

## **Thailand's Red Drum Murders Through an Analysis of Declassified Documents**

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Although more than forty years have now passed since agents of Thailand's Communist Suppression Operations Command killed 1,000–3,000 civilian villagers in Phatthalung province, accounts of the so called Red Drum Murders remain in disagreement. The differences in detail are examined in the context of recently declassified U.S. government documents for the first time. Diplomatic cables and government reports clarify the narrative and provide new information regarding the actors involved and the extent of U.S. knowledge and complicity in the murders while raising new questions as to the time frame and extent of the atrocities. This paper explores the mechanics of the murders, the government official responsible for the murders, the roles of suppression and development in the Thai counterinsurgency, and the continuity of state repression and impunity in the Thai government today, and places the murders in a context of collective violence theory.

“I do not see how a people that can find in its conscience any excuse whatever for slowly burning to death a human being, or for tolerating such an act, can be entrusted with the salvation of a race”

— James Weldon Johnson (Johnson 1912, 53)

After the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the Thai military and its leaders became the most powerful political force in the country (Darling and Darling 1971, 84). Since then, numerous examples of brutal military on civilian violence have occurred in the name of defending the stability and integrity of the kingdom (e.g., Ban Na Sai, Red Shirt Demonstrations, and South Thailand Insurgency). Perhaps no example provides more potency than that of the Red Drum Murders of 1972. In the jungles of the Mid-South of the country, thousands of innocent civilians were burnt—usually after being killed, but often while still alive—in 50-gallon oil drums. Following the democratic revolution of 1973 student organizations brought the murders to the

public's attention, yet, as will be shown, the "democratic" government obstructed the investigation and denied that any significant wrongdoing had occurred (Haberkorn 2013, 185–186).<sup>1</sup>

Given the secret and restrictive nature of the military, its intimidation of the government and its reluctance to confront these events, indisputable facts regarding these murders remain hard to come by. Previous accounts of the murders supply a basic storyline of events (Peagam 1975, Dennis 1982, and Haberkorn 2013), and by weaving these together this paper generates an approximate narrative of what occurred in the jungle of the Mid-South some forty years ago. This article makes its contribution through an analysis and interpretation of relevant U.S. government documents for the first time, including official reports and diplomatic cables. Such an examination provides valuable insight into the more obscure dynamics of the murders, exploring not only their mechanics, but also partially explaining the incentives of the killers

This investigation has four main purposes. First, it will describe how the murders were carried out and the student exposé that followed. The goal of this examination will be to elucidate key differences that exist between different accounts of the murders and provide explanations for the existence of these differences. Second, through the use of declassified documents, General Sant, the man responsible for the Red Drum Murders, will be examined. These documents provide new insights into Sant's role in the murders, the incentives that drove him, and his special interest in maintaining and strengthening military control of government. Third, the level of U.S. knowledge of the murders will be investigated. Documents here examined provide the first evidence that the U.S. knew that forces under General Sant's command had committed extra-judicial killings of civilians in the past. The U.S. involvement will then be placed in a global context through a discussion of Thailand's strategic position during the Vietnam War, and U.S. foreign policy regarding human rights under President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Finally, the relationship between suppressive violence and increased insurgency will be examined. Through a combination of anecdotal and historical evidence, the argument will be made that, in the case of Thailand, developmental, non-violent counterinsurgency strategies were more effective than violent, suppressive strategies. The Thai government's use of brutal

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<sup>1</sup> Documents here analyzed have all been declassified and were obtained from the personal collection of Dr. Kevin Hewison (see acknowledgements).

violence against civilians and insurgents in recent years will be discussed as a failure to learn from the lessons of history.

### **Context in Political Violence Theory**

Charles Tilly's social theory regarding collective violence in politics bears relevance to the Red Drum Murders. Tilly describes an analytical framework by which political violence can be described. Tilly identifies actors in collective political violence as "political identities", which have four identifiable characteristics- boundaries between actors, stories about those boundaries, social relations across the boundaries, and social relations within the boundaries (Tilly 2003, 32–33). Tilly also defines two individual actors- political entrepreneurs and violence specialists. A political entrepreneur has the capacity to activate boundaries, connect distinct groups and networks, coordinate group actions, and act as a group representative (Tilly 2003, 34–35). A violence specialist controls the means of bringing harm to persons and objects (Tilly 2003, 35). The intersection of political entrepreneurs and violence specialists includes regional warlords and military rulers (Tilly 2003, 36). Throughout this article, the presence of political identities (group actors) and political entrepreneurs and violence specialists (individual actors) in the Red Drum Murders will be noted when they arise.

### **Detailing the Red Drum Murders**

Despite the brutal nature and public exposure and investigation of the Red Drum Murders, many details of the events remain unclear. A generally agreed narrative does exist though, and this article will discuss the narrative first, drawing on the few available resources- (Peagam 1975, Dennis 1982, and Haberkorn 2013), followed by an examination of the more opaque aspects of the murders.

