

A CRITICAL VIEW OF THE KHMER ROUGE
SOCIO-ECONOMIC PLAN:
1975-1979

by
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In Cambodia, between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge conducted a terrifying revolutionary experiment. They evacuated all cities, expelled all foreigners, and forced the entire population to perform agricultural work in the countryside. They purged any rich, capitalist, or educated individual they discovered. All told, 2 million people out of an approximate population of seven million, died under the Khmer Rouge--either murdered, starved, or killed by disease.

The revolution had been based upon a distinct socio-economic plan devised by the Khmer Rouge leadership. The plan included intellectual underpinnings developed over two decades earlier when the leaders were students in Paris studying the communist movement of the 1950s.

This thesis examines those intellectual underpinnings and questions how they resulted in the Khmer Rouge's genocide. Specifically, it considers whether they were inherently flawed, or whether other circumstances caused what happened.

It concludes that many factors contributed to the tragedy. Above all else, however, it argues that any utopian vision carried out by a minority is doomed to failure.

The work relies on many survivors' autobiographies and other related texts.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE PUPPET AND HIS “SIDESHOW:” CAMBODIA BEFORE THE REVOLUTION	4
III. INTELLECTUAL BLUEPRINT	25
Introduction	25
Historical Context	25
Summary and Analysis	28
Khieu Samphan (1959)	28
Hou Yuon (1955 and 1964)	35
Comparison and Analysis	42
IV. “THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION:” 1975-1979	47
Evacuation	47
Organization and Indoctrination	57
Khmer Rouge Administrative Structure and Hierarchy.....	74
Collapse	78
V. CONCLUSION	87
VI. EPILOGUE	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY	102

INTRODUCTION

In April 1975, as the Second Indochinese War came to a close, events in Cambodia took a dramatic, revolutionary turn. Unable without further American support to withstand the siege of Phnom Penh, Lon Nol and the right-wing Cambodian government fell to the Khmer Rouge. Led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge entered the capital from the countryside and immediately expelled all foreigners, sealed off the country's borders, and declared the establishment of the new Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime.

The regime lasted until January 1979. In this short time, Cambodia underwent a revolutionary experiment more radical than the world had ever seen. Governed by the Khmer Rouge, the country was turned back to "year zero." All major cities were evacuated, and the country's entire population was forced to perform agricultural work in the countryside. The bonds of civilization were severed. Religion, democracy, freedom, law, family unity, culture, displays of emotion, travel, money, material goods, and colorful clothing were abolished. *Angka*, the collective leadership of the Khmer Rouge, became the sole authority in the peoples' lives. Anarchy ruled. The four horsemen of the apocalypse--conquest, slaughter, famine, and death--descended upon the once sleepy, peaceful country. The Khmer Rouge purged any previously "rich," "capitalist," or "educated" individual they discovered, including doctors, engineers, architects, teachers, politicians, lawyers, and other framers of society. Eventually the feelings of paranoia and

revenge that caused the Khmer Rouge to slaughter so many of their innocent countrymen and women were turned inward. They began to purge themselves. The killing increased the mania, and the mania increased the killing. The regime's fragile organization and framework systematically collapsed.

In their final hour, the Khmer Rouge made one last misguided attempt at the revolutionary success they desired--they increased their border attacks against their traditional enemy, the Vietnamese. The two countries had been at war since 1977. Finally past bearing the Khmer Rouge's unfounded aggression, the Vietnamese decided to end the regime. Experienced and hardened by three decades of war, they pushed into Cambodia. The survivors were liberated.

Slowly, the rest of the world learned of the destruction that took place under the Khmer Rouge. Between two and three million Cambodians out of a population of about seven million had died--starved, murdered, or killed from disease. The land, before a vibrant, colorful country, rich with natural resources--including extensive forests, plentiful farmland and an abundant water supply--lay in ruins; unable to feed its meager population.

At the heart of the revolution had been a distinct socio-economic plan devised by the Khmer Rouge leadership: Pol Pot (previously known as Saloth Sar), Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon and Hu Nim, among others. The plan had intellectual underpinnings developed more than two decades earlier when the leaders were in Paris, studying the communist movement of the 1950s. From their rooms in the city's Latin Quarter, the students learned about the Stalinist revolution in the Soviet Union and the Cultural Revolution in China. They were intrigued. Economically and socially,

Cambodia at the time suffered from problems similar to the ones that had earlier plagued China and the Soviet Union. For instance, in the Soviet Union before the Russian Revolution the people had been economically oppressed by the nation's wealthy aristocracy and landowners. Likewise, in Cambodia during the 1950s the majority of the peasants in the countryside were economically enslaved to rich Chinese middlemen and moneylenders.

The Cambodian students studied Marxist-Leninist theory, and through its ideological lens they analyzed Cambodia's social and economic ills. Further, they proposed solutions based on Marxist theories and principles. A number of these students wrote doctoral theses and other essays.

Surprisingly, the future Khmer Rouge leaders' writings accurately depict Cambodia's social and economic condition in the 1950s. On paper, their analyses of exploitation and usury and their socio-economic theories appear reasonable and benevolent. However, as the DK regime later proved, when put into practice, these theories caused immense deprivation and suffering.

The purpose of this thesis is to determine why such theories and principles, once implemented, became so destructive. Specifically, it will consider whether they were inherently flawed, or whether other circumstances and forces were responsible for the Khmer Rouge's genocide. Before addressing these questions it is necessary first to examine Cambodia's political and social history prior to the DK regime.

THE PUPPET AND HIS "SIDESHOW:" CAMBODIA BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Cambodia is a small country in Southeast Asia wedged between Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Generally flat as the surface of the ocean, it consists mainly of fields and forests. Its people are Khmer, descendants of an ancient civilization that once occupied the territory. Geographically, the land is now divided into a number of provinces with a few towns in each one. Phnom Penh is the only major city by Western standards. It contains most of the major industry and is the home of the nation's government. Currently, one million people--roughly one-tenth of the country's total population--live inside Phnom Penh. Everyone else resides in the countryside where they rely on the country's rich natural resources to produce its main crop, rice. At the heart of production is the powerful Tonle Sap River. Once part of the ocean, it is the most abundant freshwater source of fish in the world. Each year, the Tonle sap floods, expanding to cover most of the countryside. Later, it recedes, partially soaking into the ground and providing the perfect conditions for cultivating rice. The Cambodian people plan their rice harvests and many other activities around the ebb and flow of the great river.

Near the river's north end lies a town called Siem Reap. Today it consists of many thatched huts lifted above the ground to avoid the water of the Tonle Sap and a small market and trading center. However, the town rests at the foot of the lost

civilization now known as Angkor, undeniably, one of the wonders of the world. Angkor is defined by a number of massive temples standing near each other in the jungle. The grandest of them, Angkor Wat, built around 1100 A.D., is more than one mile around. "A stupendous creation," it is made of large stone blocks that are held together by pressure.¹ At its peak, it reaches 130 feet high.² Distinguished by three tiers that rise up above its main structure and stand erect, it casts a beautiful portrait against the blue Cambodian sky and dark green jungle. Intricate carvings of ancient Khmer life and Buddhist or Hindu mythology mark the stone blocks that form its structure. Built during the Angkorean period (800-1400 A.D.), the temple symbolizes for most Khmers the start of their proud history.

Historians and archeologists believe that it must have taken hundreds of years of slave labor to create the Angkor temples. Nevertheless, the period was the height of Khmer civilization. At that time, the kingdom of Angkor ruled much of what today are now "southern Laos, eastern Thailand, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam."³ Angkor was the center of trade, commerce, and art in the region, and the temples represented its strength and grandeur. Khmer life during that period revolved around the monuments, which honored the successive Angkorean kings. Dancers, servants, officials and priests

¹ Chandler, David, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview press Inc., 1992) 39.

² Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 39.

³ Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 12.

all lived within the temples' domain and served the king's will.⁴ An "intricate" system of waterways and reservoirs surrounded the temples. Constructed by slave labor, the waterworks provided an "everlasting and totally controlled source of irrigation."⁵ Supposedly, they allowed the Khmer people to produce three or four rice harvests a year. This strong "economic base" was a major reason for the civilization's political success and expansion.⁶ However, the prosperity did not last. Around 1400 AD the Siamese attacked Angkor and drove many Khmer out of their homeland. This invasion marked the beginning of a time of political instability for the area now known as Cambodia. Since that time, Cambodia has struggled to maintain its borders among its larger, more powerful neighbors.

In the early 19th century Cambodia was taken over by two of those neighbors: the Thai and Vietnamese. Both countries viewed the country as a means to expand their empires. At one time, it was reduced to a small strip between them. It would have disappeared altogether had the French not intervened in the mid-19th century. As the French and British fought for control over Southeast Asia, Cambodia became a pawn in the imperialists' political game. Ultimately, however, the French were able to colonize

⁴ Shawcross, William, *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 40.

⁵ Shawcross, 39.

⁶ Shawcross, 39.

Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In 1864 , the French established a protectorate over Cambodia and expanded the country's borders to near their current size.

The French were attracted to the country's rich agricultural resources and pleasant people. They soon began to indoctrinate the Khmers by spreading the French language and creating a French system of laws and government. Shortly after their intervention, a French archeologist exploring the Cambodian jungle discovered for the Western world the lost civilization of Angkor. The discovery generated a curiosity among French historians, archeologists and other professionals concerning the temples' origin. As a result, a great amount of Khmer history that had disappeared over time was rediscovered by the French. The effect of these findings on the people, who for a long time had not understood the temples' origin, was an increased sense of national pride, history, and unity.

