventually erupted in violence" (Oudone 1984, 12, 17, 19–22, 25, 41). The RLA's military power increased in December 1951 when the United States was allowed to send weapons and supplies indirectly via France. This allowed RLA weapons to be modernized, upgrading outdated British arms. Finally, the Lao army had foreign sponsors able and willing to modernize it. This rearming was combined with French training amid renewed support from Jean de Lattre, the new head of French forces, in 1952. The RLA commander-in-chief, Colonel Sounthone Patthammavong, in fact had no military experience when he took charge of the new army but had only served as provincial governor of Savannakhet. His selection was deliberate as ex-Issara refused to allow any former loyalist for the job. In the early years there were

few Lao officers. An officer training school was not created until 1951 at Dong Hene and Paksong. Thus, the RLA still relied on 274 French officers and NCOs. By 1953 it had expanded to twelve thousand personnel, and by 1954 it had grown rapidly to twenty-five thousand. From 1950 to 1954 the RLA received $30 million in US aid, with a total of fifty thousand personnel serving in it from 1945 (Viliam 2009, 56; Creak 2015, 91–92).

The RLA was deployed around Lao cities, while FTEO Lao units were tasked with pacification (i.e., counterinsurgency), fanning the flames of civil war across vast areas of Laos. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison noted, "At the district level, BCL companies followed the French 'hedgehog' counterinsurgency strategy of hardening their respective garrisons to create a network of minifortresses along the frontier that were theoretically capable of reinforcing each other in event of attack" (Conboy and Morrison 1995, 4, 6–8). In November 1950 the French raised a paramilitary force, the Garde Nationale, which consisted of small 17-man units wearing no uniform and given one month's training. It also included the Compagnies Supplétives Militaires, village volunteer forces. By January 1951 there were 3,400 such troops, but they were troubled by recruiting Pathet Lao defectors and RLA deserters, so they "contributed little to keeping the countryside under RLG control" (Conboy and Morrison 1995). Another paramilitary force was more effective. This was the Groupe de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés, which was made up of other ethnolinguistic groups—unlike the Garde Nationale, which was all ethnic Lao. In Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua, Captain Desfarges worked with Touby Lyfoung to organize Hmong and Phouan forces along these lines in November 1952. Sam Neua alone had 1,214 men, including French officers, while Xieng Khouang had 2,400. The young Hmong officer Vang Pao—the first Hmong soldier to graduate from Dong Hene and a future RLA general—was among the first to lead his own hundred-man *commandos spéciaux*. This force's operations "ran the gamut of unconventional warfare: raids, psychological warfare, reconnaissance, pacification, sabotage, kidnapping, assassination" (Conboy and Morrison 1995). Yet that same month Crown Prince Savang Vatthana requested the French to wind down pacification, ostensibly due to its success in securing peace across Laos; but one wonders whether Savang was at all aware of the heavy toll it took on the civilian population. Nonetheless, the French hailed their pacification operation as a "tremendous success," expanding it to Phongsaly and the northwest and on to southern Laos (Conboy and Morrison 1995). By the time of the ceasefire in August 1954 there were 62 Garde Nationale companies and 12 *commandos spéciaux* companies (Creak 2015, 92).

One defining feature of the RLA in its early years was its inadequacy in the face

of a far superior foe. At the time of the first PAVN offensive the highest field rank serving in the RLA was that of captain; and across the RLA there were only 12 Lao officers in total (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 2, 1953). By early 1954 there were more PAVN soldiers in Laos (17,600) than there were soldiers in the nascent RLA (17,000) (Oudone 1984, 25; Goscha 2004, 150). The RLA was clearly outmatched by PAVN forces. The latter had been engaged in a major war with a first-rate Western military power for years while also receiving PRC aid, training, equipment, and advisers. On the other hand, the RLA was on the brink of being seriously weakened by French military drawdown per the Geneva Accords of 1954.[15] This would cause the RLA to lose the vast majority of its officers and rapidly promote lower-ranking soldiers to fill the breach.

