

Condescending Saviours: What Went Wrong with the Pol Pot Regime*

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I. AN OVERVIEW OF THIS ARTICLE

OUR STAND

In April 1975, two weeks before the fall of Saigon in Vietnam, an army of ragged, thin and very young peasant men and women defeated the US-backed government in neighbouring Cambodia. In January 1979, some 44 months later, this new regime was swept from power and scattered by invading Vietnamese soldiers.

The briefness of this period is part of what makes it hard to understand. Further, there are no sweeping eye-witness accounts, and even some of the basic facts are in dispute among those who study Cambodia (or Kampuchea, as it is called in the country's Khmer language). A major difficulty is that the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) led by Pol Pot made a secret of its policies and goals and even its existence for most of its time in power, and since then none of its leaders have come forward to defend its line. Yet the main source of confusion about this period is that a reactionary consensus has been imposed, both because it has been drummed into people's heads by the media, and because there have been so few dissenting voices.

Whenever Pol Pot is mentioned (often, considering that it has been two decades since the demise of his Democratic Kampuchea regime), the conclusion is always the same: revolution is worse than the social ills it claims to cure. Many studies focus on unsubstantiated figures on the number of people who died during the Democratic Kampuchea period in an effort to prove that the forces who drove the US out of Southeast Asia turned out to be worse than the imperialists themselves.¹

The truth - who and what do you believe - is a big issue here. Any reader who doesn't ask "Why should I believe that?" isn't fully awake to the way this issue is being used.

We are out to overthrow "common knowledge" on this question. Unlike others who falsely claim they have no particular viewpoint from which they judge, our basic stand is explicit: as Mao said, "It's right to rebel against reaction." In other words, here our starting point is that the war waged by the three Indochinese peoples (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) against imperialism was just. No matter how critical our conclusions on the Pol Pot regime, the fact is that they had to deal with the horror that the US created. If anyone should be on trial for genocide in Southeast Asia, it should be the US ruling class. The charges of genocide the rulers of the US want to press against former CPK leaders are an attempt to reverse right and wrong.

AIMS

A major problem in other analyses of this experience is the foregone conclusion that it was "irrational" and therefore basically inexplicable. We've looked at it through the lens of dialectical materialist reason, examining who was trying to do what - their politics and policies - and further, what was possible in that

¹This is why the US Congress and the Clinton administration appropriated millions of dollars for "Cambodian genocide" studies at a time when they were slashing research funding in general. One of the highest estimates for the number of dead was formulated by Ben Kiernan, a leading scholar in the field who once supported Vietnam and is now head of the US government-financed Yale University Cambodian Genocide Program. He subtracted certain estimates for the population of Cambodia in 1979 from those for its 1975 population and came up with the figure of 1.5 million people dead of starvation, disease and execution during the Democratic Kampuchea government. But these figures are highly problematic. Those were war years and such figures were not obtained by counting heads; further, the pro-US pre-1975 Cambodian government and the pro-Vietnamese post-1979 government had their reasons to exaggerate upward (in the first case) and downward (in the second). Even DK government figures given at various times are mutually inconsistent. Kiernan arbitrarily decided to accept the unsubstantiated (and unpublished) figures of a private researcher. Michael Vickery, who used CIA statistics, put the number of dead of all causes at 800,000. See Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime* (Yale University Press, 1996), p. 457; Vickery's claims are also cited and discussed here. In a 1997 interview, CPK leader Ta Mok told the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (23 October 1997), "It is clear that Pol Pot has committed crimes against humanity. I don't agree with the American figure that millions died. But hundreds of thousands, yes."

We do not accept the reactionary approach that would try to absolve one set of crimes by claiming that someone else's were bigger. But even in these terms - the sheer numbers of people murdered - the US is by far the biggest criminal. Their war on Indochina stands as one of the bloodiest crimes the world has ever seen. The US and its allies dropped three times as many bombs on Vietnam as fell in all of World War 2. They killed at least two million Vietnamese and created ten million refugees in that country. In Cambodia, the US installed a puppet government in 1970 and then sent in troops. B-52 carpet bombing raids went on almost without interruption for more than three years. Half a million tonnes of explosives and napalm devastated the countryside, unleashing unprecedented famine. That war killed a million Cambodians. Yet the Cambodia Genocide Program does not consider this part of its mission.

objective situation, and the results of those policies. This is why we have focused on basic questions the CPK had to solve.

There are four intertwined, key issues:

- The relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam. This question conditioned the entire development of the Cambodian revolution. The CPK was born and developed in conflict with the Communist Party of Vietnam (formerly known as the Workers Party of Vietnam), which sought to strategically subordinate the Cambodian revolution to the Vietnamese struggle against imperialism. After the victory in Cambodia, Vietnam, in the eyes of the CPK leadership, became the main danger to their revolution. This was a defining question, both objectively and in the thinking of the CPK leadership. The course of the revolution in Cambodia depended on it.
- The kind of society the CPK sought to build and the role of the masses in that. This means the path of revolution in Cambodia, especially the fundamental question of two-stage revolution, in the specific context of the Indochina war centred in Vietnam, with all the particular opportunities and constraints that imposed; the united front during and after the war, including a very complicated relationship with Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk; and socialist construction in the shadow of a Vietnam whose failure to carry out social revolution was linked to an increasing dependence on the USSR. Many people have heard how the Democratic Kampuchean government completely emptied the cities, for instance. Here we intend to examine these policies and why they were carried out.
- The question of the party: the state of affairs in the CPK and its leaders' conception of what a party is for. Until September 1977, the Cambodian people didn't know that what they called "the Organisation" [Angkar] and what its opponents called the Khmer Rouge was a communist party. Yet, to a large extent because of the Vietnamese victory over the US, this Party was suddenly thrust into power. It also had to deal with a situation in which its own line and ranks were far from consolidated.
- The question of the CPK's attitude toward foreign experience in general and especially Maoism. It has often been claimed that the CPK was guided by Maoism and the Chinese revolution. This is based on little but ignorance of the facts, or, in some cases, a deliberate effort to slander Maoism.² The Cambodian Party never made such a claim. Although Pol Pot lived in China on the eve of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and even though this earth-shaking event, the farthest advance yet achieved by the world proletarian revolution, had a spontaneous impact on Cambodian political life, still any support for the GPCR is completely absent from CPK documents and other statements during Mao's lifetime.³ The CPK was pro-China because Vietnam was pro-Soviet (and for the same reason also had relations with North Korea, Albania and Yugoslavia), but when CPK documents refer to the Chinese revolution it is usually to belittle it by comparison to Cambodia. The CPK claimed that it was so advanced that it "exceeds Lenin and is outstripping Mao",⁴ leading a revolution so "unique" that, "[I]n this case, it is better to learn nothing from foreign experience".⁵ But the "foreignness" of this experience is not the only reason why the CPK leadership did not want to learn from Mao's development of Marxism. They didn't like its content. As we shall see, the policies they carried out were the opposite of those developed by Mao. For the most part, the CPK leadership maintained their reserve on China until September 1977, when they established enthusiastic relations with Deng Xiaoping, the man who overthrew Mao's successors. It didn't matter much to Pol Pot what class ruled in China when he was looking for an ally against Vietnam.⁶

²The original assertion that the CPK was Maoist came from the Soviets (Vladimir Simonov, *Kampuchea: Crimes of Maoists and Their Route* [Novosti, 1979]). Their motive, of course, was to tar Maoism and Mao's China by association. The USSR refused to break relations with the US-installed Lon Nol regime.

³Kiernan, who does tend to paint the CPK as Maoist, admits, "Neither Pol Pot, nor Ieng Sary, Son Sen, Khieu Samphan, or anyone else in the CPK Center, however, is known to have expressed sympathy with the Cultural Revolution while it was occurring." (*PPR*, p. 127.) Another prominent scholar writes: "No evidence so far links the Cambodian party with China's radicals in the period 1965–1971." (Timothy Carney, "Unexpected Victory", in Karl D. Jackson, ed., *Cambodia 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death* [Princeton University Press, 1989], p. 24.)

⁴Interviews cited by Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 148.

⁵"Summary of Annotated Party History", CPK Eastern Zone document, in Jackson, p. 264.

⁶The facts are these: "In late 1967, Pol Pot ran a CPK training school in the jungle of Cambodia's northeast. In nine days of political lectures, he rarely mentioned China and never the Cultural Revolution raging there. 'China is a big country,' he

At the same time, our focus means that other important questions have to be neglected, especially the international context of all this: the full role of the US (including its support for the CPK after they were driven from power, and its intentions in Cambodia today), and of the Soviet Union; and the nature and development of Vietnam, particularly after the war. Although China was the main foreign source of support for the Democratic Kampuchea government, an overall summation of its role is impossible here. That would necessitate an examination of China's broader policies on a global level. It would also require an examination of how China's policy toward Democratic Kampuchea involved different goals by the right and left in the struggle within the Communist Party of China that came to a head in this period, a subject about which there has been speculation but very little documentation or even reliable information.

METHOD

The point has been made that almost all the available material on Democratic Kampuchea (especially for non-Khmer speakers) is from hostile sources. Most research is based on partial and conflicting reports (often from interviews of refugees in Thailand or elsewhere), and the interviewers themselves are sometimes flagrantly reactionary. But the CPK did have a line, which can be discerned in these studies, and even more importantly, in the internal Party documents translated and published by academics in the last decade. We've taken some of the main scholarly studies in this field and looked at them through the prism of the CPK's stated line and our own understanding.⁷

Our central theme is this: in that storm-tossed sea of contradictions, a society which, in the end, was no more complicated than any other but only caught in the throes of a more acute situation, there was only one course that could have saved Cambodia: revolutionary politics had to become embodied in material reality, the conscious activism of a growing section of the masses who could be relied upon in turn to unite the vast majority of the people to vanquish and root up the old society step by step, in unity with the revolutionary interests of the people of Indochina and the world. This is the standard according to which we've judged the CPK, and our understanding of the complexity, the necessity and the possibility of accomplishing this task has been strengthened by examining this experience.

To this end, part II of this article is a chronologically-based examination of the context in which the CPK won victory, and part III an analysis of their policies once in power. Part IV takes a closer look at key theoretical

remarked at one point." (Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 127, citing an interview with a participant in this school.)

Just after taking power, in June 1975, Pol Pot made a secret trip to Hanoi and Peking and some accounts say he met with Mao. Nothing is known about this alleged meeting. After this, China gave Democratic Kampuchea extensive economic (but not military) aid.

When Mao died in September 1976, Democratic Kampuchea called for a five-day period of mourning. Pol Pot, who had just become Prime Minister, made a radio speech in which he described Mao as "the most eminent teacher since Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin". A message to the Chinese Party praised the Cultural Revolution against "the counter-revolutionary headquarters of Liu Shao-chi and Deng Xiaoping". (Kenneth Quinn, "Explaining the Terror", in Jackson, pp. 219-21; also Becker, pp. 277-8.) Kiernan cites second-hand sources who say that during the year of intense struggle within the Communist Party of China following Mao's death, CPK leaders expressed their hatred for the "Gang of Four", Mao's closest comrades and successors whose arrest in 1977 marked Deng Xiaoping's revisionist coup. (*PPR*, pp. 155-6.) However, none of this is convincingly documented or given explicit political content, and so it can't be used as a pillar of serious analysis. Several writers have tried to link the Pol Pot regime to the "Gang of Four" (and above all Mao) on the basis of alleged similarities between CPK policies and the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in China; we will disprove that claim by examining and comparing those policies.

What is known without the shadow of a doubt is this: after Deng's coup, when he was still trying to pose as a revolutionary and rally support from communist parties that had looked to Maoist China, Pol Pot and the other CPK leaders came to Peking and literally embraced Deng at the airport. Pol Pot gave a speech in which the existence of the CPK was publicly revealed for the first time. Referring to the Party's history, he said, "We also learned from the experience of the world revolution and in particular Comrade Mao Tsetung's works and the experience of the Chinese revolution played an important role at the time." (Quinn, in Jackson, pp. 219-20.) But this was invoking Mao only to join hands with the betrayers of his legacy. The speech was broadcast over Chinese radio but not rebroadcast in Cambodia.

⁷Most CPK documents, captured by the US or Vietnam, are only in Khmer, and even those translated are often not generally accessible. Many radio speeches (the major mass media in Democratic Kampuchea) were recorded and translated by the US government Foreign Broadcast Service. In referring to these two kinds of sources, we have cited primary researchers. In addition to the four complete CPK documents published in the previously-cited Jackson book, the most comprehensive and readily available set of CPK documents in English is David Chandler, Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua, eds. and translators, *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977* (Yale University Southeast Studies Monograph 33, 1988), which can be ordered by mail from Yale University Press, P.O. Box 208206, New Haven, CT 06520-8206, USA. A few can be downloaded from the Yale University Cambodian Genocide Program web site at www.yale.edu/cgp.

questions as they posed themselves in Cambodia. The last section is a brief description of what happened after the 1979 overthrow of Democratic Kampuchea, especially the fate of Cambodia in the last decade during which it has been in the clutches of the UN, the IMF and other Western imperialist institutions.

II. BACKGROUND TO VICTORY

THE ANGKOR KINGDOM

Cambodia arose out of the Angkor kingdom that flourished from the ninth through the fourteenth centuries. Half a millennium later, with the rise of the modern nation, the temple complex those kings had built (now called Angkor Wat) was to become the icon of the Khmer national identity for all those who sought to raise the national banner.

When the Hindu civilisation spreading out of India was first taken up by Khmer monarchs, it brought about a transformation. The rise of a strong central state enabled the construction of an extensive irrigation system to control monsoon floods and retain water for irrigation. Nothing could be more vital in a land flooded half the year and dry the other half. Some historians say the Angkor kingdom was able to master dry season rice cultivation, making it possible to grow two or three crops a year. The wealth of the Khmer court was legendary, and its dominion spread east across the Mekong Delta (now southern Vietnam) to the sea, north through much of Laos to China and west through Thailand and part of Burma. But the temples fell into ruins, because like the dams and canals, they were built by *corvée* labour, the forced work of the peasants, and this order of exploitation could not endure. The people deserted the Hindu religion at the core of the Angkor social system and embraced Buddhism.

A strong Siam (Thailand) pressed hard from the West. Vietnam took over the lower Mekong and swaggered through Cambodia. Later Cambodians would say that Vietnamese conquerors buried Khmers alive up to their necks and filled up their mouths with hot coals to warm teapots set on top of their heads. Whether true or not, this image was to become a central reference point for all Cambodian political parties.

By the time the French arrived in the mid-19th century, the old Angkor kingdom had been carved to a sliver. France set out to colonise all the countries of the Mekong, partly to challenge the British hold on China. In 1863, it forced Cambodia's King Norodom to accept a treaty making the country a French "protectorate" in exchange for saving his throne.

A FRENCH COLONY

The French started out (like the British) drawing their profit from the opium trade and alcohol, but soon this was not enough. In 1884, French gunboats sailed up the Mekong from Vietnam. Their troops marched into the palace and made the king sign over virtually all power. The point was to establish ownership of the land in Cambodia so that French plantations could be set up, along with the imposition of harsh taxes. When peasants rose up against the French, the colonialists brought in troops from Vietnam. According to some historians, they killed two hundred thousand people, 20% of the population. Norodom, who at first had called for the revolt, two years later betrayed it, once again in return for keeping his kingdom.

The French brought Vietnamese to administer Cambodia, and aside from the royal court, they developed no local elite. Taxes collected in Cambodia went to pay for the administration of France's colony in Vietnam. The French justified their policies by labelling the Khmers lazy, "a decadent race". Unlike Vietnam, where the French found it convenient to bring about some limited degree of modernisation in the interests of profit and their overall Southeast Asian empire, practically no development was carried out in Cambodia, except for rubber plantations and other export-oriented crops. Nothing was done to maintain the irrigation system. French imports killed the national crafts (silk and cotton weaving) and nascent local industry. The imposition of taxes brought the proliferation of usurious money lenders, as peasants with no previous connection to the market had to borrow cash to pay this tribute. The land was divided into smaller and smaller parcels and many peasants became bonded labourers, forced to work for others to whom they all but belonged, rather than farming their own land. Rice production per capita dropped to the lowest level in Southeast Asia.