Although the Cambodians certainly resented the French influence, at the time they did little to confront it. For roughly a century, the French maintained a tight hold over their empire in Southeast Asia. However, their control lapsed briefly during World War II. In 1941, with French permission, Japanese troops entered Cambodia. On March 9, 1945, the Japanese performed a coup, ousting the French political government and military command. The coup lasted for approximately eight months, after which the French returned and re-established their rule. Still, the Japanese coup was meaningful. It marked the first time in nearly a century that the Cambodian people had been separated from European control and influence. The separation sparked a sense of nationalism and

liberation, which ultimately led to the country's independence. In 1953, threatened by Prince Sihanouk, the French relinquished control over Cambodia.

Sihanouk had been a product of French domination. They appointed him King of Cambodia in 1941, even though he was not the most worthy candidate in terms of his position in the royal family. As a young ruler he was passive and generally agreed with anything the French demanded. However, as he grew comfortable with his position, Sihanouk began to assert his authority. His senses of power and nationalism were heightened during the Japanese coup. Afterwards, when the French regained power over Cambodia, Sihanouk had developed a new attitude: he wanted to attain Cambodia's independence. While France became embroiled in the First Indo-Chinese War, Sihanouk, through a number of deft political maneuvers, began to assert his authority. At first, in 1946, through a document known as the *modus vivendi*, he gained Cambodia partial independence from the French. Still, he continued to fight for complete independence and was rewarded with victory in 1953. The French protectorate, which had been established in 1863, was rescinded. Further, Sihanouk had accomplished what the Vietnamese had been unable to through war: his country's freedom.

At the time when Sihanouk was crusading for Cambodia's independence, he was not alone. The temporary Japanese occupation of Cambodia brought to the surface a resentment by many Cambodians of imperialist control over their country. In 1946, through the declaration of the *modus vivendi*, the French granted the Khmer people the right to establish political parties. Inspired by their resentment of colonization, the people

quickly formed a number of national political parties. One organization, which soon developed into a major opponent of Sihanouk, was the Democratic party.

"Several members of the educated Cambodian elite" founded the Democratic party.⁷ Its main focus was achieving Cambodia's independence from the French. However, the party was also concerned with the establishment of a democratic political system based on party politics. It was the latter principle that soon became a point of contention between the Democrats and Sihanouk. A considerable amount of the Democrats' support came from the youth in Phnom Penh. Many students who attended the city's universities believed in the party's principles and vision. Among these students were a number of future Khmer Rouge leaders, including Saloth Sar, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon and Hu Nim. During the early 1950s, through grants supplied, in part, by the Democratic party, a few of these students left Cambodia to continue their studies in Paris.

Paris provided the young educated Cambodians with an opportunity to learn about events occurring around the world. It also allowed them to evaluate more openly the political, economic, and social conditions within Cambodia. In Paris, at the time, was a growing communist movement led by the Communist Party of France. The students were quickly introduced to the movement by fellow scholars and were influenced by what they learned. Also, the international adoption of communism as a perhaps

⁷ Chandler, David, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991) 27.

revolutionary political doctrine made a strong impression on the students. Many important nations around the world were installing communist governments in response to economic and social problems similar to those in Cambodia. Of special importance to the students were the Cultural Revolution in China, the Communist revolution in Vietnam, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, and Titoism in Yugoslavia. It was at this time that the students developed beliefs that they would hold throughout their years as Khmer Rouge leaders. Together, they would meet in restaurants or dormitory rooms and discuss Cambodia's plight. A few wrote doctoral theses on the subject.

While the seeds of Cambodian communism were developing in Paris, Sihanouk was trying to establish the first independent government in recent Khmer history. Like the French, he did not believe the Cambodian people were ready for democracy, so he began to establish his own absolutist government. This meant weakening the power of the country's budding political party system. Unfortunately for the Democrats, Sihanouk proved to be a very crude and successful politician. He was able to manipulate the relationship between the Cambodian monarchy and government, so that ultimately he obtained nearly absolute control. He replaced the mostly Democrat cabinet in 1953, and later, on February 27th, 1955, he abdicated the throne and developed his own political party, the Sangkum.

Sihanouk's abdication was a surprise to most Cambodians, including the royal family. However, it proved to be a smart move because it kept his adversaries, mainly the Democrats, from undermining his political strength. Sihanouk could no longer be characterized as merely a royal figure; he had fully entered the political scene. Relying

on his already large and quasi-religious following, he dominated his political opponents. The Sangkum became the country's premiere political party. His abdication typified his natural ability to neutralize his opponents, which he demonstrated throughout his career, especially in regards to foreign affairs.

With Sihanouk firmly in power, Cambodia prospered. He proved to be a respectable leader whose interests lay in establishing Cambodia as the jewel of Southeast Asia. Accordingly, he spent large amounts of government funds on beautifying Phnom Penh. He created parks, libraries, and public monuments, and he was present to unveil them all. He also spent a substantial amount of money on education. During his rule, hundreds of new schools were constructed, and a record number of young Cambodians were educated.

In the countryside, Sihanouk was considered semi-divine. The peasants and indigenous people believed that the Cambodian king was a descendent of Buddha, and they treated him accordingly. Sihanouk, not surprisingly, loved the reception he received in the countryside. He would tour the different provinces, spreading good will and delivering speeches. Privately, he felt that he was like a father to the poor Khmer.

In regard to foreign affairs, Sihanouk believed it was absolutely necessary to maintain Cambodia's neutrality. With the cold war growing and revolution occurring next door in Vietnam, this was not an easy task. However, he was successful. He appeased countries such as Thailand, China, North and South Vietnam, and the United States, but only to a point. He understood that if he allied himself with either side in the conflict, Cambodia would quickly become part of the war zone.

Sihanouk's neutrality did not benefit the North Vietnamese. They envisioned a communist Cambodia under their control, or at least sympathetic to their cause. During the 1950s, they began to infiltrate Laos and Cambodia and spread their communist influence. In Cambodia, the main targets of their work were the beleaguered Democrats. Ever since he obtained Cambodia's independence, Sihanouk had strongly opposed the Democrat party. At times, he used force to ensure that a significant number of the Democrats were not elected to the National Assembly or other political offices. He was so effective that during the late 1950s the Democrat Party temporarily disappeared. Nevertheless, his efforts convinced many Democrats to work together with the North Vietnamese.

In 1951, the North Vietnamese helped to create the KPRP (Khmer People's Revolutionary Party). Throughout the 1950s, many Democrats secretly became KPRP members. The list included Saloth Sar, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan, after they returned from Paris. Still, besides attracting a number of Democrats and left-wing radicals, the party remained relatively small and powerless during the decade. This would change as events in Vietnam began to escalate.

By 1960, Sihanouk had almost completely divorced himself from the monarchy. Also, he was becoming more intolerant of criticism. Slowly, he was beginning to isolate himself within his own government. At the time, however, he appeared firmly in control of Cambodia, and the country remained relatively peaceful and prosperous. Meanwhile, the communist movement in Cambodia was slowly developing. On September 30, 1960, at an important meeting, the KPRP changed its name to the KWP (Khmer Workers

Party). As part of the change, new party officers were elected. Saloth Sar became the third highest party official, under Tou Samouth and Nuon Chea.⁸ Further, according to Ieng Sary, the party then introduced a number of statutes.⁹ Inspired by Marxist-Leninist theory, they indicated the party's direction, membership requirements, and collective organization.

In 1963, angered, among other things, by US participation in the coup that led to Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination in Vietnam, Sihanouk rejected US economic and military aid for Cambodia. Through his oppressive campaign against the Liberals, Sihanouk had already isolated himself from the left. This action, along with his decision to nationalize both private banks and the country's import-export business, isolated him from the conservative right. Cambodian businessmen depended upon the injection of US economic aid into the Cambodian economy. They also depended on the competition and opportunity private banks and the import-export business provided. Without them, their business and livelihood would suffer. From their position, Sihanouk's decision was irrational and unfounded, and they could no longer provide him support. For the first time since he had established Cambodia's independence, Sihanouk began to appear vulnerable. The political position and balance that he had worked so hard to preserve was gradually slipping away.

⁸ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 114.

⁹ *Minutes of Secret, Anonymous Khmer Rouge Meetings Between May 1976 and January 1979*, Discovered and translated by Ben Kiernan (Yale University, 1996) 5.

Afraid of the militant police under Sihanouk's disposal, in 1963, Saloth Sar and Ieng Sary fled Phnom Penh. They entered the forests in the countryside and were protected by the Vietnamese. One year later, Sihanouk began to shift his policies to the left. He cut a deal with the Vietnamese Communists, allowing them to ship Chinese weapons and supplies through the Cambodian port, Sihanoukville, for a ten percent tax.

Meanwhile, as the conflict in Vietnam began to intensify, it became harder for Sihanouk to maintain Cambodia's neutrality. The North Vietnamese were using portions of the Cambodian countryside, especially in the northeast, as sanctuaries. Sihanouk, because his military forces were too weak to restrain the North Vietnamese troops from entering the country, could do nothing about it. On the other hand, the United States was drifting into war against the North Vietnamese. US officials were extremely concerned over Sihanouk's policies, which they felt favored the communists. Cambodia's neutrality was in danger. A major war was on the verge of erupting next door, and Sihanouk was beginning to lose control.