The operations took place in Phatthalung Province in the Mid-South of Thailand. Soldiers under the direction of the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC, later Internal Security Operations Command, ISOC) and based in impermanent army camps travelled to local villages in search of people whose names appeared on a blacklist of "known" Communist Terrorists (so-called CTs) and Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) sympathizers. If soldiers could locate a listed suspect they "invited" him or her to come with them to the camp for questioning. If soldiers could not locate the target, then they would sometimes arrest a family member in his or her place. After arriving in the camp, soldiers tortured the villager until he confessed to

a crime, before subsequently burning him to death (Dennis 1982, 142–145).

As Tilly's framework predicts, a boundary existed between government CSOC forces and civilian villagers. This boundary is marked by identifiable characteristics that set CSOC soldiers apart from civilians. CSOC soldiers wore uniforms, carried weapons, wielded authority, and were working to achieve a common goal (the defeat of the insurgency). The second characteristic of political identities- the existence of stories about boundaries- is also satisfied by the agreed narrative. CSOC members shared a story that many or even most villagers were either Communists or Communist sympathizers. Not only did the murdered villagers lie outside of the CSOC political identity, but also they were seen as agents of the CPT- an antagonistic political identity. Social relations across the boundary consisted of CSOC authority and the use of torture and execution. Other relations included protection of non-communist villagers from CPT insurgents and the extortion of protection taxes. Finally, social relations within the CSOC boundary consisted of the standard dynamics of military life. Through training, communal living, and teamwork, social relations between members of military and quasi-military units create especially strong bonds. Thus, with all four of Tilly's characteristics satisfied, CSOC qualifies as a political identity.

Two variations exist in accounts of the murders. First, although sources agree that villagers suffered violent treatment, accounts differ as to the form that this violence took. Second, and more importantly, sources disagree over several logistical aspects of the murders, such as when they occurred and how many villagers died. The former variation carries less significance because it likely results from different accounts provided by individual witnesses of the murders. It seems probable that various witnesses observed all of the described methods of killing and torture at different times and places. If some of the accounts include exaggeration, the fact that soldiers treated civilians with brutality remains true. The disagreement in logistics holds much more significance because it represents a fundamental lack of understanding of the extent of atrocities committed.

John Value Dennis Jr. (1982) and Tyrell Haberkorn (2013) wrote the two most comprehensive narratives of the Red Drum Murders. These two sources describe different methods of torture used by soldiers to extract confessions. Dennis references an account given by a man press-ganged into guiding CSOC soldiers in Phatthalung. The conscriptee states that he witnessed soldiers torture villagers in a variety of ways including punching and kicking, stabbing repeatedly with a broken bottle, beating with a piece of wood, and hitting on the back of

the neck with a tire iron, causing death (Dennis 1982, 143–145). Haberkorn presents three methods of torture- electric shock, withholding food, and being beaten about the head and chest until unconscious (Haberkorn 2013, 193–194). Furthermore, a 1975 article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* written by Norman Peagam, adds being hit on the head with a hammer to the list of methods (Peagam 1975, 22). Thus, broad consensus exists that soldiers tortured villagers and forced confessions from them.

Sources also describe different execution methods. Some state that villagers were placed inside of a single red oil drum and had gasoline poured on them and lit on fire (Peagam 1975, 22; Dennis 1982, 130; Haberkorn 2013, 186). A second alleged method involved placing prisoners on a layer of logs, with another layer added on top of them. Soldiers then poured gasoline over the villager and set him ablaze (Dennis 1982, 143). Finally, another source describes a two-drum method in which victims were placed in an empty drum that had its bottom replaced with a metal grill. Soldiers placed a second drum, this one containing gasoline, underneath the first and set it alight. Other described execution methods include throwing victims from helicopters (*Bangkok Post Special Publication* 2003, 2) and shooting (Peagam 1975, 22). Again, all accounts agree that soldiers tortured civilians and executed them by burning them in drums. However, each provides a unique description of the particular methods involved.

Two other disagreements of fact- the number of villagers killed and the timeframe of the operations- fully demonstrate the murky nature of the murders. In February, 1975 members of the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) made an effort to contact all villagers affected by the killings. Students interviewed 809 villagers who testified that their family members had been murdered, though they succeeded in verifying only 200 of these. Phinit Charusombat, the deputy secretary of the NSCT, speculated that students had only made contact with one-tenth of the effected families, leading the students to arrive at the estimate of 3,000 victims (Dennis 1982, 146–147). The students' sympathetic contemporaries put the number of those killed a bit lower. A Phatthalung Member of Parliament said that he did not believe that soldiers killed 3,000 civilians, but did claim to know of 40–50 specific cases, and had confidence that many hundreds had received the same treatment. Despite villagers' testimony, various government officials and institutions publicly minimized the significance of the killings. A Lieutenant Colonel at the Phatthalung ISOC headquarters claimed that ISOC executed only those for whom definitive evidence of Communist activities existed, and that he did not know of more than 100 people executed in such a fashion (Dennis 1982, 147). An official investigation

by the Ministry of the Interior diminished the significance of the events even further as it concluded that while innocent citizens died in the Red Drum operations, they numbered no more than 70 or 80 (Haberkorn 2013, 186).

