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Year Zero

How Communism and the Cold War Deformed Cambodia

by

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Historical Paper

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*There is a specter haunting Europe, the specter of Communism (Karl Marx)...
a hammer we use to crush the enemy (Mao Zedong).*

Revolutions over political ideals have altered South East Asia's landscape throughout history, but the most devastating occurred in Cambodia during the 1970s when Solath Sar [aka Pol Pot] and his Khmer Rouge implemented the ideals of Karl Marx and Mao Zedong to *de-form* Cambodia into *Year Zero*.¹ World reaction to Khmer Rouge reforms made recovery a struggle that still continues today.

Groundwork for *Year Zero* began in Russia when Vladimir Lenin's 1917 Bolshevik Revolution implemented Karl Marx's communist ideology that collective ownership of property and organization of labor bring common advantage to all.² After Lenin's death in 1924, Josef Stalin expanded Lenin's policies, and by 1945, World War II ended with communist Russia in charge of most of Eastern Europe. When Greece and Turkey fell to communism in 1947, President Harry Truman crafted the Truman Doctrine as a counter measure, but in 1949, Mao Zedong utilized the communist hammer to forge the People's Republic of China.³ At the same time, a young Cambodian named Solath Sar was studying in France, embracing the ideals of Marx and Mao. Sar returned to Cambodia in 1952 to join the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party, Cambodia's first communist party.⁴ The next year, Cambodia's King Sihanouk freed his subjects from ninety years of French rule.

¹ Vincent Cook, "Pol Pot and the Marxist Ideal." Available from <http://econfaculty.gmu.edu/bcaplan/museum/cook.htm>. Accessed on 30 Nov. 2011.

² "Vladimir Lenin Biography," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Available from www.notablebiographies.com/Ki-Lo/Lenin-Vladimir.html. Accessed on 14 Oct. 2011.

³ Jonathan D. Spence, "Mao Zedong," *Time* (13 Apr. 1998). Available from www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,988161,00.html. Accessed on 3 Jan. 2012.

⁴ John Perazzo, "Left-Wing Monster: Pol Pot." *FrontPageMagazine.com* (8 Aug. 2005). Reprinted with permission by *Discover the Network*. Available from <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1998>. Accessed on 14 Oct. 2011.

From 1953 - 1959, communists took control of Hungary, North Korea, Cuba, and North Vietnam. To combat communism's further spread, America supported South Vietnam and pressured Sihanouk to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization to protect Cambodia from Chinese domination. Sihanouk refused,⁵ and in early 1960, American Special Forces began reconnaissance missions in Cambodia, laying mines to thwart Viet Cong covert operations there.⁶ Sihanouk reacted by tolerating American involvement in exchange for financial aid, but he also remained friendly with North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union. To America, Cambodia epitomized the domino theory, where weaker countries become vulnerable to communist takeover if stronger neighboring countries engage in communism, (figure 1). In 1963, that domino toppled in reaction to an America backed plot to kill South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem. Vowing to fight Western imperialism, Sihanouk refused American aid, closed the American Embassy, and nationalized Cambodia's industry.

Meanwhile, in 1960, Sar and his followers formed the Workers Party of Kampuchea and established anti-Sihanouk operations in remote forests, where they planned and executed minor revolts. Then, August 2, 1964, America reacted to a North Vietnamese attack on the USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin by becoming directly involved in South Vietnam, and by 1965, the Viet Cong and North Vietnam Army began camping along Cambodia's eastern borders. When China forced Sihanouk to open up Sihanoukville to smuggle supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail (figure 2),⁷ America responded with search and destroy missions to stop them.

⁵ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, pp16-17.

⁶ Pete Berkowitz, Personal interview by author. 17 Oct. 2011.

⁷ Andy Carvin, "The Cold War Threatens Cambodia; America and Communist Containment," *Sideshow to Genocide*. Available from www.edwebproject.org. Accessed on 28 Dec. 2011.