In 1966, the KWP became the CPK (Communist Party of Kampuchea). The significance of the change is hard to measure. According to Saloth Sar, who later during the DK regime described the party's history, the change marked the separation of the Cambodian communist movement from the Vietnamese communist movement. However, many scholars doubt the validity of his assertions. They argue that, in 1966, the Cambodian communist movement was still under the control, or at least the influence, of the Vietnamese. Regardless of which version is more accurate, one thing is certain: the Vietnamese remained in Cambodia for almost another decade.

The 1966 elections for representatives in the National Assembly, was a turning point for Sihanouk. Normally, through threats and force, he would ensure the victories of candidates representing his own political party, the Sangkum. Nevertheless, in this election, he did not attempt to sway the results. Physically and emotionally drained, he allowed the elections to run free, and the results were not in his favor.¹⁰ A number of candidates he opposed, including Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, and Hou Yuon, were victorious. In one election, Sihanouk had lost a significant amount of political support.

With his own political situation disintegrating, and events in Vietnam heating up, Sihanouk began to lose control. Instead of relying on the political skill and savvy that had worked so well for him in the past, he became complacent and uninspired. He began to produce films, a longtime passion of his, and would no longer give his political career the attention it needed. As a result, he began to make political decisions without thinking too carefully of the consequences. A number of these decisions turned out to be extremely important.

By 1967, Sihanouk's economic policies had nearly bankrupted the Cambodian economy and government, and caused an extreme rise in corruption. To solve the problem, Sihanouk forced the peasants to sell their rice to the government for less than fair market value. He intended to raise some badly needed revenue, but the effect of his policy was not positive. Although it generated a small profit, the policy created

¹⁰ Osborne, Milton, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press) 178.

resentment and anger among the peasants towards the local municipalities.¹¹ Sihanouk was not blamed directly; nevertheless, the effect was damaging to his government.

At the same time, the Vietnamese now controlled almost the entire border region between Cambodia and Vietnam. Cambodia was quickly being pulled into the war and Sihanouk was helpless to stop it. Also, the CPK, although still small in number, continued to remain in the countryside, learning under the Vietnamese and developing their political ideology and structure. Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, and Hou Yuon, "the three ghosts" as they became known to most Cambodians, fled Phnom Penh for the countryside in 1967. Although they had each won seats on the National Assembly, they were afraid of Sihanouk and feared for their lives. Joining Saloth Sar and Ieng Sary, they formed the leadership of the Cambodian communist movement. By this time, nearly all major leaders of the movement had left the city for the countryside and protection under the North Vietnamese.

On a visit to Cambodia, in 1967, American ambassador to New Delhi, Chester Bowles, met with Sihanouk. The purpose of the visit was to discuss the North Vietnamese use of the country as a sanctuary and a supply route for their troops in South Vietnam. Bowles told Sihanouk that the United States had no desire to widen the war, but it would be difficult not to if the North Vietnamese were allowed to occupy sanctuaries within Cambodia. Supposedly, Bowles then asked Sihanouk if it would be all

¹¹ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, Ben, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-1981* (London: Zed Press, 1982) 106.

right for the United States to bomb certain North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, as long as no civilians were put in danger. According to the US government, Sihanouk answered "yes."¹²

In 1969, Richard Nixon became President of the United States. An insecure man by nature, he was eager to make an impression on the outcome of the war in Vietnam. Intelligence reports, provided by photo reconnaissance teams based in South Vietnam, told him of a secret North Vietnamese base called COSVN HQ (Central Office for South Vietnam) located deep in the Cambodian jungle bordering South Vietnam. The reports stipulated that the base was large and extremely important, supposedly the North Vietnamese version of the Pentagon, and their connection to the South. Nixon, after conferring with his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, decided to implement an operation based on the advice of General Creighton Abrams, Commander of US forces in South Vietnam. Nixon used Sihanouk's meeting with Bowles to justify the operation. It was called "Operation Breakfast", and consisted of six B-52 bombers secretly entering Cambodia and destroying the supposed location of COSVN HQ.¹³

The operation went off as planned, except for the results. The bombs did not damage COSVN HQ, because the base did not exist--or at least not in the form Kissinger and Nixon believed. The North Vietnamese were in Cambodia but had not constructed a

¹² Sihanouk disputes this claim. Since his meeting with Bowles, he has repeatedly denied ever assuring the American ambassador that the United States could bomb sites inside Cambodia.

¹³ Shawcross, 22.

major headquarters there. Nevertheless, Nixon and Kissinger were not discouraged by the results. On the contrary, they became more insistent on bombing the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, with the hope of somehow destroying the elusive COSVN HQ. What followed were more operations like Breakfast, respectively named: lunch, dinner, snack, and dessert. None of the missions damaged the North Vietnamese forces; but they did kill and injure many Cambodians. Still, the bombing continued, only on a greater scale. It was all part of Nixon's strategy, which he fittingly dubbed the "Madman Theory."

Nixon's plan was simple: to bomb (or threaten to) the North Vietnamese enough to convince them he was crazy; a madman who would do anything to win. He hoped that, ultimately, the strategy would cause the North Vietnamese to give in to American demands, and save American lives by replacing hand-to-hand combat with aggressive bombing. This latter idea Lyndon Johnson had developed earlier; however, the notion of appearing "irrational" was Nixon's own.¹⁴

Between 1969 and 1970, American B-52 bombers dropped a massive amount of bombs on the Cambodian countryside, especially in the northeast. It is difficult to overstate the effects of the bombing. To begin with, a number of villages were destroyed and many Cambodians were killed or injured. The North Vietnamese, instead of leaving the country, were pushed farther into Cambodia. Already, frequent skirmishes over territory were occurring between the North Vietnamese and Sihanouk's forces, which

¹⁴ Shawcross, 90.

were under general Lon Nol's command. In addition, the Cambodian communists, or the Khmer Rouge as Sihanouk had since dubbed them, were expanding their forces and preparing for war. Some Cambodians whose homes or villages had been destroyed by the American bombing and were angry with the government for allowing it, were joining forces with the Khmer Rouge. At this point, the Khmer Rouge were still relatively small in number, around two or three thousand troops. However, the progression of the Vietnam war was having a positive effect on their ability to recruit members.

For Sihanouk, the US bombing was the last straw. Events were occurring that were out of his control: he could not hinder the war's expansion into Cambodia, and the balance and neutrality he had so carefully nurtured and preserved had disappeared. Also, his own position was in jeopardy. Partially because of his economic policies and partially because of the war, Sihanouk had lost control over the Cambodian government. His subordinates no longer respected his judgment. On March 18, 1970, while Sihanouk was in France recovering from an illness, Lon Nol and Prince Sirik Matak orchestrated a coup. Lon Nol had recently been appointed prime minister, and Sirik Matak was Sihanouk's cousin and a staunch supporter of the conservative right. Together, the two men took command of the government and committed Sihanouk to exile. The United States had assured the conspirators before the coup of American support for their regime, and Lon Nol became the country's new leader. Unable to confront Lon Nol who controlled the military, Sihanouk appealed to the French for asylum. They granted his request, and Sihanouk immediately left France on a mission to rally political support.

While visiting China, Sihanouk met with Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, the North Vietnamese Prime Minister. The two parties presented Sihanouk with an offer to reclaim political power: Sihanouk would join the Khmer Rouge and lead an armed resistance against the Lon Nol government, and, in return, the North Vietnamese would train and support the resistance. The Chinese would provide the alliance with aid and supplies. Each side would benefit: the Vietnamese would be able to widen the war into Cambodia, the Chinese would support another country turning communist, the Khmer Rouge would gain credibility and respect, and Sihanouk would be able to oppose the government that had committed him to exile. After weighing the alternatives, Sihanouk accepted the offer. Ironically, the Khmer Rouge's former number one enemy had now become their premiere spokesperson.¹⁵

After aligning himself with the communists, Sihanouk declared war on the government. In a national broadcast, he called on the people to take up arms and fight against the Lon Nol regime. His plea divided the country. Many peasants in the countryside, who thought of Sihanouk as Cambodia's rightful leader, immediately joined the resistance. In the city, however, the situation was different. There was little reaction in Phnom Penh to Sihanouk's declaration, and many middle and upper class people actually felt relieved because the new regime promised economic reforms, including the return of American economic aid.

¹⁵ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 200.

With Lon Nol in power, the United States was free to pursue openly the Vietnamese in Cambodia. South Vietnamese troops crossed over the border and aggressively attacked the communists. Also, Lon Nol, inspired by American support, issued the North Vietnamese an ultimatum: either leave Cambodia within ten days, or prepare to fight the Cambodian military. His statement had the obvious effect: it further divided the country and made war inevitable.

Before the fighting really started, it appeared as though Lon Nol's troops might succeed. The United States provided them with a large amount of economic support, supplies, and training, and many city youths joined the military. However, the story on the field soon revealed the army's weaknesses.

The Vietnamese were strong and well-trained by decades of fighting against the French and Americans. Along with the Khmer Rouge, they were too powerful for Lon Nol's inexperienced army. In many instances, government troops were practically slaughtered, torn apart by the hardened Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge. Compounding the losses was Lon Nol's unrealistic approach towards war. He was a strong believer in Buddhism and magic and relied on both to protect his troops. He assigned each regiment a *lok kru*, a "magician who chanted spells and sprinkled holy water on the troops before they went out into the battlefield."¹⁶ The troops believed the magic and religion would

¹⁶ Someth May, *Cambodian Witness: The Autobiography of Someth May*, Edited by James Fenton (London: Faber and Faber) 96.

protect them, and, in many instances, were unprepared for war against an enemy that held no such illusions.

