

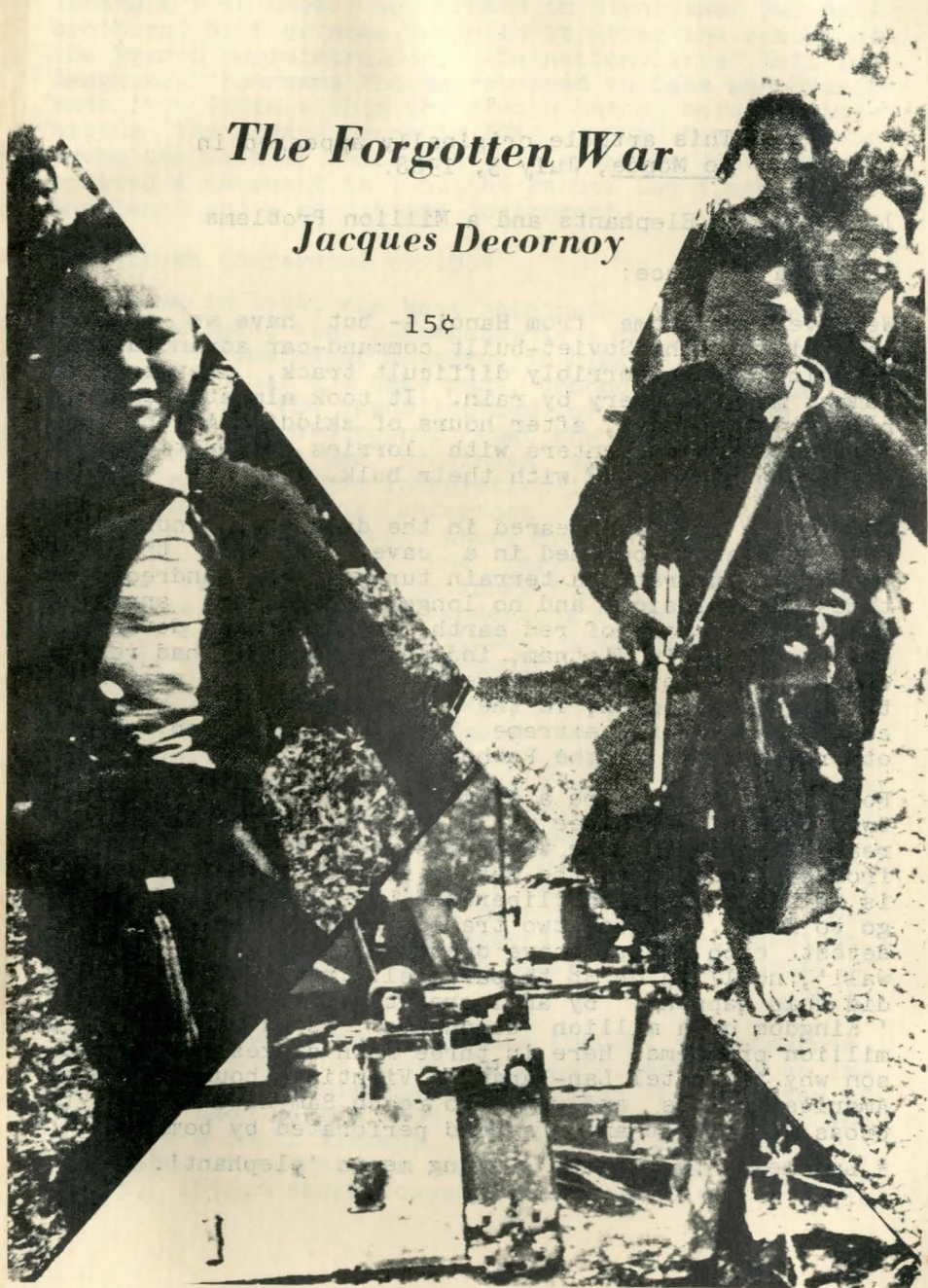
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# LAOS:

## *The Forgotten War*

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## 1. A Million Elephants and a Million Problems

### Sam Neua Province:

We have just come from Hanoi -- but have we changed countries? The Soviet-built command-car advanced hic-coughing over a terribly difficult track, crevassed by bombs, made slippery by rain. It took almost two whole nights to get here, after hours of skidding in the mud, and delicate encounters with lorries obstructing the little mountain road with their bulk.

Two feeble lights appeared in the darkness, indicating the high site perched in a cave. We left the main track to penetrate a terrain turned over hundreds of times by explosions and no longer resembling anything at all -- a chaos of red earth, broken rocks, devastated trees. As in Vietnam, indeed, and yet we had really crossed the border. We were in Laos, in a sector of the Sam-Neua region, in the 'liberated zone' which is controlled by the extreme left, the Neo Lao Haksat, otherwise known as the Pathet Lao.

Forgotten Laos where a forgotten war rages, cut into two, Laos of the "free world" and "Liberated Laos". To reach Vientiane, one takes a plane, a train or a car from Bangkok. Once the Mekong is crossed the traveller is in Laos. To reach 'liberated Laos', one has first to go to Hanoi. These two transit capital cities, which detest each other, have become symbols. No 'Berlin wall', no 17 th or 38 th parallel...yet two Laos'. How did this happen? By an incredibly tortuous path. The 'Kingdom of a million elephants' is a kingdom of a million problems. Here in three main stages is the reason why the Hotel Lan-Xang\* in Vientiane houses so many American pilots and why, to reach Sam-neua one has to cross North Vietnam on a road perforated by bombs.

\* Lan means 'a million'. Xang means 'elephant'.



At the end of 1945, a nationalist government, Lao Issara ('Free Laos') was formed in Vientiane. Two half brothers, both princes, were in it. After the return of the French administration, the nationalists left for Bangkok. Souvanna Phouma returned to Laos when Paris made it a State within the French Union, before recognising its independence in 1953. But Souphanouvong chose the path of armed struggle with the Vietminh. He created a movement in 1950, the Pathet Lao (Land of the Laotians) and a resistance government.