To prepare himself to lead a large scale revolt, Sar went to China in 1966 for organizational training, changing his party's name to the Communist Party of Kamupchea upon his return. Sihanouk called Sar's rebels Khmer Rouge, Rouge (red communist) Khmer (Cambodians). As Sihanouk struggled to keep Cambodia neutral, Khmer Rouge and North Vietnam forces waged war against his government from remote camps.⁸ On March 15, 1969, President Richard Nixon covertly authorized Operation Menu to remove those camps.⁹ From March 1969 - August 1973, American planes dropped "three million tons of bombs...killing an estimated half a million villagers"¹⁰ (figure 3).

Supported by American financial and military aid, Cambodia's Prime Minister, Lon Nol, ended Cambodia's neutrality by ousting Sihanouk as Chief of State in January 1970 and forming the Khmer Republic. Sihanouk, exiled in China, encouraged Cambodians to revolt against the new right-wing regime,¹¹ and civil war erupted between Nol's forces and Khmer Rouge followers. As a result, Cambodia suffered economic and military destabilization. The continued fighting, combined with American carpet bombings, also resulted in an increase in Cambodian support for the Khmer Rouge.¹² Khmer Rouge officer Chhit Do exploited the bombings to convert the Khmer people. Bombings made people "crazy...ready to believe what they were

⁸ "Lon Nol Ousts Prince Sihanouk," *The History Channel*. Available from <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/lon-nol-ousts-prince-sihanouk>. Accessed on 2 Jan. 2012.

⁹ Thomas Blanton and Dr. William Burr, eds., *The Kissinger Telcons*. *National Security Archive*. Electronic Briefing Book No. 123. 26 May 2004. Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon. Transcript of White House tape, 9 Dec. 1970, 8:45pm. Available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB123>. Accessed 6 Nov. 2011.

¹⁰ Don Fulsome, *Nixon's Darkest Secrets*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012: 178.

¹¹ Andy Carvin, "The Coup: Opportunities for Nixon and the Khmer Rouge." *Sideshow to Genocide*. Available from www.edwebproject.org. Accessed on 28 Dec. 2011.

¹² Seth Mydans, "Ex-Khmer Rouge Leader Blames U.S." *The New York Times* (23 Nov. 2011). Available from www.nytimes.com/2011/11/24/world/asia/ex-khmer-rouge-leader-blames-us.html? Accessed on 14 Dec. 2011.

told.”¹³ Refugees from all over Cambodia fled to safety in the capitol of Phnom Penh. From 1970 – 1975, Nol and his army battled the exiled Sihanouk, his North Vietnamese supporters, and the Khmer Rouge for control of Cambodia.¹⁴

President Nixon reacted to the ongoing conflict by negotiating for peace instead of increasing American military support. After signing the Paris Peace Accords on January 27, 1973, Nixon prepared to remove American troops from Vietnam, surmising that North and South Vietnam would react by declaring a ceasefire to stabilize their respective communist and democratic governments. He also reasoned that peace in Viet Nam would prompt Vietnamese troops to leave Cambodia. Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese insurgents responded to Nixon’s efforts toward peace with continued conflict, foreshadowing the imminent communist takeover of both countries. As a result, Congress passed the Case-Church Amendment on June 19, 1973, halting all military activities in Southeast Asia by August 15th.

The effect of this amendment was that once American troops left Cambodia, Nol’s forces lost ground,¹⁵ and the Khmer Rouge, supported by the Vietnamese and Chinese, took control of Cambodia. America reacted by airlifting ammunition and rice to Cambodia until April 10, 1975, when President Gerald Ford, following the advice of Senator Hubert Humphrey, Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, recommended that Congress help “wash his hands”¹⁶ of the whole affair. Congress agreed to cut all aid, and troop evacuations began five days later, setting the domino effect in motion. Without American support, Phnom Penh surrendered to Khmer Rouge

¹³ Owen, Taylor and Ben Kiernan, “Bombs Over Cambodia.” *Walrus Magazine* (Oct. 2006).

¹⁴ “Timeline Cambodia,” *BBC News*. 27 Sept. 2011. Available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1244006.stm. Accessed on 30 Nov. 2011.

¹⁵ David Andelman, “Cambodia’s Reserves Are Called Unfit. *New York Times* (7 Mar. 1975), A-3.

¹⁶ “Cambodia.” *U.S. Department of State*. Available from www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bng/2732.htm. Accessed on 6 Jan. 2012.

forces, and Sar became the leader of Cambodia (figure 4), changing his name to Pol Pot, and, ironically, renaming the country *Democratic Kampuchea*.