The king's grandson, Norodom Sihanouk, was crowned king by the Vichy French regime and then ruled under the subsequent Japanese occupation. After World War 2, he "invited" France to return. Both capitalism and feudalism became increasingly onerous in the coming decades. The royal court grew fabulously bloated. In some areas of the countryside, particularly Battambang and Svay Rieng, landlordism became rampant. In general, the number of peasants who no longer owned land but lived as tenants or sharecroppers grew at a quickening pace, especially in the 1950s and '60s, and reached about one in five by the end of Sihanouk's reign in 1970. While the bulk of the peasants still owned some land, a great many families had less than a hectare (considered the minimum to feed a family of four) and had to rent both land and tools. The overwhelming majority were in debt to moneylenders and shopkeepers. Many peasants owed more than they could make in a year. Moneylenders commonly charged 12% a month in interest, and worked in tandem with traders, who would buy rice cheaply at the beginning of the season when it was plentiful and sell it back at higher prices and on credit to the peasants at the end of the season when food ran out. Overwhelmingly, these lenders and merchants were Chinese or Sino-Khmer.

As Mao said, when the productive forces are held back by social relations, the tools speak through people. Resistance arose against these social relations that condemned the people to poverty in what had once been a rich land.

Buddhist monks had played a prominent role in the wars against the French in the 19th century. By the 1930s and '40s, Buddhist wats (temples) became centres of national resistance, first against the French and then against the Japanese. While Buddhism as an ideology was a main prop of the social system, the Buddhist church was also the only source of education (the French established no schools), the centre of intellectual life and the only real national institution aside from the monarchy. Most young men spent a few years as monks. This meant that various political trends were nurtured in the monasteries.

THE EARLY COMMUNIST MOVEMENT

In 1930, as winds of revolution began to rise in the world, and in the context of revolutionary war in China, the Comintern (Communist International) directed the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh to found the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). This Party's core was in Vietnam, where the communist movement was by far the most advanced in the region. Laos was and remained the Indochinese country where it was least developed. In Cambodia, at first the only Party members were Vietnamese rubber plantation workers in the east and middle-class ethnic Chinese urban dwellers. Later, in the wake of the Buddhist-led anti-colonial movement of the 1940s, the Party began to recruit among the young monks, and for the next two decades many Party cadre and leaders were ex-monks.

World War 2 transformed this struggle for independence. Shortly afterward, the Vietnamese launched an armed uprising against the French. At that time, the international communist movement advised both the Vietnamese and the Chinese not to seek national liberation through revolutionary war. Neither Party agreed. After the victory of the Chinese revolution in 1949, the Chinese became the major external source of support for the Vietnamese revolutionaries, just as they also did for the Korean people in their war against the US invasion in the same period. By the time the Vietnamese drove out the French in 1954, the US was paying for 80% of France's expenses in this conflict, which they considered an essential part of encircling China.

Following the dissolution of the ICP in 1951, the Vietnamese had formed their own communist party (the Workers Party of Vietnam [VWP], renamed the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1976). They also had their own army. The situation of the Cambodian communists was very different. It was not just that the Cambodian revolutionaries were less developed politically, organisationally and militarily than their Vietnamese counterparts. Their external dependence on Vietnam was matched by the fact that they had little distinct communist organisation. Instead of a communist party, the Cambodians followed Vietnamese advice and formed a united front organisation, the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party. Instead of forming their own army, an army that while united around the immediate tasks of the revolution would also be a key training ground in the long-term goals and ideology of communism, they simply worked with the Buddhist and nationalist Issarak guerrillas who had emerged in the struggle against Japan. In other words, both the Vietnamese and Cambodian communists treated Cambodia as though the task there was not to organise a revolution that would be part of the world-wide proletarian revolution, but simply an adjunct to

the Vietnamese struggle.

The VWP leadership had a theoretical justification for this and won many Cambodians to it. They saw conditions in Cambodia as unsuitable for revolution, because, they said, so many Cambodian peasants were small landholders and social antagonism was insufficiently developed there. The communist movement in Cambodia was equally doomed to weakness, they thought, so that they would always have to play the father party. A 1951 VWP document says, “The Vietnamese party reserves the right to supervise the activities of its brother parties in Cambodia and Laos.”⁸

The following contradiction was to mark the decades to come: on the one hand the Vietnamese movement was strong and pulled the Cambodian movement forward; on the other, the weakness of the Cambodians suited the Vietnamese, who attempted to institutionalise this weakness. The Vietnamese were to carry the main burden of fighting, first against the French and then the Americans, with all the heroic sacrifice that entailed, and at the same time they were to subordinate the struggle in the neighbouring countries to their own. Whether or not to do so tactically is one question (for instance, whether or not to concentrate forces in one or another country, etc., for the good of the Indochinese struggle overall), but the VWP turned this into a strategy in which revolution in Cambodia or Laos could never take place except through Vietnamese intervention.

The Vietnamese trapped and completely smashed the French colonial army in the battle of Dien Bien Phu. France was forced to accept a negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam in 1954. A Geneva Conference spelled out the conditions for the end of the Indochina war: Vietnam was divided, with a revolutionary government in the North and elections scheduled in the South to create a reunited, independent country. The situation in Cambodia was more ambiguous. The Issarak movement was well-rooted and its fighting forces numbered in the thousands. But Sihanouk, as he so often did, played a double game. He had persuaded the French to grant Cambodia’s independence in 1953, telling them they could either deal with him or lose Cambodia to the communists France was fighting in Vietnam. At the Geneva Conference, he succeeded in getting an agreement to guarantee the continuation of his regime in return for Cambodia’s neutrality.

BITTER LESSONS

The Cambodian communists were left with empty hands. They were obligated to dissolve their armed forces. About a thousand people, about half of the revolutionary activists at that time, left Cambodia on ships bound for northern Vietnam along with the Vietnamese troops who had been fighting in Cambodia. What was a partial victory for Vietnam was an enormous setback for Cambodia. This experience had a far-reaching impact on the future leadership core of the CPK, both those who spent these war years at university in Paris and those like Pol Pot who returned just in time to see their hopes completely frustrated.

This was the beginning of what is called the Sihanouk period, in which the king abdicated in favour of his father, becoming a mere prince, and ran the country through a combination of parliamentary manoeuvres, fixed elections and violence until his overthrow in 1970. It is an extremely complex period that only became more complicated when the Vietnamese returned to the armed struggle in 1959, after the US refused to allow the promised elections in southern Vietnam. Sihanouk declared what he called at first “Khmer socialism” and later “Buddhist socialism”. The essence of his doctrine was to preserve “the barrier which preserves the originality of our race, of our traditions, of our religious faith, and which safeguards our independence vis-à-vis certain of our neighbours”. The purpose of this “socialism”, he explained, was “to prevent the triumph of Communism in Cambodia”.⁹ He meant what he said: the purpose of his policies, foreign and domestic, was to perpetuate his rule and the whole system it represented.

Things went from bad to worse for the Cambodian communists. They established the legal Pracheachon Party and took part in the 1955 elections. “The Pracheachon’s greatest accomplishment was to fill the police dossiers with the names of all the leftists who exposed themselves in the election,” writes an observer.¹⁰ The Party was allowed a legal existence, and some members worked secretly within the regime, but Sihanouk

⁸Cited in Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over* (Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 345. On this point also, see David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 48.

⁹Cited in Chandler, p. 87.

¹⁰Becker, p. 97.

carried out a ruthless policy of hunting down and murdering communists, especially in the countryside. The communists had some success in organising industrial workers until Sihanouk turned around and crushed the strike movement. His police brazenly murdered the publisher of the Pracheachon newspaper on the sidewalk in front of its office. The Party's leader secretly betrayed information to Sihanouk's police for several years before openly going over to the government. It is said that 90% of the Party's members in the rural areas were lost in the late 1950s. Many were killed or scattered by the enemy; others just drifted away. A draft history of the CPK attributed most of these losses to a passive attitude prevailing within the Party.¹¹

The Communist Party of Kampuchea was founded in 1960. It was then called the Workers Party of Kampuchea, like the Vietnamese party. It was clandestine and its existence was secret; publicly, it worked through the legal Pracheachon Party. The strange dance with Sihanouk continued; the prince brought two leading communists into his cabinet and one into the legislature, but had the Party chairman kidnapped and murdered. Student riots against police repression broke out in 1963. In response, Sihanouk published a list of the members of the Party's central committee and promised to wipe out what he labelled the "Khmer Rouge" (Red Khmers).

Events abroad had a far-reaching impact on both sides in that period. Sihanouk was upset by the 1963 murder of Diem, the US flunky in South Vietnam killed by the CIA when deemed no longer useful. The prince broke relations with the US and made an agreement with the North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front in the South that would allow them to use Cambodian territory in return for a promise to respect Cambodia's borders.¹² The Cambodian communists, for their part, were said to have taken sharp note of the 1965 debacle in Indonesia. The legal, open Communist Party of Indonesia had hoped to achieve liberation without armed struggle through its association with the nationalist Sukarno regime; instead both the regime and the Party were crushed by a US-organised right-wing coup and uncounted people slaughtered.

POL POT BECOMES CHAIRMAN

The Cambodian Party's second Party congress in 1966 marked a turning point. Its name was changed and Pol Pot became the CPK's chairman. Most of the Party leadership and a large part of its rank and file (which included many students and teachers) withdrew into the countryside. The centre of gravity began to shift, first to the eastern border, where contact and co-operation was re-established with the Vietnamese communists, and then to Ratanakari province, in the isolated northeast hills. The Party began to build clandestine organisation in the countryside in preparation for armed struggle. It won the support of the tribal hill people who had long suffered under the central government. With these moves, the CPK was moving away from the Vietnamese Party, which still held that there was no revolutionary situation in Cambodia and that therefore it was wrong to endanger co-operation with Sihanouk.¹³ Yet ironically, the situation in Cambodia was becoming increasingly conditioned by the war in Vietnam, and this heating up was to intensify Cambodia's internal contradictions to the breaking point.

China was supplying arms to the Vietnamese through Cambodia's ports. Sihanouk skimmed a certain percentage off the top. Similarly, a large amount of Cambodian rice was being sold to the National Liberation Front forces in southern Vietnam. This was a problem for Sihanouk, because it represented a loss of government income from rice export taxes. He introduced a system called ramassage, under which government soldiers went to the villages and forced the peasants to sell the rice to them at less than market prices. In Samlueat, in the west near Battambang, peasants rose up and attacked military posts. The CPK, although centred in the opposite end of the country, supported this rebellion.

Pol Pot later explained, "It was in this ripening revolutionary situation that an armed uprising broke out in 1967 in Samlueat. . . . This was set off by the people through their own movement. The Party Central

¹¹"Summary of Annotated Party History", in Jackson, p. 257

¹²Typically, Sihanouk put nationalised US businesses into the hands of his cronies. Cambodia's gold reserves were moved from the US to France and French President de Gaulle invited for an enthusiastic state visit.

¹³Wilfred Burchett, one of the few Western journalists to report on the war from the point of view of the Vietnamese and who was privy to the thinking of the VWP, wrote that in 1967 he turned down a request that he write about an "armed struggle about to be launched against Sihanouk". "It was absurd to speak of a 'revolutionary situation' in Cambodia at that time." Wilfred Burchett, *At the Barricades* (London, 1979), p. 324.

Committee had not yet decided on general armed insurrection throughout the country.”¹⁴ In fact, the Party had not yet formally changed the more eclectic line that had predominated since the beginning of the decade, that of “combined political struggle and armed struggle”, and it is not clear to what degree the Party was united around making a complete rupture with its past practice. (The CPK’s Eastern Zone, in particular, was said to have been reluctant.) But circumstances intervened. “It is quite true that our Party had not yet raised the principle of armed struggle, but in the face of this massive civil war by the enemy, our Party had to fight back with arms.”¹⁵

Sihanouk used planes the Chinese had given him to resist the US and instead bombed western Cambodian villages. He turned the guns he had taken as his price for co-operation with the Vietnamese against the Cambodian peasants. He took public responsibility for an order that all captured rebels be executed on the spot. The prince bragged that they would be roasted and fed to the vultures. He gave instructions to film prisoners being hacked to death and had these newsreels shown in theatres in the cities. In the countryside, his troops left severed heads on poles to make the same point.

The rebellion lasted from April through May.

Now the CPK began to organise for a nation-wide uprising in earnest. In January 1968, it launched its first offensive. The revolutionaries had very few modern weapons at this point and the Party leadership had to flee Sihanouk’s forces yet again, but a civil war had been unleashed.

The Vietnamese didn’t welcome this development, but co-operation with the CPK continued. The NLF was preoccupied with preparing for the February 1968 Tet offensive, a make-it-or-break-it gamble on urban insurrection whose defeat was to signal the end of a large measure of reliance on the strategy and tactics of protracted people’s war and the beginning of a more conventional war with the aim of a negotiated settlement.

But again ironically, and certainly against their will, Sihanouk, the CPK and the Vietnamese were moving toward a three-way alliance.

THE US “SECRET WAR” IN CAMBODIA

In March 1969 the US launched its “secret” bombing campaign of Cambodia. Panicked, Sihanouk invited Jackie Kennedy (widow of the American president) for a visit and re-established relations with the US But it was too late. In March 1970, Sihanouk’s prime minister, General Lon Nol, on whom Sihanouk had relied to repress the communists since the beginning, overthrew him in a US-orchestrated coup. At the end of April, the U.S invaded Cambodia. Some 30,000 US troops and 40,000 troops from South Vietnam rampaged through eastern Cambodia for two months with the declared aim of rooting out the Vietnamese NLF fighters, who shifted westward to avoid a decisive battle. Sihanouk fled to Paris and then Peking. China offered to support him on the condition that he take up the war against US imperialism. A few days later, Sihanouk issued a call to arms to the Cambodian people, as head of a National United Front of Kampuchea (usually known by its French initials, FUNK) whose core was the Khmer Rouge. He also called for a summit conference to unite the Indochinese peoples against US imperialism. Sihanouk was made head of state of the FUNK’s government in exile, the Royal Government of National Union, but the FUNK’s programme was silent on what role Sihanouk would play in a post-liberation government.

At that point, the CPK had about 50,000 local militia fighters and an army some 5,000-strong. That would double within a year. Close military co-operation was established between the liberation forces of the two countries. “They were poorly equipped; they relied as much on captured US weapons as on arms and ammunition supplied by the Chinese or Vietnamese,” comments an American writer who was a journalist in Phnom Penh at that time.¹⁶ But she adds, “Time was the major aid given them by the Vietnamese, and they used it efficiently.”

Clearly there were two sides to this process. The CPK had to build up its armed forces step by step and had little to rely on but the support of the Cambodian people. That support, according to all serious observers,

¹⁴1977 Pol Pot speech, cited by Chandler, pp. 166–7.

¹⁵*Provatt nei Pak Kommyunis Kampuchea* (History of the Communist Party of Kampuchea), mimeographed document said to be distributed by Ieng Sary in 1974, cited in Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power* (Verso/New Left Books, 1985), pp. 250–1.

¹⁶Becker, p. 148.

was broad, deep and strong. Nothing else could explain the steady expansion of the revolutionary army, which reached 40,000 by 1973. Even their purchase of much material and weaponry from corrupt Lon Nol officials and officers is testament to the support they won from rubber plantation workers (who enabled them to sell rubber). But the Vietnamese did the bulk of the fighting against the Lon Nol army through the end of 1972, and by then they had broken the reactionaries' teeth. Even more importantly, they beat US imperialism in Vietnam. Otherwise, the liberation of Cambodia could not have taken place at that time.

By 1973, the Vietnamese had forced the US to the negotiating table in Paris and they wanted the CPK to join them. The Vietnamese sought and won a cessation of bombing and the withdrawal of American troops. The US was not willing to concede defeat and the war was to continue for more than two years, yet they had put a limit on what they were willing to risk to achieve victory. In the context of the US's Indochina war overall, this was a decisive juncture. But in terms of their own immediate war aims, the Cambodians saw no reason to agree to a cease-fire that would only relieve their stranglehold on an all but isolated Phnom Penh, which seemed about to fall into their hands. This was why Lon Nol was eager for a cease-fire even if the CPK did not take part in the Paris accords, and why the CPK refused both offers.