During the war, many important developments and changes occurred within the CPK. First, it is important to note that in 1970 the Khmer Rouge generally adopted a code of conduct passed down by the Vietnamese communists. The code influenced the Khmer Rouge's behavior towards the peasants in the countryside. Basically, it ordered them to avoid any type of action or rhetoric that would offend the people. By maintaining such behavior the Khmer Rouge successfully attracted a large peasant following. Also, the Khmer Rouge leaders, by this time, had almost completely defined the CPK's ideology. Although, they disagreed over certain issues within the ideology and its general extremity, including the relationship between the CPK and the Vietnamese communists. The prevailing view, held by most of the CPK's high command, was that at some point, when it proved to be militarily and politically convenient, the organization must divorce itself from the Vietnamese communist movement. They felt that if the revolution was to be successful, it had to be completely autonomous and nationalist. Other Khmer Rouge disagreed with this view. They believed the Vietnamese were a helpful ally whose friendship was beneficial and should be preserved. By the end of 1971, those who held the latter view within the party were being secretly purged, along with any Cambodian communists who had much of an association with the Vietnamese. By 1972, the Khmer Rouge had almost completely separated from the Vietnamese. In addition, the resistance had moved out of the northeast and spread across a large part of

the countryside. In most areas where they existed, the Khmer Rouge were now in control.

US bombing finally stopped in 1973, cut short by a congressional vote. During the last year of the offense alone, over 100,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the countryside. The psychological damage inflicted on the peasants, Khmer Rouge, and Vietnamese who were the victims is hard to measure; however, the resistance survived and continued to grow strong.

For Lon Nol and his army, the situation was quickly deteriorating. Although the army received large amounts of US economic aid and weapons, very little of it actually reached the troops on the field. Instead, corrupt generals and other army officials grew rich from the war. They placed "phantom soldiers" on their payrolls and kept extra money given to their regiments, and they sold weapons to the enemy.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the troops were deprived. They were not properly equipped, and in some instances were not provided with enough food to survive.

Phnom Penh also suffered from the war. Corrupted by the American aid, the city's infrastructure collapsed. Government service became "synonymous with getting rich."¹⁸ Wealthy businessmen found ways to exploit the circumstances the war created. Crime and graft increased, and prostitution and gambling became major industries. Schools were shut down, and many socialist programs implemented during the Sihanouk

¹⁷ Haing Ngor and Warner, Roger, *A Cambodian Odyssey* (New York: Macmillan) 61.

¹⁸ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 223.

era were ended. Also, a great number of war refugees entered the city, homeless and hungry.

The war lasted until April 17th, 1975, the day the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh and took over the country. Over 600,000 Cambodians were killed during the war, and countless others were injured. The country was largely destroyed. Checkered with large craters from the bombing, a major portion of the land resembled the surface of the moon. The guerrilla warfare and the American B-52 bombers had ripped apart villages, and hundreds of thousands of people were homeless and starving. Many had relocated to the capital. Phnom Penh swelled with a population of roughly three million, nearly half of the country's population. Impaled by war, this was the nation the Khmer Rouge inherited.

INTELLECTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

Introduction

Before they became Khmer Rouge leaders, Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon led academic lives. Throughout the 1950s the two men studied together in Cambodia and France. Later, during the early 1960s they held teaching positions in Phnom Penh. As both students and professors, they were concerned over Cambodia's poor economic and social situation. Each believed that their country's socio-economic structure restrained its economic and industrial potential and repressed the majority of the people. Throughout their academic careers, the two men formed certain ideological beliefs regarding Cambodia's situation. These were discussed in academic works they wrote during the 1950s and 1960s. They provided the intellectual underpinnings for the Khmer Rouge's experiment attempted between 1975 and 1979. Their historical context yields relevant insight into Cambodia's revolution

Historical Context

A number of revolutions adopted Marx and Engels famous work, *The Communist Manifesto* (1872), as their ideology. The Bolshevik-led Russian Revolution in 1917 was preeminent. It introduced communism to the world on a grand scale and set a precedent; yet, in many respects it departed from Marxist ideology. This pattern would continue

throughout history, with each successive “communist” movement diverging further from Marx and Engels’ true doctrine. The Cambodian revolution was inspired by Marxism and preceding communist revolutions but had material departures. Comparisons between theory and practice have profound significance.

Marx felt that a communist revolution could occur only in advanced, capitalist industrial countries, and that it would stem from a confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He argued that capitalism would inevitably lead to overproduction, which would create a set of “crises.” The bourgeoisie, he determined, would handle these crises by “extracting the economic surplus from the population.”¹⁹ The working class would revolt, but similar circumstances would arise. However, as technology and communication progressed, the ability of the working class to unite around political interests would improve. The cycle would move towards and eventually end with a communist revolution that would establish a “classless, non-exploitive society.”²⁰

The Russian Revolution strayed from Marx’s theory in two significant respects: Russia was not an advanced, capitalist industrial country, and the Bolsheviks were a small, clandestine group of revolutionaries intent on seizing power. Rather than gaining the support of the working class, they sought to pacify it.

The Chinese Communist movement in the 1950s and 60s continued this variation. China, at the time, was primarily an agrarian peasant society. Mao Zedong essentially

¹⁹ Vickery, Michael, *Cambodia: 1975-1982* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) 258.

²⁰ Vickery, 258.

transformed the peasants into industrial workers, created agricultural cooperatives, and redistributed land. Further, the Great Leap Forward launched in 1958 raised production expectations. The state recruited more workers and forced them to increase their strenuous labor. Also, the movement struggled to eliminate the differences between “mental and manual labor,” and between “town and countryside.”²¹

Yugoslavia under Tito after World War II arguably bears the most resemblance to the Cambodian revolution. Yugoslavia’s pre-revolutionary socio-economic condition paralleled Cambodia’s during the 1950s and 1960s. The country had an “overwhelmingly peasant character” and “little industry.”²² Further, the communist movement came to power following a major war in which the country struggled internally between nationalists and externally against the Germans. In addition, Tito’s forces throughout the hostilities were mainly “backwoods peasants,” unqualified to govern cities or run industries.²³

There is little doubt that as scholars, Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, and other future Khmer Rouge leaders studied and were influenced by these movements. That they could conceive of applying Marxist doctrine to their country’s socio-economic condition demonstrates the extent that preceding revolutions had manipulated such doctrine. What follows are summaries of three important works by Hou Yuon (1955 and 1964) and

²¹ Vickery, 273.

²² Vickery, 275.

²³ Vickery, 276.

Khieu Samphan (1959). Their analyses and ideologies are not Marxist, but were “Marxist inspired.”

Summary and Analysis

Khieu Samphan (1959)

Khieu Samphan was a central figure in the Cambodian communist party's development. As a student, he attended the University of Paris and was a member of the "Marxist circle" of Cambodian students there.²⁴ His peers considered him "intelligent, ambitious and aloof."²⁵ He finished his studies in Paris by completing his doctoral thesis entitled, *Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development* (1959). It is a critical analysis of Cambodia's economic and industrial structure during the 1950s, which argues that such structure must be significantly reformed. After completing his thesis, he returned to Phnom Penh and among other political activities became the publisher of *L'Observateur*, a French language newspaper. One underlying purpose of the paper was to promote the establishment of a national democracy.²⁶ Khieu Samphan fought hard for this cause and was a National Assembly member between 1962 and 1967. He was also a participant in the underground communist movement. His leftist views often placed him

²⁴ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 391.

²⁵ Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 19.

²⁶ Summer, Laura, Translators Introduction to “Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development,” by Khieu Samphan (New York: Cornell, 1977) 8.

in danger. During his political career he was repeatedly threatened and, in a few instances, beaten and abused by soldiers under Sihanouk's command. In 1967, after Sihanouk accused him of rebellion and threatened his life, he fled Phnom Penh for the jungle. There he joined Saloth Sar and Ieng Sary. Throughout the Khmer Rouge's development and rise to power, Khieu Samphan remained an important and influential leader. Ieng Sary, in an interview published on January 31, 1972, in *Courrier du Vietnam*, describes him:

Mr. Khieu Samphan has become a prominent patriot with a wealth of revolutionary experience and is well qualified to lead our revolutionary war for liberation...His dedication to the movement for national independence, freedom and democracy, has set for our people and [sic] armymen, a vivid example as a genuine and upright patriot.²⁷

Khieu Samphan was instrumental in the formation of the Khmer Rouge's ideology and socio-economic plan. His doctoral thesis, *Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development*, begins by describing the Cambodian economy in the 1950s. According to him, 85% of the "economically active" population was engaged in some form of agriculture, which barely sustained their needs.²⁸ He refers to this group, based on family-oriented farming, as the "precapitalist sector."²⁹ Within the precapitalist sector existed some "capitalist structure," but foreign companies primarily controlled it. It

²⁷ Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia, *Cambodia 1972 by Mr. Ieng Sary* (1972) 17.

²⁸ Khieu Samphan, "Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development," Translated by Laura Summer, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Paris, 1959) 23.

²⁹ Khieu Samphan, 23.

focused mainly on export commodities and did not benefit the economy because the profits were repatriated.

Similarly, foreigners controlled industry.³⁰ They imported all industrial supplies and raw materials and exported all profit. Little industry focused on necessities. Instead, many companies produced luxury items such as soft drinks and cigarettes enjoyed by few people. In general, industry was weak and unstable.

