

Refereed article

How Laos was Represented in the East German Newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, 1946–1990

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Abstract

Even though the East German communist party newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, or ND, can be called a controversial propaganda instrument, it may still help provide a fuller picture of Second World–Third World relations during the Cold War. In its pursuit of greater international recognition in the Cold War rivalry with West Germany, the East German government established relations with as many countries as possible. This included Third World countries such as Laos and ND reported on this, usually in an ideologically biased way and sometimes with Orientalist characteristics. Nonetheless, ND can be useful for historical research on Laos as the newspaper had connections that Western media did not have access to. This paper is based on a review of 2,984 articles about Laos published by ND from 1946 to 1990.

Keywords: Laos, East Germany, international relations, Second World–Third World relations, Cold War, representation of an Asian country in media

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Introduction

A lot has been written about relations during the Cold War between Laos and the US, China, Vietnam and the Soviet Union (e.g. Castle 1993; Cesari 2007; Charaby 2006; Dommen 1979; Eliades 1999; Gaiduk 2003; Goscha 2004; Jacobs 2012; Kochavi 2002; Kurlantzick 2016; Langer 1973; Lee 1970; Rust 2012; Shu Quanzhi 2021), but in the last thirty years I have come across very little about relations between Laos and other countries. What interests me is what people in other socialist countries thought about Laos during the Cold War and I think that analyzing media is a good way to get a better understanding of that.

My research for this paper is in line with recent research that has aimed to provide a fuller picture of Second World–Third World relations during the Cold War. Southeast Asia is increasingly developing, which makes a more detailed understanding of its historical and diplomatic background not only interesting but also necessary. Given the current developments in the world, it is not at all inconceivable that the competition between China and the US, for instance, could evolve into a new Cold War. That is why it is so important to study the origins and consequences of the Cold War that lasted from 1947 to 1991 (Li 2020). More insight into this could lead to a better understanding and management of today's international relations. Regarding the wider academic context, this research might be grouped under the role of development in the Cold War rivalry. The choice of East German media automatically means the Cold War era, as the German Democratic Republic (also called GDR or East Germany) only existed during that period.

During the Cold War there were relations between Laos and Soviet satellite states such as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania. This paper deals with the East German perspective. The GDR interacted with Laos during the Cold War for various reasons, including helping to shape the civil service and the armed forces. The results of this can still be noticed today, which makes it interesting to investigate the relations between Laos and the GDR. Since *Neues Deutschland* was the party newspaper of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands or Socialist Unity Party of Germany, which ruled East Germany from 1949 to 1990), it may provide valuable information about the ideology and expectations behind GDR–Laos relations. The research question that I will be working with in this paper is: How was Laos represented in the East German newspaper *Neues Deutschland*?

The newspaper *Neues Deutschland* (“New Germany,” from here: ND) has often been regarded as a rather controversial source and later in this paper I will elaborate on that. For this research I made use of online archives and of my own collection of newspaper clippings about Laos. My search eventually yielded 2,984 articles from ND. I have benefited a lot from the online newspaper archives of the Berlin State

Library¹ and the *ND-Archiv* website.² The annual counts of the numbers of articles about Laos are not always correct on the ND website though. The longer articles consist of multiple paragraphs and subsections which are often presented as separate articles in the search results. I also came across double counts. Hence, searching the *Neues Deutschland* website will indicate a larger number of articles on Laos than there actually were. According to Deacon (2007: 17–18), it is not clear why double counts occur in digital archives. It is also possible that there are articles that have not yet been digitized and, as a result, have escaped my attention. For instance, a number of items listed on the ND website appear not to be available in the Berlin State Library. In any case, I realize I have to be careful with quantification of coverage only through searches. The quantification in the tables in this paper is the result of a detailed analysis of the articles I have found so far.

Content Analysis

The purpose of this paper is to provide a general overview of what was published in ND about Laos, which involves a content analysis. Many different definitions of “content analysis” have been formulated over time and there is one that most closely matches my ideas for this project. Laswell et al. (1952) described content analysis as a method that aims to describe with optimal accuracy and objectivity what is generally said about a particular subject (i.e. Laos) in a certain place (i.e. *Neues Deutschland*) at a given time (1946–1990). Because this definition does not specifically take into account the quantitative aspect and the replicability that are important factors for content analysis, I have added these factors as recommended by Riffe et al. (1998).

What types of content were selected for this project? Over the years I have collected several hundred clippings about Laos from various East German newspapers. Of these, about 200 came from ND, and since that was the ruling party’s flagship paper and I wanted to know more about Laos–GDR relations during the Cold War, I thought that was a good starting point. So I decided to look for *everything* that had appeared in ND about Laos, from front page news, diplomatic and political articles, editorials, opinion pieces, official declarations, statements and communiqués, to background articles about history and culture. Of course, it would be impossible to cover all of these items in the scope of this paper, so I have limited myself to providing a brief overview. Naturally, this leaves interesting areas for future research.

To bring order to the vast amount of material and to enable later analysis, I created a coding manual wherein I filled out a coding sheet for each article to highlight the following information: 1) issue date; 2) page number; 3) article word count; 4) headline; 5) author(s); 6) news source(s); 7) coding and sub-coding of the article.

1 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, online newspaper archive, see <https://zefys.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/>

2 ND-Archiv website, see <https://www.nd-archiv.de/>

Sub-groups coded as number seven from the coding sheet included texts such as communiqués, laws, declarations, official statements, speeches, treaties and reports of meetings, which were usually printed in their entirety in ND. The other sub-groups were activities of the Pathet Lao, influence of Vietnam and China, development, cooperation, socialism, ideological bias and the possible presence of Orientalist influences in ND's reporting about Laos. For each item I wrote a short summary and some additional information, and then put all this information together in chronological order in a catalog, which facilitates further research. I created tables to organize article data for statistical analysis, as described by Lynch and Peer (2002). My statistical analysis used in this content analysis mainly involved counting (of articles, words, pages, front page/diplomatic/foreign news, authors, and news sources). All results can be found in the tables for quick reference.

