



29 ans

en 1920

Prince Prajadhipok

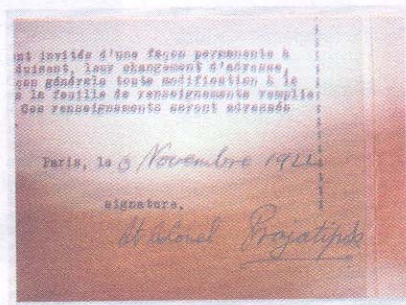
ON THE RECORD: Prince Prajadhipok's file at Ecole Supérieure de Guerre in Paris in 1922-1924.

Regal EXPERIENCES

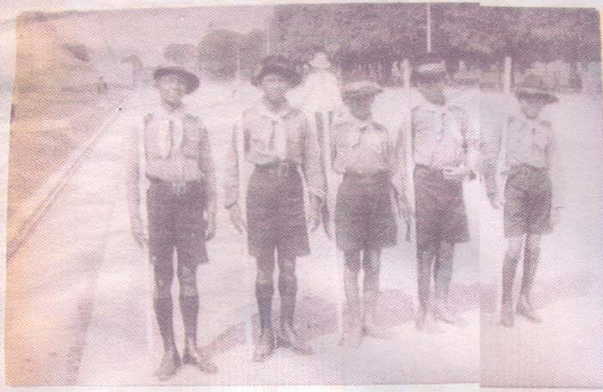
To mark the anniversary of the birth of King Prajadhipok, or Rama VII, today, **Laurent Hennequin** presents his findings from the archives of the French Ministry of Defence, shedding light on the young prince as an army cadet in France

Who would have thought that one could find in France, and all the more so in the archives of the Ministry of Defence, documents that disclose much of the history of Rama VII as a person (1893-1941) and as a sovereign (1925-1935), at a crucial time of history when Siam changed from absolute monarchy to democracy? This happens to be the case for two different reasons.

First, when still Prince Prajadhipok, a part of his student days was spent at the Ecole de Guerre in Paris, from 1922 to 1924, with some periods for training upcountry in Nancy. Some archives are thus kept for this episode in his life, in particular his teachers' reports on various topics. They all stress that Prince Prajadhipok was resourceful and diligent, as well as conscious of his own status, and was sometimes distant or, contradictorily, exuberant. For example, his teacher in artillery in the first year says this about him: "A very clever officer, with a high intellectual culture, quick-witted . . . He does not like being questioned on the field, certainly because of his rank and of his knowledge of our language, which remains still imperfect . . . He seems to entertain some sympathy towards France, more out of reason than out of instinct, because of the quality of our teaching. It is



difficult to judge on this account, because he is rarely sociable and does not talk much." The general conclusion is that he was certainly a good element for his own country, but that he was reserved on the importance that he would give to France when in service back home. »



Boys-Scouts ayant remplacé les
policiers à la police de la ville.



Char de Combat (nouveau modèle) gardant le
Palais de Parakkawan (au second plan) -



Char de Combat en banage de rue
au lever du jour le 12 Octobre

UPRISING: Pictures of the 1933 rebellion led
by Prince Bovaradej.

STATELY: Part of
Vincennes Castle, in
the compound of which
the archives of the
Ministry of Defence are
preserved.



»The second set of documents, far more abundant, is made up of reports that the military attaché at the French embassy regularly sent to the Ministry of Defence. As Siam had allied with France in the First World War and as it was neighbouring French Indochina, that diplomatic position was created in 1920. The role of this attaché was, among other things, to send correspondence every time there was some event worth mentioning, to send reports on a monthly basis and to compile files on various subjects when deemed necessary. These testimonies provide history with precious documents for the study of the king's reign, as they come from an independent and, so to speak, professional observer in Bangkok with access to closed circles.

All their writings, of course, provide, first and foremost, detailed information on a prominent institution of the country — the army. They describe its state during various periods in all respects, considering its number, its organisation, its equipment, the social origin of the hierarchy, its morale, its ability to withstand a conflict, etc. They also bring unusual details, such as the number of shoes that a ranked soldier was allotted or the kind of preserved food he was given. Special attention is paid to aviation, since Siam was then trying to establish a carrier, with, in the beginning, French materials and assistance, though the country quickly diversified its cooperation.

Additionally, the judgment of such observers is precious because of their own perspectives. For example, although the king had been trained in France, he was cautious enough not to give a marked preference for any country, with, as a negative consequence too, a lack of cohesion in the hierarchy. It also appears that due to the prevailing circumstances, the army was not so much an institution for defending the country from external aggression as an instrument for building national unity, with the soldiers being educated in this sense, and as a means of protection against some internal danger. "One of the questions often [asked] is why this Siamese army, which, including the reserves, represent, at the door of our own Indochina, troops of 150,000 men, suitably trained and supervised and equipped with arms which improve and modernise? Why? The answer, officially, is that the Siamese nation, in the process of construction as it is, is handicapped by the diversity of races that make it, and that, in order to give the whole a soul, an army is as necessary as a school. Another official reason is the presence of Chinese communities, which fermented at the same time by nationalist and communist propaganda, may, some day, constitute a threat [to] the State." However, the author cannot refrain from adding: "The

Siamese people, whose conquering expansion we [the French] stopped some 30 years ago, have neither forgotten nor forgiven." (de Lapomarede 1927.)