Just as the immediate aims of the two main Indochinese liberation forces at the time of these Paris negotiations were different, the immediate results were dramatically different. The US withdrawal from Vietnam meant no let-up for Cambodia. Quite the opposite. Under the Paris accords, the US could no longer bomb Vietnam, where they hoped that massive US support could enable the reactionary regime to hold out for a "decent interval", but they feared that a Khmer Rouge victory was imminent. CIA director William Colby called bombing Cambodia "the only game in town".¹⁷

Much of Cambodia was declared a "free-fire zone".¹⁸ The Paris peace talks took place in January; in February the US sent its war planes back over Cambodia. A quarter of a million tonnes of bombs fell in raids that went on every single day for 140 days. This was more than three times the amount dropped on Japan in the last, all-out bombing campaign of World War 2 that culminated with the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The objective was to build a fire wall around Phnom Penh. It did gain the Lon Nol regime two years respite.

There had been friction between the two Indochinese parties in the best of times, and now relations deteriorated rapidly. According to the CPK, the Vietnamese proposed setting up joint military command and units, but the Cambodians preferred to keep their independence.¹⁹ Starting in the early 1970s, after the US invasion of Cambodia and the formation of the FUNK, the Vietnamese had begun to send back hundreds of the Cambodians who had been in exile in northern Vietnam for 15 years. The Vietnamese wanted to build up the revolutionary forces in Cambodia, but they wanted to do so by building up their own influence within the CPK. Many of these returning Cambodian cadre had undergone training in the Vietnamese approach to politics as well as other fields. At first they were welcomed home and integrated into CPK-led units. Within several years, almost all of them were removed from the Party and a great many executed. "The group of former combatants trained in Hanoi", a 1976 document would later say, "...became 100% Vietnamese and nothing left as Khmers. They were subservient lackeys of the Vietnamese."²⁰ This bitter contradiction was reflected within the CPK itself, as firefights broke out between troops of the CPK's Southwest Zone and the CPK's Eastern Zone command, considered pro-Vietnamese, "Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds". In the Southwestern Zone, leadership was said to have told people that there were two kinds of enemies, acute and non-acute. "The Vietnamese were not yet our acute enemy, which was the US-Lon Nol, but at the time it was said that Vietnam was our number two enemy." Vietnam was frequently referred to as "the hereditary enemy".²¹

¹⁷Cited in Chandler, p. 224

¹⁸An area where American pilots could bomb or strafe any suspected enemy target without prior permission, which basically meant all people, animals, houses and fields outside government-held areas.

¹⁹Government of Democratic Kampuchea, *Black Paper - Facts and Evidences of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam Against Kampuchea*, 1978.

²⁰"The Last Plan", in Jackson, p. 301.

²¹Kiernan, *HPPCP*, p. 362.

THE RICE WAR

If the CPK had little holding it up but the support of the people, the US had little to hold up the Lon Nol regime up but B-52s. Even his American advisors considered his regime a disaster. It was so corrupt and incompetent that as many as half the soldiers on its roster didn't really exist but were merely a device for the generals to pocket their pay. Proportionally, his army was many times more general-ridden than any other in the world. In the face of constant US carpet-bombing, the CPK, like the Vietnamese, used an effective tactic: its fighters moved in as close as possible to the government forces. Most of the casualties were civilians; further, the ravages of explosives and napalm destruction were turning vast areas of the countryside into wastelands, while able-bodied young men were obliged to fight for one side or the other. The question of feeding the people and the troops became increasingly acute on both sides. Rice riots shook refugee-swollen Phnom Penh. By now the US had to supply rice in massive quantities. So much did Lon Nol's survival depend on this that the US Embassy was cabling home weekly reports on rice stocks.

In some liberated areas, rice production had improved, despite the bombing, but the demands of the war were outstripping supply. Until then, land taken from landlords and other traitors who backed the US-Lon Nol regime was distributed to landless peasant families individually. Peasants enthusiastically joined mutual aid teams in which each helped farm the land of all. Half the country's population lived in liberated areas, administered by mass organisations such as the Peasants Association and the Patriotic Monks Association. (The existence of the Alliance of Communist Youth, through which the Party did much of its recruiting, was still secret, as was that of the Party itself.) Moneylending and borrowing on rice crops was abolished, although merchants continued to ply their trade. No longer were peasants plagued by corruption, rape, theft, drunkenness and gambling. In some places peasants had voluntarily formed co-operatives of 10–30 families that raised living standards.

In May 1973 Angkar launched what it called the “Democratic Revolution”. Now these co-operatives were to be moved to a “higher level” and made universal. The term co-operative is misleading, since private property was basically abolished. So were cities in the liberated areas.

The internal CPK publication *Tung Padevat* (Revolutionary Flags) was later to explain the situation like this: “There was progress on the one hand and the same old society on the other. . . . [T]hose in possession of the land kept their private ownership. Furthermore, previously landless peasants and previously landless workers now received land from the [revolutionary] state. Therefore land remained in private ownership in general.” In the northeastern city of Kratie, part of a CPK-led liberated area, “our state was their [the comprador capitalists] satellite.” “Kratie township showed the same signs as the old society. Honda motorcycles were speeding up and down the streets like before, while our ragged guerrillas walked in the dust. This showed that they were still the masters. . . if we followed that road, we would have gone nowhere.”²²

Kratie was completely evacuated and turned into a ghost town. In the countryside, money, credit and trading were abolished; rice and other basic products were directly collected by the new state. Private ownership of land, farm tools, motor vehicles and so on disappeared.

It was unheard of, as the CPK document quoted above admits, for private property to be completely confiscated during a national liberation war, when the task is to unite all who can be united against the imperialists and their puppet regime, including the national bourgeoisie and even some patriotic big capitalists and landlords whose existence is completely bound up with reactionary society but who can sometimes be won to action against the main enemy (such as Sihanouk himself). Furthermore, this treated all property as the same, whether it belonged to feudal landlords and plantation owners (ultimately targets of the revolution) or peasants, who could only win their own liberation against these forces by seizing the land. So what was the purpose of these measures?

Pol Pot later described the aim like this: “[T]he landowners and merchants gathered all the rice to sell to the Lon Nol clique and to the Vietnamese. The poor strata of our people ran out of rice. . . the Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea, who were fighting at the front, they were running out of rice and fed with rice soup at every meal. . . that was why in 1973, the Central Committee of our Party decided to create co-operatives on

²² *Tung Padevat*, August 1975, translated by T.M. Carney and cited by Kiernan, *HPPCP*, pp. 368–9.

inferior and superior levels in the whole liberated area.”²³ Another CPK leader explained the 1973 decision more bluntly: “The Vietnamese were the biggest problem. They would buy the rice. So we abolished money. If the people did not need money, if they lived in a co-operative where everything was provided for them by the state, they would not sell rice to the Vietnamese.”²⁴

These measures were taken in the desperate days of war and in the heat of a revolutionary upsurge. Apparently they were not carried out everywhere in the liberated areas or all at once. In some areas, they were applied only to advanced villages; in others, they were compulsory for all. But they were not meant as temporary or tactical steps; rather they prefigured the CPK regime to come. The CPK’s main characteristics and the main political and ideological issues raised by its rule had come to the fore, as did the particular way in which they were to be inter-tangled.

NATIONALISM AND REVISIONISM

To return to the four issues posed at the beginning of this article:

First, the CPK’s handling of the Vietnam question: Vietnamese disdain for the revolution in Cambodia and attempts to subordinate it to their own national interests was becoming the main factor conditioning the development of the Cambodian revolution. That this was a condition, an external factor, cannot be emphasised too much, because this external factor did not determine the response of the Cambodian revolutionaries.

It should be kept in mind that the military connection and interpenetration of the two national liberation struggles made it possible for the Vietnamese to influence the course of the Cambodian struggle, but the opposite was also not impossible, and if an increasingly wrong line on the part of the VWP was a big problem for Cambodia, it was to prove even more disastrous for the masses of people in Vietnam.²⁵ Vietnam was a problem for the Cambodian revolution, but it was also a big advantage. The US had been defeated there and it was full of people who had sacrificed everything for the anti-imperialist struggle. The fact that so many Cambodians lived in Vietnam and vice-versa was a potentially wide-open door through which a revolutionary line in Cambodia could have impact in the whole region. But the CPK couldn’t see that. All they could see was the negative aspect of the situation. They couldn’t see beyond their own conception of Cambodian national interests, any more than the Vietnamese revisionists could understand why they should be concerned about revolution in Cambodia. In response to the Vietnamese line that tended to reduce the Indochinese struggle to revolution in Vietnam and support for that in the other two countries, the CPK was equally incapable of seeing the need and possibility of spreading thorough-going, proletarian internationalist revolution throughout Indochina, in unity with the world’s people (including Maoist China, a very important element in this situation).

Second, this, of course, raises the question of what kind of revolution they wanted to carry out. That was to become increasingly clear in the few years in which the CPK held countrywide political power, as we’ll see in the next section. But already, these measures taken in 1973 herald the line that called for leaping over the stage of national democratic revolution and even socialism, which was to take an astonishing form after nation-wide liberation. The target was skewed: instead of focusing revolutionary fire on the US and the Lon Nol regime, private property in general was declared the enemy, in a country where most people had some property, and the greatest humiliation portrayed as the fact that some middle-class young men had motorcycles while Khmer Rouge fighters walked in the dust. (Note that for Tung Padevat, the fact that previously landless peasants had got land is not considered a factor that could fan their enthusiasm for revolution to go further; rather the conclusion is that their land should be confiscated.) The CPK’s inability to even imagine the possibility of uniting the Indochinese people on a revolutionary basis was matched by its inability to grasp the importance of uniting the vast majority of people to make revolution in Cambodia.

Third, another grave portent was the handling of contradictions within the Party (particularly the unjust handling of returning cadre from Vietnam). As we have seen, the struggle against the “Vietnamese” influence in the CPK was in fact a two-line struggle within the Cambodian Party, an endeavour to chalk out a

²³September 1978 speech by Pol Pot, cited by Becker, pp. 162–3.

²⁴Interview with Thiounn Prasith cited by Becker, p. 163.

²⁵For an analysis of the political and military line of the VWP through the late 1970s, see “Vietnam: Miscarriage of the Revolution”, *Revolution* (Organ of the Central Committee of the RCP,USA), Vol.4, No.7–8, July/August 1979.

revolutionary line in conflict with the non-revolutionary line that had predominated. But because this struggle itself was seen from a nationalist perspective, it was summed up incorrectly as mainly a struggle against an external enemy (Vietnam and “Vietnamese minds”). This summation itself became an enormous obstacle to the Party’s development, undermining the more revolutionary orientation that had won out. Because these questions were not treated politically in a straight-on fashion, which could have strengthened the understanding and unity of the CPK, this situation weakened the Party. Rather than learning from this error, it was to systematise this approach.

Lastly, the CPK needed to develop a critique of the political, ideological and military line of the Vietnamese Party, whose bearings were never firm and which had been increasingly drawn into the political and ideological orbit of the USSR. Such a criticism would have been essential for clarifying the road to liberation and socialism in Cambodia and uniting the Party, but it was no less desperately needed in Vietnam and Laos as well. This was one aspect of “foreign experience” that the CPK could ignore only at the risk of losing their own bearings and their ability to lead any revolution at all. The other was Mao’s polemic against Soviet-led modern revisionism and his developing summation of the historical experience of the international communist movement, and the line and experience of the Cultural Revolution. But instead of making the ideology and interests of the international proletariat their starting point, they reacted to Vietnamese chauvinism on a nationalist basis themselves, making this contradiction insoluble. Despite the CPK’s very real and acknowledged leadership over broad masses of the Cambodian people and its valuable and heroic role in the struggle against US imperialism, which made an important contribution to the international proletarian revolution, as the CPK developed a consolidated line in the course of the war, it was heading further and further up a blind alley.

III. VICTORY WASTED

LIBERATION

The liberation of Phnom Penh came on 17 April 1975. The final assault had begun on the first day of the year. Revolutionary troops cut off Highway One linking Phnom Penh to Saigon. They strung Chinese-supplied water mines on cables across the Mekong and pulled them up as ships approached, cutting off that route as well. Heavy howitzers (supplied from the Vietnamese, who had captured them from the Americans) pounded the capital’s airport, its sole remaining link with the US. Fearing what its ambassador called an “uncontrolled solution”,²⁶ the United States sent Lon Nol into exile and tried to cut a separate deal with Sihanouk if he would break his alliance with the CPK. He rejected that offer, perhaps because it was too late. The hated reactionary army - the army that had raped and robbed in the city just as it had in the countryside - collapsed, while the armed forces led by the CPK encircled the cities and closed in. At some 60,000 strong, including several battalions of women, along with many more peasants in local militias, the revolutionary army was several times smaller than Lon Nol’s, but under the leadership of the CPK the justness of its cause had become an irresistible material force.

The US and their puppet regime had tried to paint the war as one to save Cambodia from a Vietnamese invasion, but now, for the first time in modern history, Cambodia was entirely in the hands of Cambodians. Even a US State Department officer in Phnom Penh had to admit, “The population in the [Lon Nol] Republican zone welcomed surrender when April 17, 1975 came.”²⁷

Yet it could be said that two different Cambodias, or two different parts of it that had undergone a diverging development, confronted each other that day. First under the French (and even before), and then under the Sihanouk years of economic boom, Phnom Penh, like so many Third World urban concentrations, had always been a city apart from the rest of the country. Its economy was articulated to foreign capital, to the export of rice and rubber and a few manufactured items, and its main role was to serve as a warehouse and distribution point for foreign goods. Throughout most of the twentieth century the majority of its population had been Cambodian-born but non-Khmer, especially Chinese and Vietnamese. Following independence from France, Sihanouk, in one of his “modernising” moods, issued an edict that forbade the wearing of traditional

²⁶Chandler, p. 234.

²⁷Timothy Carney, “The Organization of Power”, in Jackson, p. 35.

peasant clothing in town or going barefoot. The million refugees who had poured in during the years of American carpet bombing changed that - doubling the city's population to about two million - but at the same time it became even more cut off from the countryside. While millions of peasants had been part of the revolution for several years at the time of the taking of Phnom Penh, the people in the capital had been living almost exclusively off the reactionary war or the charity the American ambassador's wife dispensed while her husband helped direct the destruction of the country.

The city captured by the liberation forces was no prize in any immediate sense. There were few stocks of arms and ammunition and no fighter jets or tanks or heavy artillery. No raw materials, no spare parts, and for want of fuel, almost no electricity. Much of the city was without water. There were no medicines or other hospital supplies. And above all, no food. The rice supplies on hand were only enough to feed the city for less than a week.

The country overall was not in much better shape. The Lon Nol regime had indicated half a million dead on its side; another 600,000 were reported killed in the liberated areas (out of a total population of between seven and eight million). Hundreds of thousands of the survivors were badly maimed or crippled. The last dispatch sent out by the USAID reported that Cambodia had "slipped in less than five years from a significant exporter of rice to large-scale imports, and when these ended in April 1975, to the brink of starvation".²⁸ At least half the rice fields had been dug up by bombs or lay unplanted. The American air raids and fighting had killed off the bulk of the water buffalo used to pull ploughs, along with cattle and other farm animals. Almost half the country's population had been driven from their homes. The country's motorways and railroads were shattered, the rivers clogged with the carcasses of sunken ships.

These were the circumstances under which the liberation forces evacuated Phnom Penh and other major cities almost as soon as they entered. Further, they had no way to know whether or not the US would renew its bombing raids. War was still raging in Vietnam. Only a few weeks later, on May 12th, the US was to stage the Mayaguez incident, in which the capture of an American freighter carrying military supplies in Cambodian waters was the pretext for another US attack, destroying most Cambodian naval facilities and knocking out the country's only oil refinery at Kampong Song.