Content analysis does have its limitations and disadvantages, which may be both procedural and theoretical. Moreover, content analysis is subject to error. I also realize that this project is inherently reductive, because the matter at hand (i.e. the way Laos was represented in ND) is rather complex. Throughout this paper I will often refer to ND articles on Laos. However, as it was not possible to list all 2,984 items within the scope of this paper, I had to make a selection. This is another limitation of the project.

Third World, Second World and Laos

The East German government was interested in building relations with as many countries as possible, to try to give the GDR regime more legitimacy. In this way they also wanted to offer more counterweight to West Germany in the Cold War rivalry (Johnson 1993; Kuhns 1985; Scholtyseck 2003). That said, Laos was not the GDR's most important partner in the Third World. Cuba and Vietnam were more central to the GDR's involvement in development work. Did Laos actually belong to the *Third World* during the Cold War? As this paper is intended to help provide a fuller picture of Second World–Third World relations during the Cold War, I will hereby briefly discuss the term “Third World.” It was coined by the French scientist Alfred Sauvy in 1952 (Palieraki 2023). Nowadays it is often considered a derogatory term to describe the group of ex-colonial, newly independent, economically developing nations that were non-aligned with either NATO or the Warsaw Pact. It is part of a “three worlds” segmentation used to rank the world’s economies by economic status *and* political divisions: the United States and their allies represent the “First” World, while the Soviet Union and their allies form the “Second” World. However, there is still no consensus on the definition of the “Third” World and strictly speaking it was more a political than an economic division (Tomlinson 2003). Interestingly, official GDR agreements with Cuba, Laos, Mongolia and Vietnam were listed under “Bilateral treaties between the GDR and socialist states” (German Democratic Republic 1979: 1200–1222). In ND articles, Laos was also often referred to as a “brother country” of the GDR. This raises the question of

whether the GDR leaders really saw Laos as part of the socialist world—in which case Laos would belong to the *Second World*—or whether they overestimated the scope, scale and influence of their development efforts.

The Newspaper *Neues Deutschland*

The newspaper *Neues Deutschland* has been called controversial for a number of reasons. For instance, a former East German journalist who used to work for ND (personal communication, September 28, 2018) told me that ND was “nothing more than propaganda from a dictatorial regime.” ND was indeed the main party organ of the SED, and everything about the newspaper was regulated by the party, from page layout to target readership (Fiedler and Meyen 2011). At a press conference in Berlin in 1950, the then editor-in-chief of ND, Rudolf Herrnstadt, said that his paper’s task was not to entertain people or to make money, but to fight a political battle. According to Herrnstadt, ND was a political institution that had the character of a newspaper because of its effectiveness and not just a newspaper that deals with politics (Herrmann 1963: 39). The character of ND was therefore one of unconditional commitment to the political goals of the SED (Kirstein 2010) and those who wrote for ND had to be SED members. Occasionally articles were written by foreigners, but they had to be members of a communist or socialist party in their own country. The editor-in-chief of the Lao newspaper *Pasason* (“The People”), Sone Khamvanevongsa (1985), also wrote an article about Laos. As far as I know he is the only Laotian ever to have written an article for ND.

ND staff were taught that their task was to reproduce and disseminate the propaganda of the SED, thus fulfilling an important social function in the GDR (Fiedler and Meyen 2011). Newspapers from the GDR regularly featured deception, falsification, generalization and clichés. For example, East German newspapers kept emphasizing how good everything was in communist areas and how terribly things were going for people in capitalist countries. This was all justified in the name of the SED regime’s pedagogical intentions and their need to counter Western propaganda (former East German journalist, personal communication, September 28, 2018). So why would it be worth studying articles from ND?

It would be interesting to discover an image of relations between the Second and Third Worlds during the Cold War in general, and between the GDR and Laos in particular. Since ND was the official organ of the leading party in the GDR, studying the news about Laos—however biased that may be—nevertheless creates a picture of what happened between the two countries. In order to understand and analyze the official pronouncements of the SED, it is necessary to examine the content of its newspaper (Blücher 1959). If one reads thousands of articles covering a time span of four decades, then an image emerges of what was considered important, what the emphasis was on. In this way, I view the articles from ND as a distinct level of “reality” in their own right. This is in line with what Atkinson and Coffey (1997) propose, namely, to look at the context in which the articles were produced and the

readership for which they were written. Through this method the articles become important as conveyors of a certain impression or ideology. I combine this with looking at the articles as documents in their historical context. Viewed this way, such documents form a specific discourse, which Atkinson and Coffey (1997) describe as a *documentary reality*. In this view the ND articles, however “official,” do not necessarily have to be transparent or straightforward representations of an underlying social or organizational reality. Instead, they should be regarded as texts written for specific purposes. In this context I had two sub-questions: What examples are found in ND articles of the influence of the GDR’s official Marxist–Leninist state ideology on the East German press and the way it represented the development of Laos? And what are Orientalist influences in ND’s reporting about Laos? This last aspect can be interesting since this research is about the ways a European newspaper reported on Laos.

News in East German media was classified in only two categories, namely *Inland* (domestic) and *Ausland* (foreign). Foreign coverage was mainly about political and economic circumstances in other countries. All other news, including the economy, politics, science and education, sports and culture, was considered domestic. The daily newspaper ND usually comprised 8 pages, sometimes more, and news about Laos could be found on any of them. Page 2 of ND mainly contained diplomatic news. There one could come across reports of meetings between East German and foreign (including Lao) diplomats, news of official visits, telegrams between governments and heads of state, communiqués and treaties, cooperation agreements with other countries, official receptions at embassies, and diplomatic discussions with foreign envoys. Pages 5 and 7 of ND usually contained mixed foreign news, including articles about Laos or articles in which Laos is mentioned. During the Vietnam War (1955–1975), such articles included news about battles, troop movements, aerial bombardments, coups d’état, the growth of the Pathet Lao, American interference, North Vietnamese influence, and so on. After the communist takeover of power in Laos in 1975, the news was often about how the Lao regime was going to manage the socialist construction of the country and about the ways in which the GDR could play a role in this.