If the primary role of the attaché was to inform Paris and Indochina about the Siamese army, he also sent information about all the other subjects that could be judged to be of some interest, ranging from the political situation to the state of the society or the last rice crop. On this point, because of the circumstances, we find

different situations with the three officers who held the position in succession.

The first attache, Joseph Desgruelles (in Siam from 1920 to 1925), departed just after Rama VII's accession to the throne and consequently left little on the subject which is of interest to us. However, he had in his position made rather frequent contacts with Prince Prajadhipok, who had recently come back from France and who then destined himself to a military career. Two things clearly stand out from the attache's observations. First, the prince had changed considerably after his stay abroad, gaining more maturity and self-confidence. Second, he intended to reform the army, in particular its top hierarchy, which he judged quite critically, taking on some matters inspiration from the French example. To partly illustrate the last point, Prince Prajadhipok is reported to have said to the French military attache: "You have seen like me the manoeuvres . . . No liaison between the units, insufficient training of our commanding officers, lack of initiative . . . Our commanding officers are terrible, which definitely is a pity for our army, because our non-commanding officers are good and our rank and file soldiers excellent."

The second attache, Henri Georges Bonnefond de Lapomarede (1926-1931), is certainly the most important one for an in-depth vision of Siam. As the political situation was rather calm during his tour, he reported mostly, for example, on the determination and efforts of the government to build a network of communications, first and foremost with railways but also with roads and planes. The political dimension of the endeavour did not escape his attention either, as the purpose was to connect all the provinces in a way or another to the capital so as to centralise power and ensure direct control over them: "The project adopted and implemented by the Siamese government consists in . . . first opening railway lines, then extending them towards all the directions which represent economic and political objectives, and prolonging them, as best as possible, depending on the budget available, with road sections." He was also a keen observer of the political situation noting that, in contrast with his predecessor, Rama VII was governing with other princes, whether uncles, brothers or cousins, thus reinforcing absolute monarchy. On the subject, de Lapomarede wondered why the country still adhered to the old political system, the country being indeed socially peaceful with no urgency to make a profound change. However, it seemed to him that it was a sort of historical necessity to reform the system. He said concerning the process of modernising the country: "The passage from absolute monarchy to a representation regime will certainly be, in a near future, one of the interior political problems of the country."

The attache made two copious reports presenting the state of Siam, one in 1927 and another in 1929, in which he dealt with all the aspects in the country, from geography to the efforts to educate the population, to the commercial movements in the country or abroad, to the relations with the other powers, to the composition of the government and, of course, to the state of the army, to mention just a few points. The data that they collate may be, in their most part, available elsewhere, but here they are gathered in a single document by a single observer who gives cohesion to them. Hence, they certainly contain original information, not only concerning the army, and, again, they are presented by an original, independent and highly informed observer. We must note, too, that after de Lapomarede left Siam and retired, he wrote quite a few articles in French reviews on the events of 1932 and thereafter, the quality of which is much higher than what could generally be read in the French press and which could be of interest to Thais as well.

The tenure of the third attache, Henri Roux (1931-1936), was of course dominated by the upheavals of 1932 and the subsequent years. He provided, on some occasions, daily reports on the events, which are fairly well known from other sources, but he was in quite a privileged situation to observe them in the context of the role of the army in all the events, the special links with France of two important actors, Pridi Banomyong and Phibul Songkhram, as well as the debate on the army in political circles. He thus considers as a soldier how the promoters of the coup d'etat could seize power on June 24, noting that the military strength used for action was rather limited, that the army committed mistakes in strategy and that the new men in power seemed to fear, during the first days, that another faction would make a coup against them as easily as they had done. Similarly, to give just another example, he witnessed the failed counter coup d'etat led by Prince Bovoradej and analysed it from his own military point of view, detailing the material and troops involved by both sides as well as their morale and their obedience in such a conflict. In particular, on this occasion, he could observe the attitude of the army in case of conflict, judging its ability to withstand a war. He attributed the failure of the coup d'etat to the reluctance of its leaders to inflict casualties among the other ranks, possibly civilians, and of the fear of enticing a civil war, as they probably expected at the beginning little resistance. He also recorded the reaction of the population, who appeared to stand by the government, sometimes actively, bringing them more legitimacy than they ever had before. Last, he noted the absence of reaction from the king, who supported publicly neither side and wondered if he could hold such a kind of neutral stand in other similar cases that were likely to happen again.

These few lines are merely hints at the contents of several thousand pages kept in these archives in France and which have proven to be of high importance to the history of Siam. The research centre on King Rama VII, Phra Pok Klao Institute, has charged the Franco-Thai Document and Research Centre of Silpakorn University to reproduce these documents, along with others from other sources, and it plans to make them available in the near future. ■

Laurent Hennequin is attached to the French Department of the Faculty of Arts of Silpakorn University, and is now implementing a research project, at the request of the Phra Pok Klao Institute, concerning French documents on King Prajadhipok and Siam under his reign.



PLANNING: A map of the manoeuvres of 1930.



HISTORIC: Pictures of the 1930 manoeuvres.