#### The Geneva Conference of 1954

At Geneva in 1954, the West obtained a concession from the communists, that representatives of the Pathet Lao and of the analogous movement in Cambodia - the Khmer Issarak - should not take part. Cambodia agreed to the principle of the reunification of Laos around the throne. It was understood that the Pathet Lao forces would regroup in two provinces while waiting for general elections and integration into the Royal Army. The Vietminh troops undertook to evacuate their positions in the country where France alone was authorised to have troops: one garrison at Seno, and a mission for training national forces. The Laotian Government, on its side, undertook to take 'measures' intended to integrate (without discrimination) all citizens in the national community.

But integration was very difficult, and Laos was to remain the subject of diplomatic meetings for years. It had to wait until 1957 after the transformation of the Pathet Lao, in 1956, into a political party, the Neo Lao Haksat (Laotian Patriotic Front), for a government of national union to be constituted, presided over by Souvanna Phouma, in which Souphanouvong took the Ministry of Planning. 1958 saw the beginning of the fusion of the two armies and the organisation of elections. The Neo Lao Haksat and the neutralist party, Santiab, hostile to America, won a comfortable majority of seats.

The Right became scared, Souvanna Phouma, the moderate, had to cede power to Phouk Sananikone, member of an important family in Vientiane, who ousted the Minister of the Neo Lao Haksat, and built strong links with Ngo Dinh Diem's South Vietnam, and with Formosa, that is, in a word, with the most reactionary pro-American Asia. In May, 1959, Souphanouvong and some of his friends



were arrested in Vientiane. In June, Washington announced supplementary aid to the Royal Army. On December 31, General Phoumi, a CIA protégé, and a relation of Sarit's, the Bangkok dictator, seized power. The April 1960 elections were openly rigged. On May 24, Souphanouvong escaped from prison and went back to the mountain provinces. The national union was dead before it had ever really existed. The Right, incompetent and corrupt, were in power.

Sickened by this spectacle, a young parachutist captain, Kong Lé, seized power in Vientiane in August, 1960, recalled Souvanna Phouma to power, and proposed negotiations with both Phouma and Souphanouvong to end the civil war and proclaim the neutrality of the country. Rejecting the advice of the United States Ambassador and those from London and Paris who supported this step, Phoumi and his confidant at the head of the government, Boun Oum, spurned all conciliation. Encouraged by the CIA, they unleashed an offensive against the meagre forces of Kong Lé, which drove the latter into an understanding with the Pathet Lao and to appeal to Moscow, which sent supplies by air lift. Suddenly, the forces of the Right, which had succeeded in retaking Vientiane, had to evacuate part of the areas they controlled despite the aid of American special forces, finding no other excuse for their reversal than the pretended 'aggression of seven North Vietnamese battalions'.

...and that of 1962

This was the situation when John Kennedy came to the White House in 1961. In the period since his election, he had time to convince himself that it was necessary to change his policy on Laos. This is what he did at his first press conference, announcing in discreet but nevertheless clear terms his support for the neutralist formula tirelessly pressed by Great Britain and France. All that remained was to persuade the competent American administrations and the rival forces of Phoumi (still persisting in their dreams of total victory) and of Souphanouvong which were winning success after success.

In March, after having moved out the Seventh Fleet, the President succeeded in persuading Moscow, which had been proposing for a long time the reconvening of the 1954 Geneva Conference to consider the case of Laos and to sponsor a preliminary ceasefire. Not without difficulty



it was decided on May 16, to reconvene the Conference in Geneva. It took more than a year to come to an end, after an agreement between the three Laotian factions on a treaty neutralising and uniting the country, under international guarantees. Thirteen countries, including China and the two Vietnams, signed this document which, it was hoped, would open the way to a settlement of the Vietnam affair. But it was quickly realised that the agreement was only the product of a compromise between the three Great Powers and scarcely reflected the forces at work in the heart of a society in the process of evolution. So long as the Vietnam war lasted, it was illusory, in any case, to think that Laos could be pushed to one side, since it was only because of the gradual development of American intervention that Hanoi's troops in the South increased in number, some of which passed through the territory in Laos held by the Pathet Lao.

From their side, the numerous Americans who pulled the strings of the Laotian Right continued on the same road and their protégés showed how little they were prepared to implement the agreements. Several personalities on the Left were assassinated, among them the neutralist Minister of Foreign Affairs, Quinim Pholsena. From the beginning of 1963, the Pathet Lao denounced the Air America Company, publicly notorious as a child of the CIA. They, too, no longer intended to sacrifice much to apply a treaty which they signed, without any doubt, under pressure from Moscow, and with no enthusiasm.

Clashes multiplied while discussions between the rival forces took place. Phoumi, indeed, was exiled to Thailand -- but that was only a matter of settling accounts among the Rightist factions. Attempts at reconciliation failed one after the other. Prince Souvanna Phouma, unable to prevent the military and feudal cliques from destroying each other, was soon no longer, in the eyes of the Left, the 'neutralist' who scared Washington and paid official visits to Moscow and Hanoi, but a Prime Minister about to accuse North Vietnam of intervening in Laos and to ask the Americans to bomb the areas held by Souphanouvong's forces. In May, 1964, Washington admitted the existence of reconnaissance flights over the Plain of Jars and rapidly went on to attack the Pathet Lao from the air. Kong Lê followed Phoumi into exile. There was left only the Pathet Lao, stretched along the length of the country from China to Cambodia, face to face with the forces of the Right, scattered and

heavily supported by the Americans. The Left receives support from the socialist countries but aid which, unlike that which Washington gives to the other side, does not lead to the scientific destruction of the areas held by the enemy. In foreign policy, as in internal policy, middle of the road formulae have failed.