3.4 *Invasion or Liberation? PAVN-Pathet Lao Offensives of 1953–54*

On April 12, 1953, the PAVN-Pathet Lao "invasion"/"liberation" of Laos was in full swing with elements of the 308th, 312th, and 316th PAVN divisions in action (Shu 2021, 139; Wolfson-Ford 2024, 65–71). One division was sent to attack Luang Prabang. It reached within thirty kilometers of the city on May 10, the day before the annual celebration of the RLG constitution when the National Assembly convened. PAVN-Pathet Lao forces eventually withdrew due to overextended supply lines mired in monsoon rains, but not before decimating a Lao battalion at Muang Khoua (only four soldiers survived). The outpost consisted of a French captain, a French lieutenant, a handful of French noncommissioned officers, and three hundred Lao infantry. After intense fighting, they were ordered to hold out at all costs on April 3, 1953, while a second defensive line was prepared. The same day a nearby outpost at Sop Nao was surrounded by PAVN-Pathet Lao forces. The Sop Nao garrison was overrun and fled to the Khoua outpost on April 12. From April 13 the outpost withstood assault for 36 days, finally falling in the early hours of May 18. Lao soldiers were said to have performed "heroically" by Bernard Fall (Fall 1961, 126). PAVN assaults were made easier by Pathet Lao guides, such as Faydang Lobliayao, and the use of French colonial roads: PAVN-Pathet Lao forces moved rapidly along Route 6 from Hanoi through Sam Neua before turning south to link up with more forces using Route 7, which went from Vinh through Xieng Khouang. From there these forces could travel west to threaten Luang Prabang or Vientiane on Route 13. Another major battle site was at Sepon, which straddled Route 9.

On withdrawing from Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang, PAVN forces reinforced resistance bases of the Pathet Lao in Sam Neua and Phongsaly. The PAVN-Pathet Lao offensive of 1953 was larger in scale than anything previously witnessed. Until this

point Lao soldiers had been involved in the fighting in the First Indochina War, but only on the periphery (Creak 2015). Two other PAVN divisions were sent to Hua Phan and Xieng Khouang, where their only opposition was three Lao battalions. RLG forces retreating from the Sam Neua garrison suffered losses of nearly 90 percent. Xieng Khouang itself was overrun before being retaken in fierce fighting in May. A total of 1,569 Lao and French soldiers died during the first PAVN-Pathet Lao offensive, a not inconsequential number for the newly formed RLA (roughly 10 percent). This came as defenses at the Plain of Jars surged with French Foreign Legion and Lao infantry battalions, Lao national guard companies resupplied by US C-119 transport planes flown by Civil Air Transport (tied to the CIA), and a battalion of State of Vietnam paratroopers to beat back PAVN-Pathet Lao forces as the war became increasingly conventional and internationalized (Conboy and Morrison 1995, 5–6).

Even before the campaign, high-level RLG officials were concerned over the possibility of a PAVN-Pathet Lao offensive. In December 1952 two frontier outposts were lost in Sam Neua, presaging events to come. Thereafter, a parachute battalion was sent to the town of Sam Neua, which became locked in monthslong combat with PAVN-Pathet Lao forces. As early as March 11, 1953, the RLG newspaper *Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien* (March 11, 1953) noted "a slight stiffening" of PAVN-Pathet Lao activities in northeastern Laos. A high-level delegation went to tour Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang. This mission included Crown Prince Savang Vatthana, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, and Minister of Defense Phoui Sananikone (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, March 23, 1953; March 31, 1953). While in Xieng Khouang, the crown prince met with local leaders of the Phouan and Hmong: Chao Saykham and Touby Lyfoung respectively. Shortly after, while the crown prince was receiving the diplomatic credentials of the new Australian ambassador, he remarked, "Today your country is interested in the bloody struggles in Vietnam whose borders touch on Laos. This interest is a comfort and encouragement for Laos is constantly threatened by foreign aggression." He concluded, "what matters to Laos is the strengthening of friendship with all the countries imbued with peace and liberty" (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 3, 1953).

The RLG took a major step to address the DRV threat. It passed a law which for the first time permitted mass mobilization of the population to be conscripted into the RLA.[16] While the main offensive had not yet begun, fighting in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang was motivation enough. When the law was debated in the National Assembly on April 6, 1953, deputies observed a moment of silence for fallen soldiers "in recognition of our combatants and to the memory of our valiant soldiers fallen on the field of battle" (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 7, 1953). The assembly unanimously

expressed its support for the RLA. It professed that "the entire nation is behind them [RLA] for the defense of the borders" (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 7, 1953). Following the enactment of the new law, the RLG set about conscripting new recruits, raising six battalions and thereby doubling the size of the RLA. Since there were still not enough men, RLG officials were called to enlist.