Khieu Samphan attributes Cambodia's "economic backwardness" to the French colonization.³¹ When the French intervened in the late-nineteenth century, Cambodia's economy was feudal with most land in the hands of a few lords or officials. Industry existed only in crude form. Peasants produced different goods, such as silk, ivory, or leather crafts, and bartered with villages that specialized in other trades. He argues that, if left alone, the economy would have progressed toward modern capitalism. However, by prematurely incorporating Cambodia into a capitalist free-trade system, the French interrupted the country's natural economic development. Local industries and businesses were unable to compete successfully against foreign ones, and consequently failed to further develop. The history of the native silk and cotton industry provides an example of this economic trend. Before the French colonization, the trade was expanding. Local weavers were experimenting with different ways to weave and dye the silk, and overall their production rate was increasing. Once the French entered the market, however, the

³⁰ Khieu Samphan, 27.

³¹ Khieu Samphan, 30.

provincial industry virtually disappeared. Because the French could manufacture rayon and cotton cheaper and in greater quantities, their products undercut local sales.

French intervention caused a number of disturbing economic trends, including the return of feudalism. Merchants and artisans, who previously had begun to break away from feudalism, retreated because of foreign competition to agrarian occupations. In their place arose a new class of Cambodian businessmen and merchants whose work was linked to foreign goods and services. Also, foreign capitalists introduced the notion of private property, which divided land holdings. They then purchased and consolidated many small parcels of land. Numerous peasants were forced to pay rent to work the land and were exploited by a new class of middlemen--moneylenders and usurers. Overall, the economy's natural progression was "retarded," and nearly all forms of business and industry fell under foreign interests' control.

Many countries were providing Cambodia with aid in numerous forms by the 1950s. This aid strengthened "international integration," which Khieu Samphan defines as the imposition of foreign capital upon Cambodia's less developed economy. In 1955-1957, the United States contributed 172 million dollars of aid. However, 66% was military aid, and the majority of the rest was allocated towards transportation and infrastructure. This type of aid benefited the country's growing import-export business but did not promote any genuine domestic industry or business. In addition, the aid concealed the people's oppression and poverty.

International integration and foreign aid caused many people--Khieu Samphan estimates over 85% of Phnom Penh's population--to participate in "unproductive" work.

He characterizes such labor as any type that is "tertiary" or "intermediary" in nature; in other words, work that provides foreign or elite services or products, instead of goods or services that most people used. He classifies traders, cafe and restaurant personnel, porters, pedicab drivers, civil servants, and professionals that provide public services as unproductive workers.

"Disequilibrium in the foreign account" further damaged the economy.³² This instability, the result of international integration, stemmed from the importation of more goods than were exported. Cambodia's underdeveloped economy was unable to compete with more advanced foreign economies. Khieu Samphan concludes that such disequilibrium, unless resolved, could devalue Cambodian exports. He also warns that if it continues and affects a large majority of the population "it could lead to violent upheaval."³³

To eliminate these economic problems, he advocates removing international integration. Independent and autonomous development, he writes, is the only way to achieve the country's domestic economic and industrial potential. The second half of his thesis addresses the prerequisites and structural changes necessary for Cambodia to achieve this state.

Foreign companies that repatriated profits stripped the economy of important capital and hindered its development. To solve this problem, Khieu Samphan suggests

³² Khieu Samphan, 63.

³³ Khieu Samphan, 68.

establishing a state monopoly on foreign trade in major exports such as rice and rubber. Private initiative would still control production, but all designated exports would be sold to the government for a fair price, ensuring that any revenue earned remained inside the country.

At the same time, he calls for the reduction of imports. They had replaced national products and had undercut domestic industry. In addition, they did not satisfy people's needs. He does not say specifically how this could be done; he mentions only the necessity for it to be accomplished.

In regards to foreign assistance, he advocates eliminating aid that demands political or economic "subjugation," while retaining aid that genuinely provides support for national economic and industrial development. Further, he stresses the importance of aid diversification in order to maintain Cambodia's autonomy--socially, politically, and economically.

Foreigners controlled the country's banking system and provided little credit for national business or industry. They lent more funds to foreign businesses than to local ones, which impeded domestic business and industrial growth. Also, their practices caused the exchange rate to fluctuate dramatically. To correct the problem, Khieu Samphan proposes to create a genuine national credit system accompanied by the strict regulation of exchange rates. These reforms, he argues, would eliminate the exchange rate's inconsistency, provide greater capital to Khmer businessmen under easier terms, and promote national investment.

Finally, Khieu Samphan argues for tax reforms to relieve the peasants' financial burden and end their dependence on usurers, moneylenders, and other middlemen. He especially resented the Chinese businessmen's influence who he felt profited from the peasant's financial plight.

The last chapter, entitled, "The Necessity of Structural Reform," is the most revealing section in *Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development*. It outlines specific structural reforms to repair the national economy and industry. In this visionary section, Khieu Samphan describes structural reforms that would not have been immediately possible within the existing economic and political structure.

To lower land rent and abolish usury, extreme measures were necessary. At the heart of the situation was the agricultural production rate. Production needed to be increased for a number of reasons: to raise the peasant's wage, to create more raw materials for national industry, and to build a surplus to export in exchange for necessary capital goods that could not be domestically produced. This could be done, he concludes, through the creation of agricultural cooperatives.

He envisions cooperatives as a means to collectively strengthen the peasant's production capabilities. He suggests that peasants could together apply for credit and increase their financial leverage. Also, he foresees cooperatives as a means to consolidate labor, tools, land and other "instruments of production." However, the tools, land, etc., along with the produce, would remain private property. Furthermore, to empower the strategy, all arable land would have to be cultivated. Increasing land usage and rural production would positively effect industry.

In the city, he was most concerned with electricity. Large generators powered most of Phnom Penh, and domestic companies could ill afford this expensive, impractical form of energy. He says that the capital needs a permanent, universal power source that would promote domestic business and industry. This type of energy, coupled with a vibrant cooperative structure, would ignite production and provide greater economies of scale and national competitiveness.

Finally, Khieu Samphan advocates broadening state support. He concludes that the government must assist the individual producer or artisan and the industrial or agricultural cooperative based on one condition: the beneficiary cannot exploit the peasants' condition.

Hou Yuon (1955 and 1964)

Hou Yuon was another important revolutionary. He also studied in Paris with the "Marxist Circle" of Cambodian students and was considered intelligent and physically imposing. He openly confronted Sihanouk and his economic and social strategies. Upon returning from France, Hou Yuon joined the underground Communist movement and participated in party politics, once running as a candidate for the Sangkum party. However, in 1967, Sihanouk accused Hu Nim, Khieu Samphan, and Hou Yuon of rebellion, and all three left the city for the jungle. Hou Yuon later became a member of the Communist Party Central Committee and was instrumental in the Khmer Rouge's ideological and structural development. However, after the Khmer Rouge came to power, he disagreed with Pol Pot and Ieng Sary over party policy--specifically the mass

evacuation of Phnom Penh and the abolition of money and wages--and was executed on some unknown date. Back in 1955, however, Hou Yuon wrote *The Peasantry of Kampuchea: Colonialism and Modernization*, a critical analysis of the peasants' economic situation in Cambodia, part of which is summarized below.³⁴

The Peasantry of Kampuchea opens with an important question: "Do big property owners exist in Kampuchea?"³⁵ Although during the 1950s land was extremely parceled in the country, underneath this division existed a different story. Land was being consolidated into the hands of a few. Large land holders, or "absentee landlords," did not own or work the land in a capitalist sense, with one large plot of land surrounding their estate. Instead, they controlled numerous small plots of land in multiple areas. In part, they were descendants of the feudal mandarins and officials who had once controlled the countryside. However, a massive land redistribution occurred after the French colonization that allowed foreign interests to control large holdings of land as well.

Hou Yuon argues that the development of Kampuchean land distribution from the feudal to the modern state--parceled land dominated by absentee landlords--created new social conditions and classes. This reorganization was caused primarily by the imposition of modern capitalism onto the feudal system, and it brought forth two significant types of rent: sharecropping and tenancy. Tenancy is the rent of land in return for fixed payment

³⁴ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 388.

³⁵ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 34.

or kind. Sharecropping is the sharing of the harvest by the farmer and the land owners according to defined proportions. Tenancy was linked to rice production, while sharecropping was common in commercial production. Both types of rent exploited the peasantry and had increased along with land division and absentee landlords.

As parceled land and new forms of rent restructured the countryside, new social classes arose. Hou Yuon divides them into five categories: landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and semi-proletariat. Landlords were individuals who did not directly work in the fields and both owned and rented land. Rich peasants were landowners, but owned and worked some land and rented the rest. Middle peasants were similar to rich peasants, except they rented a higher percentage of land than they owned. Poor peasants rented tools, livestock, and other means of production, along with the land. In some cases, they owned a tiny amount of land, hardly worth mentioning. As a class, they constituted 80% of the peasantry. And, finally, semi-proletariat were peasants who owned nothing and survived only by renting their labor; they were essentially serfs.

Hou Yuon classifies and describes the peasantry in order to display their poverty and difficult economic situation. In most cases, the oppressed peasants produced only enough to sustain their livelihood. They were hindered by the government and the local administration, which taxed the peasantry at an 18% rate of their income. Hou Yuon points out that this was extremely high considering the peasants' low production capabilities, and the heavy rents that landlords demanded. Also, the real exploitation rate of the peasantry was high. The government, landlords, usurers and other middlemen, imposed on the peasants a combination of fees, taxes, and rents that was great in

comparison to the peasants' income. Further, after the peasants paid for their sustenance, they had little to spend on the means of production. In general, this trend restrained agricultural development, which in turn adversely effected industry. Hou Yuon examines the usurer's, or middleman's role, in this equation.