The Cambodian people's dream of neutrality under the Khmer Rouge regime soon proved to be an illusion. Pot imposed a totalitarian communist government ruled by fear and excessive military enforcements. To control civilians, the Khmer Rouge evacuated cities by fabricating the danger of American bombing raids and herded people into remote cooperatives to erect shelters. Anyone questioning the soldiers was killed. Entire families whose men had been soldiers or part of the educated class disappeared.¹⁷ Without cities, no areas existed for crowds to assemble; the annihilation of leaders made forming resistance movements impossible.¹⁸

Between 1975-1979, the Khmer Rouge implemented Marx-Mao reforms, restarting Cambodia's history as a *peasant* society: no class divisions, money, schools, or hospitals.¹⁹ Chinese and Vietnamese minorities and nearly a quarter of Cambodia's seven million people were annihilated to cleanse Cambodia of educated people and political opponents. The rest became revolutionary worker-peasants, and Cambodia a nation of slaves.²⁰ The *Angkar Padevoat*, the Revolutionary Organization, destroyed anything relating to Cambodia's past, including Buddhist monasteries, schools, newspapers, and books. For centuries Cambodians had used sayings and proverbs for moral guidance. The Khmer Rouge created its own slogans to

¹⁷ Arn Chorn-Pond, Taped Speech to teachers. *Facing History and Ourselves* Archives. Facing History and Ourselves, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1993.

¹⁸ Sydney Schanberg, "Cambodia Reds Are Uprooting Millions As They Impose a 'Peasant Revolution'." *New York Times* (9 May 1975), Front – A17.

¹⁹ "Cambodia's Holocaust," *Cambodian Communities Out of Crisis*. Internet. Available from www.cambcomm.org.uk/holocaust.html. Accessed on 10 Oct. 2011.

²⁰ Bruce Sharp, "The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia: The Unique Revolution." 16 July 2008. Available from www.mekong.net/cambodia/uniq_rev.htm. Accessed on 11 Jan. 2012.

attack and destroy enemies. Pot's "reforms" caused the destruction of social relations, work practices, and cultural activities that held the society together.²¹

To liberate Cambodians, Vietnamese troops and the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation entered Cambodia, taking power in Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979. They formed the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).²² Pot and his followers fled to remote places near Thailand's border to fight the PRK for the next decade as they had fought in the 1960s and 70s against Sihanouk's and Nol's governments.²³ America responded by denouncing the Vietnamese takeover as an invasion. Ironically, America sided with the Khmer Rouge in reaction to America's embarrassing exit from Viet Nam in 1973 and the resulting defeat of democracy in South Vietnam.

For the next decade, America, China, and Thailand diplomatically supported Pol Pot, imposed an embargo on Cambodia, and undermined negotiations that denied the Khmer Rouge an influential role.²⁴ America refused to stabilize relations with Cambodia until the PRK agreed to negotiate a settlement with Sihanouk, the United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia, and the Khmer Rouge.²⁵ The United Nations reacted by

²¹ Henry Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: 2004: ppixiii-xv, 5, 99.

²² Sok Udom Deth, "The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979 - 1989: A Draconian Savior?" A thesis presented to the faculty of the Center for International Studies of Ohio University, June 2009, pp9-11.

²³ "Cambodia: Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia." Photius Coutsoukis, 2004. 24 Mar. 2005. Republished from The Library of Congress Country Studies and the CIA World Factbook. Available from www.photius.com/countries/cambodia/national_security/cambodia_national_security_vietnamese_invasion_~50.html Accessed on 5 Dec. 2011.

²⁴ Jack Colhoun, "On the Side of Pol Pot: U.S. Supports Khmer Rouge." *Covert Action Quarterly Magazine* (Summer 1990). Available from www.thirdworldtraveler.com/US_ThirdWorld/US_PolPot.html. Accessed on 12 Jan. 2012.