Twenty-three years after the formation of the Lao Issara government, Laos still knows neither peace nor freedom. It was into this nightmare world that we penetrated, crossing the North Vietnamese frontier in our Soviet-made command-car.

## II. Owls in the Grotto

Right up to the last few feet of the journey, it was necessary to steer the car between bomb and rocket craters. A wooden ladder propped against the chalky rock gave access to the grotto hotel, a natural hole in the mountain 'aided' by charges of dynamite. The traveller passed from one 'suite' to another, walking along a 'floor' of sharp pebbles, to arrive finally at his 'room'. From his bed he can see the sky through a break in the mountain. He can feel a fresh wind, but it would be extraordinary bad luck if a rocket landed in this cave. The foundations of this shelter are perfectly protected from bomb explosions in any case. A tiny motor distributes a supply almost unknown in 'liberated Laos' -- electricity.

This retreat for hunted guerrillas is managed by Mme. Kempeth Pholsena, a graduate of Moscow university, French speaking, and a daughter of Quinim Pholsena, Laotian Minister of Foreign Affairs and neutralist leader, assassinated in April, 1963. Life, here, is of the simplist. Set on the rocky platform which forms the entrance to the grotto is a washbasin. A dangerous place if one puts one's nose out of the mountain: it can happen that one cannot finish shaving because of the jets raiding from Thailand. Then, one lies flat on the floor of the grotto with a bit of the sky and a few flower pots attached to the rock by a thread of wire for a view. A difficult life but still possible in this season. But when the rainy season begins, water penetrates the chalky mass and drips into the 'hotel'. A world without noise, for the surrounding villages have disappeared, the inhabitants themselves living hidden in the mountains. A few buffalo, a few pigs walk below our feet between the craters made by American bombs. At the



end of 1957. several large bombs fell two metres from the grotto: it is dangerous to lean out at any time of the night or day.

### Thousands of Bombs

A 'routine' day .... at 7 o'clock, an AD-6 plane prowls above us. It hangs around for about ten minutes, then leaves. At 7:30 the plane returns, flies over once, and, three times, drops its cargo a few kilometres from the 'hotel'. There is a flight of jets at 8 o'clock and at 8:30 jets and bombs. The same operation at 9 o'clock. In the afternoon we hear planes again on several occasions. It is not surprising, in these circumstances, to watch the breathless arrival at the 'hotel' of a Secretary of State in the defunct government of national union. Papers in his hand, he has run from one cave to another. In this region which they control and administer, the Laotians of the Left seem to be an underground in their own land, the guerrillas camouflaging themselves in the shelter of the rocks, as if the enemy ruled the valley, though he is only master of the skies.

It seems that the intensity and density of the bombing is even greater in the province of Xieng-Khouang in the Plain of Jars. Their persistence in this zone of grottoes raises the problem of the real motives of the Americans. Prince Souvanna Phouma told us in Vientiane (Le Monde, February 23rd) that the raids were aimed less at the Laotians than at the North Vietnamese at their point of entry into the country. It is certain that the US Air Force attacks the trails. But such a relentless attack on the region where we were can only be explained if the target is the central administration itself of the Neo Lao Haksat. Thousands of bombs have fallen for three years on a small area two to three kilometres long. In front of the cave where Prince Souphanouvong received us, the craters were so close that they cut into each other. In this forgotten war, unlike the attacks on North Vietnam, these raids have never been officially reported, but only, with much delay and discretion, 'admitted'. The Americans are trying to 'break' the Laotian Left, both psychologically and, if possible, physically.

In Vientiane - and the Prime Minister cannot be unaware of it, the Pathet Lao, who know that he encourages these offensives, is not ready to forgive him. They also

blame Thailand, from which all the bombers fly, and governments supporting American intervention or maintaining a complete silence on the subject. To declare, as Prince Souvanna Phouma has done, that the Lao Haksat 'will rejoin the national community' when it is 'liberated' from 'North Vietnamese ascendancy' is to misunderstand completely the views of the leaders of the Left who ask, on the contrary, that Vientiane should disengage itself from enormous American influence and that the Americans no longer intervene in their country.

One of the officials of the Sam-Neua district told us that between February, 1965 and March, 1968, 65 villages had been destroyed. A number impossible to verify for a short report, but it is a fact that between Sam-Neua and a place about 30 kilometres away where we stayed, no house in the villages and hamlets had been spared. Bridges had been destroyed, fields up to the rivers were holed with bomb craters.

### Shelters in the Hill

Life in the caves has its inconveniences for the peasants. It is even more serious for the political and administrative people who have to rule an immense mountainous country, stretching from China to Cambodia, where distances are counted less in kilometres than in days and nights of marching. Nevertheless, the people work on without any sign of giving in. 'Owls by day, foxes by night' goes the Laotian proverb. During the day the owl goes to earth in the shadow, but, at night, the fox comes out.

To take risks at night, even when one is a fox, presents problems. At three in the morning, we had to leave for Sam-Neua, but the command-car skidded at the foot of a bomb crater. The journey had to take place later at dawn - a delicate moment.

We could not stay on in this village, so, camouflaging the command-car, we left on foot, by a mule path, crossed a river on a bamboo bridge to arrive finally, in the forest, at a hut of poor planks covered by a roof of corrugated iron, with a 'floor' of beaten earth: the office of the chairman of the district administration. Attached to a nail, the map of this region of the province, broken by bomb splinters, drawn by hand, without scale - one sign among others of the great poverty of the Neo Lao Haksat. In another hut close by we ate



glutinous rice, which forms the basis of Laotian food, surrounded by men and women of the militia who were busy reinforcing a shelter hollowed out of the hill, under the trees. In the afternoon, several times, American planes flew over us. Profiting from a break in the clouds, reconnaissance planes passed over again and again. From above Sam-Neua, they could see only the motionless ruins and deserted houses.