The question of time frame demonstrates even more uncertainty regarding the extent of the killings. Haberkorn and Dennis both reference August 7, 1972 as the beginning of the murders and state that they continued throughout 1972 (Haberkorn 2013, 188; Dennis 1982, 143). Two news reports from 1975 instead allege that the killings occurred in 1971 and 1972 (Peagam 1975, 22; Grossman 2012, 203). In further contrast, the 2003 *Bangkok Post* article states that the killings began in 1970 and continued through 1975, suggesting that many of the killings would have occurred *during* the democratic 1973–1976 period (*Bangkok Post Special Publication* 2003, 2).

What can explain a disagreement over such basic facts? One possibility suggests that the mass killings generally labeled as the Red Drum actually refer to a series of CSOC/ISOC atrocities that began as early as 1969. A recently declassified February 11, 1975 diplomatic cable sent from the American embassy in Bangkok to then Secretary of State Kissinger lies at the heart of this hypothesis. The cable, titled “Alleged ISOC Atrocities,” begins by discussing NSCT claims of mass torture and assassination by CSOC members. The cable continues,

These charges refer to a period roughly 1969–1971 when there was an intense confrontation between communist terrorists and the RTG. The terrorists had become increasingly bold in the use of murder as a weapon of intimidation. Local police reaction was severe and soon articles in Bangkok newspapers appeared dramatizing the confrontation (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Alleged*, 1).

Neither Dennis, Haberkorn, nor any other source reference CSOC murders prior to 1970, but this cable suggests that U.S. officials had knowledge of previous events similar to the 1972 Red Drum operations before the more infamous murders occurred. It seems clear that CSOC and the military had carried out a series of tortures and extra-judicial murders that began, possibly as early as 1969 and probably continued for several years, and perhaps to 1975, when they were exposed by student activists.

## The Student Exposé

In the 1973–1976 period, idealistic university students fanned out across the rural areas of the country, spreading information about democracy. In January, 1975, while engaged in this promotion in Phattalung province, student leader Phinit Charusombat heard rumors of the Red Drum Murders. Upon returning to Bangkok, he brought the issue to the attention of the NSCT leadership. They, along with the United Front Against Dictatorship (UF), created a committee charged with investigating and disseminating the details of the Red Drum killings to the public. A total of sixty students from Chulalongkorn, Thammasat, Mahidol, and Ramkhamhaeng universities made the journey in six groups of ten, along with journalists from various newspapers. Students met with villagers who had been arrested and released and family members of those killed in the Red Drum operations and attempted to compile a comprehensive list of effected villagers (Haberkorn 2013, 196–200). Students located nineteen witnesses of the killings who agreed to testify in Bangkok about the murders. 20,000 students and other capital residents attended a public hearing on February 14 where they learned about the Red Drum atrocities (Haberkorn 2013, 196). Many thousands more read about the allegations in the newspapers, which published interviews with witnesses and provided close coverage of the public hearing.

Following the public hearing, students made several demands of the government. All were aimed at strengthening democracy and partially righting the wrongs of the Red Drum operations. Dennis lists three demands: (1) the revocation of the Anti-Communist Activities Act, (2) compensation for relatives of Red Barrel victims, and (3) local elections of district officers and provincial governors (Dennis 1982, 133). Haberkorn provides six demands, some of which differ from those listed above. In addition to numbers one and two, she also lists as demands the protection of those involved in exposing the murders, the removal of soldiers and Village Defense Volunteers from Phatthalung, the punishment of officials who broke the law, and the dissolution of ISOC. The rapidly expanding right-wing opposition used these demands to portray the students as aiding communists (see Prajak 2006).

Despite the assurance of General Kris Sivara, the commander of the Royal Thai Army (RTA), that they would not be harassed on their trip, the students encountered significant governmental interference. Various district officers and ISOC officials drove through districts with a truckload of soldiers, making threats against anyone who might consider talking to the students. In Ban Phut village a district officer named Asa Monkholisiri used 50 heavily armed soldiers to warn villagers

that the students' interviews constituted a Communist plot (Dennis 1982, 136). Asa also handed out free food and clothing in an attempt to purchase villagers' silence. Residents resisted Asa's bribery though, and he and the soldiers eventually left. Residents then testified that at least 200 people from Ban Phut alone died in the Red Drums.