Over the years, ND occasionally provided articles about Laos with a map. This was invariably a small line drawing in black and white, prepared by one of ND’s cartographers such as Kloss (during the 1950s), Wegener (from the 1950s through to the 1980s), Gneckow (1960s), Weigelt (1970s and 80s), and Döring (1980s).

The Sources

It is of course also important to find out where ND got the news about Laos from. This is often stated in the articles. Of course, ND used the news agencies and media of other Warsaw Pact countries. More striking, though, was ND’s far greater reliance on the output of Western media and news agencies. The Allgemeine Deutsche Nachrichtendienst, or General German News Service (ADN), is by far the most

frequently mentioned news agency, which is not surprising as it was the GDR state news agency (Fiedler 2014: 110–116; Minholz and Stirnberg 1995).

ND's other sources included major Western news agencies such as United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP), Reuters and Agence France-Presse (AFP). East German media also made use of a range of West German sources, one of which was the Deutsche Presse-Agentur (German Press Agency, DPA). This is remarkable because coverage of West Germany in ND was always negative. It is also peculiar that while ND looked down on Western news sources and often dismissed them as “bourgeois,” they were nevertheless consistently mentioned. Equally remarkable is that of the 2,984 articles examined, the Soviet news agency TASS was cited as the primary source only 119 times, while *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was cited only 74 times. Given that the GDR had a very close relationship with the USSR, it would have made sense if TASS and *Pravda* had been the primary sources of foreign news in the majority of articles, but that turned out not to be the case. Instead, it became increasingly clear how much ND depended on Western news agencies and other media for its news about Laos. It is likely that VNA (Vietnam News Agency) was another important supplier of information about Laos, as it had representatives in Eastern Europe from 1950. However, ND mentioned VNA as a news source only 68 times. KPL (Khaosan Pathet Lao, or Lao News Agency) was cited in 108 articles.

East German media also published news from primary sources that most Western media did not have access to, such as interviews with Lao government ministers or Pathet Lao officials. Of course we have to keep in mind that ND was a political newspaper, but its access to political and military sources in Laos can nevertheless be interesting from a historical point of view. Prince Souphanouvong, Phoune Sipaseuth or Phoumi Vongvichit, for example, rarely granted interviews to Western media, but there are a few in ND. During his state visit to the GDR in 1977, Lao Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane also delivered some long speeches, which were printed in their entirety in ND, thus creating a somewhat broader picture of how he viewed certain matters. In this context it is interesting to mention that ND itself was also seen as a valuable source, for example by the CIA. During the Cold War, the CIA tried to gather information about what was going on in Laos from various quarters, including communist party newspapers from the Warsaw Pact countries. The CIA used ND as one of the sources for its *Daily Report*. For instance, there were English translations of ND articles about Laos (Kauffelt 1966, cited in Central Intelligence Agency 1966). So even though ND may at first glance seem like an unreliable propaganda newspaper, reviewing its information from influential contacts in other (socialist) countries can be worthwhile and may indeed lead to a fuller picture of Second World–Third World relations during the Cold War.

The 1950s

Of the total 2,984 articles analyzed for this project, only one was published in the 1940s: the first ND article mentioning Laos dates from November 23, 1946. Although it appeared on the front page, this was a short news item of only 32 words about the signing of the Washington agreement between France and Thailand six days earlier. The next article in ND about Laos did not appear until January 5, 1950. In the course of the 1950s, ND gradually published more articles (174 in all) in which Laos was mentioned (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Neues Deutschland* articles about Laos, 1946–1990. This table consists of four parts, each covering a decade.

Neues Deutschland articles about Laos, 1946–1959						
Year	Total number of articles about Laos	Front page articles	Diplomatic news articles	Foreign news articles	Average number of words per article	Average number of words, front page articles
1946	1	1	0	0	32	32
1950	5	1	3	1	168	185
1951	3	0	1	2	275	N/A
1952	2	1	1	0	870	608
1953	9	1	7	1	404	332
1954	40	4	2	34	563	197
1955	12	0	1	11	194	N/A
1956	14	0	0	14	187	N/A
1957	6	0	0	6	185	N/A
1958	5	0	0	5	1,038	N/A
1959	78	6	4	68	249	175

<i>Neues Deutschland</i> articles about Laos, 1960–1969						
Year	Total number of articles about Laos	Front page articles	Diplomatic news articles	Foreign news articles	Average number of words per article	Average number of words, front page articles
1960	70	0	6	64	198	N/A
1961	231	29	30	172	249	282
1962	107	12	18	77	227	298
1963	33	0	3	30	200	N/A
1964	48	4	6	38	218	200
1965	33	11	3	19	148	93
1966	47	9	7	31	210	131
1967	14	1	2	11	288	82
1968	46	8	11	27	349	415
1969	30	2	5	23	308	132

<i>Neues Deutschland</i> articles about Laos, 1970–1979						
Year	Total number of articles about Laos	Front page articles	Diplomatic news articles	Foreign news articles	Average number of words per article	Average number of words, front page articles
1970	187	15	21	151	331	187
1971	282	68	29	185	284	214
1972	120	18	13	89	293	283
1973	107	11	12	84	224	159
1974	48	1	6	41	232	195
1975	96	4	17	75	209	193
1976	83	4	16	63	207	225
1977	125	12	32	81	251	367
1978	101	8	32	61	193	223
1979	118	13	28	77	169	134

Neues Deutschland articles about Laos, 1980–1990						
Year	Total number of articles about Laos	Front page articles	Diplomatic news articles	Foreign news articles	Average number of words per article	Average number of words, front page articles
1980	85	12	26	47	150	93
1981	93	6	18	69	226	70
1982	153	25	49	79	264	234
1983	88	6	28	54	232	233
1984	88	4	18	66	169	125
1985	85	9	20	56	196	187
1986	87	12	22	53	204	149
1987	66	6	23	37	201	109
1988	85	10	24	51	223	228
1989	46	5	17	24	191	105
1990	7	0	3	4	360	N/A
N/A = not applicable.						

