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Richard A. Ruth. *In Buddha's Company: Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. x + 275 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3419-7; $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-3489-0.

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Forgotten Soldiers in Vietnam

Richard A. Ruth's *In Buddha's Company* offers an engaging narrative of the experience of Thai soldiers in South Vietnam. The study contributes to the literature on the Vietnam War in several important ways. Ruth's account of the motivations of the volunteers, who ranged from rural poor to educated urbanites and the sons of political and military elites, offers an intriguing comparison to recent studies of why American and South Vietnamese soldiers served and how they lived and fought during the war.[1] The account of the daily lives and intermittent battles of Thai soldiers in South Vietnam strengthens our understanding of the uncertain environment in which friend and foe were often indistinguishable. Ruth's study also offers a Thai perspective to ongoing debates over Southeast Asian perceptions of the Vietnam War. His conclusions support those scholars who have raised doubts about the outright rejection of fears over falling dominoes.[2] Ruth is unequivocal on this issue: "By late 1966, Thailand's military-political leadership had come to see direct involvement as a military action necessary to maintain Thailand's stability and independence in the face of external aggression directed from Beijing and Hanoi" (p. 2). Finally, Ruth shows how the Thai military dictatorship used the Vietnam War for its own purposes of building support against insurgent communists and Muslim separatists and how the Thai nationalism that was strengthened in the war led to a deepening militarism among political elites and at least parts of society. He concludes that the war transformed the soldiers that fought in it and the soldiers and their government transformed Thailand.

Ruth, a historian of Southeast Asia who teaches at the U.S. Naval Academy, primarily aims to dispel two stereotypes. Thai soldiers are commonly seen as mercenaries deployed by a government whose participation in the Vietnam War was bought by American money under the "many flags" program. In addition, they are usually depicted as greedy war profiteers who abused their access to the American PX at their main base, Bearcat Camp in Bien Hoa province, and generally contributed to a flourishing black market in Vietnam and Thailand. They are also seen as suppliers of drugs to American soldiers in search of escape. Ruth is more successful in challenging the mercenary label at the national level, as he carefully shows why the political and cultural needs of leaders in Bangkok as well as their legitimate fears about the spread of communism and a wider insurgency or full-blown war in Thailand conditioned their policies. Thai soldiers saw themselves as merciful heroes, but with respect to the dichotomy of warriors and profiteers, a nuanced picture emerges from Ruth's narrative that shows them as a complex combination of both.

Over 37,000 Thai military personnel served in South Vietnam between 1967, when the first combat unit, the Queen's Cobra Regiment, was deployed to Bien Hoa, and 1971, when the last men of the Black Panther Division returned home. 539 Thai soldiers died in South Vietnam. Ruth recreates their experience from interviews with 60 veterans, material sources attained from former soldiers (including photographs, souvenirs, and yearbooks), contemporary newspaper accounts in Thailand and the United States, the official history of the Thai military in the Vietnam War, memoirs of American and Australian soldiers who trained or encountered Thai units, and U.S. government records that illustrate political and military relations between the United States and Thailand. The oral histories emerge as the most telling source and Ruth vividly describes the adventures and daily life of Thai soldiers in Vietnam. At times he seems to suggest a shared experience that is undermined by his own careful narrative, but in general he takes great pains not to overstate his argument. Like Peter Kindsvatter in his masterful study of American soldiers in the twentieth century, Ruth successfully renders the deeper meaning of the wartime

service of Thai soldiers from the specific events that serve as illustration.[3]

In the first two chapters, Ruth explores the question who fought and why and he explains how Thai soldiers and the war in Vietnam received public support from Thai society. The contrast to the United States is captured in King Bhumibol's incredulous response to American antiwar protesters: they were victims of "mass brainwashing" who "do not really know about Vietnam or its politics" (pp. 36-37). Thai society, the king implied, understood that along with South Vietnam all of Southeast Asia was under assault. Thailand's military dictatorship stressed that argument as well and it found an ally in the Buddhist hierarchy, which came to support mobilization after some initial trepidation. As a result, "Thailand's contributions to the Vietnam War were Buddhist armies. Their mission, as suggested to the public, was to defend Thailand's Buddhist traditions and to rescue another Buddhist country from the perceived godlessness of an atheistic political system" (pp. 48-49). Buddhist symbols and amulets sustained the spirit of the men in Vietnam and funerals and religious celebrations at home underscored the bond between Thai society and its soldiers. The army could recruit from a large pool of young men who had completed their national military service. Over 30,000 volunteered when the initial call for a force of 1,000 men went out. That allotment was doubled and still the army could insist on volunteers who had completed their high school education. Some of the soldiers came from Bangkok but the majority were from rural areas. Ruth demonstrates that their motivations ranged from a desire to escape poverty to seeking adventure, but they were always underwritten by a deep sense of patriotism. He concludes that military service linked the countryside to the capital and that a new nationalism emerged from the mobilization drive and its propaganda and from the war effort that followed.