The first real raid against the population centre itself was launched on February 19, 1965. Very serious attacks were made on it quite recently on March 17 and 19, 1968. The town looks like a long street, bordered with European - type houses built at the time of French colonial rule, and traditional Laotian dwellings of wood and bamboo. The two ends of the town were razed to the ground. The old ruins of 1965 have disappeared, those of March 1968 were still 'smoking' when we visited them. Branches of trees lay all along the length of the river, houses were totally burned out (phosphorus had been used).

At the other end of Sam-Neua, the sight was even more painful. Everywhere enormous craters, the church and many houses were demolished. In order to reach the people who might be living there, the Americans dropped their all-too-famous 'bombes a billes' (fragmentation bombs). Here lay a 'mother bomb' disembowelled, by the side of the road. All around, over a dozen metres, the earth was covered with 'daughter bombs', little machines that the Vietnamese know well, unexploded and hiding hundreds of steel splinters. One of them had rolled into a shelter, under a mat, mortally wounding the three people who had taken refuge there.

The inhabitants dispersed into the forest, but only to find very thin protection there. As night fell, one saw them emerge, walk around, feed their cattle. Some ventured as far as the town there to collect the remains of beams or doors which they carried off into the forest, the wreckage of their destroyed homes, not completely burned. There were no traces of DCA - as mobile, apparently, as in Vietnam - but units are to be found in the region since the March raids. About two kilometres from Sam-Neua, one can see the debris of a plane shot down; the pilot was torn to pieces by the bombs which he did not have time to release. (1)

All the inhabited zones situated around the population

centre have suffered greatly. One district official tells the litany of their misfortunes:

March 66:	15 killed in such and such a village
November 66:	15 killed in another
The same month:	a pagoda destroyed; 6 monks killed
September 67:	8 killed
November 1:	7 killed
November 19:	16 killed
February 68:	4 killed

To which we must add the many wounded. The inhabitants ask the reason for this deluge of fire and steel. 'I don't even know where America is', said a peasant mother whose daughter had just been killed and who had lost all her belongings. A peasant said: 'I understood nothing before when people spoke against the United States. After the raids on my village, I know what they mean'. Everything American, far and wide, is hated by the people.

- (1) The Pathet Lao claims to have shot down more than 800 planes, which seems very exaggerated. Their D. C. A. do not have shells larger than 37 millimetres. In this field at least, the aid they receive from the socialist countries seems modest (these countries, and among them, North Vietnam, China, and the U.S.S.R., have diplomatic representatives in Vientiane).

### III. The Factories of the Night

Bane-Kang...

'During the course of the last two months, American planes have dropped almost as many bombs on Laos as on North Vietnam' the weekly Times reported on March 22. In these conditions, rare are the oases where it is not necessary to live permanently underground, hidden in the forest, or sheltered in a cave.

The village of Bane-Kang is one of these, and one knows the reason for this very well. Some unexploded bombs lie about around it, overflights are frequent, but we have been able to sleep without fear in one of these houses on piles underneath which flocks of ducks and black pigs wander by day and night. In the afternoon, when it is hottest, the men and women go to the river to take a bath, each in a different place. On the opposite bank, officials showed us the rice paddies with



pride: the second harvest this year is growing there. This is revolutionary in Laos, though normal in the Vietnamese countryside.

The village is prosperous, a little more prosperous, it seemed, than the hamlets we saw in Sam-Neua. Here there is no lack of glutinous rice, nor of fruit, nor of poultry. There was no school here before 1954. Today all the children are at school. They are seen at work in their small classes, near the houses where the women sew their dresses. The men who are not working in the fields smoke a water pipe or drink from jars of rice alcohol. The fight against illiteracy among adults continues. Nurses care for their patients. The village is kept impeccable. There is no sign of undernourishment or of endemic disease.

Here and there on the houses, a series of pictures vaunting the successes of the Pathet Lao, friendship among ethnic groups, or again, showing the funeral of an American plane, by a militia team. In this 'liberated Laos', spread out over fantastic distances difficult to cross, central directives can only travel slowly. But the village has two transistor posts which receive Radio Sam-Neua. 'We have tried, but the people did not like it', an official told us. It is a matter of temperament. The philosophy of life remains gentler here, in spite of everything, than in the neighbouring countries. People like noise in these hamlets, but they make the noise themselves by singing, drumming, playing the khene, a little bamboo instrument the sound of which is like that of a harmonica or an accordion. They dance the Lamvong with slow steps and a graceful twisting of the arms and fingers. They sing 'greetings to the DCA' or 'The victory of Nam-bac', which was won in January, 1968, from the forces of the Right, to music suitable for celebrating love in the shade of the coconut palms, or under the juicy mango trees. Someone gets up and makes up a poem to a traditional theme and rhythm. Each time, the author or just the singer, announces the origin of the song: for example, 'Province of Phong-saly' or perhaps, 'the Meo minority of such and such a district'.

#### A Virulent Nationalism

The deeprootedness of this peasant community is clearly stressed. The poem does not stop at the frontiers of the hamlet of its origin. It tells of the Laotian nation, of Prince Souphanouvong, of the 'puppets' of the

'American aggressors'. In the sad night of Vientiane, American pilots re-create the atmosphere of Saigon, with their blackmarket sales and prostitutes. Do they know that a rural people are forging a Laotian nationality in the villages and caves they have just overflown or bombed, that they dance only Laotian dances and make their own culture, as well as their political ideology, a weapon against foreign intervention?