Mansfield-Richardson (2017: 111) has created a system of rankings of newspaper coverage according to the total number of articles on a subject during the year of the content analysis. If a newspaper publishes 200 or more articles in a year about a particular subject, it can be classified as extremely high volume coverage. From 100 to 199 articles per year is high volume coverage; from 50 to 99 articles per year is medium volume coverage; from 10 to 49 articles is low volume coverage; and extremely low volume coverage from 1 to 9 articles per year. On this scale, ND's coverage of Laos in the 1950s was in the low to very low volume coverage scale, except for 1959, which saw medium volume coverage. As the situation in Laos deteriorated, ND's interest increased. Until 1954, most of the articles dealt with the independence struggle in Vietnam, with Laos appearing only occasionally. The French and Americans were invariably portrayed by ND as colonial overlords, imperialists, hypocrites and aggressors. Throughout the 1950s, ND described the Lao as brave freedom fighters and paid a lot of attention to the achievements of the Lao People's Liberation Army.



Figure 1. Map of French Indochina from ND September 3, 1950, p. 3, by an unknown cartographer. Note the railway lines between Vientiane and Saigon, with a branch to Saravane; between Nong Het and Vinh; and between Saigon and Phnom Penh. These railways never existed. As a matter of fact, in 1950 there were no railways at all in Laos.

Interestingly, in articles from the period 1953–1954, ND referred to the country of Laos as “Pathet Lao.” It is not clear whether there was a misunderstanding here or whether it was meant to be provocative, as it would have made more sense to simply refer to the country as Laos—especially for a German audience. Likewise, I also thought that it would not be logical for Finland to be referred to as “Suomi” (the Finnish name for the country) for a German readership, until I noticed that, from 1954, ND did indeed call Finland “Suomi.” That makes it questionable whether ND used the name “Pathet Lao” to indicate the country of Laos as a provocation against the Royal Lao Government (RLG). That said, ND referred to most other Asian countries by their common names as printed in Western atlases. Pathet Lao literally means “Lao Nation” or “Lao State.” The organization called *Pathet Lao* was a leftist political movement in Laos which included many nationalists and a smaller number of communists. It certainly did not control the whole country in the 1950s (Zasloff 1973), which makes it curious that all of Laos was so called by ND in the period 1953–1954. A map caption in an article from 1954 states that “Pathet Lao is called Laos by the imperialists” (ND May 16, 1954: 5), which may be an indication that Laos was deliberately named “Pathet Lao” by ND (Figure 2). But what also makes it peculiar is that ND itself started calling the country *Laos* from 1955 onwards. Perhaps ND did this to show deference to the Geneva Agreements then endorsed by

the Soviet Union. In any case, ND made no secret from the start that it had a lot of sympathy for the Pathet Lao and for its political wing, the Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Haksat). From the 1950s through to the 1970s, ND took a great interest in the growth and activities of the Pathet Lao.



Figure 2. Map of Laos from ND May 16, 1954, p. 5, prepared by an unknown cartographer. The caption states that “Our map shows the situation of the liberation movement in Pathet Lao (called Laos by the imperialists).” The accompanying article does not refer to the French invention of the name Laos.

As soon as Laos gained independence in 1953, ND immediately took a very critical stance towards the RLG. Hence using the term “Pathet Lao” to refer to the country of Laos may have been intended as a provocation to the RLG. But here we encounter a curious ambiguity. Especially in the period from 1946 to 1975, before the communists seized power in Laos, the reporting in ND regularly seemed opportunistic. On the one hand, ND kept emphasizing how much they respected the RLG, but on the other hand ND openly expressed its support for the Lao Patriotic Front, which was against the RLG. There are interesting examples of this in ND. For instance, Kong Le staged a coup against the RLG in 1960 (Stuart-Fox 1997: 112–116), but his later official visit to the GDR was front page news on May 17, 1962, at a time when the RLG was still described by ND as “the rightful government of Laos.” From 1960 to 1971, Prince Souvanna Phouma also continued to be called “Prime Minister of the legitimate government of Laos,” even though he was opposed to the Pathet Lao supported by the GDR. However, from 1971 the reporting in ND became more hostile towards Souvanna Phouma, who was increasingly associated

with “CIA murder gangs” (Steiniger 1971). Nonetheless, from 1954 to 1975, the GDR government continued to send congratulatory telegrams and New Year’s greetings to the Royal Lao Government every year, with ND reporting on it, usually on page 2 among the diplomatic news. ND also reported every time the King of Laos sent back a telegram of thanks and good wishes to the GDR leaders. King Savang Vatthana had fairly amicable relations with the Soviet Union after 1962, so it is possible that this extended to other Eastern Bloc countries. As Kuhns (1985) argues in his dissertation, the East German government seemed desperate to have as many foreign relations as possible, because of the desire to obtain diplomatic recognition for itself, the desire to play a role on the world stage that was actually greater than any small European state could hope for at the time, and because of the desire to provide a counterbalance to West Germany in the Cold War rivalry. The GDR leaders realized that the Royal Lao Government should therefore not be treated too brusquely. But at the same time, in ND articles the GDR leadership kept accusing the RLG of corruption, collaborating with the US and provoking a civil war.

In 1954, ND paid ample attention to the Geneva Conference which met in an attempt to settle the First Indochina War. ND seemed to consider American interference and opposition in Geneva just as important as the Conference itself, and repeatedly emphasized what they perceived as Washington’s underhanded and warlike policy on Indochina. The GDR was part of the Warsaw Pact and therefore it is not surprising that all of the Soviet Union’s proposals during the Conference were described as extremely peaceful, honest and positive by ND. After the Conference, ND regularly pointed out how the US was not adhering to the Geneva Agreements and violated the ceasefire. According to the Geneva Agreements, elections had to be called in Laos, which ND also paid attention to. The resulting First Coalition Government was closely watched: five of the six articles published on Laos in 1957 were about it.

Given ND’s extremely critical stance towards the US, I had expected it to publish something about the forced resignation of the Souvanna Phouma government, brought about by the suspension of US aid in July 1958 (Phraxyayavong 2009: 71–78; Stuart-Fox 1997: 103–104). This would certainly have been useful for ND’s ideological purposes and would also have helped support its point of view regarding the “imperialist machinations” of the US in Asia, but I found nothing about it in ND.