Aside from the short-term public furor, the only tangible result of the students' actions was the previously mentioned whitewashed investigation by the Minister of the Interior. The report concluded that the RTG should not dissolve ISOC, and that no state actors required discipline (Haberhorn 2013, 199–200). Despite the high degree of public attention that the Red Drum Murders aroused, the lack of government response and the strong transition of the public's opinion towards anti-Communist sentiment caused the murders to be, for the most part, swept under the rug. The long-term significance of the students' efforts was not any more positive. The exposé and the government backlash against it represented significant steps in the radicalization of the student movement that led to its demonization and which would culminate in the massacre of students on October 6, 1976 (Dennis 1982, 130).

### **General Sant and the Struggle for Military Dominance of Government**

None of the accounts previously examined name the government official responsible for the Red Drum Murders. However, analysis of recently declassified government documents in conjunction with earlier literature reveals that the man in charge of the Red Drum operations was General Sant Chitpatima, the Commander of the Fifth Military Circle and the CSOC regional commander in charge of the Mid-South region. General Sant was an outspoken soldier who repeatedly advanced the interests of military political dominance over civilian government. This section outlines Sant's role in the Red Drum Murders and examines the incentives that shaped his actions in the Mid-South.

Sant believed that only the military had the capacity to run the country. A diplomatic cable demonstrated his disdain in its description of his response to a police operation, "General San[t] Chitpatima said June 5 that he assumed the police designed operation would fail. He said that the people responsible didn't know what they were doing and predicted that at some point he would be called in to take charge" (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Local*, 4).

Sant apparently saw the relative freedom of the 1973–1976 period of democratic government as one of great danger for the stability and future of Thailand. Yet, Sant was involved in events that caused



instability meant to demonstrate the weakness of elected government. For example, in April, 1975 the U.S. mission stated that Sant had helped organize a police officers' strike in Bangkok meant to discredit the weak civil government that he characterized, as "leftist-leaning" (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Thoughts*, 2). Sant's handling of a deteriorating security situation along the Malaysian border in the South provides another example of his efforts to undermine civilian government. . In this case, while he did carry out orders from Bangkok, according to a diplomatic cable, "San[t] could do much for dampening the security situation in the South, but he apparently will do so only on his own terms" (U.S. Department of State 1975 *RTG*, 5). Most significantly, Sant spoke openly of supporting a military coup (U.S. Department of State 1975 *General*, 1).<sup>2</sup> Sant seems to have been regularly involved in intricate political intrigue. According to diplomatic cables, he rigged elections and staged large counter-demonstrations against students in southern provinces in early 1975 (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Thoughts*, 1).

Sant's important position as CSOC regional commander and leader of the Fifth Military Circle, his ability to manipulate other political actors, and his ability to mobilize groups of people, such as police unions, qualify him as a political entrepreneur, as defined by Tilly. Also, his control of violence activities and position in the military qualify him as a violence specialist. Tilly places regional warlords and military rulers in the set of people that includes both political entrepreneurs and violence specialists (Tilly 2003, 36). Sant may not have had the full power of a warlord, but he appears to fit into this intersection nonetheless. The positioning of a man who was both a political entrepreneur and a violence specialist, positioned at the head of a militarized political identity, brought together the key actors involved in collective violence.

Sant's activities in the Mid-South appear to have been driven by both his desire for personal advancement and also for a share of U.S. military assistance. By identifying and executing large numbers of alleged insurgents in Phatthalung, Sant and his forces created an

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<sup>2</sup> Sant favored strong, preferably military government, and he was personally ambitious. In 1981, after he had risen to deputy army commander-in-chief, and when the government led by General Prem Tinsulanonda was under pressure from civilian elements and seemingly destabilized, Sant launched a coup bid ("General Prem's failure to halt political infighting prompts Thai coup," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 2, 1981). According to a report in Grossman (2009, 240), Sant stated "a weak government was leading the nation to disaster." Sant's coup was defeated with royal family support to Prem, and Sant fled to Burma ("Thai Premier Promises Leniency for Rebels," *New York Times*, April 4, 1981).