He identifies the usurers as primarily Chinese money lenders and middlemen, and compares their role in the economy to "the circulation of blood in the human body."³⁶ The Chinese were the "arteries;" they sucked the produce from the peasants and in return delivered useless imports to them. The produce, passed along from one middleman to the next, was continuously purchased for a higher price. Ultimately, it was sold to "big Cholon [Chinese] importers"--the main arteries--who delivered it for export.³⁷ The circulation of the produce created a healthy profit for everyone involved, except the peasants. The middlemen forced them to sell their harvests for a low price. To make up for their losses, they borrowed capital from moneylenders who charged exorbitant interest rates. Before long, the peasants found themselves in debt. Economically, they became slaves, working simply to pay off their accrued debt, which always returned.

These were the main economic problems identified in *The Peasantry of Kampuchea*. Later, in 1964, Hou Yuon wrote *The Co-operative Question*, his answer to these problems. He could not be completely straightforward in his work, considering the political climate at the time; nevertheless, it gives a valuable insight into the socialist

³⁶ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 59.

³⁷ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 59.

reforms that the Khmer Rouge later adopted, to a degree.³⁸ Below is a summary of roughly two-thirds of *The Co-operative Question*.

The work begins with a call to arms. Hou Yuon appeals to the Cambodian people to unite against the "American imperialists and their lackeys."³⁹ At the time, Sihanouk had just rejected economic aid from the United States and had nationalized the private banking system and the import-export business. Hou Yuon supports these reforms. They were the start of the advancement of the national economy. He argues that all Cambodians must help to resolve economic weaknesses and focus on the "conflict" against the Americans. To improve the economy, he calls for the mass adoption of a cooperative strategy.

Cooperatives would help solve two important rural problems: the peasants' dependence on usurers or middlemen and their low production in general. They would empower the peasants through the collectivization of the means of production and would encourage greater technological advancement. Technology, he explains, is an important component of economic progress. Most important, however, is the need for the cooperatives to be built in the interests of the people. He divides the cooperative strategy into four stages: labor pools, production cooperatives, common property cooperatives, and cooperatives that provide means of production and produce.

³⁸ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 136.

³⁹ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 137.

Labor pools are the first stage. The consolidation of labor would increase the productive forces. However, Hou Yuon argues, within the cooperative must exist a permanent organization that maintains its focus and structure. Also, because some people would contribute more land than others, a medium of exchange, such as riels (money) or thangs of rice would be necessary.

Production cooperatives are the second stage and would include the collectivization of the means of production, such as animals, tools, and seed. Still, although publicly used, the means of production would remain private property. However, the produce itself would be divided in a number of ways. One portion would be given to the workers, distributed according to the amount of work completed and land owned, while another would finance and uphold the cooperative organization. Finally, the remaining amount would be used to construct public facilities, such as schools and medical facilities.

Eventually, Hou Yuon envisioned members naturally deciding to "pooling their wealth for common prosperity."⁴⁰ Accordingly, the administration would assume greater responsibility and authority, controlling the cooperative's means of production, capital, and produce. As the leadership grew more powerful than the individual peasant, it would purchase more technologically advanced tools and machines, such as tractors, harvesters, and modern plows. The production rate would then increase, and the cooperative could

⁴⁰ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 144.

sell or export produce for a higher price, excluding the middlemen or usurers necessary for trade on a smaller scale.

Hou Yuon repeatedly focuses on the importance of the leadership's role in his ideology:

Cooperatives are organizations of the masses to enable them to struggle to achieve the above-mentioned purposes [abolish usury and exploitation]. In this struggle the masses are the rank and file and the leaders are the front commanders. The masses need both administration and leadership. The commanders must represent the masses; they are the members who have woken up...⁴¹

Hou Yuon agrees with Marx and Engels, who defined Communist leaders as, "the ideologists who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole."⁴² He believes the leadership must educate the masses and further teach them the cooperative ideology. However, he stresses that cooperatives are democratic organizations and that cooperative leaders are not bureaucrats who claim to know everything. Instead, leaders enthusiastically and openly work with the people, and are chosen by them.

Hou Yuon discusses "individualism" in Khmer society. In Marxist fashion, he declares that foreign capitalists (Hou Yuon's bourgeoisie), particularly the French, economically repress the peasantry (Hou Yuon's proletariat) with their notion of individualism. The concept, he believes, encourages the peasants to participate in the

⁴¹ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 151.

⁴² Engels, Frederick and Marx, Karl, *The Communist Manifesto*, 2d ed. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1987) 25.

capitalist system, within which they are inherently disadvantaged. In the capitalist system, the capital itself is actually a social power, which causes class division and struggle. Hou Yuon suggests: “merchant capital and usury capital are able actively to oppress the peasants because there are no institutions among the peasants.”⁴³ The French capitalists, he points out, controlled most industry, production, business, and *capital*, and had economically enslaved the peasantry within their system. He argues that the peasants will find freedom if they throw aside their capitalist “individualism” and support a cooperative system.

Comparison and Analysis

The scholars' works include some important similarities. They each identify French intervention as the main cause for the economy's "retardation." They argue that the injection of modern capitalism into the semi-feudal Cambodian economy stunted domestic economic and industrial progression. The result, they assert, has been increased economic development based on the usury and exploitation of the peasantry by foreigners and rich landlords. Significantly, they recognize similar solutions to these problems.

Both Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon support a cooperative strategy as a means to develop domestic economic and industrial interests. Cooperatives, they conclude, will increase domestic production and improve the peasants' status and economic situation. Also, they will end the peasants' dependence on middlemen and usurers and provide them

⁴³ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 152.

with financial advantages, including the ability as cooperative members to acquire large amounts of credit.

In regard to structure and development, Khieu Samphan's and Hou Yuon's cooperative strategies are strikingly similar. Cooperatives must be constructed through the collectivization of the means of production. However, whereas Khieu Samphan suggests that the means of production remain private property for the cooperative to use, Hou Yuon concludes that naturally the peasants will concede their ownership. In all likelihood, Khieu Samphan agreed with this assumption but may not have felt comfortable at the time stating it. Like Hou Yuon, he believed in the inherent "naturalness" of the cooperative strategy for the Cambodian people. In his thesis, he states: "It is not unusual to see our peasants organizing themselves into teams of several families to help each other with transplanting and harvesting, all while singing well-known songs. The task is to generalize this practice in a systematic way."⁴⁴ Thus, he says, cooperatives already existed, only in a less organized form. The leadership's task is to organize and direct the development of this natural collective system into a solid cooperative structure.

Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon define the leadership's role in the same manner. They call the peasantry "the masses," a Marxist term, and assert that the cooperative leadership's job is to spread the cooperative ideology. In *The Co-operative Question*, Hou Yuon states: "The leaders must dare to provoke the consciousness of the masses

⁴⁴ Khieu Samphan, 103.

continuously and nourish the ideology of the masses until the necessary point where the duckweed is tossed aside and the reeds uprooted."⁴⁵ Part of the duckweed and reeds Hou Yuon refers to is the Marxist notion of "individualism." The colonists, they argue, suggest that individualism allows the peasant to work, live, and compete freely. However, in reality, it is an idea that the capitalists promote to indoctrinate and suppress the people. It maintains the capitalist society, which undermines the peasants' socio-economic condition. Under foreign influence, the peasants become capitalist minions, deceived by their so called "individualism," and reduced to barely providing for their own sustenance. To realize freedom, the scholars argue, the peasants must shed their individualism and trust the cooperative leadership to direct the economy "in the interests of the nation and people."⁴⁶

Both Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan argue that the abolition of "capitalist" individualism does not mean the abolition of democracy. Whereas, democracy allows the peasants a voice in the cooperative development and empowers the movement, "capitalist" individualism misleads them into maintaining their poor status quo and impedes any change. Khieu Samphan, concerning the leadership's role, states: "the leadership must therefore ally itself with a broad democracy and rely on broad support from the mass of the people."⁴⁷ Hou Yuon, regarding democracy's place in the

⁴⁵ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 155.

⁴⁶ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 161.

⁴⁷ Khieu Samphan, 112.

cooperative system, argues: "if there is a firm philosophy of democracy and a successful application of democracy to build the people's strength, then cliquism, nepotism, and individualism will vanish."⁴⁸

Also, to both scholars the reorganization of society into cooperatives needed to be accompanied by the reordering of society based on work productivity. Foreign capitalists had created overproduction and excess and ignored the people's needs. They argue that cooperatives alone could not eliminate the nation's economic or industrial problems. Instead, the people had to be directed towards work that would stimulate national economic and industrial growth. This process coincides with their belief that the people must sacrifice their own interests in order to promote domestic production. In regards to this sacrifice, the future leaders consistently use the word "struggle." Later, this term would become a Khmer Rouge theme.

As two of Cambodia's most educated men, Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon were concerned with their country's poverty. They were especially sickened by the constant exploitation of the peasantry and the poor state of domestic business and industry. From their works, it is clear that they understood the causes of these economic and industrial problems. Foreign capital and business, they recognized, had stunted national economic growth. Angered by the situation, and inspired by Marxist theory and past communist movements, they sought change. They desired an independent, self-sufficient, autonomous Cambodia, where national industry and business prospered; a country void

⁴⁸ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 155.

of class division and economic subjugation, where the people worked together in freedom.

These were admirable goals, but how did such well-intentioned men become responsible for the Khmer Rouge's genocide? Why did their socio-economic plan--centered on the institution of a cooperative strategy--lead to anarchy and great human suffering? More precisely, were their socio-economic analyses and cooperative strategies inherently flawed, or were outside circumstances determinative? This thesis will examine these questions. It will look at what actually occurred during the Khmer Rouge years--specifically, the socio-economic plan the Khmer Rouge implemented and its results. In addition, it will compare the Khmer Rouge socio-economic plan with the ones Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan outlined in their works.

“THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION:”

1975-1979

Through our suffering I want you, my readers, to see how fine-sounding ideals of justice and equality can be perverted by fanatics to create a brutal oppression and an equality of misery....

--Pin Yathay, survivor⁴⁹

Evacuation

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh. Armed to the teeth with Chinese and Soviet made assault rifles, they marched through the streets, largely ignoring the crowds that gathered around them. They were pure Khmer from the countryside, almost a different race than the lighter skinned city people. Intense hardened expressions covered their faces. They wore black clothing with red *kramas* around their foreheads. They were young, in some cases, only thirteen or fourteen years old. And for most of them, it was their first visit to the city.

As the city people observed the soldiers, they questioned their country's fate. The Khmer Rouge were a mystery to them, although they had heard stories. Some people talked of the Khmer Rouge as liberators, revolutionaries who would return the country to the happier times before the corrupt Lon Nol government and the war. They surmised

⁴⁹ Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, Edited with John Man (New York: The Free Press, 1987) Forward.

that the Khmer Rouge were Sihanouk's allies. Maybe, they reassured themselves, he would return and govern the country again. After all, he was the Khmer people's father. It was his country. Others were more skeptical. They insisted that the Khmer Rouge were dangerous radicals. They feared the dark soldiers with cold and heartless expressions. Nevertheless, all Cambodians agreed on one thing: the Khmer Rouge were now in control.

For Pol Pot and his follows, their long-awaited opportunity had arrived. The country was theirs, although not in the functional state they had envisioned. They were relatively free to implement any type of political, economic, or social structure they desired, and they had the Cambodian people's full attention. Most people in the city were pinned to the radio, listening for any clue regarding the new regime's intentions. They prayed to Lord Buddha. They hoped the Khmer Rouge would lead the country in the right direction, towards prosperity and peace. If the Khmer Rouge did that, the people would obey. Their hearts and minds would follow the Khmer Rouge through any struggle, even war. The Khmer Rouge only needed to point the country in the right direction and get started.

Listening to their radios, the people heard an unfamiliar voice speak. It appeared suddenly, crackling over the loud speakers, and interrupted a speech by the General May Sichan, the Chief of Staff of the government's armed forces. The voice proclaimed: "The war is won by weapons and not negotiations! The government forces have surrendered!"

Underground forces have triumphed! Now the war is over!"⁵⁰ The disturbing voice belonged to a Khmer Rouge who had commandeered the microphone in the radio station's broadcast center. An eerie silence followed his proclamation, an unsettling calm after so much war. As the people waited anxiously, a distressing rumor spread: the Khmer Rouge had ordered the evacuation of the capital. Everyone must leave--immediately!

From the people's vantage point the message was incomprehensible. Why would the Americans bomb Phnom Penh? What purpose would such bombing serve? The Americans had already lost the war in Vietnam and left Indochina.

Of course the people did not know the Cambodian communists' agenda. The Khmer Rouge leadership had developed a radical socio-economic plan to solve the country's problems; and considering the country's state, time was critical. Millions of people, victims of the war and bombing, were already starving and homeless. The economy had shut down and all foreigners had left the country. The American diplomats had been the last to leave, and they had simply waived good-bye and boarded their helicopters to safety and freedom. The Cambodian people--alone--would either live or die; prosper or fail. Consequently, economic and humanitarian problems needed to be solved immediately in order to avoid further starvation and suffering.

The Khmer Rouge's first actions were unprecedented in their scope: they evacuated the city, sealed off the country's borders, expelled all foreigners, and sent the

⁵⁰ Pin Yathay, 11.

city populations to the countryside. They planned to establish agrarian cooperatives and achieve the autonomous national development they had envisioned.

Did their actions represent their original grand design? It does not appear so. To the contrary, they had abandoned the step-by-step implementation of a cooperative strategy. Under ideal circumstances, perhaps the relatively moderate economic reforms that Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan had argued for as students would have been put in place. For example, they might have gradually detached the Cambodian economy from foreign capital and influence. But, mainly because it required too much time considering the circumstances the war had already caused, they eliminated that process. The Khmer Rouge, especially Pol Pot, were concerned with the possibility of resistance. Pol Pot feared all former capitalist, educated professionals--such as lawyers, doctors, engineers, and government workers--who could potentially oppose and undermine his revolution. His order to evacuate the city effected, in part, a pre-emptive strike against these people. Pin Yathay, an engineer before the Khmer Rouge took over, recalls a Khmer Rouge's speech after the evacuation describing why it occurred. According to Pin Yathay, the Khmer Rouge said: "If we do not change city life an enemy organization can be established and conspire against us. We evacuated the city to destroy any resistance, to destroy the cradles of reactionary and mercantile capitalism...This is but one of the aspects of our dissension with the Vietnamese."⁵¹

⁵¹ Pin Yathay, 66-67.

Consequently, the Khmer Rouge deceived the people and successfully evacuated the city with little resistance. The Americans, of course, never intended to bomb Phnom Penh. Pol Pot knew this, but he ordered his troops to spread the lie anyway.

The Khmer Rouge obeyed Pol Pot's instructions. They hastily fanned out across the city and forced the people out of their homes. At first, they tried to be considerate. They told the people about the possible American bombing and asked them to depart for the countryside. They gave assurances that everything would be all right. Naturally, the people hesitated to vacate their homes immediately. At the very least, they argued, they would require a few days to pack. But Pol Pot had issued orders and his cadre quickly grew intolerant. Eventually, the Khmer Rouge resorted to force, sometimes even killing people who refused their orders.

While this was happening, survivors attest, the Khmer Rouge's behavior was schizophrenic. It vacillated between politeness and anger. In the mornings, for instance, the Khmer Rouge recited their code of behavior:

1. Thou shalt love, honor and serve the workers and peasants.
2. Thou shalt serve the people wherever thou goest, with all thy heart and all thy mind.
3. Thou shalt respect the people without injury to their interests, without touching their goods or plantations, forbidding thyself to steal so much as one pepper, and taking care never to utter a single offensive word against them.
4. Thou shalt beg the people's pardon if thou hast committed some error in respecting them. If thou has injured the interests of the people, to the people thou shalt make reparation.
5. Thou shalt observe the rules of the people when speaking, sleeping, walking, standing or seated, in amusement or laughter.
6. Thou shalt do nothing improper respecting women.
7. In food and drink thou shalt take nothing but revolutionary products.
8. Thou shalt never gamble in any way.
9. Thou shalt not touch the people's money. Thou shalt never put out thy hand to touch so much as one tin of rice or pill of medicine belonging to the good of the state or ministry.

10. Thou shalt behave with great meekness toward the workers and the peasants and the entire population. Toward the enemy, however, the American imperialists and their lackeys, thou shalt feed hatred with force and vigilance.
11. Thou shalt continuously join the people's production and love thy work.
12. Against any foe and against every obstacle thou shalt struggle with determination and courage, ready to make every sacrifice, including thy life, for the people, the workers and the peasants, for the revolution and for *Angka*, without hesitation and without rest.⁵²

However, other times, they appeared cold and revengeful, as if they despised the city people who they supposedly were liberating. They had acquired a power of disassociation--their words varied from their deeds--and no one dared to object.

Hours after the evacuation announcement, the main roads out of Phnom Penh were crowded. Old people, young people, infants, mothers, fathers, and children, like ants, grudgingly marched together. The Khmer Rouge, weapons in hand, encouraged them. The "stifling heat" and lack of food disabled the "old, the infirm, and the young," causing the evacuation to proceed at a snail's pace.⁵³ The people carried their possessions on "their backs or bicycles."⁵⁴ The roads were littered with discarded belongings, abandoned vehicles, and human corpses. Suicide, traditionally a Khmer taboo, surfaced during the exodus; a sign of the people's growing hopelessness. Someth May, a survivor, describes an especially gruesome scene in his autobiography, *Cambodian Witness*:

After two hours we reached the market place called Phsar Doeum Kor, where there were two piles of bodies in civilian clothes, as if two whole

⁵² Haing Ngor and Warner, 112-113.

⁵³ Criddle, JoAn D., *To Destroy You is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987).

⁵⁴ Pin Yathay, 107.

families had been killed, babies and all. Two pieces of hardboard stuck out of the pile, and someone had scrawled in charcoal: For refusing to leave as they were told....We passed mutilated bodies, some killed by grenades or mortars, others decapitated. There must have been heavy fighting here. There were burnt cars and houses all around.⁵⁵

Despite the horrific conditions most people endured. They learned to ignore the death surrounding them and adapted to their situation. Provisions were quickly acknowledged as being more useful than most luxury items, and the people began to bargain accordingly. Gold was the exception. As a basis for bartering, "everyone recognized its value."⁵⁶ The Khmer Rouge remained vague about the near future. They encouraged everyone to keep moving and discouraged questions. Sometimes they referred to an authority they called *Angka*. They assured the people that *Angka* would take care of everything.

Traditionally, *Angka* meant "organization" in Khmer. But, throughout the revolution, the term had a different meaning. The regime's ideology stressed the importance of equality. Rather than revealing its hierarchical leadership, the Khmer Rouge leadership created *Angka* to maintain the appearance of equality. They used it to persuade their cadre and the people that the revolution was ideologically pure. Ironically, many survivors, including a number of the Khmer Rouge, did not know who Pol Pot was until after the regime collapsed.⁵⁷ *Angka* was the only high authority they recognized.