In the midst of the PAVN-Pathet Lao offensive, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma gave an impromptu passionate speech on April 16, 1953. The assault interrupted celebrations for the traditional Lao New Year; that it threatened Luang Prabang—where the king, crown prince, prime minister, and other high-level RLG officials were presiding over official ceremonies—only further inflamed sentiment. In a fiery speech the prime minister denounced the "invasion" in nationalist and anti-communist terms, thereby obscuring the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war as a foreign attack and so potently distorting the nature of the war. The speech reached a wide audience as it was printed on the front page of the *Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien* and broadcast on Radio Lao. News of the PAVN-Pathet Lao assault caught the attention of many concerned about what might happen. In Vientiane and elsewhere, the news was greeted with panic and fear, leading thousands to flee across the Mekong River to Thailand. Grimly, Souvanna Phouma called for a "fight to the death" to defend Lao independence and sovereignty against the enemy:

> Let us approach them with calm and resolution. Our determination to defend the soil and independence of our homeland, the same as our traditions and our culture, must be for the aggressors already a salutary warning. They know by . . . the proud words of our national hymn: "whoever would want to invade our country will find us resolved to fight to the death." (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 16, 1953)

An accompanying RLG statement noted that Laos had been independent since 1949 and so did not require liberation. It had a fully functioning democracy. The RLG was working to improve the economy and address social issues. The RLG claimed it faced no internal adversaries in its efforts, thereby dismissing its enemies as entirely foreign, spilling over from Vietnam: "Bands coming from abroad and fueled by the foreigner were able to sporadically disturb certain regions where police operations were necessary." It added that the enemy were "foreign fanatics without any links to Laos and its inhabitants." It called the DRV-Pathet Lao aggression a criminal act by a "foreign faction which proves once again that it only aims to impose an ideology on the world [i.e., communism] without regard for borders or the right of peoples to self-determination" (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 16, 1953).

King Sisavang Vong showed his mettle in the PAVN-Pathet Lao offensive when he refused to retreat from Luang Prabang, the royal and spiritual capital of Laos. He was acting on the prediction of a well-known senior Buddhist monk that enemy forces would not reach the city. He stood his ground in an act of heroism that was widely praised by foreigner and Lao alike. As a result of the king's heroism, "patriotic fervor swept the country" (Stuart-Fox 1997, 82). During the early stages of the offensive, French military commanders seriously considered evacuating the entire country but were forced to defend Laos when King Sisavang Vong steadfastly refused to be evacuated (Fall 1961, 117).

On this occasion, the king spoke to his top civil and military officials on how important official patriotism was but added it must be without vanity or egotism and guided by preservation and self-abnegation. He feared division among RLG leaders would fatally weaken Laos before powerful foes. He foresaw any such weakness would be seized upon and fully exploited. As for the offensive, he said, "today storms are rumbling at our borders. But we have faith that the men of the Lao country, its officers, its soldiers, and its administrations will know what to do in the face of all danger with courage and honor" (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 16, 1953). Sisavang Vong called for unity not unlike as had been done in ancient Rome and other places facing unending civil wars.

The PAVN-Pathet Lao offensive was not over. PAVN-Pathet Lao forces made a second incursion, from December 20, 1953, to February 18, 1954. This involved a much larger PAVN army, numbering ten thousand soldiers. On December 21, 1953, one PAVN regiment crossed the Nape pass on Route 8 to seize Nhommarath, while another crossed the Mu Gia pass along Route 9 to take Sepon. PAVN-Pathet Lao forces then pushed west, reaching the Mekong to occupy Thakhek on Route 12 by December 26. They succeeded in effectively cutting Laos in half, threatening its independence and, in RLG minds, its existence. PAVN-Pathet Lao forces then endangered the military base at Séno (30 km east of Savannakhet) in mid-January 1954. They were halted when they again outran supply lines, having first done so in the April–May 1953 campaign, but the RLA retook Thakhek and Nhommarath only on February 18. A second PAVN-Pathet Lao force again made a push to Luang Prabang but was turned back by 15 Lao and French battalions in late February 1954 (Conboy and Morrison 1995, 8–9).