illusion of a powerful CPT presence. The CPT was active in the area, but its forces remained relatively small.<sup>3</sup> However, by the late 1960's, the United States pumped tens of millions of dollars into Thai security efforts annually (Boonkong 1973, 23), and Sant obviously saw the potential benefit of maximizing the appearance of the power of the insurgency. Besides the benefits of U.S. military assistance, the Thai military also managed a range of legal and semi-legal enterprises in the areas they controlled, ranging from smuggling and petty shakedowns to protection rackets that yielded "taxes." Given the supposed danger of insurgents and the relative wealth of the rubber farmers of the Mid-South, the military could demand relatively high "taxes" in exchange for the loyal defense of villagers (Tarr 1991, 36). In addition, as land was cleared for more rubber planting or other commercial cropping, the military could gain benefits by taking up land or providing protection to farmers who often operated in an atmosphere of primitive accumulation (see Berkoff, 1976). Infrastructure development projects were also lucrative. Despite the goal of these projects to benefit the poor, "most of the development projects, such as the construction of rural roads built in security-sensitive areas, were primarily intended to serve the needs of the police and military" (Thomas 1986, 20). The local commanders were well placed to draw benefits from such investments, which were drawn to areas that had been demonstrated to have high levels of communist infiltration. Thus, numerous sources of funding provided Sant with incentives for artificially increasing the appearance of CPT strength in Phatthalung.

Outside of the military, there were also incentives for violent repression and corrupt accumulation. For example, according to rumors and statements from state officials, district officials and villagers used the Red Drum activities to settle conflicts (Haberkorn 2013, 197). The value of the rubber farms of the Mid-South provided participants at all levels with enormous potential for personal monetary benefit at the expense of others. Such actions fit into the model of the rational peasant as outlined by Samuel L. Popkin. Popkin argues that villagers will do whatever they believe most benefit the personal utility of themselves

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<sup>3</sup> George K. Tanham describes the power of the insurgency in the Mid-South, writing, "The 400 guerrillas do not constitute a serious menace to the Thai government but must be kept under constant surveillance" (Tanham 1974, 65). A 1973 Department of Defense analysis of the counterinsurgency, echoes this estimate as it found that 600 insurgents existed in Southern Thailand. This total presumably includes both the Mid and Far South (U.S. National Security Council 1973, 3).

and their family (Popkin 1979, 31). If the arrest and execution of Villager A serves to benefit Villager B, perhaps by increased access to rubber farms, then Popkin would not be surprised if villager B took actions that yielded these results. Certainly the personal ethics and cultural inhibitions of many villagers would prevent such tactics (their utility would be reduced because of the spiritual costs of such actions), but some outliers did seem to exist. Stathis N. Kalyvas specifically discusses denunciation of neighbors during civil wars. He notes that both political denunciations (performed in order to increase political gain or meet political goals, such as peace) and personal denunciations (performed for self-gain) are quite common in civil wars (Kalyvas 2006, 180). Denunciations of neighbors for the purpose of gaining land rights would qualify as personal denunciations, while denunciation of a neighbor with the hope of hurting the CPT and ending the insurgency would be labeled as political.

### **The Establishment of CSOC and its Loss of Autonomy**

Like the insurgency itself, an in-depth exploration of the counterinsurgency effort goes beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, only the most relevant aspect, that of CSOC, will be discussed. A 1973 Department of Defense document outlines four critical aspects of anti-Maoist counterinsurgency strategy: the destruction of the armed insurgents, protection and defense of the local population, replacement of the insurgent influence with a government presence, and the establishment of a centralized organization to oversee counterinsurgency operations (U.S. National Security Council 1973, 9). CSOC, established in December 1965 filled this centralized agency role in the Thai case (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1966, 23). Initially, CSOC coordinated and devised strategy for defeating the insurgency in the Northeast with operations conducted by the military and police. However, this changed in October, 1967 when the RTA took over CSOC in the Northeast, giving itself the authority to carry out its own operations. At this time, the military-dominated government authorized martial law in the Northeast and directed military commanders throughout the country to establish headquarters for the coordination of Communist suppression in their regions. The net of counterinsurgency therefore expanded to include the entire country. In 1969, the authority of the military further expanded with total responsibility for regional CSOC activities placed in the hands army commanders- including Sant in the Mid-South (Tanham 1974, 86-88). The result was that CSOC became a military-dominated and directed organization. Now that local commanders answered to their military superiors and gained full

control of counterinsurgency operations, commanders like Sant no longer answered to any coordinating body outside of the military.

### **U.S. Involvement in the Red Drum Murders?**

The extent of United States official knowledge of the Red Drum Operations remains unclear. Tanham, the counterinsurgency specialist, makes only one mention of an operational matter that might include the Red Drum murders, and this description desperately lacks detail. He writes, “In the Mid-South early in 1972 General San[t], under the guise of training exercises, launched active army operations against the CT’s with some success. Though his tactics were considered too rough by some in Bangkok, he has continued aggressive actions” (Tanham 1974, 100). We may only speculate about these “rough” and “aggressive” actions, Tanham’s level of knowledge, and who in Bangkok found Sant’s actions perturbing.