'Yes, indeed, but they are communists' reply the good apostles, forgetting that if the kids 'cheer the DCA', it is because the American planes ceaselessly threaten their lives. However, are they communists? Certainly the Pathet Lao does not work for nothing hand in hand with Hanoi and the Socialist countries. But they are Laotian, as the Vietnamese are Vietnamese, which says a lot. We know nothing precise about the influence of Hanoi on the Pathet-Lao, but we have been able to verify, on every occasion, the virulent nationalism of education and of geography and history; a nationalism of culture, a nationalism of methods and social organisation. The necessity to work together and to master the water supply -for the second rice harvest - necessarily reinforces the cohesion of the villages and collectivises work at the centre of the co-operatives, though today they practise only a simple system of inter-aid. The political philosophy impressed on the cadres has the flexibility of a young bamboo. Conversations are never marked with the rigidity of analysis which one finds in North Vietnam or among the leaders of the NLF in the South. (1)

The Pathet Lao insist on the necessity of putting back into the saddle the government of national union born of the Geneva Accords of 1962, which has never really functioned. Until this wish is realised, they have to administer and develop the areas they control: two thirds of the territory (according to them) and 50% of the people (about 1.5 million inhabitants); according to Vientiane, one third. This is why, in January 1968, they held their first 'financial and economic congress' agreeing to a three-year plan, 1968 to 70, the main lines of which were explained by Mr. Nouhak Phonsavane, a member of the central committee. One of the key ideas of this programme is to give the country, and all intermediate levels, from the hamlet to the province, economic autonomy, as far as is possible, in all areas. In this way, it can partly compensate for the absence of rapid communications, and increase production.



One cannot, however, scatter or raise little industrial centres everywhere, or important schools. Hence the existence, in the province of Sam-Neua, of nuclei of production and education, established by the central committee. A visit to them, at the end of a night's journey, sometimes slowed down by overflights of planes, brings surprises for the visitor.

### Weaving and Geography

Somewhere in the region of Sam-Neua, we left our command car to clamber up piles of rocks, to jump over the bamboo hedges protecting the fields from the greedy buffalo, to arrive at last at little straw huts, very feebly lit. It is here that both modern and traditional pharmaceutical products are made. Work is carried out only at night, because the fumes have to be camouflaged. Behind the workshops is an enormous cave, in which work is continuously going on. About a hundred women are working there, many of whom come from the minority ethnic groups. If a foreigner is not surprised by such a mixture of vitamins, he cannot hide his apprehension at swallowing a concoction of monkey bones or of deer horns. It seems that these frightful juices soothe and cure. In Hanoi, moreover, very serious research is also carried out on the lines of traditional pharmacopeia.

In another area of the province we make our way along a path carved out by the flow of a torrent. Near individual caves, youths practised high jumping. Then we passed near houses destroyed in bombing raids, before climbing to a series of caves which hid iron works. The raw material comes from Vietnam, from unexploded American weapons recovered on the spot and from worn out lorries. Out of these workshops come domestic appliances, farming implements, machetes. In these humid, rocky, secret places, buzzing with mosquitoes, workers, men and women, sleep during the day as they would at night, and work during the night. The Americans are not popular here either.

It is at the spinning mill and the weaving factory that a visitor finds the greatest cause for astonishment. Here the enterprise is not hidden in a cave at the foot of a mountain, but much higher up, in a place very difficult to get to which can only be reached by scaling sheer rock cut into rough steps, marked out with bamboo. Another mountain fronts this cave directly. No bomb, no rocket can possibly reach these workshops from which

come both materials for dresses and for military uniforms. For about eighty metres one passes from Chinese machines, silent because they are electric, to the most ancient spinning wheels. On the left, in a small rocky enclave, girl bookkeepers balance their books.

Everything has been brought there, installed, built by the textile workers, men and women. There was nothing previously here in this wild ravine, in this countryside of thickets, huge trees, and interlaced with bamboo. At the foot of the mountain a village has been created out of all kinds of oits and pieces, dormitories for girls, dormitories for boys, straw huts for the families of officials, a carpenter's workshop to make wooden looms, a dyeing shop, a parade for meetings, dances and ping pong, a cave for the electricians, etc. For eight hours a day, textiles are made, but the work does not stop then. Houses must still be built, wood must be found in the forest (11 tons a month), a guard must be mounted, rice and cassava cultivated, pigs and poultry tended, and professional, cultural and political courses studied. On Saturday, at midday, the machines stop. After a short meal, we see the workers disperse, pencils and notebooks in hand. The carpenter's shop, the canteen, and other straw huts as well, are transformed into classrooms where they study geometry, algebra and geography. It is after this, when night falls, that there is dancing. In North Vietnam there is, particularly in the administration, a permanent system of education which gives a solid grounding of general culture. On a much more modest level, they are trying to do the same in 'liberated Laos'. The laboratory for this training - one has to go and look for it - in the caves, of course, is the school for training teachers and schoolmasters. One can see the pupils scattered over the area, studying. They made the tables, the benches, the houses, the pictures, the roads to the rocky classrooms. Rooms where it is difficult to study: Young people seated near the cave opening can write by natural light, but most must make do with a tiny petrol lamp. The instruction aims to be as complete as possible: everyone cultivates his own vegetables and rice, everyone raises his own cattle. The goal is to be self-sufficient. Until this is achieved, they still receive rice from the central administration.

The director of education in the 'liberated zone' and the headmaster of the school showed us their work and talked of their ideas. It is from them that we heard the



most 'committed' exposition of 'national progressive education', even more than in discussion with other Pathet Lao leaders. The school serves, of course, to raise the level of culture, but also to defend the country, to 'serve the people', to 'hate the Americans'. The teacher must be a propagandist of the people. He must know how to run a meeting, how to explain the central political line, he must be a shooting instructor and link manual work with theoretical teaching. Weaving, ironmongery, education, culture of burned fields, must have no secrets from him. On the other hand, he must know how to adapt himself to local conditions. It is for this reason that, since 1965, a Méo writing has been used. There are not enough books. Research is being carried out now into the possibility of publishing new textbooks on the history and geography of Laos in the national language. No one wants to depend on French or other languages any more. The country remains open to the foreigner, but they believe that everyone must go through the same mill of national culture.