The 1960s

During the 1960s, significantly more articles on Laos (659 in all) were published by ND than in the previous decade. In total, Laos was front page news for ND 76 times in the period 1960–1969 (see Table 1). On Mansfield-Richardson’s (2017: 111) scale, ND’s coverage of Laos in the 1960s fluctuated between low volume coverage (in 1967) and extremely high volume coverage (in 1961). Compared to the 1950s, ND’s interest in Laos was clearly growing, which is understandable as the conflict in Indochina was spiraling out of control.



Figure 3. Map of Laos from ND August 10, 1966, p. 7, prepared by Wegener. Note how the map refers to Laos and Cambodia, but says South Vietnam instead of Republic of Vietnam.

Throughout the 1960s, ND's readers were constantly informed about the achievements of the Pathet Lao. In January 1960, ND expressed concern that the new Lao government under Phoui Sananikone wanted ties with the US-led SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (Zempelburg 1960). The GDR had hoped that Laos would remain neutral and would not get involved with the American bloc. In 1960, ND reported about the escape of Pathet Lao leaders imprisoned in Vientiane (ND May 25, 1960: 5). In August of the same year, Captain Kong Le carried out a successful neutralist coup d'état against the Lao rightwing government (ND August 10, 1960: 5). ND was very interested in Kong Le and when he visited the GDR in 1962—he had become a general in the meantime—it was even front page news (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Kong Le visited the GDR in May 1962, which was front-page news for ND. A couple of years earlier, Kong Le was still an unknown captain in the Royal Lao Army. But now he was in East Berlin as a general, raising a glass with the Chairman of the State Council of East Germany, Walter Ulbricht. “Volle Unterstützung der DDR für das laotische Volk” (“Full support of the GDR for the Lao people”).

The Battle of Vientiane in December 1960 had an important political effect in that Kong Le’s forces allied with the Pathet Lao on the Plain of Jars (ND December 11, 1960: 7). In 1963, however, disagreements arose between the neutralists and the Pathet Lao, leading to the eventual failure of the neutralist cause in Laos. The right wing was involved too, as they were linked to the assassination of the foreign minister of the Kingdom of Laos, Quinim Pholsena (ND April 3, 1963: 7). Meanwhile the Plain of Jars had turned into an armed camp (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 76–78; Pommerening 1962). In the period 1962–1968, ND published numerous news items about the formation of a coalition government in Laos. However, the coalition government’s work was severely hindered by the US. The role of SEATO was also extensively discussed by ND. SEATO was, in effect, the counterpart of NATO in Asia and, like NATO, was led by the US. Hence it is logical that the leaders of the GDR—which was a Warsaw Pact country—were very suspicious of it. Therefore, throughout the 1960s, ND continuously applauded that the Lao neutralists wanted nothing to do with SEATO. The East German leaders were probably more wary of SEATO than Laotian politicians, who considered it a non-entity when it failed to gain currency soon after its creation. The Geneva

Agreements of July 1962 and the formation of the Second Coalition Government were matters that were extensively described by ND as well.

In 1961, the US started its “secret war” against areas under Pathet Lao control (Stuart-Fox et al. 2023: 430), with the Hmong being armed and trained by American military advisers. Along with them, Thai and South Vietnamese units and “Chiang Kai-shek gangs” (which is what Kuomintang remnants in the Golden Triangle were called by ND) were also involved in this war. Over the years, all troops and advisers associated with the US in Laos were variously described by ND using a range of epithets, for example as pirates, aggressors, sky killers and barbarians, traitors, gangsters and bandits, murderers and their henchmen, butchers and accomplices, coup plotters, reactionaries, hypocrites, and also as puppets and lackeys of the US. On the other hand, ND kept describing the actions of the Pathet Lao as heroic, patriotic, self-sacrificing, steadfast, democratic, honest and brave. As the US could not beat the Lao patriotic forces, the infamous American air war was unleashed on them in 1964. This would last until 1973 and was also extensively covered by ND.

The 1970s

When looking at ND’s coverage of Laos, the 1970s are an interesting decade in various ways. The 1970s were an exceptionally turbulent time for Laos. During that decade, ND published no less than 1,267 articles about Laos or in which Laos appeared, which is substantially more than in the decades before and after. Based on the criteria described by Mansfield-Richardson (2017: 111), ND’s coverage of Laos in the 1970s fluctuated between low volume coverage (in 1974) and extremely high volume coverage (in 1971), see Table 1. The year 1975 marked a turning point for the countries of Indochina. Taking advantage of the immense chaos that resulted from the Vietnam War, communist movements seized power in Vietnam and Cambodia, and in December 1975 the same thing happened in Laos (Goldston 2009). We can observe an interesting shift in the way Laos was described by ND during the 1970s. While the first half of that decade was dominated by the war in Laos and the role of the US in it, this changed when the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) came to power in 1975 (Punya 2019: 36–41). ND reported differently about Laos after the communist takeover in 1975, with a noticeable shift from ideology to an emphasis on development.

The first series of postage stamps issued by the newly proclaimed Lao People’s Democratic Republic were printed in East Germany in 1976. The stamps showed Lao PDR’s new national emblem and thus served as a promotion of Laos’ new national image. ND proudly stated that the symbolic first series of stamps was ceremoniously handed over to Mrs. Khampheng Boupha, the Lao Minister of Post and Telecommunications, by the East German ambassador to Laos, Dietrich Jarck (ND December 1, 1976: 2). Symbolically, this was an important step in relations between Laos and the GDR. Laos had become a member of the Universal Postal Union in 1952, which meant that its stamps were recognized internationally. A

postage stamp is of public interest, it represents the identity and affirms the territorial sovereignty of a country. One of the first things a new country's government wants to do to show they are in charge of their territory is to set up their own postal service—and have new stamps printed. The fact that Laos entrusted this task to the GDR suggests that relations between the two countries were cordial. That was confirmed by Kaysone Phomvihane's state visit to the GDR in May 1977, which was front-page news for ND for four days in a row (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Kaysone's state visit to the GDR in May 1977 was front-page news for ND. It was not often that Laos was reported in great detail on ND's front page for four days in a row: this only happened during Kaysone's visits to East Germany in 1977, 1982 and 1988. Of course, Laos often made the front page of ND in the 1960s and 1970s because of the war, but these were usually short articles that were also not illustrated.