The February 1975 cable mentioned earlier provides the only evidence of U.S. knowledge of the murders. Given that the cable held classified status at the time of its origin, we can assume that the author remains candid throughout. The embassy stated that it did not believe Bangkok newspapers’ “sensationalized” accounts of allegations that it thinks referred to the 1969–1971 period. The embassy cable period reveals two important things. First, it seems the embassy either did not know about the operations of 1972 or was trying to give the impression that they had ceased. Second, the embassy provides the impression that it did know that extrajudicial killings had previously occurred under Sant’s watch and that officials had mistakenly placed civilians on a list of known insurgents in the past. The cable goes on to mention a 1971 interview with Sant by an officer of the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Command in which Sant is said to have:

Acknowledged that incidents had occurred but denied that they were ordered or condoned by him or by CSOC. He alleged that the actions were spontaneously and locally instigated. Villagers had come to the local police stating that known CT in their villagers had threatened to kill them...they refused further cooperation unless strong action was taken...authorities were led by the villagers to the homes of persons identified as CT. These were arrested and summarily executed with the villagers themselves participating in ‘large numbers.’ As a result of the publicity, Sant had been ordered by the then military group and CSOC to investigate and ‘clean up’ the situation. Part of the cleanup measures included the establishment of province lists of known CT. Committees of five to seven men had to agree unanimously before a name could be added to the list of CT (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Alleged*, 2)

It seems remarkable that the same lists that CSOC officials apparently used during the Red Drum Operations resulted from supposed “reform”. The cable concludes with personal comments by its author, stating his certainty that Red Drum allegations did not warrant attention by the U.S. authorities. Instead he emphasizes that, “There has long been an understanding between Thai officials, civil police and military, and U.S. counterparts that the handling of lists of suspected terrorists of whatever origin (simple bandit, Malaysian, Chinese, Separatist or Communist) is a concern strictly of the RTG officials involved” (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Alleged*, 2). Furthermore, the tone of the closing statements demonstrate that the author’s concern lies not with the veracity of the alleged atrocities, but rather the fact that, “the prevalence of press articles attacking ISOC...makes the problem of popularizing the new Aw Paw Paw Program (APP)...that much more difficult” (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Alleged*, 2). The APP was an ISOC program designed to involve rural villagers in their own self-defense and to better coordinate all village defense programs under a single administration (U.S. Department of State 1975 *National*, 1).

If the U.S. Embassy knowledge about the events in Phatthalung was limited, the question arises as to whether U.S. officials would have done more regarding the Red Drum operations if they had full information. Although any answer to this query remains purely speculative, evidence points to the contrary. The U.S. position appears to have been to support their important allies in the Thai military above all else. The sometimes ineffective and brutal handling of the insurgency apparently did bother some, and yet, highest-ranking officials did not share these concerns. For example, James L Woods, an intelligence and research worker in Bangkok in the 1960’s and 1970’s, questioned the indiscriminate bombing of parts of the Northeast. He argued that bombing of rural areas had killed many civilians and pushed villagers towards the CPT. According to Woods,

“Then Holbrook [the director of the Advanced Research Projects Agency] said, ‘Does any of this make sense? Aren’t we just creating more insurgents?’ and Ambassador [Leonard] Unger said, ‘Well, you know it’s a sovereign country. They’re free to make their own mistakes and we’re here to help them.’ I’m sure that wasn’t the exact phrase, but ‘keep the bombs flowing’ was the bottom line. ‘We’re not going to question the Thais’ right to drop bombs on their own villages’” (Kennedy 2001, 220).

American diplomacy in other Southeast Asian countries at the time further emphasizes the prioritization of U.S. interests over the defense of human rights. In a conversation between Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Thai Foreign Minister Chatchai Choonhavan in November 1975 the Secretary made this primacy clear. Kissinger said, “You should also tell the Cambodians [the Khmer Rouge] that we will be friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won’t let that stand in our way (U.S. Department of State 1975 *Memorandum*, 8).” In the early 1970’s, all of the United States Southeast Asian policy centered around the containment of Communism, specifically by winning the War in Vietnam. The U.S. used air bases in Thailand to run bombing operations in North Vietnam. The U.S. carried out bombing runs without regard for sovereignty or international agreements- the operations violated the 1962 Geneva Agreement that ended the Laotian War and the Geneva accords (Lomax 1967, 31–32). Given that support from the RTG was critical to the Vietnam War effort and broader U.S. interests, it seems that U.S. officials would have done anything that protected U.S. interests and its relationship with the Thai military. Gross human rights abuses in the jungles of Phatthalung were not going to be permitted to damage the relationship.