In Buddha's Company is not a conventional military history. While Ruth briefly discusses some of the early engagements of Thai units with Viet Cong guerrilla, he is primarily interested in how soldiers perceived and understood their experience in Vietnam. In the third and fourth chapters, he concludes that the reaction of Thai soldiers to American culture, both in Vietnam and at home, where American soldiers and airmen were a visible presence, was decidedly mixed. Thai soldiers were proud to be trained by American instructors in counterinsurgency warfare and they enthusiastically embraced popular material culture and mass consumption. Ruth discusses this in detail in a highly entertaining chapter on the significance of the PX and the ability to purchase watches, stereos, televisions, exotic foods, and beer and hard liquor. But this remained a shallow embrace of Western culture and Thai soldiers discovered a spiritual emptiness in their American friends. Indeed, the search for a deeper spirituality drove many Americans to seek out Thais as suppliers of drugs as well as of religious amulets, often in exchange for guns. The main argument in these middle chapters is that for Thai soldiers, Western modernity provided a menu from which to choose what could be woven into a deeper sense of Thai nationalism and spiritualism. That, too, served the purposes of the military, political, and religious leaders back home.

In the final two chapters, Ruth deepens the discussion of identity yet introduces ambiguity about the relationship of the Thai and the Vietnamese. Unlike many of their American comrades in arms, Thai soldiers–despite the cautionary warnings of their leaders–gained a positive image of the Vietnamese people. Ruth reminds us that most of the contact with civilians occurred with Vietnamese women who worked in and around the camps. These encounters brought out paternalistic and protective feelings among the soldiers. But Thai soldiers also developed great respect for the enemy. They believed the Vietnamese welcomed their presence and that cultural kinship allowed Thai soldiers to serve as interpreters for Americans who did not understand the environment they were in. Ruth presents an intriguing, but brief, discussion of civic action programs and of individual acts of kindness that implies roads not taken in the broader strategy of the allies. Here his analysis could have been strengthened by a Vietnamese perspective and consideration of the military and political realities on the ground. But it is the final chapter that introduces ambiguity. Ruth closes with a discussion of the spiritual dangers lurking in a Vietnam that Thai Buddhists could not instinctively understand. He highlights the significance of religion in general and of amulets for protection in particular, but conveys that the Thai found themselves in an alien environment and that they depended on Buddha's company. Survival was the proof of the effectiveness of religious beliefs and symbols. This stands in contrast to their own belief of kinship with the Vietnamese people and deeper understanding of Vietnam. Indeed, Ruth points out that his interlocutors remember Laos and Cambodia as culturally akin to Thailand while Vietnam seemed distant and Chinese.

What results from Ruth's discussion is a rich social and cultural history of Thai soldiers that allows for broader conclusions on society and politics in Thailand during and after the Vietnam War. Ruth demonstrates how the three pillars of the Thai state–the royal family,

Buddhist hierarchy, and military government–came together in support of the war effort and how each used and stoked the spirit of voluntarism and anticommunism that then served as bedrock foundation for a new Thai nationalism aimed against internal as well as external enemies. In the long run this led to a deepening of military dictatorship and to the rise of staunchly anticommunist generals who had cut their teeth in Vietnam.

Ruth's study is equally an insightful analysis of Thai soldiers and society, of Thailand's role in the Vietnam War, and of American misinterpretations. He clearly and persuasively rejects the prevailing argument in Western scholarship that Thai soldiers can simply be written off as mere mercenaries, purchased by American money and entirely dependent on U.S. military logistics and supplies once deployed in South Vietnam. Instead, Ruth concludes that we need to take seriously the domestic and regional security concerns of the Thai state. Unfortunately, the resulting nationalism was deeply linked to militarism and continued to fester in postwar Thailand, and has destabilized democratic government and kept military rulers in power for long stretches of time. Public support for the troops became a central feature of political culture during the war and the war itself, though now largely forgotten by mainstream Thai society, served as both catalyst and cause for a militarized version of modernity.

It is thus apparent that Ruth's book offers implications that go far beyond Thai history and could help us question our own perceptions of how the United States responded to the Vietnam War. While the Thai government used the war as rallying point for the nation, American policymakers attempted to wage a limited war in cold blood.[4] Yet the reverberations of consent, in Thailand, and dissent, in the United States, have deeply affected postwar political culture in both countries. Richard Ruth's study deserves a wide readership. Anyone interested in soldiers' experiences, the Vietnam War, the Cold War in Asia, and the contemporary history of Southeast Asia will naturally pick it up, but those scholars and students who work on questions of national identity and political culture, too, will find stimulating questions and conclusions. Any reader can expect a well-paced and entertaining narrative to complement the deeper analysis that frames the book.

Notes

[1]. For instance, Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); and Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008).

[2]. The most forceful, if controversial, recent revisionist argument from an American perspective is Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For focused regional analysis that includes Thailand see Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[3]. Peter Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

[4]. George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 121-150.

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