The US and other imperialist press wailed that this evacuation was a death march, but even the most unfavourable reports give no evidence of that. As a New York Times reporter described it, "in fact, it was a journey away from certain death by starvation... [which] was already a reality in the urban centres."²⁹ Liberation fighters went door to door and asked people to leave as soon as they could gather up their possessions. There was no violence. People walked out of the city in families and were given food and drink on the way. Some medicine was also dispensed. True, as the Western press complained, the wounded and sick were evacuated from the hospitals, but for the moment, at least, they were little worse off anywhere else. Captured high officials and officers of the Lon Nol regime were executed, but the only reports of mass executions of former soldiers came from Battambang and elsewhere in the Northwestern Zone, and the Party centre soon ordered that they be halted. Since the US press led the pack in howling about "Khmer Rouge atrocities" on the heels of the American defeat, it seems only fitting to quote a once-classified report from the US Embassy in Thailand, in charge of "monitoring" events in Kampuchea, which said that after the first month, "reports of the wilful killing of former government officials and soldiers more or less ended".³⁰

Yet the emptying of the cities was not meant as a wartime step, nor even as a necessary adjustment of an untenable situation. The fighters who organised the exodus told people that this was only a temporary measure, but it was not, nor was it ever meant to be. In a May 1975 Party conference, it had been decided to put an end to cities once and for all. The evacuation was complete and permanent. Later, a few skilled workers were to be called back and peasants sent to replace factory workers, a few government offices and foreign embassies were to reopen, but for almost four years the living part of the capital was reduced to the size of a few square blocks. The rest was cleaned up and then abandoned to the weeds.

The evacuation of the cities was only the first step in a broader programme adopted in the months before

²⁸Cited in Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 163.

²⁹Cited by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* (South End Press, 1979), p. 161.

³⁰Embassy airgram of August 26, 1975, cited in Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 92.

liberation. Markets, private property, money and religion were abolished. The emptying of the cities was seen as a decisive step in this. “If we had kept Phnom Penh,” the CPK wrote in its internal organ, “it [private property] would have had much strength. It is true that we were stronger and had more influence than the private sector when we were in the countryside. But in Phnom Penh we would have become their satellite.”³¹

A “UNIQUE” REVOLUTION?

The CPK understood very well that this ran contrary to the policies and experience of every socialist revolution. “The expulsion of the population of Phnom Penh is a measure one will not find in any other country’s revolution,” noted an internal CPK document. Foreign Minister Ieng Sary later explained to a foreign correspondent, “The Khmer revolution has no precedent. What we are trying to do has never been done before in history.”³²

In fact, the CPK leadership considered their revolution totally unique. In July, Pol Pot told a meeting of 3,000 army representatives: “We have won total, definitive, and clean victory, meaning that we have won it without any foreign connection or involvement. We dared to wage a struggle on a stand completely different from that of the world revolution. . . . In the whole world, since the advent of revolutionary war and since the birth of US imperialism, no country, no people and no army has been able to drive the imperialists out to the last man and score total victory over them. Nobody could.”³³

Pol Pot was making two separate claims that need to be deconstructed. First, the idea that no one else had ever before defeated the US was simply false - what about China, Korea and Vietnam? It seems that the real point here is to contrast Cambodia with Vietnam, which had received aid from the USSR and China and therefore won an unclear victory. It is true that the Vietnamese leadership had turned away from revolutionary Marxism on every front (including military doctrine) and in the struggle to free Vietnam from the clutches of the US compromised their country and sold their soul to the equally imperialist USSR. (After the fall of the Soviet bloc, this approach led them to fall into the hands of the West again.) But Cambodia did not win its liberation independently of the world context.³⁴

This first claim, with its blatant nationalism, was inextricably linked to the second, which was true: the CPK was not adapting Marxism’s lessons (based on historical and world-wide experience) to Cambodia’s specific and unique conditions but instead proceeding from “a stand completely different from that of the world revolution”. Cambodians returning from Europe were lectured on “the superiority of the Khmer revolution, in particular because of the abolition of money and the evacuation of the cities”.³⁵ This was explicitly a criticism of China’s revolution: “The Chinese now pay wages to state workers, etc. Wages lead to private ownership, because when you have money you save to buy this or that.”³⁶

The point of difference - Cambodia’s uniqueness - was that the struggle was not aimed against the old ruling classes, which were considered irremediably smashed, but against all private property in general and all who had become tainted by it, including all classes in the cities. “We have already put down the capitalists and the feudalist classes and we continue to strike them further. And we are also hitting the private property of the petty bourgeoisie, the peasants and the workers. . . . We evacuated the people from the cities which is our class struggle.”³⁷

The other side of this “class struggle” is what was done with the people evacuated from the cities. The country’s population was divided into two categories, “old people” (those living in revolutionary base areas

³¹Cited in Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 96.

³²Both cited in Chandler, p. 240.

³³*Tung Padevat*, August 1975, cited in Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 94. Emphasis in original.

³⁴While principally relying on its own forces, Cambodia received important aid from China during the war and after it as well. (The first shipload of food supplies from China arrived less than a week after liberation. By mid-September, China offered \$1 billion in interest-free economic aid, including a \$20 million outright gift - the most aid China ever gave any one country. Statistics from *China Quarterly*, quoted in Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 129.

³⁵Interviews cited by Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 148.

³⁶CPK document “Examine the Control”, cited by Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 147.

³⁷“Sharpen the Consciousness of the Proletarian Class to Be as Keen and Strong as Possible,” *Tung Padevat*, in Jackson, pp. 271-9.

before April 1975) and “new people” (city dwellers and peasants living in areas under Lon Nol’s control, about 30% of the population according to a CPK document³⁸ and closer to 40% according to other calculations.³⁹)

A PROFITABLE DIVISION

These two categories did not correspond to social class. There were very different classes in the first category, from poor and landless peasants to rich peasants (by liberation, most non-peasants had fled the countryside). The second included an even broader range of classes, from capitalists and feudals, to shopkeepers and intellectuals, to industrial workers and rickshaw drivers.⁴⁰ Nor did this classification correspond to any political category, since it threw together people who sympathised with the revolution and those who opposed it. For instance, almost all of Cambodia’s Chinese minority (about 430,000), by now located in the cities, were labelled “new people”, mixing together moneylenders big and small, shopkeepers and students. Many Sino-Khmer students had been influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China and became radical. (Sihanouk had banned the Cambodia-China Friendship Association, even as he was receiving aid from China.) Speaking Chinese was forbidden.

Students, in fact, had provided important support and many members for the CPK. Secondary education had been very limited until 1954. (Khieu Ponnary, married to Pol Pot, was the first Cambodian woman to graduate from a secular secondary school and later ran a secondary school herself to provide work and income for CPK leaders.) In a futile effort to modernise his country without revolution, Sihanouk spent up to a quarter of the national budget on education and produced a million educated youth. Many of them, without work or future prospects, were open to revolutionary ideas, although by liberation the Party had not carried out mass work in the cities for years. All of them were sent to be “new people”.

At first, many of those who had come from villages originally were free to return there, and the rest were concentrated in a number of areas, especially the Southwest and Eastern zones. All were installed in co-operatives and, like everyone else, went to work in the fields. But the two categories were not treated equally. The co-operatives were political as well as economic units - they were the basic local government, the only mass organisation and the form in which almost all daily life was organised. The “old people” were “full rights members”. The “new people” were not. They could not be candidates for the committees that led the co-operatives or any other post. When the following year, in a manifestation of national unity and institution-building, the country adopted a constitution and a national assembly, they were not allowed to vote. Party documents describe a further division of the “new people” into “probationary members” and “depositees”. It is unclear how widely this was carried out or how much consequence it had. But Party documents themselves make little distinction. “New people” were expected to be neutral at best, and if not all enemies, not potentially advanced either.⁴¹ Often they were told: “To keep you is no gain, to get rid of you no loss.”

There is much evidence that “base people” (as the “old people” were often called) considered the “new people” a burden, unable to farm very well. In some areas, they were well received and well treated. In other areas, they were given less food, the worst shelter and harsh treatment. Initially they were concentrated in the zones where the Party was strongest. In September 1975, a second mass exodus took place. “New people” were sent by foot and rail from the Southwest and East to the less densely populated Northern and Northwestern zones. About 800,000 were sent to the Northwest alone, almost doubling its population in the space of a few months. Here conditions were to become especially harsh.

A NEW STATE RELIGION

At the same time, the CPK was also carrying out another massive population transfer. Previously, the Lon Nol regime, aptly described as “Buddhist fascism”, had launched pogroms against ethnic Vietnamese living

³⁸“On the Control and Implementation of the Political Line of Gathering Forces for the Party’s National Democratic Front”, 22 September 1975, cited in Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 16.

³⁹Kiernan, *PPR*, p. 458.

⁴⁰“Sharpen the Consciousness”, p. 278.

⁴¹See “Pay Attention to Pushing the Work of Building Party and People’s Collective Strength Even Stronger”, in Jackson, especially p. 296.

in Cambodia as part of its holy war against the Vietnamese “Thimils” (the Sanskrit word for “infidels” - a term that was meant to simultaneously lash out at the Vietnamese for being communist atheists and also incorporate the popular Cambodian scorn for the Vietnamese for having, in Cambodian eyes, surrendered to Christianity). 300,000 peasant settlers, plantation workers and other Vietnamese were driven out amid a squall of racist hysteria whipped up by the US puppet regime, drawing on animosities accumulated in earlier centuries of Vietnamese occupation. Within five months after the liberation in Cambodia, most of the remaining 150,000 ethnic Vietnamese were also removed to Vietnam. The Democratic Kampuchea government labelled them “Vietnamese residents whom Vietnam had secretly infiltrated into Kampuchea and who lived hidden, mixed with the population”.⁴² Few of the 10,000 who remained (mostly with Khmer spouses and families) survived the next few years.

Another non-Khmer minority targeted by the DK regime were the Chams, a Moslem people numbering several hundred thousand, with their own distinctive customs, who live throughout Cambodia, especially along the rivers. In addition to fishing, many worked as butchers (a job Buddhists preferred to leave to them) or small traders. They were considered fierce fighters, and during the war both sides recruited many Cham soldiers. It has been said that they initially supported the Khmer Rouge because of the discrimination they had suffered at the hands of the Buddhist governments, but that they turned against the revolutionaries after 1973 when their language, distinctive dress, religion and religious trappings (such as beards) were banned in the new co-operatives - and then the Lon Nol regime turned around and courted them.⁴³ While it may be true that as a particularly traditional and religious group, they tended to oppose the revolution, it is certain that when the new government persecuted them, they resisted violently, sometimes killing CPK cadre, Khmer and Cham alike. Their villages were broken up and they were scattered among the “new people” in co-operatives. There was no attempt to wipe them out as long as they ate pork (a test repeatedly put to them) and abandoned their customs. But they were forced to accept Khmerisation.

However, Khmer minorities (the “upper Khmer” or tribal peoples of the hills) were favoured as “real” Cambodians whose dark skin was favourably contrasted to that of “white” Chinese, Vietnamese and others.

All this adds up to a systematic approach: religion was abolished by decree, but the CPK did not hesitate to rely on the most backward religious and ethnic prejudices, synthesised in the (not very) new state religion: Khmer superiority.

It also went very well with another aspect of the Democratic Kampuchea regime that, whether consciously or not, also represented a reluctance to thoroughly break with traditional ideas. The Democratic Kampuchea government did not repeat Sihanouk’s “Buddhist socialism” slogans, but he was, in name, at least, the head of the new state (until he was quietly sent into retirement in September 1977), and that whole concept of communism (which Sihanouk often condemned as treason to Buddhism) was never publicly referred to. In this situation, it was easy for many people to have the impression that the “Organisation” was simply a more nationalist and radical component of the united front of which the Buddhist monarch was the ostensible leader.

THE PLAN FOR SOCIALISM

Shortly after liberation, the new government declared the old Lon Nol banknotes no longer legal currency. New bills with an image of the Angkor Wat temples had been printed up, but at the last minute the government decided not to put them into circulation. Money, they announced, was history in Cambodia.

This was a radical measure, but not a particularly revolutionary decision.

For one thing, it was not simply an over-hasty step based on a hatred for what Marx called “the nexus of callous cash payment” that turns all human relations into ones of naked self-interest.⁴⁴ Like the 1973 leap to co-operatives, it was justified as a measure against national enemies who might use it: “If we use money, it will fall into the hands of individuals. . . . If the money falls into the hands of bad people or enemies, they will

⁴²This description of ethnic Vietnamese who had lived in Cambodia for generations, in the same way as many Cambodians lived in Vietnam, could have been taken from Lon Nol’s fascist propaganda, but in fact it comes from the DK government’s *Black Paper*.

⁴³Becker, pp. 262–3.

⁴⁴“Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert Tucker, ed. (W.W. Norton & Co, 1972), p. 337.

use it to destroy our cadres by bribing them with this or that. . . . They have the money to bribe the people's sentiment. Then in one year, ten years, twenty years, our clean Cambodian society will become Vietnam."⁴⁵

For another thing, currency was abolished but, as we shall see, money as a category persisted - and, when it came to determining the plans of the state and the lives of the people, it ruled.

In 1976, the CPK adopted a four-year plan for the country's development, which in almost comical nationalist one-upsmanship over China was called the "Super Great Leap Forward". The main target was to double rice production in the years 1977-1980 so that Cambodia could export \$1.4 billion worth of agricultural goods. Ninety percent of that was to be rice sold to its traditional buyers (Hong Kong, Singapore and African countries), with Thailand a vital market for other products. The profit would be used to buy the machinery and raw materials needed to achieve modern (mechanised) agriculture within 10-15 years and modern industry within 15-20 years.

The key to doubling rice production would be to "solve the water question" by building an extensive system of water-retention dams and irrigation canals throughout the country, so as to progress from a pre-Liberation average of one metric tonne a year per hectare to an average of three tonnes in areas where one crop a year was harvested and six tonnes or more in a growing number of areas where irrigation was to make two yearly harvests possible. To that end, within a year, the co-operatives moved to a "higher level" - far bigger farms, with up to a thousand people, and roving work teams able to carry out large-scale projects. All private property was abolished except for clothes, eating and hygiene utensils, notebooks and a few other personal items. Collective eating arrangements were made universal and compulsory; people were forbidden to carry out sideline activities such as fishing, gathering fruit and nuts, raising chickens, etc., which had made an important difference in their living standards.

Some critics of Democratic Kampuchea have ridiculed its ambitious economic goals as unobtainable or unnecessary, but that is not our purpose here. What was wrong with the CPK's plan for "building socialism quickly" was not that it was too quick, but that it couldn't lead to socialism.

First of all, it is impossible to build socialism in a country that hasn't settled accounts with feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism (capitalism interlocked with feudalism and imperialism). The CPK did not intend to build an "autarchic [self-contained], peasant society", as some critics have claimed; instead of liberating the peasants, they planned to modernise exclusively on the backs of the peasants. (This will be discussed further in part IV.)

Secondly, the plan confused socialism with modern machinery. That's why its slogans are so similar to the call for "Four Modernisations" issued at that same moment by the Right in the Chinese Party, which argued that increasing production was the most important aspect of building socialism. In opposition to this, the Maoist slogan "Grasp revolution, promote production" put forward revolutionising the relations of production (which means, ultimately, the relations between people) as key to developing the productive forces (understood to include both tools and people). This, too, will be taken up again in part IV, but for now, at least, it has to be said that in building a society where the basic relationships between people are based on coercion, the CPK was simply perpetuating the old social relationships in a new form.

In fact, the CPK's approach to economics was capitalist in essence. Both socialism and capitalism need surplus product (over and above what people need to live) to build up the productive forces, but in the CPK plan rice was taken as capital in the strictly capitalist sense, as a commodity to be traded for other commodities on the international market. For all of the CPK's nationalism, the calculations in this plan to build socialism had to be - and were - expressed in American dollars.⁴⁶ Although a socialist country will have to buy some necessary items abroad, an economy that revolves around buying and selling on the world market will never achieve the all-around, balanced internal development necessary to become independent from imperialism, build socialism and support the world revolution. Even aside from the problem of how to stand up to external imperialist pressure (which Cambodia apparently hoped to solve by selling to colonies and other countries under the thumb of the big powers, rather than directly to imperialist countries), such a country will never be able to break free of market considerations internally. This plan would have enslaved

⁴⁵"Examine the Control", cited in Kiernan, *PPR*, pp. 98-9.