In 1977, East Germany faced a “coffee crisis.” Because the coffee harvest in Brazil had failed, coffee was difficult to obtain from the usual suppliers on the world market, so the East German industry developed an “Ersatz” mix consisting of coffee, chicory, rye, and sugar beet. This concoction was not exactly tasty and led to so many complaints that the GDR leaders feared social unrest (Wunderich 2003). As a result, the GDR started looking for other sources in the Third World and trade agreements were signed with countries such as Vietnam, Ethiopia, Angola, and Laos. This also led to the GDR seeing the concept of development aid in an entirely different context.

In the 1950s and 1960s, everything ND published about development aid was negative. For instance, in 1960 ND was of the opinion that development aid was

nothing more than a colonial policy by the imperialist powers, who in this way controlled the less developed countries. From the East German point of view, Western countries only pumped money into poor countries to prevent them from becoming communist, hence this kind of development aid was described by ND as “costly anti-communism” perpetrated by neo-colonialists. This is an example of the influence of the GDR’s official Marxist–Leninist state ideology on the East German press and the way it represented the development of Laos. In this context, the role of USAID (United States Agency for International Development) in Laos was also seen as questionable by ND (Feldbauer 1969). The USAID office was described as “a secret command center for America’s war in Laos” (ND April 15, 1970: 7), which it actually was (Phraxayavong 2009: 74–75, 251–252). USAID was seen by ND as an organization aimed at secretly furthering American imperialism (Kauffelt 1970). The role of USAID in Laos was fragmenting and undermining the already fragile bureaucratic and political structures of the Lao state, and under the guise of development aid, many relief goods were in fact channeled to military activities (Stuart-Fox 1997: 154–155). Moreover, the massive flow of money from the US to the royal government in Vientiane led to inflation and encouraged corruption and graft (Chomsky 2005: 156). All this confirmed ND’s negative view of development cooperation by Western countries. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the government of the GDR was more interested in providing scientific aid (Helbing 1963) and deemed cooperation with less developed countries possible if this were in the service of development towards socialism.

Yet the cooperation that was established with coffee suppliers such as Laos in the 1970s made the GDR leaders realize that the process of development can work two ways and that development aid can indeed be mutually beneficial from the perspective of trade. It is striking how during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, ND’s reporting on the topic of development aid became more positive. According to ND, an effective way to help countries with their development was to train people from those countries to become skilled workers and to send trucks, tractors and FDJ “friendship brigades” (ND April 30, 1983: 3). FDJ was the Freie Deutsche Jugend, or Free German Youth, an East German youth movement. Their friendship brigades were teams of development workers who helped with training and setting up projects. That sounds very peaceful of course, but what ND did not mention was that the East German trade agreements with countries like Ethiopia and Angola meant that the GDR supplied small arms in exchange for coffee (Dietrich 2015; Döring 1999). The GDR nevertheless tried to uphold an image abroad of a peace-loving state that offered an alternative to the Western capitalist forms of trade and development aid, and attempted to match its coffee deals with Laos with the image of East German socialist solidarity with developing countries (Kapfenberger 1980). Still, the eventual trade agreement between the GDR and Laos worked out favorably for both countries. After the long war, the Laotian economy was in a bad state and its communist leaders were looking for ways to improve it. Laos had a predominantly agricultural economy in which the cultivation of coffee fitted

perfectly. At the same time, Laos was also in need of foreign investment. The GDR was prepared to invest in the Lao coffee sector and helped with mechanization, transportation, education and quality improvement. GDR investments in Lao coffee cultivation eventually turned out to be beneficial for the development of the economy of Laos in general (Kloiber 2017) and of Champassak Province in particular, with glowing reports in ND (e.g. Pries 1987). The advantage for the GDR was that the supply of coffee was secured again and that relations with Laos were strengthened.

In 1978, collectivization of agriculture was implemented in Laos, although ND initially did not use the word collectivization. Instead, ND first described it as an “agricultural revolution” and a “development of the entire economy” (Hagen 1978). By the time ND started using the term “agricultural cooperatives,” the LPRP had already suspended the program. And even though the LPRP itself frankly admitted that agricultural collectivization had failed (Evans 1990: 51–54; Pholsena and Banomyong 2006: 157–159), ND continued to describe it in terms that made it seem like it had been a success (e.g. Kapfenberger 1981). While it is possible that there was a lack of knowledge on the part of ND about the situation in Laos, it is more likely that the failure of agricultural collectivization in Laos was covered up. There were also collective farms in the GDR, but the East German socialist collectivization experience had been ambiguous. The main reasons for agricultural collectivization in the GDR had been political rather than economic. It was part of a communist agenda for transforming the country’s society and economy (Schöne 2005). Although at first collectivization in East Germany had seemed promising (Francisco 1979), it later turned out to be less successful because of decreasing productivity (Last 2009: 191–194; Schöne 2014), which was something the SED tried to hide from the public. Economic data were generally treated as a state secret in the GDR (Bryson 1984: 62) and this is noticeable in the articles in ND. As a tightly controlled instrument of the SED for influencing public opinion, ND invariably published one-sided positive news about East German agricultural projects and therefore never mentioned the failed collectivization attempt in its socialist “brother country” Laos. If they had, it would have been unfavorable publicity for similar projects in East Germany. This is another example of the influence of the GDR’s official Marxist–Leninist state ideology on the East German press and the way it represented the development of socialism in Laos.

The 1980s

With the Vietnam War finally over and the LPRP firmly in power in Laos, the 1980s saw more room in ND for discussion of the development of Laos. As socialism’s role in this was a key issue, it was regularly discussed in ND. Based on the criteria described by Mansfield-Richardson (2017: 111), ND’s coverage of Laos in the 1980s fluctuated between low volume coverage (in 1989) and high volume coverage (in 1982), see Table 1. Throughout the 1980s, we can see in ND how Laos was

actively drawn into the socialist network. Many conferences were held in Warsaw Pact countries, where ministers from the socialist countries met. On such occasions matters of socialist cooperation were discussed, ranging from education and public health to justice and culture. ND invariably listed the countries participating, wherein Laos was typically regularly mentioned.