### **Violence and Support for the Insurgency**

The comment by James L Woods that brutal counterinsurgency methods led to increased insurgency and sympathy for the CPT is worthy of some consideration. Although an estimate of the number of civilians-turned-insurgents is unknown, anecdotal evidence does exist. Specific to the Red Drum Murders, many villagers who witnessed the killing of innocent neighbors claimed they joined the CPT in search of protection. Fon Silamul, one of these villagers, said that he had no choice but to seek the help of the CPT out of fear for his life. In a 2003 *Bangkok Post* interview Fon said, “What can villagers like us do when we are sandwiched between government officials and the CPT?...Taking sides with the CPT seemed to be the best way to survive in the circumstances when the police and security officers could not provide us with protection and everything was a mess” (*Bangkok Post Special Publication* 2003, 2).

At the time of the Red Drum exposé the student investigators acknowledged that guerrillas existed in Phatthalung, but claimed that these specific insurgents resulted from suppressive counterinsurgency methods. One leftist writer, Yotthong Thapthiwmai, claimed that counterinsurgency in Phatthalung originated as a response to an invented threat (Dennis 1982, 139). Yotthong wrote that the

counterinsurgency war began when Yongut Dusithamo, a teacher and Village Defense Volunteer, supplied local young men with shotguns and chickens and directed them to kill the chickens, shoot their guns into the air, and run through local rice fields. Teacher Yongut then reported the incident as a run-in with insurgents in which the young men had injured, but not killed, several insurgents. A request for increased funding accompanied the report, and violent counterinsurgency efforts soon followed (Haberhorn 2013, 192).

Several other high profile examples of the alienating effect of harsh counterinsurgency exist. During 1965–1966, the early days of the insurgency, the military used air and military attacks along with wide-range sweeps in order to locate and destroy groups of insurgents. These actions proved generally ineffective except in upsetting the local population, thereby generating Communist sympathy among rural villagers (Tanham 1974, 86). Ironically, it was the failure of these operations that contributed to the formation of CSOC (Marks 2007, 38). Yet as CSOC came under military control, similar operations occurred in the Northeastern Province of Loei in 1972. Soldiers employed napalm to kill 300 alleged guerrillas and the operation resulted in the death of one hundred non-combatants. According to a *Bangkok Post* article, over 500 United States military advisers and special forces also assisted in this napalming operation (Grossman 2009, 183).<sup>4</sup>

In the South, harsh counterinsurgency began in the countryside of Surat Thani in 1967, apparently in response to an “uprising” of villagers. The villagers in question had executed a local police chief and several of his subordinates after a plainclothes policeman shot and killed a well-regarded postal worker, claiming that he belonged to the CPT. In response to this rebellious action, the district officer sent a high priority request to Bangkok, requesting armed reinforcements. The RTA sent artillery units, and suppression operations followed immediately. In an attempt to defend themselves, the villagers soon linked themselves with the CPT, and armed conflict continued for the next 16 years. Surat Thani provides a concrete example of counterinsurgency directly resulting in the rise of insurgency itself (Tarr 1991, 36–37).

On October 6, 1976 the Thai military overthrew the democratically elected civil government in a coup d'état. The coup followed brutal attacks by rightists on students at Thammasat University. A large group of students were protesting government corruption. State radio portrayed students as anti-government Communist sympathizers.

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<sup>4</sup> The claim of 500 may be an exaggeration, but the presence of at least some American forces seems likely.

Despite the NSCT's willingness to surrender in order to prevent further violence, police and rightists began to shoot indiscriminately into the school. Officially, 46 students died, but other estimates put the total at over 100 (Puey 1976, 5–8). Outside the walls of the school, civilians joined in the violence, yielding iconic images of brutal violence carried out by common people, with even children watching in delight (Ulevich 1977). Following the events of the coup, the massacre, and a series of repressive measures, thousands of students, teachers, labor activists, and liberal politicians left the city and joined the CPT in the jungle, including in the South (Morell and Chai-Anan 1979, 320). Although these same fleeing students would eventually become some of the first to abandon the insurgency, the massacre temporarily reinforced the guerrillas' numbers (Thomas 1986, 17).

These are several examples of counterinsurgency efforts and government-sponsored violence directly leading to increased support for the CPT and the insurgency. Again, the full effects of this influence cannot be quantified, but a 1972 CIA report did state that much of what sustained the CPT was government neglect and isolation of civilians (U.S. National Security Council 1973, 4). These thoughts are echoed by an internal CSOC report from 1973, which stated that,

“Whenever there were suppression operations and sweeps, the officers never investigated or understood clearly the state of minority groups in each village, such as which group was hostile and which was friendly. Then the Government officers committed atrocities like burning the village and plantation area and killing animals and villagers... These actions indirectly caused groups to join the communists” (Peagam 1975, 22).

The theory that the communist insurgency was bolstered by government neglect and counterinsurgency violence support is further bolstered by historical evidence of the governmental actions which eventually led to the collapse of the CPT. Following the withdrawal of Chinese support of the CPT in 1979, the government established a much more developmental-based counterinsurgency strategy (Marks 2007). The government held limited elections in 1979 and 1983, an action which was seen as a gradual democratization, giving people some degree of influence over the workings of the government and allowing some political dissent. In addition, the government established new development programs to specifically help the rural poor- something that previous programs had not done. The civil government also made a display of removing a few corrupt local officials from power (Thomas 1986, 21).