⁴⁶Literally. This plan and related political documents are in *Pol Pot Plans the Future*.

Cambodia ever more thoroughly to the capitalist world market. Apparently the CPK was not consciously following the model of Cuba, with its fatal decision to mortgage the country to the export of sugar, but there was nothing “unique” about the Cambodian version of this revisionism.⁴⁷

The application of this plan varied in the CPK’s seven zones, which seems to reflect different lines within the Party more than local conditions. However, the CPK centre itself, in a document published in Tung Padevat, emphasised the strategic importance of choosing where to concentrate offensives, in economic construction as much as in war, and declared, “The good number one battlefield for us is the NW zone”.⁴⁸ The Party had taken the decision that the Northwestern and Northern zones were to provide a large part of the rice surplus.

The larger Northwestern Zone contained some of Cambodia’s most productive rice fields and before liberation had been the main source of its rice exports. But of the zone’s 1.8 million inhabitants (a quarter of the country’s population), the majority were former city people from Phnom Penh and Battambang, making this by far the greatest concentration of “new people”. Further, the demands placed on them were to be higher than anywhere else. Forty percent of the country’s fields chosen to be harvested twice yearly were in the Northwest, and the state was to keep half the value of the rice harvested there, as opposed to 20% in other zones.

This was truly a perverse decision from the point of view of socialism, and stood in sharp contrast to Mao’s China. China took up the slogan of “In agriculture, learn from Tachai” - an agriculturally difficult area where the advanced consciousness of former poor peasants propelled rapid economic development by creating new relations of production. The CPK chose to make its economic breakthroughs in the agriculturally richest areas by concentrating the greatest number of people they had excluded from the revolution, in a region where the Party was relatively weak (it was held by the Lon Nol regime until the end and the reactionary army staged its last stand there) and unable to lead. And more, many of these urban people were not used to this kind of labour and didn’t know much about farming. At the same time, the Southwestern Zone, a poor area that had long been a CPK stronghold, was given a much smaller place in this economic offensive and relieved of most of its “new people”, as was the Eastern Zone, where the CPK was also strong and deeply-rooted.

Instead of relying on the conscious activism of the labourers and giving special emphasis to the efforts of the most advanced, the CPK was operating according to a very different logic. A revisionist modernisation scheme was the major factor in this apparently irrational decision. Capital was working in mysterious ways, but it was definitely in command

HARVEST OF DISASTER

The harvest at the end of 1975 - truly a battle against the devastation wreaked by the US imperialists - was surprisingly successful. But by the next year, the results were disastrous. Especially in the Northwest, large numbers of people died from malnutrition and disease, both adults toiling in the fields and youth in the mobile work teams building irrigation projects. The expanded “co-operatives” were administered by committees of 30, “old people” and Party or army cadre. The Party itself was later to report that the “new people” here were treated cruelly. Ieng Thirith, Democratic Kampuchea’s Minister for Social Affairs, made an inspection tour of the zone in mid-1977 on behalf of the CPK centre, of which she was a leading member. “Conditions there were very queer. In Battambang [province, not the city], I saw they [the cadre] made all the people go to the rice fields. The fields were very far from the villages. The people had no homes and they were all very ill. . . . I know the directives of the Prime Minister [Pol Pot] were that no old people, pregnant women, women nursing babies or small children were to work in the fields. But I saw everybody in the open rice fields, in the open air and very hot sun, and many were ill with diarrhoea and malaria.”⁴⁹

The CPK leadership understood that something was going very wrong. Overwork had become a major national problem. “So far this year, the strength of the labour force is rather feeble. Only in the East is

⁴⁷See “Notes on the Political Economy of Cuba”, *A World To Win* nos. 14 and 15 (1990/1991).

⁴⁸“Excerpted Report on the Leading Views of the Comrade Representing the Party Organization at a Zone Assembly”, in *PPPF*, p. 25. Note that this plan was discussed within the Party for a time, although the Party’s existence was still secret.

⁴⁹Interview with Ieng Thirith, Becker, p. 247.

the labour force not feeble”, reads a late 1976 report attributed to Pol Pot.⁵⁰ Most people were not being adequately fed. Concerning food reserves, the report continues, “A number of places have solved it nicely, but three-quarters of the country has failed to do so.”⁵¹ “Some of our comrades behave as if all new people were enemies. They don’t trust them to make political progress, to acquire political consciousness, or to solve the problems of livelihood. This is a big misinterpretation. If it were true, we would be unable to round up the people to take the side of the revolution in terms of politics, consciousness, and in terms of tasks assigned by the line laid down by the Party.”⁵²

This report is striking for what is right in it as well as what is wrong. The Party recognised that things were going badly, it expressed concern for the people and correctly understood that it had to solve problems of livelihood and unite the people if it were going to retain power. Yet at the same time the report also fails to recognise the source of these problems.

Because the CPK held that the main target was “individualism, whether of feudalists, capitalists, or other classes not particularly poor, such as independent farmers, independent workers, and independent manual labourers”,⁵³ they could not distinguish between contradictions among the people and those with the enemy. It was impossible to unite the people with that line. Further, since the co-operatives were not based on “the principle of voluntary co-operation and mutual benefit”, as Mao wrote of China’s co-operative movement,⁵⁴ and since the CPK could not lead the co-operatives in a way that would meet the people’s basic necessities, at least over time, then how could people be expected to have any enthusiasm for them?

The inability of Party cadre to win the support of the people and a tendency to impose policy by force is often criticised in this and other documents. Part of the solution, the report says, is for cadre to go “down to live among the people” and “be trained to solve this problem well so as to unite themselves with the people”.⁵⁵ Again, this fails to see that no matter how Party members and committees carried it out, the underlying obstacle was the Party’s line itself. But the CPK leadership was determined to find the source of the problem in the application of the line. The report’s main focus is not on Party members’ shortcomings or mistakes, but on conspiratorial wrecking activities: “[H]idden enemies seek to deprive the people of food, while following our orders to some extent. These people exist in the army. They look like people conforming with the law. They take our circular instructions and use them to mistreat the people and to deprive them, forcing them to work whether they are sick or healthy.”⁵⁶

This was actually the operative section: “[T]here is a sickness inside the Party, born in the time when we waged a people’s and democratic revolution. [In other words, in the 1960s and ’70s.] We cannot locate it precisely. . . . We search for the microbes within the Party without success. They are buried. As our socialist revolution advances, however, seeping more strongly into every corner of the Party, the army and among the people, we can locate the ugly microbes. We are encouraged to expel treacherous elements that pose problems to the Party and to the revolution. If we wait any longer, the microbes can do real damage. . . . To give an example, the string of traitors that we smashed recently had been organised secretly during the people’s revolution and the democratic revolution. In those days, that sort of people could get alongside us. In a socialist era, they must be cast aside. Now 1976 was a year of furious, diligent class struggle. Many microbes emerged. Many networks came into view.”⁵⁷

Ieng Thirith was more blunt in her interview with a Western correspondent. “Agents had gotten into our ranks,” she said, “and they had gotten into our highest ranks. We were not yet in full control in 1976. The power was in the hands of the zone secretaries. . . . they controlled millions of people, and we, the government, we controlled nothing but factories [in Phnom Penh]. That’s all.”⁵⁸ Her husband, Ieng Sary, foreign minister and top Party leader, blamed Nhim Ros, secretary of the Northwestern Zone, and So Phim, secretary of the

⁵⁰“Report of Activities of the Party Centre According to the General Political Tasks of 1976,” *PPPF*, p. 197.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵⁴Mao Tsetung, “On the Question of Agricultural Cooperatives”, *Selected Readings* (Foreign Languages Press, 1971), p. 399.

⁵⁵“Report”, *PPPF*, p. 205.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 184–5.

⁵⁸Interview with Becker, p. 247.

Eastern Zone, for exacerbating divisions among the people in order to carry out sabotage.⁵⁹ Both men were eventually called Vietnamese agents. Nhim Ros was executed, So Phim killed while resisting arrest.⁶⁰

SECRET WAR WITHIN THE PARTY

Who were these hidden enemies? It is more than likely that some existed. There are many examples of the Right within the Chinese Party sabotaging socialist construction by applying policies that did not correspond to the requirements of the situation and the sentiments of the masses. In fact, one of the greatest lessons Mao drew from the experience of the Cultural Revolution and of socialist construction in the USSR was that with the development of the socialist revolution, the key battles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are those fought within the party itself over what policies and line to apply. But the CPK was saying something different. The problem was not one of line, a line that could be identified, criticised, struggled against and defeated as the party reached a higher unity. Nor does the reference to people who had joined the party during the democratic revolution point to what Mao meant when he warned about “bourgeois democrats becoming capitalist roaders”, people who joined the party during the period of New Democratic revolution but who opposed the further transformation of society through continuing socialist revolution. Instead, the CPK claimed that these hidden enemies were able to sneak in during that period because of the weaknesses imposed by Vietnamese influence. They owed their continued power to Vietnam because, in the CPK leadership’s view, now that money had been abolished and the old property-owning classes had been scattered in co-operatives, there was no longer any internal social basis for the emergence of antagonistic classes and thus antagonistic class struggle within Kampuchean society or the Party.⁶¹

Before this late 1976 report quoted above, the CPK leadership had sent cadre from the Eastern Zone to “sweep” the Northwestern Zone, rooting out leading cadre suspected of being at fault for the problems that were arising. Ieng Sary later complained that the Eastern Zone cadre had punished and killed the wrong people.⁶² After the report, cadre from the Southwestern Zone were sent in to repeat this combing. They found little rice on hand, although the quotas had been reported fulfilled and the required amount had been turned over to the state. Apparently a number of the Northwestern “old people” were killed as punishment. At first the “new people” welcomed the Southwestern Zone cadre, who were more politically sophisticated and treated them better. Some “new people” were brought in to leadership of the co-operatives to replace the removed “old people”, and in general this distinction seems to have lessened in this zone. But by the next harvest, the problem just repeated itself. The harvest was even worse. Some reports say that half the rice fields lay unplanted because the people were too weak from hunger and disease to work.⁶³ However, the centre’s rice requisition was not lessened. Instead, there was a new “sweep”.

The CPK set up a prison for those suspected of grave political crimes in a former school building at Tuol Sleng, not far from the capital. All of those who entered there were tortured and almost all of them executed. The killings in the countryside are more difficult to examine. What makes Tuol Sleng different is that the Party kept detailed records of every prisoner, their class background and their confessions, for detailed confessions were the main point of its existence. The Vietnamese, after they invaded and occupied Cambodia in 1979, made a museum of Tuol Sleng and used it to discredit the CPK. But there has never been any claim that the documents there are forged. The authenticity of some of them was confirmed by Ieng Sary.⁶⁴ Kang Kek

⁵⁹Interview with Becker, p. 245.

⁶⁰So Phim had purged the Cambodian returnees from Vietnam, which is a counter?argument to the charge that he was a simple Vietnamese tool, but there did seem to be a dispute between the Eastern Zone and the Party centre over how to deal with Vietnam.

⁶¹It should be noted that this document concludes that in light of these “hidden enemies” and “networks” within the Party, its existence should remain secret. “Enemies also want us to emerge so that they can observe us clearly, and so they can proceed to accomplish their long-term objectives. The emergence of the Party poses the problem of defending the leadership. Back in September and October, we had thought to emerge also, but since that time documents have revealed that enemies have tried to defeat us by using every possible method. . . .” The conclusion was “to defer our decision on the emergence of the Party”. The argument that revealing the Party’s existence would endanger its leadership is made less convincing by the fact that by this time Pol Pot and the other top Party leadership were now publicly identified as running the government. What was secret was both that they were supposed to be communists and the existence of the Party itself

⁶²Interview with Becker, p. 275

⁶³Charles H. Twining, “The Economy”, in Jackson, p. 145.

⁶⁴Interview with Becker, p. 275.

Iey (better known as “Duch”), who was in charge at Tuol Sleng, recently corroborated the basic outline and verified his signature on some of these documents.⁶⁵

A REACTIONARY METHOD

No socialist regime has ever made systematic use of torture. It was illegal in China, and it should be noted that Mao points this out forcefully just before discussing “counter-revolutionaries who have sneaked into the Party”.⁶⁶ One of many reasons for this is that while the enemy may be able to use torture to break some revolutionaries so that they commit the reactionary act of informing on their comrades, no torture can ever make a reactionary into a revolutionary - and therefore, the question of the truth of what people say under torture, always a big question, is even greater for proletarian revolutionaries. Further, it degrades the revolution and creates a climate that impedes the correct and necessary struggle against wrong lines in the party. The Cambodian experience is proof of this.

In China, when Mao analysed that there was a bourgeois headquarters within the Party, he and other Party leaders took the basic issues at stake to the masses and launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to subject the bourgeois line and policies to mass criticism, make the lessons of the material basis for the emergence of a new bourgeoisie under socialism a mass question and formulate new policies to continue digging up that “soil” step by step while raising the consciousness of the Party and the masses through studying basic Marxist works and thoroughly dissecting and criticising the bourgeois line. When, as the document quoted above says, the CPK leadership analysed that a “life-and-death struggle” threatened their Party, they resorted to secrecy, torture and executions.

At first, in 1976, of the more than 750 executions at Tuol Sleng, most were considered members of the old society: Lon Nol soldiers, professionals, students, factory workers, etc. They confessed to CIA links. Koy Thuon, secretary of the Northern Zone, also admitted to CIA connections under torture and was executed in 1977. But the confession of Northwest Zone leader Nhim Rhos was a bombshell: the Vietnamese, he said, had set up a parallel party within the CPK. In the next two years, as some 20,000 people in all were tortured and killed in Tuol Sleng, this theme became a drumbeat, and every confession led to further arrests, torture and confessions of Party leaders, members and their spouses and children, in ever-widening mad spasms of murder.

As could be expected, the meticulous records left behind in this place of horror make it unmistakably clear that people were tortured until they gave the confession sought after. The regulations stated that torture was to be applied “by hand” and slowly, to facilitate this result; the torturer was considered to have failed at his duty if a prisoner died before writing what was considered an acceptable confession (often involving many drafts and a final “clean” version).

Since this was not seen as a political and ideological line struggle and certainly not as one that had to be taken to the masses, Democratic Kampuchea’s failures were reduced to a police question and dealt with accordingly. The executions carried out by the regime should be examined in light of this fundamental line problem and not explained in terms of “Cambodian psychology”, or by some inexplicable rage gripping the Party and its mass base (or even as the result of a just rage unleashed by the US-inflicted slaughter).

REAL ISSUES

The question of the differences and contention between the various zones of Democratic Kampuchea (which had developed pretty much autonomously until liberation) is one of the most controversial among Cambodia researchers. There are no documents and not much evidence that would point to clearly contending lines. But it is clear that there were major issues at stake. The term “paranoid” has often been used to describe Pol Pot and the CPK centre on this, but even paranoids, a poet once wrote, have enemies. There were plots; this

⁶⁵“Duch” became a born-again Christian in 1992 and spent the next few years working under an assumed name for the UN and NGOs in western Cambodia. In May 1999 he gave extensive interviews to *Far Eastern Economic Review* writer Nate Thayer (*FEER*, 13 May 1999.)

⁶⁶Mao, “Main Points of the Resolution of the Political Bureau”, *Selected Works*, Vol. 5 (Foreign Languages Press, 1977), p. 46.

was a life-and-death struggle around basic questions of the line of the Kampuchean revolution. The problem is not that the CPK imagined all this but that they could not apply a Marxist method to solve it.

One cluster of issues is obvious: the long-festering controversy over how to sum up the CPK's history and Vietnam's role in it.