Also during the 1980s, ND regularly paid attention to education programs for Laotians, both in the GDR and in Laos. This mainly concerned training for medical, technical, agricultural and forestry personnel. On such occasions, Laos was often even referred to as a “brother country” of the GDR. I did not find any coverage in ND about the training of the Lao army, police force and fire services by East German instructors in the 1980s though. I had expected to find at least something about this in ND, because in the period 1998–2000, I regularly spoke with Laotians in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Paksane and Thakhek who had become firefighters in the 1980s. They had all been trained by East German instructors at the time and were without exception very positive about East German efforts to train firefighters in Laos. There had even been plans in the mid-1980s to set up an East German firefighting school near Vientiane (Gutter 2013), but these plans never materialized for unclear reasons.

It is possible that ND did not write about these projects because the East German Stasi was involved. Stasi is an acronym for *Staatssicherheit*, or State Security. This was the secret police of East Germany. Still, East Germany trained Lao police forces quite openly, so much so that the Lao secret police were even called “Stasi” by the Lao population (McCauley 2017: 174).

Obtaining information about the fire service through Lao newspapers is also difficult as they hardly published anything about them. In Laos, the fire service is part of the police force and as such is considered a public security organization. Ever since 1975, anything pertaining to public safety has been kept secret by the Lao authorities, which may be another reason why ND did not report on this. Only two articles were published by ND in the 1980s about cooperation between Laos and the GDR in the fields of justice and public safety (ND December 11, 1980: 2; ND January 30, 1986: 2).

As in 1977, Kaysone Phomvihane's state visit to the GDR in 1982 was front-page news in ND for several days in a row (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Kaysone Phomvihane's second state visit to the GDR in September 1982 was again front-page news: articles include his reception by Erich Honecker, Chairman of the State Council of East Germany, talks with SED officials, and signing of the friendship treaty between the two countries.

A year later, a Lao military delegation visited the GDR. The GDR had previously been rather secretive about its military cooperation with developing countries, but Khamtay Siphandone's visit was described in quite some detail. This was indeed one of those rare moments when Khamtay was in the news. Although he was one of the most powerful men in the Lao government, he kept a very low profile. Stuart-Fox (1997: 171) mentions Khamtay Siphandone as one of the more shadowy figures from the army who had led the guerrilla struggle during the war, while Johnson (1992) describes Khamtay as a reclusive person who had almost no contact with non-communists. These are not favorable qualities for a head of government who would have to communicate with Western countries about investments and development assistance. Hence news items like this, even though they may be biased, make a source like ND interesting for additional information about relations between the Second and Third Worlds during the Cold War.



Figure 7. An interesting aspect of a news source like ND is that it featured influential yet low-profile figures from socialist countries, such as Khamtay Siphandone. Pictured here on the front page of ND, July 2, 1983.

During the 1980s, ND apparently did its best to become somewhat more accessible to households, rather than just disseminating political news. Therefore, it occasionally included a fun page for the whole family with riddles, jokes and puzzles. Still, I was surprised to find a recipe for a Lao fried beef curry on one of these pages in ND (April 27, 1985: 16).



Figure 8. The last time Laos was extensively covered on ND's front page for several days in a row was during Kaysone's state visit in September 1988. Kaysone had clearly aged a lot. Erich Honecker received the highest Lao medal of honor from Kaysone.

The Year 1990

Finally, there were seven articles about Laos in the year 1990, the last year ND existed. Based on the criteria described by Mansfield-Richardson (2017: 111), ND's reporting on Laos in the 1990s can be categorized as extremely low volume coverage (see Table 1). Laos did not make the front page that year. Five of the seven articles were about the development of Laos, one article was about drug addiction and another was about a border agreement that Laos had signed with China (ND August 24, 1990: 4). The last article I found in ND about Laos dates from September 14, 1990 and is about *Chintanakan mai* or "New thinking," which, according to author Klaus Behling (1990), was the key to opening the Lao treasure chest. Still, *Chintanakan mai* was not as important as Behling makes it out to be. It was not even a formal policy for reform, but just a temporary slogan promoting economic reform in Laos (Yamada 2018).

Spelling Issues Relating to Lao Names in ND

When analyzing the newspaper articles about Laos, I encountered a large number of names of people and places. In general, Lao personal names were transcribed in ND in an understandable way. Because this paper provides an overview of how ND represented Laos, the way in which the spelling of Lao names was handled is also relevant. The average East German newspaper reader probably would not have bothered about spelling mistakes in Lao names, but for those who are interested in the Lao language, I will briefly discuss some interesting spelling variations and errors that I discovered during this study.

During the Cold War, many articles were written about Laos by ND correspondents stationed in Hanoi, who were likely not familiar with the Lao language. They were, however, quite consistent in their spelling of Lao names. I came across some interesting misspellings during my research, of which Prince Souphanouvong's name is the most common example. His name occurred often in ND reports, but it was also misspelled as Souphanouvong, Souvanouvong, Souvanouphong or as Souvannavong. The name should be written as Souphanouvong though, not to be confused with his opponent's name, Souvanna Phouma. The *ph* in the name Souphanouvong is pronounced as an aspirated *p* in Lao, not as an *f* or *v*. This can easily lead to misunderstanding or confusion among speakers of European languages such as German. Moreover, the fact that Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma were both princes and related to each other (they were half-brothers), probably contributed to the spelling errors in their names.