PAVN-Pathet Lao "invasions"/"liberations" began to completely distort RLG leaders' thinking, pushing them to even greater levels of DRV-Pathet Lao hatred. Minister of the Interior Pheng Phongsavan (a close ally of the monarchy and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and a future neutralist) gave an impassioned speech about

the dangers of communist Vietnamese "hordes" at an RLA graduation ceremony in December 1953. He began by congratulating the students on their success. Then he reflected on all that had happened in Laos since they began training:

> A war that we did not want raged on the territory of our homeland. From north to south, from east to west, the columns of our soldiers were chasing the communist enemy, attacking victoriously wherever it wished to accept combat, liberating day after day parcels of our soil that the odious aggressor Vietminh wished to place under its totalitarian domination. The battle of the definitive liberation of our Lao land is in progress. Without betraying military secrets, I can tell you today that it is on track. The Vietminh hordes are fleeing our borders, tirelessly pursued by our units of friendly forces of the French Union and the national army. (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, December 15, 1953)

Pheng urged them to join the unfolding war: "you will be proud to have participated in the defense of our homeland" (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, December 15, 1953). He spoke of the importance of the RLA since the assault:

> Each of you represents a cogwheel in this young army, which makes us proud because it is and will remain the first instrument of our sovereignty and the maintenance of our independence. Allied to your patriotism, virtues of courage and discipline and above all the sense of sacrifice nobly understood and consented will make you valuable cadres on whom your government and the entire Lao country depend. (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, December 15, 1953)

Pheng's speech displayed a new, potent form of nationalism. The idea of "DRV invasions" fed a powerful, dangerous nativist strain of Lao anti-communism while simultaneously concealing the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war. RLG officials spread this ideology at ceremonies and to the population via press and radio. Pheng spoke of liberation as a sacred mission:

> So your stay in the national army . . . will not have been a simple accident, a simple interruption of your normal activities, but you will have found the fertile occasion to play your part in the noble combat of the liberation of our Lao HOMELAND. (*Lao Presse Bulletin Quotidien*, April 16, 1953)

Pathet Lao discourses on the "liberation" of Laos from French-US imperialisms, old and new, are well known. But Minister of the Interior Pheng Phongsavan spoke of another struggle waged by the RLG to liberate Laos from what it saw as communist imperialists: the DRV, Pathet Lao, and PRC.

4 Geneva Accords and the Latent Civil War

In the final days of the First Indochina War in Laos, RLG pacification forces regained control of much of Phongsaly, Xieng Khouang, and Sam Neua and even made thrusts toward French forces under siege at Dien Bien Phu. Crown Prince Savang Vatthana went to observe the forces in Phongsaly in June 1954, "boasting that the maquis could retake the provincial capital" (Conboy and Morrison 1995, 9–10, 12). Skirmishes continued along the mountain passes between Laos and Vietnam until the ceasefire of August 6, 1954. Savang maintained his interest in pacification after the war, discussing possible US aid for "auto-defense" forces with the first US diplomat, Charles Yost, in late 1954 (Keefer *et al.* 1990, 729). Savang had already started a youth movement in 1947 which had political and military applications (Wolfson-Ford 2020, 183–187). The auto-defense program was first established in Phongsaly, led by RLA officer Ouane Rathikoun, before being rolled out throughout Laos in June 1955. The CIA later rearmed the auto-defense forces (Conboy 2021, 15). So the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war continued, still obscured by RLG officials under the guise of pacification. Lao territory was also organized into military regions for the first time (beyond the few areas, such as Phongsaly, already organized this way during the colonial period). The auto-defense mission involved recruiting locals who disliked Pathet Lao rule (with its travel restrictions, forced labor, confiscation of food, conscription, and taxation), who were then trained by the RLA mostly for defense but also to conduct small raids and cut Pathet Lao supply lines.

The RLG-Pathet Lao civil war spread fighting across many areas of Laos—just like the Issara-loyalist civil war before it. While the DRV "invasions"/"liberations" of 1953–54 made it appear to the RLG leaders as if the conflict was solely a clash between states—the RLG and DRV—civil war continued unabated. Indeed, it appears civil war in the name of pacification spread in rural areas by increasing conventional war: the formation of the National Garde and pacification operations by FTEO forces. The war remained a double conflict: the RLG-Pathet Lao intra-state civil war, and a conventional interstate war of (inter)national armies, the French Union-RLA versus PAVN-Pathet Lao. The ending of the conventional war at the Geneva Conference in 1954 did not end the civil war between the RLG and Pathet Lao, which itself sparked the Second Indochina War in Laos on May 18, 1959. Indeed, as Christopher Goscha notes, "in Laos, more than in Cambodia or even southern Vietnam, the VWP was going to stay on and they were developing a concrete strategy and transnational project to do so" (Goscha 2011, 29). The VWP's project and actions to intervene in Laos led to the establishment of the DRV Advisory Group 100 five days before the

Geneva Convention was signed on July 21, 1954. The organization was created to organize, train, and rebuild the Pathet Lao as it struggled to defend a nascent resistance state in Phongsaly and Sam Neua with sovereignty remaining fragmented in Laos amid civil war.