The Vietnamese hardly needed to set up a separate political party because their influence and line had been within the CPK since the beginning. Just about the only political question involved in this mortal combat within the Party about which there are contending documents revolves around when to date the Party's founding. A pre-liberation Eastern Zone document puts it in 1951, when the Pracheachon Party was founded under Vietnamese influence.⁶⁷ The 1976 "Decision of the Central Committee on a Variety of Questions" attacks this directly: "The question of the Party History: Set the birth of the Party in 1960 instead; do not use 1951, so that we are close to others - make a clean break."⁶⁸

An important bone of contention with the Workers Party of Vietnam and within the ranks and leadership of the CPK itself had always been how to relate to Sihanouk, in other words, whether or not to subordinate the revolutionary struggle in Cambodia to hopes for an anti-US alliance with the prince. The Vietnamese Party clearly had more confidence in Sihanouk than they did in the Cambodian communists, in terms of the way the VWP tended to see things, which was in relation to their own immediate war aims. But no foreign influence was required to create a reluctance, among some Cambodian Party members, especially those who had found a place in Sihanouk's two-faced political system, to thoroughly rupture with the old society and face the uncertainties of war against it. This is part of the experience of every party that prepares to launch people's war.

In the most basic strategic sense, the line associated with the CPK centre was correct: if the CPK had not built up its own revolutionary army - and it could not have done so without waging war and carrying out agrarian revolution - then Cambodia would not have been liberated from the US.⁶⁹ In fact, it is highly unlikely that Sihanouk would have joined the united front led by the CPK otherwise. As the Party correctly wrote about the Sihanouk forces, "Although they did not want to join us, when the storm came they had to come and take shelter in our refuge. This is because we had already prepared our refuge."⁷⁰

In this, the Cambodian revolution was not so different from the Chinese revolution, where the question of what attitude to take towards Chiang Kai-shek was one of the thorniest problems and a core issue, for it embraced all the basic questions of the class analysis of Chinese society, the primacy of agrarian revolution and people's war, the strategic nature of the revolutionary united front and the question of tactical alliances, the question of independent armed forces under party leadership and so on. These repeated life-and-death struggles within the Communist Party of China were the motive force of the Party's advance, both in terms of the development of its line and the development of the consciousness and unity of its members. It is true that some of the standard-bearers of the wrong line, who at times dominated the Party, eventually committed treason and went over to the enemy in one form or another; but if Mao had simply tried to solve the question by terror he would have failed utterly - in fact, the line developed under his leadership would not have emerged.

Once again, the question of "foreign experience" is fundamental. The problem of class struggle under socialism and two-line struggle in the party as its concentrated expression is one that the proletariat has been grappling with since socialism was first established in the Soviet Union, and the lessons Mao drew from this experience were paid for at a very high price. The CPK had grasped some immediate issues - if they had not, they would not have won victory - but by rejecting those lessons, the CPK was doomed not to "exceed Lenin and outstrip Mao", but to cut off any possibility of correcting their increasingly monstrous errors.

⁶⁷"Summary of Annotated Party History", in Jackson, p. 251 ff.

⁶⁸ *PPPF*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Within that, there are some tactical questions. It was not wrong for China to encourage Sihanouk to act against the US, particularly insofar as Sihanouk did provide concrete aid to the anti-imperialist war. China also provided aid to the CPK, long before and at the time of liberation, and there is no evidence that they ever pressured the CPK to follow suite on China's state-to-state policy. The CPK itself later held that it had concentrated its political fire on Sihanouk's prime minister Lon Nol and his coup preparations, and not on the prince himself during the last year of that period. (*Black Paper*)

⁷⁰ "Abbreviated Lessons," *PPPF*, p. 220

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Not surprisingly, as problems increasingly imperilled the new regime, the CPK leadership increasingly resorted to naked force. This was not necessarily because they wanted to. It was not the path they had set out on, or they never would have gathered and organised the mass support to win victory. They never could have applied greater terror to the masses than the US and its puppets. This theme of the unintendedness of the consequences of their regime has been repeatedly emphasised by surviving Party leaders, even Pol Pot himself. A foreign correspondent described a brief conversation with Pol Pot shortly before his death like this: “I told him many people in the city hate him and think he’s responsible for the killings. He said he knew how many people died. When he said that, he broke down and cried. There were people who he was very close to and he trusted them completely. Then, in the end, they made a mess of everything.”⁷¹ Yet they could find no other method.

The “Super Great Leap Forward” was spiralling into counter-revolutionary depths. The Western imperialist media reports about “genocide” in Cambodia had begun at the moment of liberation - and they were lies and/or gross exaggerations motivated by wounded reactionary pride at having “lost” Indochina. But later, particularly after the first year, amid this turbulent political situation, mass killings did break out and spread. For instance, until late 1976, the centre prevented the killing of former rank-and-file soldiers in the Lon Nol armed forces. This correct policy - while the top officers had blood debts against the masses under their own rule as well as the revolutionaries, the soldiers were usually unenthusiastic conscripts - was later reversed. Former soldiers were sifted out from among the “new people” and killed, often with their families (this execution of wives and children was supposedly to prevent them from seeking revenge against the revolution, but in fact it seems tinged with a feudalistic view of the family). Once again the contrast with real revolutions is stunning. This policy not only made enemies out of hundreds of thousands of people who had not actively opposed the regime or were even supportive, it created a climate in which the “new people” and others were increasingly fearful and opposed to the regime.

In fact, the whole political atmosphere degenerated further and further. The centre may or may not have given directives regarding the killing of people in the co-operatives, but at any rate, the killings of groups of people in far-off fields at night that have come to be emblematic of the Pol Pot regime in the Western press were the inevitable result of the centre’s line. Tools and farm animals were scarce and precious; the 1976 report cites their protection (along with the fulfilment of work quotas in general) as a main form of class struggle. In China, too, the question of the economic use of and preservation of the people’s resources was considered a question of class consciousness. But the CPK’s treatment of this was consistent with their overall line. It is not surprising that city people working many hours a day might ruin a hoe or allow a water buffalo to break a leg, whether out of ignorance or bad luck, or even out of backward resentment - which didn’t make them unredeemable enemies of the revolution. Yet that is how such incidents were often treated, especially if the person had a “bad” class background or other “problems”. The co-operative leadership was becoming increasingly anxious and desperate (and perhaps cynical) and lashing out wildly.

There was a certain change of course in Democratic Kampuchea’s last 15 months or so. Since the regime was about to end abruptly, it is hard to know where all this was headed. Perhaps the desire was to make it a more “normal” revisionist country.

In September 1977, the Cambodian people were finally let in on the secret that “the Organisation” was a communist party. While clandestinity is a basic organisational principle for every party preparing for or waging war against the old order, nonetheless, since the Communist Manifesto, as Marx and Engels declared then, “communists have always disdained to conceal their views”. The 1977 move did not signal a changed relationship with the masses and may have been meant mainly for foreign consumption. It took place in the context of a campaign to “normalise” Democratic Kampuchea’s status and end its diplomatic isolation, and especially an attempt to enter into a military alliance with China immediately following Deng’s coup.

In that same context, in mid-1978 the government announced major policy changes. The CPK leadership, with plans for modern industry, surely knew that they could not do without engineers and technicians for long. Intellectuals (especially foreign-educated Cambodian experts who’d been declared “new people” when

⁷¹Nate Thayer, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 October 1997.

they returned after liberation) were suddenly showered with good food and other inducements and invited back to Phnom Penh. They were gathered together for meetings with representatives of the CPK leadership, who told them that their mistreatment had been a mistake, a provocation against the revolution organised by the CIA and Vietnam.

This seems to have been a part of a broader effort to recoup popular support. A March 1978 article in the CPK organ underlines the need to “gather forces” and says, “And the full rights and probationary members of the co-operatives and even the depositees must study and watch and draw experiences as well. However the full-rights members must study apart first, in order to unite together; and the probationary and depositee members study together, drawing experiences, making corrections over and over - they will all progress. We must educate and build full rights members into progressives. . .”.⁷² In many areas, at least, the distinction between “old” and “new people” was ended by mid-year.

A BAD WAR

Negotiations between Cambodia and Vietnam to achieve a final delineation of their borders had gone on since the two countries were liberated. Vietnam refused to accept the land border drawn by the French colonialists (despite the fact that when the French drew up these borders a century before, they had meant to settle old disputes in Vietnam’s favour). This was a violation of the agreement reached with Sihanouk in 1967 and amounted to a state of permanent pressure against Cambodia. For its part, Cambodia refused to recognise the French-drawn boundaries in the sea, rivers and water known as the Brevié line (less was at stake in this, although the hope that this territory might harbour oil deposits may have loomed large in a country with apparently no other hydrocarbon resources). Until 1977, however, the situation between the two countries was tense but generally stable, as both sides seemed to be avoiding any decisive diplomatic moves or military action.

Exactly how that situation unravelled is not altogether clear, nor, in the end, crucial to our analysis. But the timing is significant. Hostilities began as both countries were entering internal crisis. They blossomed into full war a year later, as Vietnam moved entirely into the Soviet camp and the US began trying to line up an alliance with China, where power had been seized by revisionists.

The CPK was convinced that Vietnam was trying to organise a coup from within. This is the gist of the confessions of former Party leaders Koy Thuon and Hu Nim. There seem to have been bomb explosions in the capital and Siem Reap in 1976. The movement of 20,000 DK troops to the capital - equal to its entire civilian population - indicates extreme concern. The clearest manifestation of what may have been Vietnamese or pro-Vietnamese infiltration occurred in late 1978, on the eve of the Vietnamese invasion. The Democratic Kampuchea government had invited three Western journalists in an effort to win international support. On their last night in the country, there was a mysterious attack on the guest house where they were staying, in the Southwest, not far from the capital. Malcolm Caldwell, one of the most prominent Western writers sympathetic to the new regime, who had just come back delighted from a private interview with Pol Pot, was singled out and shot dead.

Many bourgeois military analysts say the Cambodians mounted small-scale border raids against historically disputed areas in early 1977; fighting was generalised by mid-year. A Cambodian offensive meant to smack the Vietnamese met with defeat, and Vietnam counter-attacked in force. The CPK’s Eastern Zone front collapsed without a major fight. By the end of 1977, Kampuchea broke off relations with Vietnam.

There was a lull for a while in 1978. The centre sent in two brigades to arrest the Eastern Zone leadership. Many Eastern Zone troops fled to link up with the advancing Vietnamese. Vietnam’s army recruited these troops and ethnic Khmers in Vietnam into specially-formed units meant for fighting on Cambodian soil. Cambodia responded by deporting massive numbers of Eastern Zone civilians to the Northwest.

Vietnam’s war aims were made clear by its actions: eventually it was not only to invade and knock out the DK army, but also station 150,000 troops in Cambodia in a decade-long occupation that ended only when the collapse of the USSR made Vietnam’s leaders decide to seek Western investment. In this light, the argument that Vietnam was merely trying to protect itself against the CPK is not tenable.

⁷²“Pay Attention to Pushing the Work of Building Party and People’s Collective Strength Even Stronger”, in Jackson, p. 296.

Nonetheless, Democratic Kampuchea set out to face this threat in a reactionary manner. Phnom Penh radio broadcast an appeal to “purify our armed forces, our Party and the masses of people. . . in defence of Cambodian territory and the Cambodian race. . . . One of us must kill 30 Vietnamese. . . two million troops would be more than enough to fight the Vietnamese, because Vietnam has only 50 million inhabitants. . . . We need only two million troops to crush the 50 million Vietnamese, and we would still have six million people left. We must formulate our combat line in this manner, in order to win victory.”⁷³

This was an astonishing call from a self-proclaimed communist party. It may have seemed to the Democratic Kampuchea leadership that this kind of appeal was the only way to unite Cambodians behind them at that point. But by calling for a race war, they ensured their own defeat. If the Vietnamese government was threatening Cambodia’s sovereignty, it had trampled no less on the revolutionary aspirations of the people of Vietnam. All of Indochina needed real New Democratic and socialist revolution. Why couldn’t a revolutionary party in Cambodia do everything possible to unite with the workers and peasants in Vietnam, including supporting revolutionary politics there? In fact, why didn’t the Cambodian Party do everything possible to avoid or at least postpone a war that went against the interests of the masses of both countries?

The CPK appears to have welcomed the prospect of a showdown. It seems that the Party was convinced that such a final conflict would finally put an end to their own internal problems, both by setting off a wave of national unity and ending Vietnamese interference. Besides, the CPK seemed certain of winning it, which turned out to be a highly subjective view.

Pol Pot told the two other invited Western journalists that Vietnam could not defeat Cambodia on its own because “there is nothing in Vietnam”. Vietnam’s plan, he said, was for the Soviet Union to send Warsaw Pact troops from Europe to invade and occupy Cambodia. The US and its Southeast Asian allies would not accept that; and more, that would leave the Soviet empire weakened on the European front and NATO would move against it.⁷⁴

The Soviet Union, threatened by the prospect of a US/China entente, continued to back Vietnam. US President Carter’s National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was later to brag that, “I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot. I encouraged the Thai to support the DK.”⁷⁵ In February 1979 China would invade Vietnam with a quarter of a million troops to “teach them a lesson” - only to be taught a better lesson by the Vietnamese. But the CPK’s hope that reactionary alliances would mean Cambodia’s salvation and that they would emerge victorious turned out to be another wild miscalculation.

On 25 December 1978, Vietnam unleashed the same “blossoming lotus” strategy they had used to take Saigon. The troops under Vietnamese command included 100,000 Vietnamese and 30,000 Cambodians. The bulk of Kampuchea’s 80,000 troops were massed at the eastern border, in expectations of positional warfare. Vietnam’s troops outflanked them, punching through north and south of their positions to the centre of Cambodia and then unfolded, with part of their forces moving back east to crush the Cambodian army from behind and the rest speeding westward and outward in all directions. By January 7, two weeks later, they seized Phnom Penh.

The CPK leadership had to be ferried out by helicopter as ignominiously as Lon Nol before them.

IV. SOME THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

ON PRIVATE PROPERTY AND EQUALITY

To be provocative, let’s recall what Marx and Engels wrote in the Communist Manifesto: “In a sense, the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.”⁷⁶

Isn’t this what the CPK set out to do? And why shouldn’t they have tried to do so at one stroke, overnight? There are two aspects to what was wrong with their understanding, both inextricably interrelated. One is

⁷³A BBC recording cited by Kiernan, *PPR*, pp. 393–4.

⁷⁴Becker, pp. 431–2.

⁷⁵Quoted in Becker, p. 440.

⁷⁶“Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert Tucker, ed. (W.W. Norton & Co., 1972), pp. 335–62.

a wrong conception of private property and its contradictory nature and role in a country like Cambodia - the question of New Democratic revolution. The other is a wrong conception about what it means to negate capitalism through socialism. In both aspects, CPK line and policy was, despite its occasional Marxist terminology, profoundly anti-Marxist.

In the Manifesto, the founders of Marxism explain that they do not mean that socialism will abolish the property of “the petty artisan and of the small peasant”. “There is no need to abolish that; the development of industry has to a great extent already destroyed it, and is destroying it daily.” That kind of private property existed long before capitalism and, the experience of socialist revolution has proven, will exist for a long time after capitalism as a system has been overthrown. The main target of socialism is capital, “that kind of property which exploits wage-labour, and which cannot increase except upon conditions of begetting a new supply of wage-labour for fresh exploitation”. Thus capital is a very particular kind of private property: it is the collective product of the labourers that is expropriated, snatched from them, by a class with antagonistic interests, the bourgeoisie. “To be a capitalist is, therefore, not a personal, it is a social power.” This point cannot be emphasised enough. The aim is not to abolish the “personal appropriation of the products of labour... for the maintenance and reproduction of human life... All we want to do away with is the miserable character of this appropriation, under which the labourer lives merely to increase capital, and is allowed to live only in so far as the interests of the ruling class require it.”

To explain, expand and apply this analysis to Cambodia, first let’s look at the aspect of private property. Contrary to what Marx and Engels foresaw in the mid-19th century, every socialist revolution so far has taken place in countries where small-scale property, not capitalist property, was the most prevalent form (even though Russia, where the majority of people were peasants, was an imperialist country). China was ruled over by “the three mountains”, imperialism, feudalism and what Mao called bureaucrat capital capital tied up with imperialism, the landlords and the state.

Cambodia was different from China in many ways and yet it was not very different in some fundamental ones. The vast majority of the people were oppressed and exploited by all three mountains. In particular, the peasants’ ability to make the land produce a living was constantly undermined and held back by the tribute taken from them by these three forces, sometimes as rent and other forms of exploitation by feudal landowners, and sometimes at the hands of the tax collectors and usurers, who also sucked up the surplus created by the peasants’ toil. This surplus was not principally reinvested in production (and even more rarely in agricultural production). It went to support a feudal aristocracy (especially the court) and the colonialist administration and its successor, Sihanouk’s feudal-bureaucrat capitalist government, and other forms of parasitism as well (including the usurers themselves and the Buddhist hierarchy).