Lao news sources may have had unusual names for ND staff as well and this repeatedly led to spelling errors. ND also regularly made errors in the spelling of Lao geographical names. Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted or acceptable system for transcribing Lao names and words into Roman script. The French phonetic transcriptions, developed in colonial times, are also not always consistent, so there is quite a bit of variation possible in the spelling of Lao names. That variation is indeed reflected in the way ND reported on Laos. The name Xieng Khuang for instance, lends itself to a variety of spellings, including Xieng Kouang, Xieng Khouang, Xieng Khoang, Xieng Khuang, Xien Khoang, Sieng Kuang, Sieng Kwang, and even Xieng Quang, which can all be found in ND. Common names such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang did not pose a problem for ND, but some lesser known ones did. Yet I have the impression that despite the variation of spellings in ND, it usually remained clear what or who was meant by them.

Orientalist Influences in ND's Coverage of Laos

In ND's descriptions of Laos and Lao people I also came across Orientalist traits. Orientalism is a concept established by Edward Said in 1978. He saw it as a method of cultural and practical discrimination against non-European peoples and societies, as a contemptuous portrayal of The East or "The Orient". This includes

generalization, ethnocentrism, racism and sexism (Said 1995). Orientalism contains a subtle Eurocentric prejudice against Asian peoples and their cultures. It also involves a certain created or constructed human image. Hence Orientalism is about the exaggeration of difference (e.g. exoticism), the use of stereotypical analytical models for looking at “the Oriental world” and the presumption of the superiority of the West. For instance, when the East is represented as exotic, primitive or irrational, it defines and reflects how the West sees itself as rational, sophisticated and powerful.

ND’s coverage generally portrayed the Lao population as friendly and gentle, to which the Orientalist clichés of peaceful, relaxed Buddhists were added. However, such stereotypes ignore Laos’ cultural diversity. ND used stereotyping for propaganda purposes, indicating that certain knowledge about Laos disseminated by ND was not generated through actual facts but through imagined constructs. In this context, aspects of Orientalism served the spreading of ND’s socialist propaganda.

An example of Orientalist influences can be found in an ND article (Lorf 1961) about the Geneva Conference of 1961. The article contains interesting elements of Orientalism in the passage about a Laotian princess who had made an appearance in the conference room and the prejudice against her. She was considered quite exotic by the people in the conference room. The journalists at the conference were also amazed at the princess’ good French language skills, which is curious because, after all, Laos had been part of the French colony of Indochina for six decades. Although the country had been independent since 1953, French was still the official second language of the Lao government. The princess is portrayed as mysterious and alluring, which is, however, an exoticized and gendered construction:

The princess, a graceful young lady in a gold brocade skirt and with an extremely likeable and interesting profile, amazed the journalists not only with her excellent and sophisticated French, but also with her absolute confidence in answering the most difficult questions—there were even outright provocations from some Western correspondents. Her dignity and her purposeful manner soon resulted in a verdict that was later passed on unanimously by some correspondents who were known to be rough during the exchange of news: “A charming lady” – eine charmante Dame (Lorf 1961).

Such a description is a gendered Orientalist narrative (Khalid 2011). Probably without realizing it, Lorf puts the princess down as the “Other” (Burney 2012; Miri 2013; Said 1995: 19–24), something one would not expect from an experienced diplomat such as Lorf (Fritzlar 1996: 492). The Lao princess was considered so exotic that a couple of days later, ND published a photo of her and even called her a “sensation in Geneva” (ND May 26, 1961: 7). By describing the Lao princess this way, she was labeled as different due to characteristics that distinguish her from a perceived norm. Her long dark overcoat, her shoes and her handbag, which are all visible in the photo, are of a European style, however, so the only thing that sets her apart from white Europeans is her Asian face. Hence calling her a “sensation” is an action of *othering* Asian people.

Many articles in ND are about the needy Laos that will not be able to save itself without GDR assistance. This reinforces another common Western thought, that developing countries such as Laos cannot take care of themselves and need Western help and guidance. This establishes a narrative wherein Laos appears to be “saved” by the continuous support of countries like the GDR.

In an article from 1961, Artur Mannbar describes his visit to a market in Laos and the products he finds there. To his surprise, he sees goods that “do not fit into the landscape” as far as he is concerned (Mannbar 1961). Between the baskets of fruits and vegetables and “primitive household items”, Mannbar discovers expensive French perfumes, electric shavers and fashionable items from the West. The word *primitive* is a glaring example of Orientalist terminology. Mannbar does not want Laos to be part of global consumer capitalism, but by rejecting the presence of modern Western goods at a local Lao market because he thinks that they “do not fit into the landscape,” he also rejects the sameness these goods bring. Hence Mannbar reinforces the Otherness which is a crucial aspect of Orientalism.

Conclusions

During the Cold War, relations between East Germany and Laos developed steadily. *Neues Deutschland*, or ND, was the party newspaper of the ruling SED, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. ND provides information from an Eastern European perspective about the ideology and expectations behind GDR–Laos relations. Until 1954, most of the articles dealt with the independence struggle in Vietnam, with Laos appearing only occasionally. Throughout the 1950s, ND paid a lot of attention to the achievements of the Lao People’s Liberation Army. During the 1960s, ND’s readers were constantly informed about the achievements of the communist Pathet Lao. We can see an interesting shift in the way Laos was described by ND in the 1970s: while the first half of that decade was dominated by the war in Laos and the role of the US in it, this changed when the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party came to power in 1975. ND reported differently about Laos after the communist takeover, with a noticeable shift from communist ideology to an emphasis on development. East Germany’s “coffee crisis” in 1977 led to ND seeing the concept of development aid in an entirely different context. It is striking how during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, ND’s reporting on the topic of development aid became more positive. Moreover, to some extent, ND used stereotyping for propaganda purposes, indicating that certain knowledge about Laos disseminated by ND was not generated through actual facts but through imagined constructs. In this context, aspects of Orientalism served the spread of ND’s socialist propaganda.

Even though ND has often been regarded as a controversial source, it can nonetheless be useful for learning more about Second World–Third World relations during the Cold War. ND was a political instrument, a propaganda tool of the SED. But at the same time, East German media also published news from primary sources that most Western media did not have access to, such as interviews with Lao

government ministers or Pathet Lao officials. So although ND may at first glance seem like an unreliable propaganda newspaper, its information from influential contacts in other (socialist) countries can be of value and may indeed lead to a fuller picture of Second World–Third World relations during the Cold War.

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