The most significant aspect of the nonviolent approach centered on an amnesty program which allowed CPT members to defect from the party without labeling them as rebels. Instead, they became identified as “participants in Thai national development.” The government allowed participants to travel to “free zones” in order to negotiate their peaceful defection. Defectors even received funding for their re-adjustment to peaceful, productive life as well as a guarantee of safety and civil rights. For all intents and purposes, the RTG allowed these ex-CPT members to again become full members of Thai society (Thomas 1986, 20–21). The amnesty program yielded immediate results. From 1979 to 1982 more than 7,500 armed insurgents along with an even larger group of family dependents and unarmed sympathizers permanently left the ranks of the CPT. Defections continued over the next three years such that by the end of 1985 there no more than 700 armed guerrillas remained. While the change in government strategy cannot receive full credit for the disintegration of the CPT- the withdrawal of Chinese support was a critical step- the transition from a counterinsurgency policy based on suppression and violence to one based on development and amnesty was an important change.

### **Learning from the Mistakes of the Past**

The communist insurgency and the Red Drum murders provided the RTG with hard evidence that sacrificing human rights in exchange for potential security is a risky undertaking. As shown previously, both the U.S. government and the RTG reached the conclusion that suppressive violence, combined with government neglect, did little to secure the country and instead led to increased destabilization. It was only through development, amnesty, and democratization that the insurgency was permanently eliminated. Sadly, recent Thai history has not seen this lesson applied.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s 2003 War on Drugs bears alarming similarities to the Red Drum Murders. The RTG portrayed drugs and drug users as destroying the integrity of Thai society, much in the same way that it portrayed Communism in 1960s and 1970s. The central government required provincial officials to assemble blacklists of known drug offenders in their jurisdiction, just as they made lists of known CTs. Many citizens on the blacklists were placed there in error as a result of personal rivalries with government officials, much in the same way that villagers were often put on Red Drum lists for the personal benefit of district officials. People on the blacklists were often arbitrarily arrested, forced into confessions, and/or killed. Upwards of 2,000 people died in a three month period and the police required

thousands of others to report to police and drug rehabilitation facilities (*Human Rights Watch* 2004, 1–2; 20–21).

A similar policy of violence can be seen in the government's response to the mass red-shirt demonstrations of 2010. Instead of redressing grievances of the People, the government responded with military force. By the end of the two-month movement, 90 civilians lay dead and thousands more sustained injuries (*Human Rights Watch* 2011, 4).

Finally, the government has continued to use torture as a counterinsurgency mechanism in the South in recent years. According to an Amnesty International report, security forces have tortured people through beatings, burning them with candles, burying people up to their necks in the ground, use of electric shocks, and exposure to extreme temperatures. The report notes that the government response has had a similar effect of the anti-communist counterinsurgency in the 1970's- "The government's heavy-handed security response, with some 45 percent of Thai military forces currently stationed in the south, has led to widespread human rights violations and has alienated the local population" (Amnesty International 2009, 4). Even though the RTG previously learned the importance of development and protection of human rights when carrying out counterinsurgency operations, that lesson seems to have been lost on the current government.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of declassified diplomatic cables and government reports as well as historical and contemporary secondary documents has revealed new details of the Red Drum Murders. Differences in mechanical and logistical details from secondary and primary accounts have been examined. Based on these documents, it appears that the murders may have begun as early as 1969 and continued for several years, perhaps as late as 1975. This represents a significantly longer period of time than the 1971–1972 period previously referenced.

This analysis has also revealed new information regarding the man responsible for the murders, General Sant Chitpatima. Previous accounts of the murders have not named the responsible official, but analysis of newly available documents has allowed an analysis of Sant's role and the incentives that encouraged him and his forces to take the action that they did. Together CSOC and General Sant have been identified as consistent with the analytical framework of political violence put forth by Tilly.

Analysis of these documents has also provided the first evidence of U.S. knowledge of extra-judicial killings that occurred under Sant's

watch. The hands-off approach taken by the U.S. mission in Thailand was typical of official U.S. foreign policy in South East Asia under President Nixon. The Red Drum murders have been placed in a larger context of Thai counterinsurgency strategy and the relative effectiveness of suppressive and developmental strategies. Finally, the response of the Thai government to political instability in the last decade has been compared to the suppressive counterinsurgency tactics of which the Red Drum Murders are representative. Sadly, it seems that the current Thai government is repeating the mistakes of the past as it attempts to stabilize the political situation both in the capital and in the insurgency-affected South.

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