NEW DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

In countries of this kind, as the Declaration of RIM succinctly puts it, “The target of the revolution... is foreign imperialism and the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie and feudals, which are classes closely linked to and dependent on imperialism. In these countries, the revolution will pass through two stages: a first, new democratic revolution which leads directly to the second, socialist revolution. The character, target and tasks of the first stage of the revolution enables and requires the proletariat to form a broad united front of all classes and strata that can be won to support the new democratic programme. It must do so, however, on the basis of developing and strengthening the independent forces of the proletariat, including in appropriate conditions its own armed forces and establishing the hegemony of the proletariat among other sections of the revolutionary masses, especially the poor peasants. The cornerstone of this alliance is the worker-peasant alliance and the carrying out of the agrarian revolution (i.e., the struggle against semi-feudal exploitation in the countryside and/or the fulfilment of the slogan ‘land to the tiller’) occupies a central part of the new democratic programme.”⁷⁷

Even this first, new democratic stage of the revolution was not thoroughly carried out in Cambodia. Initially, the targets were correctly selected and the peasants mobilised in a war of national liberation and agrarian revolution, but even in the two years or so before liberation there was a tendency to confuse the aims. By 1976, contrasting Cambodia’s “Super Great Leap Forward”, one year after liberation, to China’s mere Great

⁷⁷ *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement* (Keralam, India, 1998), p. 35.

Leap Forward seven years after liberation there, the CPK was to write: “Certainly our Party didn’t hesitate. We didn’t go through a period of land reform or social change. We leaped from a people’s democratic revolution into socialism.”⁷⁸ This means that the difference was not just one of pace, but of road.

Cambodia’s “co-operatives” were not a sequel to a revolutionary redistribution of the land. Instead, they simply amounted to confiscation of whatever land many peasants did have by a state whose economic plans would effectively chain them more tightly to the world market. The claim that Cambodia had become “basically a collective society”⁷⁹ cannot be accepted if we accept the Manifesto’s distinction between capitalism and socialism: “In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour. In Communist society [here Marx and Engels mean to include the first stage of communist society, i.e. socialism], accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.” In light of all we have seen about Democratic Kampuchea, which category best describes the existence of the masses of people there is obvious. The leap was not into socialism but into capitalism.

AGRICULTURAL CO-OPERATION

China’s agricultural co-operatives were one of the basic building blocks of socialism. But the formation of high-level agricultural co-operatives (the people’s communes) was the culmination of a process that began with the New Democratic revolution. Immediately following the nation-wide seizure of power (and even before, in some liberated areas), the peasants were led to seize the land. Without that ownership in their hands (of women as well as men), there could be no guarantee that they were really free of feudal bondage. Otherwise, they would have felt that nothing had changed, and in fact there would have been a tendency for feudal relations to reappear in new forms. As Mao pointed out, the New Democratic revolution had opened the door to capitalism. But at the same time, it opened the door even wider to socialism. The peasants could see the advantages of pooling their land and labour, and they could also see that the polarisation between rich and poor that inevitably accompanies capitalist development in agriculture means that socialism is the only way out for the vast majority. With little time wasted, they were organised to form mutual aid teams and small, lower-level co-operatives in which land was farmed collectively but people received a share of the harvest in proportion to the land, animals and tools they had provided. (This was done extensively in the liberated areas of Cambodia until 1973 and in some places after that, and was very popular with the peasants.) Then, in the mid-1950s, the Chinese Party began “to call on the peasants, with the same principles of voluntary co-operation and mutual benefit, to unite further on the basis of these small, semi-socialist co-operatives and organise large agricultural producers’ co-operatives which are fully socialist in nature. [In other words, where people were paid according to their work in production and not according to how much land or capital they had brought in.] These steps make it possible for the peasants to gradually raise their socialist consciousness, through their personal experience and gradually change their mode of life, thus lessening any feeling of an abrupt change. These steps can generally avoid any drop in crop yields during, say, the first year or two; indeed, they must ensure a year-by-year increase, and this can be done.”⁸⁰

While in Cambodia, almost everyone was forced to live on a “co-operative” farm, in China the co-operatives built by relying on the poor and lower-middle peasants were so clearly superior that for a short period of time at first the better-off peasants had to be prevented from flooding into them and taking them over before the other peasants could develop their own political strength.

WHAT IS A SOCIALIST ECONOMY?

The CPK was no less wrong about socialism than about New Democracy. It wrongly held that all public property is automatically socialist. Marx identified socialist public property not with state ownership but social ownership. In other words, state ownership, too, can be (and certainly was in pre-liberation Cambodia) a form of private ownership in the Marxist sense, a form in which the surplus produced by the labourers is appropriated by a handful of people for their own interests while the “labourer lives merely to increase capital, and is allowed to live only in so far as the interests of the ruling class require”.

⁷⁸“The Party’s Four Year Plan to Build Socialism in All Fields”, *PPPF*, p. 46.

⁷⁹“The Party’s Four Year Plan”, p. 45.

⁸⁰Mao, “On the Question of Agricultural Cooperatives”, p. 409.

Whether or not a society is truly socialist depends on whether or not the labouring masses increasingly, and in waves, are becoming the masters of production (the process of production itself, the relations of people in production and the allocation of the surplus), of the state and of all society, leading step by step but steadily toward the abolition of what the Chinese revolutionaries called “the four ills”: class distinctions generally, the relations of production on which they rest, the social relations that correspond to these production relations and all the ideas that result from these social relations. This point deserves the most profound study (see *Maoist Economics: The Shanghai Textbook*), but even this relatively brief overview here makes it all too plain that despite the CPK’s claims to be “20 or 30 years ahead of China”, it had embarked on a different road.

Mao’s study of the experience of socialist construction in the world, including especially the USSR, as well as China, led him to understand that socialism is a relatively long historical period of transition. The Shanghai Textbook explains, “For a certain period of time in socialist society, there still exist non-socialist relations of production. . . . On the other hand, the socialist relations of production themselves undergo a process of development from a less mature to a more mature state. In socialist society, ‘communism cannot as yet be fully ripe economically and entirely free from traditions or traces of capitalism.’ The establishment of the system of socialist public ownership was a fundamental negation of the system of private ownership. But this does not imply that the issue of ownership is completely settled; bourgeois right has not been abolished entirely in the sphere of ownership. Furthermore, owing to the practice of the commodity system, exchange through money, distribution according to work, and the existence of basic differences between workers and peasants, town and country, and mental and manual labour, bourgeois right still exists to a serious extent in the mutual relations between people, and holds a dominant position in distribution. This kind of bourgeois right in the historical period of socialism cannot be entirely abolished, and, in certain aspects it is still allowed to exist legally and is protected by the state. It can only be restricted under the dictatorship of the proletariat, which actively creates the conditions for the elimination of bourgeois right from the stage of history.”⁸¹

Bourgeois right refers to economic and social relations that uphold formal equality but actually contain elements of inequality.⁸² While the CPK thought that it had solved the problem of social inequalities and therefore of classes overnight by getting rid of money and wages, bourgeois right inevitably continued to exist. For instance, to speak only of “natural” inequalities, under its distribution system able-bodied young people got larger rations than the handicapped or the elderly. Since the productive level was so low, there was not enough surplus to feed everyone equally. Another example is certain indispensable privileges extended to leading cadre, such as access to transport, radios, etc., as well as extra food rations and medicines to ensure their survival. Absolute egalitarianism proved impossible. As Mao said, criticising this idea when it arose in the early days of the Red Army in China, “We should point out that, before the abolition of capitalism, absolute egalitarianism is a mere illusion of peasants and small proprietors, and that even under socialism there can be no absolute equality, for material things will then be distributed according to the principle of ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his work’ as well as on that of meeting the needs of the work.”⁸³

Under communism, Marx said, society will be guided by the principle “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need”. But until then bourgeois right can only be eliminated gradually and step by step. In brief, the leap from “according to their work” to “according to their need” will be made possible by the increasing communist consciousness of the masses (which is the driving factor) and the development of production (so that people’s needs can actually be satisfied). Not only was the apparent abolition of bourgeois right under the DK regime an illusion, it hid actual injustices, a denial of rights, such as “old people” getting privileges over “new people” (in fact, once again this smelled of feudalism, since family relations could play a determinate role in whether an individual was classified as “new” or “old”). If the regime had lasted longer and especially if it had succeeded in industrialising, these inequalities (which were already potentially fatal) would only have become more pronounced.

⁸¹ *Maoist Economics and the Revolutionary Road to Communism: The Shanghai Textbook*, Raymond Lotta, ed. (Banner Press, 1994), pp. 24–5. Translation of the 1975 Chinese textbook *Fundamentals of Political Economy*.

⁸² See Lotta’s introduction to *Maoist Economics*, p. xliii.

⁸³ “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party”, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, p. 111.

The CPK muddled socialism and communism by doing away with wages, money, etc., but met neither the criterion of communism (in fact, not meeting the needs of the masses at all) nor that of socialism (by not taking into account people's productive labour at all in determining what they receive, but simply giving them starvation rations and sometimes less, which actually hampered production by dampening their enthusiasm for work and often leaving them unable to do so). As Mao said in a different context, this was like wanting a cow to produce milk but not letting it eat grass.

Pol Pot looked at the problem like this: "Where can we find capital to build our industry? Our capital comes essentially from the work of our people. Our people, by their work, develop agricultural production. . . . We also have another important source of capital. That is the fact that we have no salary. The absence of salary constitutes in itself a great source of capital."⁸⁴ While it is true that the surplus created by production is the source of capital under socialism as well as capitalism, this completely and deliberately ignores the difference between this surplus under capitalism and socialism, where "accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer". They adopted the basic capitalist principle of squeezing the labouring people as much as possible. . . in many cases, to death.⁸⁵ In this view, similar to the one that attracts Western capital to set up garment factories in Cambodia today, the country's main comparative advantage is not rice but the fact that its backward social relations make for very cheap labour.

Historically, by far the main error committed in relation to bourgeois right has been to resist moving step by step to eliminate it. Until the "four ills" are eliminated, it will not be "impossible for the bourgeoisie to exist or a new bourgeoisie to arise".⁸⁶ In one of his most far-reaching contributions, made amidst the struggle to prevent Deng and others like him from seizing control of the Party and the state, Mao warned the people, "Our country at present practices a commodity system, the wage system is unequal too, as in the eight-grade scale, and so forth. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat such things can only be restricted. Therefore, if people like Lin Biao come to power [here Mao was summing up the lessons of a previous two-line struggle within the party to serve a new one, against Deng Xiaoping], it will be quite easy for them to rig up the capitalist system. That is why we should do more reading of Marxist-Leninist works."⁸⁷

But the CPK was committing this same error in another, "unique" fashion. Money had been abolished, but commodity production still prevailed: co-operatives gave the state a certain amount of rice and other products (valued in dollars) and received other commodities in exchange; rice itself was considered the most important commodity not because it could feed people but because it could be exchanged on the international market. It was deemed unprofitable to divert efforts from this capital formation to the struggle against malaria and other diseases that were ravishing the people.⁸⁸ In fact, labour power itself remained a commodity, since the purpose of production was not to satisfy the people's needs but to accumulate capital. Under these conditions, the abolition of money simply served as a very threadbare cloak to hide the dominance of capitalism, and the absence of wages an attempt to hide the most bone-cutting exploitation.

Actually, the CPK's line was not entirely "unique". In China, the revisionist ringleaders Liu Shao-chi and Chen Po-ta called for the premature abolition of commodity production, the Shanghai Textbook recounts. Mao retorted, "This way of thinking which attempts to prematurely abolish commodity production and exchange, prematurely negate the constructive role of commodities, value, money and price is detrimental to developing socialist construction and is therefore incorrect." The textbook goes on to say, "Socialist commodity production must not only be retained, but must be developed to consolidate the economic

⁸⁴Speech by Pol Pot, "Let Us Continue to Firmly Hold Aloft the Banner of the Victory of the Glorious Communist Party of Kampuchea In Order to Defend Democratic Kampuchea, Carry On Socialist Revolution and Build up Socialism," cited in Becker, p. 198.

⁸⁵The 1976 plan says, "We must provide the people with 50–100 percent of their material necessities from 1977 on." ("The Party's Four Year Plan", p. 111.) This represents such stunning indifference to whether or not people lived or died that it's not hard to understand why the plan was kept a secret. The IMF and the World Bank make similar calculations, but their language is less frank.

⁸⁶Textbook, p. 21.

⁸⁷Cited in *Textbook*, p. 9.

⁸⁸The 1976 plan put off the manufacture of insecticides and medicines until the end of the four-year period. Although the plan mentions mobilising traditional medicine, there seems to have been no effort to do so scientifically; rather people were often given remedies without regard to whether they cured or killed. China offered to send "barefoot doctors" to share its experiences of combining traditional and modern medicine, but as with other such offers from China, the regime was not anxious to allow outsiders into the villages.

link between China's industry and agriculture and between urban and rural areas in order to promote the development of socialist construction."⁸⁹

Chang Chun-chiao, one of Mao's closest comrades in arms (and a leader of the "Gang of Four" whose arrest signalled a reactionary coup in China after Mao's death) put it this way: "The wind of 'communisation' as stirred up by Liu Shao-chi and Chen Po-ta shall never be allowed to rise again. We have always held that, instead of having too much in the way of commodities, our country has not yet a sufficient abundance of them. So as long as the communes cannot yet offer a great deal to be 'communised' along with what the production teams and the work brigades would bring in, and enterprises under ownership by the whole people cannot offer a great abundance of products for distribution to each according to his needs among our 800 million people, we will have to continue practising commodity production, exchange through money and distribution according to work. We have taken and will continue to take proper measures to curb the harm caused by these things. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a dictatorship by the masses."⁹⁰

In other words, the point is not to enshrine money and commodity production, but to work to develop the political and material conditions for their abolition and not just "abolish" them in words while protecting the actual relations they represent.

NOTHING TO LOSE

There is another universally significant political lesson to be drawn from the Cambodian experience. Every country in the world is an enormous ball of contradictions in which the contradiction between socialised production (represented by the proletariat) and private appropriation (represented by the bourgeoisie) drives and/or intersects with a myriad of others. The class that really has nothing to lose is no less a minority in the imperialist countries than in the predominantly peasant ones. And yet by taking the interests and standpoint of the international proletarian revolution, the party has to rely on the poorest in society to unite the broadest number of people possible at any given moment to fight and ultimately overthrow the source of the ills that plague the vast majority, in that country and in the whole world. This means that the communists must unite with the class feelings of the most exploited and work to transform them into the liberating outlook of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Communists everywhere are grappling with this.

The words of the *Internationale*, "We want no condescending saviours/To rule us from their judgement hall/We workers ask not for their favours/Let us consult for all" refer to the fact that no one else, with the best or worst intentions, can emancipate the world's labouring people. The concluding words, "The Internationale shall be the human race", signify that the proletariat can free itself only by doing away with all classes and everything that arises from them, or in other words, by freeing the human race.

THE PARTY

This brings us back to the question of the party. A party whose existence, line, policies and ideology is secret from the masses can only build a "socialism" whose secret is that it is capitalism.

The CPK was very small in relation to the task of leading millions of Cambodian masses in constructing a new society. Since there were only about 14,000 members and membership was frozen from Liberation until late 1977, only half the co-operatives at most had a Party branch.⁹¹ In a sense, the Vietnamese had "robbed" the CPK by creating the conditions for its victory too soon, before the Party and the revolutionary movement were in a position to wield power, that is, to lead all of society. In China, the rapid achievement of socialism after liberation took place on the basis of two decades of people's war, in which the Party had been trained and tempered and vast sections of the masses transformed through the experience of agrarian revolution, revolutionary political power and armed struggle.

Yet it would have been a betrayal of the interests of the Kampuchean people and revolution internationally if the CPK had not taken power when it was all but thrust on them by force of circumstances. Without

⁸⁹ *Textbook*, p. 109.