#### Make Them go Back to Zero

In Vientiane, an American diplomat put a proposal to us which would only further alienate the United States from the Pathet Lao and would make the authority of a central government very dependent on Washington: 'To make progress in this country, it is necessary to level everything. The inhabitants must go back to zero, lose their traditional culture, for it blocks everything.' Now in Vientiane, a town which has been 'saigonised', which is morally and culturally rotten, one can see an irrational mixture with no future of traditional Lao-tian life and a search for 'western' values: rudiments of French, rudiments of English, the fascination of money, Japanese motor cycles and cars. Night clubs full of Thai prostitutes and Filippino orchestras of bad character. On March 23, the day of the Army celebrations, General Kou-rasith Abha dominated the Square of Vientiane, lording it at the side of Miss Thailand - which many officers found in dubious taste. In the capital city little is said of the terror which sacks the 'liberated zones'. One survives, without faith, in a dream, knowing that 'this cannot last'. And the training of leaders, of teachers, of peasants, and of workers in the 'liberated' grottoes is seen as a disaster, a destiny against which nothing can be done. The Americans accuse the North Vietnamese of intervening militarily in the

country, but it is they who talk of reducing Laos to zero, while the Pathet Lao exalts the national culture and national independence.

- (1) The formula of inter-aid represented in Vietnam a brief transition between the old system and the establishment of cooperatives. It continues vigorously in 'liberated Laos' after nearly 20 years of Pathet Lao administration.

#### IV It is necessary to be here

Sam-Neua..."All Americans must leave Laos'. This statement continually comes up in conversations with Pathet Lao officers. One has to be here on the spot to feel how fundamental this demand is for them. It is not just a question for them of stopping the bombing raids. The Americans must also withdraw their air companies, called 'private' - Air America, Air Continental - which supply provisions, arms and, indeed, 'advisors' to the Méo maquis, which has 72 'military attachés'. For the Pathet Lao, Washington's influence on various aspects of life must disappear. In short, for them it is a national war of liberation to be fought on all levels.

The term is not surprising in Vietnam. Does it fit the Laotian case? The enormous size of the bombing gives it its first meaning. But there is more: the Pathet Lao aims to wipe out the Méo minority groups, American backed, which live in the areas they control. From this stems the importance of the victory at Phathi.

The Americans had settled themselves with the Méo in Phathi on a huge rocky peak. Only 30 kms from Sam-Neua, they could obstruct the Pathet Lao, using helicopters ready to bring back pilots shot down and their radar to guide planes bombing Laos and North Vietnam. In March, the Pathet Lao wiped out this pocket, killing several Americans and a fair number of their friends. Planes from Thailand acted quickly, but in vain. In that region we saw the Pathet Lao troops 'raking through the area' looking for Méos still not found. At night, daughters of the peasants bring food for the fighters of Phathi. This success had enormous psychological repercussions in the province. The 'Méo policy' of the Americans moreover is a long way from reaching all the 'montagnards'. Only a minority of this ethnic group, under the direction of General Van Pao, listens to them, and it is possible that the action will not be able to continue indefinitely.



One date which has passed unnoticed gives a partial explanation of the bitterness of mind of the leaders of Sam-Neua: American raids on 'liberated Laos' began in May, 1964, therefore well before the Gulf of Tonkin incident (August, 1964) and the policy of escalation to North Vietnam (spring 1965). For this reason, Laos has, in some ways, served as a testing ground or experimental site.

For whom have they died?

There are many questions now being asked in Vientiane about the military intentions of the Pathet Lao. The question has more importance for the Right than they will admit or acknowledge, being quite incapable of facing up to it. In the North East of Luang-Prabang, when the Pathet Lao retook Nam-Bac in January, 1968, the Royal Army lost about 2000 men out of a total of 60,000 under their control, and important material. People agree in thinking that the Pathet Lao is only engaged in retaking the ground it lost in 1966. One striking fact: the officers of the Right have not fought and have left their soldiers in distress. "Why, for what should they die?", a strongly conservative politician said to us in Vientiane. "They cannot have any ideals. Their Commander-in-Chief directs the opium traffic. They are very badly paid. Only this: on the other side, 'they' fight without being paid. Again, when the men need rice or a chicken, 'they' do not steal it from the people but pay them in kind or in days of work for the peasants. What would you do..."

We took part, at a cocktail party in Vientiane, in a strange conversation between Mr. Soth Pethrasi, Pathet Lao representative in the capital, and a Right wing personality. "Why have you encircled the town of Saravane now?" he asked, "Are you going to take it?" "No, I assure you," replied the Pathet Lao man. "Will you guarantee this?" said the Right wing politician. "But, of course!" replied the Left wing politician. (1)

This, very... 'Laotian', dialogue, has farcical aspects which emphasise the ravages of war in the 'liberated zone'. But local temperament must be reckoned with. On the other hand, the Pathet Lao does not seem to wish to occupy towns, which would then be attacked by American planes. They rid themselves of foreign troops which have adhered to them. They retake lost positions - Nam-Bac - and seem to have consolidated themselves on the peri-

iphery of the urban areas. Everyone knows that, militarily, they could take Luang-Prabang or Vientiane in a few hours. They do not do so because the political work seems to interest them more (as is common in revolutionary movements of this type) and because they still stick to the government of national union formula established in 1962, without specifying how a union of such antagonistic civil and military forces could really work.

It would nevertheless be dangerous to place too much importance in this respect on texts or taboos. Indeed, in his statement in Le Monde (May 7) Prince Souphanouvong indicated that he would reply to American attacks more and more firmly. Now, take the case of Saravane - it can be noted here that the recent seige of the town messed up a whole rural development scheme financed and organised by the Americans. The words 'final victory' are one of the keys to Pathet Lao rhetoric. Its leaders for a long time have not hesitated to speak of the 'puppets' in Vientiane. Prince Souphanouvong refused to name them for us. He believes that there are certain people who are incurable, like Ky and Thieu in Saigon for the South Vietnamese N.L.F. As for the others, they could if they wished -- 'return to the bosom of the national union'. A vague formula, wide, flexible, which, aiming to say everything, signifies nothing precise.