Yet foreign involvement precluded it from being solely a civil war. On the Issara side foreign allies included the GMD (offering aided until 1948), the Thai (until the November 1947 coup), the DRV (although this was a stormy alliance that frequently broke down only to be revived in some measure, driven by at times greater mutual hatred of French rule), and the Japanese (in 1945). On the loyalist side support came from France and the UK (in 1945) and after 1949 the US. In 1949–50, the arrangement changed when the Issara and loyalists ended their civil war and the Pathet Lao was created, sparking a new RLG-Pathet Lao civil war. The Issara-loyalists then received aid from France and the United States, while the Pathet Lao received DRV and PRC aid (Shu 2021). Yet, when France intervened in August 1945 it did not necessarily think of itself as a foreign power. Likewise, the DRV intervened but at times did not view Laos as a foreign country; and the Thai also intervened and did not view Laos as foreign soil as they sought to liberate Laos from French rule to incorporate it within a greater Thai state. Meanwhile, the Issara yearned to create a greater Lao state incorporating parts of Northeast Thailand and southern China, not to mention Stung Treng in Cambodia (Baird 2010), or even possibly the White and Black Tai areas of northwestern Vietnam.

There was no shortage of civil war even as more conventional war raged: there were Lao killing Lao (which Oun lamented), especially during the Issara-loyalist conflict (1945–49). This was not just a Lao affair: indeed, Hmong killing Hmong occurred over the same question of independence as forces under Faydang Lobliayao fought the return of French rule in Xieng Khouang while Touby Lyfoung and his allies aided France (Lee 2015). Even White Tai were split over supporting France after World War II as Deo Van An supported the French reconquest of Laos while Deo Van Long and Deo Van Mun "feared to lay stakes on a bad table" (Gunn 1988, 218–219). There were cases of interethnic civil violence too, such as Lao fighting Vietnamese for control of the future of Laos. Serious fighting erupted among the Issara and their putative allies, the Vietminh/ICP, for control of Lao cities in April and August 1945. Another example was the Issara-Vietminh/ICP assault on Xieng Khouang, held by loyalist Hmong and Phouan, or a Khmu uprising in 1947. So, foreign conventional—at times interstate—war was deeply enmeshed with local bloody civil wars. The question of the nature of the war turns on who was foreign and who belonged in Laos. Were French foreigners in "their own" colonial territory? Were Vietnamese living in Laos foreigners? Did

non-Lao ethnic groups belong in a country named after Lao? Did Thai or Lao belong in a country where over half the population was not ethnic Lao? Civil wars in Laos were not just a question of whether Laos would be communist; in profound ways the civil wars were to determine who belonged in Laos.

To recapitulate, nestled within the First Indochina War (1945–54) were two civil wars in Laos. While not always recognized as such, the first one was between the Issara, who were fighting to free Laos from French colonial rule, and their opponents, the loyalists, who wanted to uphold French rule. During this civil war there was both political and ethnic violence. In its conclusion in 1949, the Issara-loyalist civil war contained the seeds for the next civil war, which was between the RLG and Pathet Lao. Both civil wars were over the nature of postcolonial Laos. What did it mean to be free and independent, or "liberated"? The Issara were already fighting to liberate Laos in 1945 and had different notions of how to do that from, say, Vietnamese populations living within Laos at the time, or from notions such as a "Dream of a Hmong Kingdom" for that matter (Lee 2015). The disconnect between the Issara and their Vietnamese allies led to the second civil war, stemming from the creation of the Pathet Lao and the Issara's acceptance of amnesty to rejoin the RLG. Nationalism was a factor on all sides, and agency—despite international interventions—should not be doubted for any group: Issara, loyalists, Viet Kieu, Hmong, Pathet Lao, or RLG. More broadly, the larger anti-colonial and Cold War conflicts of the First Indochina War should not obscure the local civil wars, just as these civil wars should not obscure the larger interstate wars. It was a double conflict where interstate war, which was itself part of the global wars of decolonization and the Cold War, was entangled with local bloody civil wars. Only when we grasp these complexities will we have a better understanding of the decades of war experienced by Laos.