⁹⁰ Chang Chun-chiao, "On Exercising All-Round Dictatorship Over the Bourgeoisie", in *And Mao Makes Five: Mao Tsetung's Last Battle*, Raymond Lotta, ed. (Banner Press, 1978), p. 219.

⁹¹ *PPR*, p. 313. For the CPK's views on the party, see "Sharpen the Consciousness".

speculating on what might have been, it is clear that their approach needed to be the opposite of what it was: they had to take particular account of the always-necessary vision of revolution as a long-term process in which the communists must fight to transform conditions and neither bow to them nor ignore them. For instance, take Ieng Thirith's complaint that, "We controlled nothing but the factories [in the capital]", so often echoed after the debacle by other CPK leaders, including Pol Pot - a startling admission for a Party that had emptied the cities! Even if that was the situation, the problem for communists would be how to solve it. The Communist Party of the USSR, since it had emerged mainly in the biggest cities, faced a similar situation in the countryside. Transforming this situation would have meant developing particular policies based on investigating the actual needs and desires of various sections of the peasants and the people to be able to lead them forward step by step, while carrying out broad socialist education and training the most advanced to become Party members. Instead, because the CPK tried to use force to impose its views, like the sorcerer's apprentice it was soon overwhelmed by the workings of an objective world it could not understand nor, in the end, control.

How could there be any real communist leadership at all by a party kept secret from the masses? Such a party can lead in the bourgeois sense, of making decisions and co-ordinating their fulfilment, but how can it lead in the communist sense, without carrying out the process of mass line, a back-and-forth of learning from the people and teaching the people, and without even explaining its policies, goals and ideology to the masses, winning them to that and in that way making its line a material force?

A proletarian party is a class party, not just in terms of its ideas, but in material terms. That is a major difference between it and conspiratorial revolutionary organisations of the bourgeois type (Blanquism). The ideology and the line of the party must correspond to the outlook and interests of the international proletarian revolution, but we are talking about something more than a group of men and women with socialist ideas. If it is not a conscious expression of a movement of a section of the masses who are being trained in communism, then it can hold some correct ideas and strive to move in a revolutionary direction, but it cannot even formulate the correct policies that would enable it to navigate amid the swirl of revolutionary struggle, let alone succeed in carrying out such policies. It will, at best, lose its bearings.

In the end, the CPK could be considered more a small circle than a party, not because of its size but because of its attitude. As Mao wrote, "Those who have this small circle mentality resist the idea of bringing all positive forces into play, of uniting with everyone that can be united with, and doing everything possible to turn negative factors into positive ones so as to serve the great cause of building a socialist society."⁹²

This does not mean that the CPK did not have a social base. It seems that the CPK had enthusiastic support from among the poorest peasants and especially the young men and women and adolescents among them, particularly downpressed in patriarchal Cambodian society. But instead of relying on the advanced to win over the people, this social base was appealed to in terms of their own immediate interests and given privileges over other sections of the people, who were simply subject to dictatorship, with little distinction between the former ruling classes and those they oppressed.

The same line arose several times in the course of the Chinese revolution, a "poor peasant" line that instead of mobilising the poor masses to unite the people, tried to appeal to their most narrow feelings of rancour and self-interest, the kind of sentiments Lenin described as "they grabbed, now let me grab too" - the ideology of capitalism and a vehicle for a new class of exploiters.

The CPK wrote, "Concretely, we did not rely on the forces of the workers. The workers were the overt vanguard [i.e., in name], but in concrete fact they did not become the vanguard. In concrete fact, there were only peasants. Therefore we did not copy anyone..."⁹³ This is certainly true: in Mao's China and in every other country where genuine people's war has been waged ever since, the communists have paid great attention to recruiting and training proletarians for this task, and further, to relying on the propertyless to lead the broad strata of peasants by transforming their world outlook and helping them become socialist peasants with proletarian consciousness. The CPK's absolute lack of interest in identifying key sections of

⁹²"On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People", *Selected Readings*, p. 461.

⁹³"Abbreviated Lesson on the History of the Kampuchean Revolutionary Movement Led by the Communist Party of Kampuchea", in Jackson, p. 219.

the working class and training and recruiting revolutionary proletarians⁹⁴ went with an equal disinterest in training a section of the peasants in Marxism in any form, and especially not in the stand, method and line developed by the international proletariat.

But this did not make the CPK a peasant party either, although its views seem to have coincided to some extent with certain spontaneous tendencies among some peasants, especially a class hatred that should have been a door to training in all-around class consciousness. Instead, these sentiments were used against the peasants' broad revolutionary interests.

Because the CPK could not apply the mass line to lead the people, because what it was trying to lead the people to do was, in fact, against their interests, it is not hard to see why they fell into imposing dictatorship over the people.

Mao was categorical about this: "Dictatorship does not apply within the ranks of people. The people cannot exercise dictatorship over themselves, nor must one section of the people oppress another. Law-breaking elements among the people will be punished according to law, but this is different in principle from the exercise of dictatorship to suppress enemies of the people. What applies among the people is democratic centralism. Our Constitution lays it down that citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, assembly, association, procession, demonstration, religious belief, and so on. . . . In advocating freedom with leadership and democracy under centralised guidance, we in no way mean that coercive measures should be taken to settle ideological questions or questions involving the distinction between right and wrong among the people."⁹⁵

The CPK may have wanted to unite the people, if only because otherwise they could not stay in power. But they couldn't. On the one hand, they turned a deaf ear to the Cultural Revolution and its theory and practice of "the all-around dictatorship of the proletariat", through which the proletarian party leads the masses in wielding their political power to transform all of society, and on the other they had no conception whatever of the complexity, the enormous contradictoriness, of socialist society, and could not distinguish contradictions among the people (whose long-term interests are basically the same) from contradictions with the enemy (whose interests are antagonistic to those of the masses). One can find all sorts of references in their documents to "mass line", "cadre going down to the people", the need to "listen to the people" and especially "unite the people". If we didn't take this into account and judged them as identical to the reactionaries who ruled before and after them, we would be missing the point. The point is that they had an increasingly wrong line, and that line was more than just a wrong idea. It became an irresistible material force because it corresponded to the reactionary way the world is already organised.

In today's world, no small producers or petit-bourgeois forces can establish their rule over any society, and all capitalist logic, big or small, must ultimately capitulate to the demands of imperialist capital. Perhaps, in its unique way, the CPK was on its way to establishing the kind of rule seen in many Third World countries in recent decades, where national bourgeois forces became bureaucrat capitalists, and where squeezing the peasants to extract surplus through state and other collective forms of exploitation goes hand in hand with a fundamental acquiescence to the world market.

PROLETARIAN INTERNATIONALISM

In a document on Party history, the CPK held that while studying experiences of foreign parties had played a positive role in its development in the 1960s, "the Party has also had numerous bad experiences resulting from the learning and copying of foreign experiences. This learning often had bad results for the Party with regard to both large and small problems. On the one hand, it made us completely ignorant; on the other hand, it hindered and sometimes destroyed the revolutionary movement and progress in organising the Party.

⁹⁴The report speaks of the political situation among the factory workers as "too complicated" to allow them to remain in the urban areas, and refers to "people from the lower layers who have recently emerged from the cities" as "too diverse" to be trusted. The conclusion is that they, like the "upper layers of society", should not be allowed to enter the leadership of the co-operatives or given political rights. This, incidentally, is in a section discussing the danger of "buried enemy networks"! ("Report of Activities of the Party Center According to General Political Tasks of 1976", *PPPF*, p. 208.)

⁹⁵"On the Correct Handling. . .", pp. 436 & 438.

In this case, it is better to learn nothing from foreign experience.”⁹⁶ This was mainly a wrong summation of the relationship with the Vietnamese, but it is a slap at Mao’s China as well. The most important reason they didn’t want to learn anything from anyone else was that they didn’t like what was being taught. They rejected Mao’s line not because it was Chinese but because it represented an outlook and interests utterly different from their own. That’s why this problem seems to have become worse over time. While there are reports of cadre studying Mao and Stalin in the early days when the Party was casting around for a correct understanding, as it developed its own consolidated line there seems to have been much less of that.

One thing they may not have liked in Marxism is its ridicule of the concept of “national communism”. No party can represent the interests of the broad masses of the people of a country (which of course doesn’t mean that they can be won over all at once, or that there are not advanced, intermediate and backward among the masses) if they don’t represent those of the vast majority of the world’s people. As the Manifesto said, “In the national struggles of the proletarians of different countries, they [the communists] point out and bring to the fore the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of nationality.” Whether a party is leading a revolution in an oppressed country or an imperialist one, it is only one detachment of an international revolutionary proletarian movement whose goal is world communism.

As it was, for the people of the world and the Cambodian people alike, the country’s liberation was truly a victory wasted.

V. CAMBODIA’S FATE

Once the Pol Pot regime was overthrown, the US had no problem supporting its remaining army. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, international aid directed by the US helped sustain the thousands of fighters in the jungles of the western Cambodian border region and in refugee camps in Thailand.⁹⁷ For a decade, the US and its ever-subservient United Nations recognised the FUNK (the CPK’s united front, of which Sihanouk was still the formal head) as the legal government of Cambodia.

Just as the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia might have gone on even longer if it hadn’t been for the collapse of the Soviet bloc, so, too, American aid (and sponsorship in the UN) might have gone on much longer if it hadn’t been for that same radically changed international context.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, not only has the US found no further use for the Khmer Rouge, it has some specific reasons to act otherwise. For one thing, because of its own efforts to brutally impose its interests through B-52s operating under various “humanitarian” banners, the US has more reason than ever to try to revise the history of Indochina, and indeed to paint itself as the main opponent of genocide instead of its main perpetrator in today’s world. And for another, by demanding a trial of remaining CPK leaders, the US can better bring to heel the present government in Phnom Penh, led by former Eastern Zone commander Hun Sen for whom such a trial could be a problem and an embarrassment. (Once reviled as a “Khmer body with a Vietnamese mind”, Hun is now supported by China.)

Famine continued to ravage Cambodia under Vietnamese occupation. The occupiers and their People’s Republic of Kampuchea encouraged peasants to form “solidarity teams” to maintain the earthen waterworks built under the CPK and pursued some of its economic goals as well. The CPK’s successor in power, the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party, called itself a continuation of the CPK founded, they declared, in 1951.

To facilitate Western support, and perhaps to bury their own past, in 1981 the CPK leadership announced the dissolution of their Party in favour of the united front against Vietnam.

Eventually they were to be deserted even by Sihanouk, in whose name they were supposedly fighting. In 1989, the US brokered a coalition government of old pro-US forces and new pro-Vietnam forces. Sihanouk became king and head of state again. His son, Prince Ranariddh, who does not seem to have enjoyed his father’s support, jostled with Hun Sen for control for years, before Hun Sen ousted him in a coup in the late 1990s.

⁹⁶“Summary of Annotated Party History”, Jackson, p. 264.

⁹⁷As the US government’s Brzezinski hinted. See Becker, p. 440.

The fortunes of the Khmer Rouge had dwindled along with their reactionary foreign support. They maintained a few thousand soldiers and seemed to have some mass support. But they ended up little more than aimless rebels at best and bandits at worst. They lived by smuggling opium, gems and illegally-cut hardwood through Thailand. Without the support of the reactionary Thai government, they would have all but vanished. Then starting in the mid-1990s, they made a deal with Hun Sen. In return for their backing, he allowed them a certain resurgence and even some political power, this time as his silent partners in the reactionary “stabilisation” of Cambodia. Ieng Sary surrendered in 1996 and received a royal pardon. He was followed within the next two years by Khieu Samphan (Democratic Kampuchea’s second head of state) and Party deputy secretary Nuon Chea, along with many of the surviving Paris-trained intellectuals who formed the initial core of Pol Pot’s cadre and supporters.

The border town of Pailin (west of Battambang, in the old Northwestern Zone) and the region around it became their fiefdom, in the same way that much of provincial Cambodia is ruled by local warlords. Until his appointment by the central government, the governor of the region was a top Khmer Rouge military commander. The deputy governor is Ieng Sary’s son. The region’s soldiers and police are former Khmer Rouge fighters. Their old units and command structures are intact but now instead of black pyjamas these 2,000 men wear new government uniforms. Now many of the men on Honda motorcycles tearing up the dust are former guerrillas. The ex-CPK leadership rule over vast smuggling and “legitimate” business operations and their city, Pailin, boasts a Caesar International Casino (meant to attract Thai businessmen), dozens of houses of prostitution, a bank and innumerable karaoke bars that cater to former guerrilla fighters. Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan live in guarded villas overlooking the city.⁹⁸ Pol Pot died in April 1998 shortly after having been sentenced to life under house arrest by his former comrades. They invited a Western reporter to briefly interview him just before his death, in what was basically a “photo opportunity” to prove that they had disassociated themselves from him. In the internal struggle leading up to his arrest, Pol Pot had ordered the execution of the Party’s military leader and 14 of his family members (Pol Pot was to explain later that the killing of Son Sen’s infant grandchildren was unintended). The last historic CPK leader in the jungle, the Southwestern Zone chief Ta Mok, who overthrew Pol Pot, tried to negotiate his own surrender in 1999 but was arrested instead. He awaits trial, although by whom remains the object of contention between the US and Hun Sen. It is only fair to ask, then, just what the West has done with Cambodia in the decade since they got it back in their clutches.

The “industrialisation” of Cambodia is supposed to be the up side of the situation. As of January 1999, there were 110 legally recognised garment factories with 72,000 workers, and 39 more factories (110,000 new jobs) authorised to open shortly. US and EU policies give Cambodian products access to their domestic markets at reduced tariffs. But the capital, of course, is Western: the West gets the profit and Cambodians the pain. Wages for many workers in the booming garment industry were recently reduced from \$40 to \$30/month for a 48-hour work week. Even better-paid workers getting 80 cents an hour were cut back to 50 cents.

Cambodia still, it seems, hardly has its own currency; workers are paid in US dollars. In the context of the Asian financial crisis, this has penalised Cambodia severely, since currencies in Indonesia and Thailand have been devaluated against the dollar, leaving the country behind in the race for the cheapest labour.

The country’s other major “industry” and a far bigger employer is prostitution: local and foreign exploiters prey on hundreds of thousands of prostitutes, mostly unemployed young women and men from the countryside. Estimates run as high as 600,000, half of them HIV-positive. Cambodia has the fastest-growing rate of AIDS infection in Asia.

The situation of the 85% percent (out of a current population of 11.4 million) who still live in the countryside is more difficult to see from abroad, since they are of scant concern to imperialist-controlled media. One fact now widely known is that in a country where peasants once pulled many tonnes of fish from an acre of water, the fish are nearing extinction. Tonle Sap, the country’s vast central lake, the biggest fresh water body in Southeast Asia, is silting up due to unrestrained logging operations for the Western luxury market. It has been reported that the country may become completely deforested in the next five years. Casinos on the lake front are pushing out the remaining fishing villages and fish breeding grounds. Relief agencies warn of the threat of massive famine.

⁹⁸See *The New York Times*, 24 July and 28 December 1998, and *The Sunday Times* (London) 19 April 1998.

Cambodia has become so literally a rubbish heap for imperialism that waste so toxic no other country will permit it is brought there. The seriousness of this was recently forced to the attention of the Western press when rioting broke out to protest the deaths of workers at one such enormous dump near the southwestern port of Sihanoukville, where Chinese weapons for the Vietnamese National Liberation Front were once unloaded.

The situation can be summed up like this: as a consequence of the US invasion and subsequent wars, Cambodia has a higher proportion of crippled people and amputees than any other country in the world. There is still no real medical system. The rail and road system destroyed by the US bombing was never rebuilt. Rice harvests never recovered. Half of the country's children are starving or chronically malnourished and the death rates for children at birth and before the age of five are among the world's highest.

The situation can also be summed up like this: politically under the tutelage of the UN, economically under the tutelage of the IMF, investment controlled directly and indirectly from the US and Europe, government a pro-imperialist coalition of every party that ruled Cambodia in the past half-century.

Nobody, of course, would ever call this genocide or demand trials. It's just ordinary life under imperialism.