²⁵ Ben Kiernan, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the U.N., and the International Community*. Yale University Southeast Asia Studies/Monograph Series, 41. New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1993, p335.

calling for withdrawal of foreign forces from Cambodia in 1979 and distributing basic humanitarian relief supplies through the United Nations Border Relief Organization. In July 1981, it convened an International Conference on Kampuchea.²⁶ But from 1979 to 1993, China and America insisted that the U.N. recognize the exiled Khmer Rouge as Cambodia's legitimate representatives. In 1987, France and Indonesia initiated a U.N. peace effort that resulted in a ceasefire agreement and adoption of the Paris Agreements in October 1991. By November, Sihanouk regained control of Cambodia and became chairman of the U.N. Supreme National Council. He then deployed U.N. Forces to de-mine Cambodia and maintain the ceasefire.²⁷

Until 1994, America and the Cambodian People's Party blocked efforts to prosecute the Khmer Rouge, which permitted unpunished perpetrators to live side-by-side with survivors of the Cambodian genocide. Then, in 1994, Congress adopted the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act to fund documentation for Khmer Rouge crimes.²⁸ In 1999, the U.N. proposed an international tribunal to bring justice to a society "that has suffered impunity for too long."²⁹ Pol Pot died in 1998, but other leaders (Nuon-Chea, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan) now face judgment for their role in one of the worst genocides committed during the twentieth century (figure 5). However, defendants deny the charges against them and refuse to cooperate, and the court is riddled with accusations of corruption. The court's first sentence of nineteen years for Comrade Duch, head of the Toul Seng Prison responsible for the deaths of 17,000 people, caused mixed

²⁶ "United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC)." Available from www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unamicbackgr.html. Accessed on 13 Jan. 2012.

²⁷ Kiernan, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia*. pxii.

²⁸ "Composite Chronology of the Evolution and Operation of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia." Center for International Human Rights, Northwestern University School of Law. p2. Available from www.cambodiatribunal.org. Accessed on 16 Jan. 2012.

²⁹ Ciorciari, John and Anne Heindel, eds. *On Trial: The Khmer Rouge Accountability Process*. Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2009: 66.

reactions. Eli Rosenbaum (American State Department) asserts that the Cambodian tribunal is important³⁰ as a “framework for Cambodia’s understanding of justice and human rights.”³¹ Survivors, like Ambassador Sichan Siv, called the sentence “a slap in the face to the victims,”³² causing the courts to re-examine the gravity of Duch’s crimes during his appeal. As a result, on February 3, 2012, the international court sentenced Duch to life imprisonment (figure 6).³³ Additionally, the trials are exposing Khmer Rouge crimes to Cambodians who were born after the fall of the Khmer Rouge (because of the genocide, today, 50% of Cambodia’s population is under the age of 20).

Reform usually conveys a positive connotation. However, the Khmer Rouge’s *communist hammer* de-formed Cambodia, destroying centuries of Khmer tradition and millions of lives. The Khmer Rouge revolution brought ethnic conflict and the murder of Cambodia’s educated classes, resulting in the destruction of Cambodia’s leaders, economy, education system, and government. Deforestation and land mines rendered 35% of Cambodia’s land unusable, and transitioning to an agrarian economy transformed Cambodia into one of the poorest countries in the world.³⁴ Because America and its allies influenced how and when the world reacted to Cambodia’s genocide, the *specter of communism* still haunts Cambodia today.

³⁰ Eli M. Rosenbaum, Telephone interview by author. 27 Jan. 2012.

³¹ Chhang, Youk. *Documentation Center of Cambodia*. “The Long Road to Justice: 13 Years of Working To Ensure That the Khmer Rouge Trials Belong to You.” 12 Jan. 2010. Available from <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/commentary/expert-commentary>. Accessed on 16 Jan. 2012.

³² Ambassador Sichan Siv, Skype interview by author. 17 October 2011.

³³ “Kaing Guek Eav alias Duch Sentenced to Life Imprisonment by the supreme Court Chamber.” *Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*. Feb. 2012. Available from www.eccc.gov.kh/en/articles/kaing-guek-eav-alias-duch-sentenced-life-imprisonment. Accessed on 18 Mar. 2012.

³⁴ *From Conflict to Peace Building: The Role of Natural Resources and the Environment*. Policy Paper No. 1, p13. Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Environment Programme, 2009. Available from http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/pedmb_policy_01.pdf. Accessed on 30 Jan. 2012.