#### The refugees and the telephone

The settlement of the Laotian problem can, in fact, be examined on two different levels: that of international politics, and that of the internal structure of the country. In Vientiane, the Prime Minister and the American diplomats; in Hanoi, the North Vietnamese leaders; at Sam-Neua, the leaders of the Pathet Lao: all agree - a settlement of the Vietnamese problem would quickly have repercussions in Laos. There is one certainty: Hanoi, which uses southern Laos to send through part of its aid to the NLF, cannot permit American intervention at will on its western flank. Peace in Indo-China, mentioned in the Hanoi Government Statement of April 3, but little noticed, means peace in Sam-Neua and Vientiane, just as much as peace in Saigon and Hanoi. Certainly, the end of American intervention in 'liberated Laos' can rapidly bring big changes for the whole country.

It is often said in Vientiane that, without North Vietnamese aid, the Pathet Lao could be contained. This is to reason in purely military terms, yet even in these



terms the statement seems gratuitous to those in Sam-Neua. 'The only valid numbers in this country are the telephone numbers', an American remarked ironically in Vientiane. This is certainly true of the numbers published of refugees whose fate was used recently, in France, ignoring all political analysis, to gladden the people's hearts. According to Souvanna Bouma, there are 600,000 refugees. According to his Director of State Insurance, 428,471. Who knows exactly? Who is a voluntary refugee and who is not? Who has fled from the Pathet Lao and who from the American bombing? Why, in the areas we visited, do the peasants prefer to go underground to protect themselves from raids, rather than leave for more merciful regions? The problem is not as simple as they say in Vientiane, where one can also hear tales of evacuation by the army, with American help, of peasants who have not even been able to bring their belongings with them. One witness said: 'Cattle are treated better'.

A similar reserve is required for official evaluations of the effective forces of the Pathet Lao. Some people, in the capital, give very small numbers in order to 'prove' that the North Vietnamese 'do all the work'. The truth is that, as in Vietnam, almost everyone in the 'liberated zone' is armed, men and women are organised in militia, in regional and regular forces. There is an abundance of Chinese and Soviet rifles and machine guns, to say nothing of captured American rifles. Must one also include in the army strength, the peasants who supply the soldiers, the workers who make uniforms or medicine?

In presenting a western-type analysis of this 'people's army', the mistakes made in South Vietnam about the NLF are repeated.

On the other side, in the Laos of the 'free world', this distinction is possible. The military can be immediately distinguished from the rest of the population. The officers, divided into family, regional and generational clans, hold on to their jobs (as long as they are corrupt), aim to get promotion to higher posts, (when this is no longer possible), and participate in this absence of morality and idealism which is common to all of them, (though of different political classes). To say this is not to rely on Pathet Lao evidence: it is only necessary to quote ministers and high civil servants of Vientiane who consider that the situation cannot be altered. No

ideology, no coherent social force, opposes the Pathet Lao which it is said, has infiltrated greatly into the middle ranks of civil servants and even into a part of the Buddhist hierarchy. To this we must add that the drafting of soldiers creates local economic difficulties in some rural areas and that the lure of foreign 'values' is accompanied by the phenomenon of social dislocation, without offering a long-term solution to the problems of Laos.

### Enormous poverty

Can the Pathet Lao, quiet but coherent in its political programme, militarily powerful, take the destiny of the country, if it wishes, rapidly in hand? It seemed to us, visiting a part of the territory they control, that they lack technical and even political staff. Their dispersion, the geographical and often mountainous terrain they rule, the meagre heritage left them by colonial rule, these elements partly explain a certain misery in their kingdom. Compared with 'liberated Laos', North Vietnam appears fabulously rich, intellectually and spiritually. At Sam-Neua there is rice and pork, but no one sees any foreign newspapers or books. A well known doctor told us he would like to be able to use French technical journals. Many of the staff, many of the leaders, in spite of their harrassing work, in spite of the air raids, in spite of the lack of electricity, could read and learn in their caves, but they have absolutely nothing. Their very difficult condition of life, their self denial, their ideas, remain unknown, 'forgotten', like the war they are waging. One of them said to us: 'Sometimes I ask myself what I am doing here....I could be in Vientiane with money, girls and cars. But, no, it is here that I must be....'

This human handicap can slow down the political and military actions of the Pathet Lao, for their ideals and their certainty that they are right is not a substitute for everything. It is true that a great many of these people - avoiding guesswork percentages - have lived in this territory too long for going back to be possible. And since the prevailing system in the rest of the country opens up no future perspectives, a political evolution in Laos must logically follow a settlement of the Vietnam conflict. When their skies are free of the terrifying presence of American planes, and when the



military advisors have left, it will, perhaps, be possible for Laotians to map out their own future. A stay among the Pathet Lao leads one to suppose that, rejecting American orientations, they will take no more inspiration from the example of Vietnam than the Vietnamese ape the Chinese or Soviet pattern.

- (1) The official presence in Vientiane of a member of the Pathet Lao constitutes the last, very symbolic trace of the national union, established on paper in 1962. Mr. Soth Pethrasi is in radio communication with the leaders in the 'liberated zones', takes part in diplomatic receptions, but has no contact with the regime. Prince Souphanouvong, for his part, writes regularly to the king, whose palace is at Luang-Prabang. The fiction of the national union remains in the government, certain members of which are in the 'liberated zone.' As for the Royal Embassy of Laos in Hanoi, it refuses to obey orders from Vientiane and supplies visas in the name of the government of the union, thus in the name of Souvanna Phouma, for the Pathet Lao zone.