Notes

1) For a similar loyalist statement by Outhong Souvannavong in October 1945, see Toye (1968, 75): "We are a small people. Few of us are educated. Our country is without great resources and can only live with the support of other countries. We must choose foreign tutelage . . . Our interests dictate that among the great powers we should choose France. So we shall preserve the moral and intellectual gains we have made; with another power we should have to go back to school, learn another language. The king has chosen and save for a few fanatics [i.e., the Issara] we are attached to France; in the smallest jungle village the Frenchman has been received like a brother . . ."
2) The Lao Issara began as an anti-French student protest at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane in July 1940, just after the fall of France to Germany during World War II. Its name changed many times, but its first name was the Committee to Restore Lao independence, thus signifying its ultimate aim. In September 1945 it merged with the Seri Lao, which was created by the Seri

Thai (itself dominated by Isan Lao). Then, in October 1945, a Lao Pen Lao (Laos is Lao) political party was created to support the new Issara government established on October 12, 1945. While the Issara used various names and added members, Sila Viravong saw it as one movement. Sila was a member of the Issara and provides an invaluable resource (see, for instance, his memoir on the Issara [1975]; see also Wolfson-Ford [2024, 33–37]).

3) The Pathet Lao's national liberation struggle is seen by historians as having both anti-French and local civil war aspects. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.
4) In the case of Vietnam, there are many works on the civil war aspect of the First Indochina War. For South Vietnam, see, for example, McHale (2021). Authors such as Martin Stuart-Fox and Grant Evans tend to accept the RLG view that the RLG-Pathet Lao civil war was really an interstate conflict, ignoring the civil dimensions of the war. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insight. For Laos during the First Indochina War, see Bodin (2008).
5) The United States and PRC began intervening in 1950 as both saw Laos as a key battlefield in the US-PRC conflict. The US sought to enlist Laos in its containment strategy, while the PRC sought to ensure Laos was free of American military bases.
6) Anne Raffin notes that loyalists in Savannakhet and Khammouane welcomed French reconquest because they blamed the Issara "for essentially turning over the country to the Viet Minh" (Raffin 2005, 226).
7) In comparison, Nhouy described Issara-Vietminh campaigns to reconquer Xieng Khouang from Hmong-loyalist forces as anti-Hmong (see Nhouy 1947).
8) Christopher Goscha (2012) noted that the Comintern compelled Ho Chi Minh to focus on Indochina rather than just Vietnam, including changing the name of the party to the Indochinese Communist Party. Ho Chi Minh himself had written calling for all Indochinese fighters to resist the French in 1926. As late as 1945 DRV officials envisioned a Soviet Republic of Indochina or Union of Socialist Indochinese Soviet Republics. Shu Quanzhi observed that the ICP again affirmed in 1948 "its policy was to achieve independence under its banner for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia" and that "national liberation of the three Indochinese countries 'cannot be separated.'" The ICP renamed itself along national lines to avoid Laos and Cambodia thinking that "Vietnam wanted to 'annex' their countries" (Shu 2021).
9) The DRV feared the Issara would fall under Thai control in 1947 and even distrusted Phetsarath with information about military operations, thereby hampering Issara-DRV military cooperation.
10) There were four thousand Viet Kieu fighting with the Pathet Lao by 1954, according to a French general (Gunn 1988, 277).
11) Personal communication, James Chamberlain, June 15, 2023.
12) Kaysone, son of a Vietnamese official in Savannakhet, was sent to Savannakhet in September 1945 by Ho Chi Minh to infiltrate the Issara, while Nouhak ran a bus line to Vinh and joined the ICP in 1947. Not all Vietnamese in Laos were ICP or Pathet Lao. Katay Don Sasorith, a major Issara leader, according to some sources, had a Vietnamese father (though he denied it in his autobiography). Vietnamese Catholics in Laos also were not necessarily anti-French.
13) Souvanna's statement about foreign fanatics eerily echoed Outhong Souvannavong's use of the same phrase against the Issara in October 1945 (Toye 1968, 75): "The king has chosen and save for a few foreign fanatics we are attached to France . . ."
14) Thanks to Christopher Goscha for this insight.
15) The RLG-Pathet Lao civil war persisted after the end of the First Indochina War. Fighting renewed in January 1955 over an expanding Pathet Lao proto-state in Sam Neua and Phongsaly Provinces.
16) There was an earlier February 1950 French-RLG agreement allowing conscription for FTEO forces.

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