## V. The Domino Theory

Vientiane... 'Vientiane reminds me of an under-developed area of Mississippi; said an American fellow journalist, on landing here en route between Hanoi and Washington. A strange place. Peking, Moscow, and Hanoi all have diplomatic missions here although, in the areas which have escaped government control, American planes shoot at anything that moves. As for the U.S.A. they have a real colony here. Their villas are spread all over the capital. There is an American quarter, American streets American lawns, American 'bermudas', American enclosures not to speak of buildings for aid services. Shops have taken to putting up notices 'in English'. And one must add the hippies, a good number of whom have come from the other side of the Pacific. Some of them, between two cigarettes which are not made of Virginian tobacco (the 'weed' is sold freely here), sing Bob Dylan songs, about the union revolts of the past, having drawn all the money they need to live well - without worrying too much about the destruction inflicted on the country by the planes of a society they claim to have left behind.

A frontier full of holes

A high civil servant announces in a bar that the Pathet Lao have taken a small government outpost in the south. How has he learned the news? From the government? Certainly not. From the military? No. Moreover one must learn which of the military to talk to to get a more or less true version of the affair. Perhaps they know nothing. From whom, then? From a sports team just back from down south who heard people speak of the fall of the outpost.

The Mekong flows 200 meters from the bar. On the other side of it is Thailand. This frontier is one of the most open in the world, very useful for trafficking. But the real traffic, commercial traffic, uses more modern means of transport than boatloads at night. To take gold and opium to Saigon, planes are safer and quicker. The Tet offensive was not well received in Vientiane: it blocked the Tan-Son-Nhut airport in Saigon.

Are you waiting for the Putsch?

One cannot judge the Right in Laos by gossip about real scandals and profitable contraband affairs. This country is not the only one in the area to see this happen; far from it. An infinitely more serious aspect is that the small number which profits from them need the enormous American presence for the situation to continue. In the shelter of this compromising umbrella from across the Pacific, they have not even succeeded in understanding each other. The quarrels in the factions are incessant. When we stopped for a few moments in front of Prince Souvanna Phouma's villa, guarded by one drowsy soldier, someone called from a car: 'Are you waiting for the next putsch?'

A good joke, but one which shows some uneasiness: Prince Boun Oum detests Prince Souvanna Phouma, who is good to him, but his clearsighted nephew holds the ministry of Finance; young officers criticise old ones; the big feudal families glare at each other like China dogs; and the generals do not like each other at all. These needle pricks are nothing new, but they have today a different meaning than in the past because the Pathet Lao is showing its teeth, marking up points, knowing very well that, if a settlement of the problem is draft-



ed during the negotiations on Vietnam, they will find themselves face to face with a Right which is disunited and has little confidence in itself.

Some of these elements, however, would like to establish a serious economic policy. This is a working hypothesis difficult to realise, for the leaders live far from the people, and war settles nothing. For instance, the retaking of Nam-Bac by the Pathet Lao deprives Vientiane of a good part of its benzoin resources, a product which is exported. A Minister reports that he fears that his agricultural plan, in a southern area, will fail, because the Pathet Lao has stolen his newly imported horned animals, probably to replace others killed by the US air force.

In Saigon: Talk, if it turns political, is about General Loan, General Ky, General Thieu. In Hanoi, the Communist Party rarely quotes its leaders, but speaks for itself and the people among whom it works. In Vientiane, the names waltz around - the Saninikones - an important family in the capital - General Kouprasith Abhay, etc. Among the Pathet Lao one meets small officials, whose names mean little, but who explain to a questioner how they run a village, a workshop, a military unit. Only a few kilometers apart sometimes, talk changes with the social and political realities which are entirely opposed. For the Pathet Lao has reared in the provinces these 'other' Laotians, still totally, fanatically Laotian, as we have already said...(1)

The Americans, for their part, emphasize their socio-economic work in the official government provinces; road building, aid to education, etc. In North Vietnam, too, the US Air Force has been known to release within an interval of a few days, in the same area, napalm and toys. In Laos, their policy is hardly different.

### An authentic people's force

A diplomat with a post in South East Asia estimated recently that 'the Laotian problem would be more difficult to settle than the Vietnamese problem'. The outcome in Laos, which has already been mentioned during the Vietnam Talks, risks giving arguments to partisans of the 'domino theory'. A solution cannot, in fact, be found, short of perpetuating the civil war and foreign inter-

vention, through the same sort of agreement as in 1962 - which was based on a vain hope for mutual respect between the participants and presupposed an accord between forces which had nothing in common.

On the contrary, everything on the home front moves towards a victory for the Pathet Lao: the seriousness of its social and political organisation, and of its nationalism; the courage and self-denial of its militants as well as the built-in incapacity of the opposing regime, not to speak of its leaders. It would be wrong, therefore, to say that if Vietnam 'falls', Laos must also 'fall'.

Will this evolution, if it takes place, be accepted by the Americans? Will it be accepted by Thailand, a powerful country, itself in the throes of a struggle, the importance of which is too often forgotten in political analyses of the region, just as its very firm links with elements of the Laotian Right are also forgotten. Foreign intervention must end, in any case, for Laos to become self-sufficient and it will be essential that the incessant bombing of the Pathet Lao by American planes and Washington's grip on Vientiane end some day. Then, as everyone knows, in the capital city, with or without the aid of Hanoi, the Pathet Lao will carry the day. Their strength comes less from outside than from the growth of authentically popular social forces. If the 'domino theory' is played out in Laos, it will not only damage the 'free world' - today, above all, represented by the thousands of bombs it scatters there - but also the feudal clans desperately propping themselves up on a foreign air force to perpetuate the circumstances of another age.

- (1) We must insist on the fact that the Laotian ethnic minorities feel themselves equally 'Laotian' - a basic element in a country in turmoil. The Laotian 'base' proper represents a little more than 50% of the population. As in Vietnam, about fifty minority groups, usually living in the high regions, form the rest of the nation.

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