⁵⁵ Someth May, 107.

⁵⁶ Haing Ngor and Warner, 112.

⁵⁷ Haing Ngor and Warner, 115.

During the evacuation the Khmer Rouge destroyed all centers of capitalism within the city. Haing Ngor, a doctor before the revolution, remembers hearing about how they set fire to every market they discovered. Before the revolution, he recalls, "The markets had been the center of daily life, the place where we went to buy fresh food and gossip with our neighbors."⁵⁸ The Khmer Rouge, he says, labeled the markets "evil" and "capitalist." They annihilated anything connected with wealth, capitalism, or foreign influence. They even burned money. Many survivors remember the Khmer Rouge's ignorance regarding capitalist or foreign goods. Haing Ngor recalls two soldiers struggling to figure out how to use a western style bathroom. The toilet confused them. Eventually, after staring at it for a while, they bent over, cupped their hands, and drank its filthy water. Under different circumstances, such ignorance might have been entertaining. But during the evacuation, it was terrifying. The Khmer Rouge, as mainly rural adolescents, failed to appreciate the utility of markets, businesses, or material goods. In their haste to reconstruct Cambodian society, they destroyed and wasted many national assets.

Along the roads, at certain cross sections, the Khmer Rouge set up checkpoints. They forced the people to stop at gun point while they searched through their belongings and asked questions. Initially, they looked for Lon Nol army officers or officials. Sometimes they lied and said they needed ex-military officers to help them in the city. Other times they resorted to threats and force. Regardless of their method, the end result

⁵⁸ Haing Ngor and Warner, 94.

was identical: any military personnel they discovered were separated from their companions and "taken away."⁵⁹ The people soon learned that being taken away meant execution.

At the second set of checkpoints, the Khmer Rouge expanded their hunt. They searched for anyone who was "capitalist," "rich," or "educated." This included doctors, engineers, businessmen and government workers. In his thesis, Khieu Samphan had labeled these professions "unproductive." The Khmer Rouge questioned the people about their prior lives. What jobs had they held? Where had they lived? What was their former life like? If the Khmer Rouge discovered any wealthy, capitalist, or educated persons, they were taken away. People started lying about their prior lives.

Someth May remembers the Khmer Rouge questioning his father at a checkpoint. His family was ordered to place their belongings on a table and answer a few questions. Someth May's father had formerly been a hospital worker. Yet, before the Khmer Rouge could ask him his prior occupation, he lied and exclaimed that he and his family were farmers and that no one had ever participated in the military. Apparently satisfied with his answer, the Khmer Rouge searched the family's belongings. In Someth May's bag they found a few books. Their discovery instigated another line of question. "What are these books about?" Whose are they?"⁶⁰ Someth May recalls that his father lied again. He said the books were for making cigarettes. They believed him and let the family pass.

⁵⁹ Someth May, 107.

⁶⁰ Someth May, 113.

The Khmer Rouge abolished books and other capitalist or "elitist" articles such as jewelry, money, and glasses. Before the people reached the checkpoints, they were forced to either hide their possessions or discard them along the roadside. Teeda Butt Mam, a survivor, in her autobiography, *To Destroy You is No Loss*, discusses the Khmer Rouge treatment of books:

Ever since our independence from colonial rule twenty-two years before, Cambodians have felt resentful of continued French influence....But it wasn't just hatred for the French that prompted the Khmer Rouge to burn books; it seemed to be hatred for any learning. Books written in Cambodian were also tossed into the ravenous flames, and bookstores, newsstands, and stationary shops torched. Rare, priceless volumes had been eliminated without a second's thought. Even illiterate peasants, filing past the burning books, were devastated by the senseless destruction.⁶¹

As scholars, Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan had identified capitalism's negative effects on the Cambodian economy and industry. They had denounced foreign intervention and the increase in unproductive work it caused. Further, they had argued for the widespread adoption of agricultural cooperatives and the "development of indigenous capitalism."⁶² In this respect, their ideologies differed greatly from the Khmer Rouge's annihilation of capitalist society and its vestiges, and their liquidation of groups of people. Pol Pot had added new elements to the revolution. Perhaps, he made some changes based on the country's deprived condition, such as the evacuation itself. However, in terms of mass murder, this explanation does not suffice. It appears that the

⁶¹ Criddle, 31.

⁶² Vickery, 267.

Khmer Rouge intended to bend the nation's will through brutal force, an idea foreign to their original beliefs. Unlike their Vietnamese, Lao, and Chinese counterparts, the Cambodian communists, in the Angkorean tradition, had decided to follow their communist line to the farthest possible point.

Organization and Indoctrination

The forced exodus lasted for weeks. The people continued to head farther into the countryside, their travel slowed by the difficult conditions. Eventually, the Khmer Rouge began to direct them toward certain villages. Worn physically and mentally, they submitted. By now, they understood that the evacuation was permanent and that the Khmer Rouge had lied. The Americans were never going to bomb Phnom Penh.

As the people settled in different villages, they were forced to register with the local Khmer Rouge administration. After that process was completed, the Khmer Rouge organized the people into groups. They were divided, based on their status before the revolution, into two categories: "old" people and "new" people. The old people, or "ancients" as they were sometimes called, were those who had joined the revolution before Phnom Penh's "liberation." After the war and bombing had destroyed their homes and lives. The new people, on the other hand, were city people; those who the regime had forced into the countryside. The Khmer Rouge treated the two groups differently. They felt that the old people had rightfully sacrificed for the revolution, while the new people had "benefited" and "profited" from it. Thus, they granted the old people more respect and freedom, while they unofficially designated the new people the lowest class.

This unfair treatment affected the old people's behavior. Instead of sympathizing with the new people who had similarly lost their homes and belongings, they acted indifferent and superior. They purposely distanced themselves from the migrants and established their rank in the country's developing social order.

After the people had registered with the village administration, they were required to work in the fields and jungle. They were divided according to their age, sex and race and placed into small work groups directed by one or two Khmer Rouge. The work lasted all day with few breaks in between, and the people were fed little. Molyda Szymusiak, a child during the revolution, remembers clearly the skimpy rations the Khmer Rouge distributed. Each family she says was allotted two Nestle cans--the regime's standard measuring unit--worth of rice per day.⁶³ Without adequate food or rest, the people found the work to be strenuous. It was pure manual labor without the use of any machines or technology. In her autobiography, Teeda Butt Mam describes the work:

Work began at 5:30 A.M., seven days a week, with never a day off. Even acute sickness offered little reprieve. We were not allowed to talk while we labored; talking was not a productive use of energy. High humidity and oppressive heat sapped our strength. Every able bodied person stayed in the fields until about 11:00 A.M., then we ate our first meal....By 1:00 or 2:00 P.M., we would resume work for four or five more hours of muscle-strained labor. Work ended after dark, about 6:00 P.M. On moonlight nights, we were sometimes required to work two or three more hours before we went to the evening meetings.⁶⁴

⁶³ Molyda Szymusiak, *The Stones Cry Out: A Cambodian Childhood 1975-1980*, Translated by Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang) 52.

⁶⁴ Criddle, 64-65.

Despite the harsh conditions, initially the Khmer Rouge provided moral support and treated many people with some respect. Consider Pin Yathay's description: "The presence of the Khmer Rouge was not oppressive or threatening. They joined us for work, speaking to us as usual in quite and polite tones."⁶⁵ The Khmer Rouge behavior varied from village to village, however, in part, this variation was the product of differences between the village administrations. Pin Yathay explains this discrepancy: "there was no established rule for the whole country. In the absence of published laws, discipline varied at the whim of each village chief."⁶⁶ Also, there were regional differences between the Khmer Rouge. Two strands existed in the country. The Khmer Rouge in the east were loyal to Sihanouk and adhered to more liberal policies and laws. In comparison, in the southwest and north the Khmer Rouge supported Pol Pot and Khieu Samphan and were generally strict and extreme. Realistically, they were not the cohesive unit Pol Pot desired.

Throughout the revolution, village life was harsh. Each family was allotted a small hut or instructed to build one themselves. The huts were like "cattle shelters;" they were without walls and the usual raised floor and provided little privacy.⁶⁷ Food was prepared in the hut's center, and a hole in its corner served as a toilet. Families slept on the hard ground packed together like canned goods. The Khmer Rouge offered the

⁶⁵ Pin Yathay, 47.

⁶⁶ Pin Yathay, 53.

⁶⁷ Someth May, 118.

people meager rations, insufficient to satisfy their needs. Families were forced to scrounge for beetles, frogs, snails, larvae, plants, and even maggots. Further, as the revolution progressed the work in the fields became harder. The Khmer Rouge, anxious to harvest rice and other crops, increased each person's work load. Also, they prohibited women and children from staying home during the day.

The cadre instructed the people to attend political meetings after they finished their work. Often, they referred to the meetings as celebrations; however, they were clearly political sessions at which the cadre would explain the party's ideology, history, and aims. The meeting's general format was similar in each village. Local Khmer Rouge leaders would take turns addressing the assembly. They would essentially repeat one message: praise for the revolution's success, which always began with the idea that the Khmer Rouge had defeated the "American imperialists." Haing Ngor, in his autobiography, describes a political meeting where a Khmer Rouge explained this notion:

Angka won the war. Not by negotiation. Not by *sompea* [kowtowing] to the Lon Nol government, or to the US government, or to the other capitalists. We won by fighting. At the beginning we had no rifles, no ammunition. Then we got slingshots. Bows and arrows. Crossbows. Wooden traps. Knives and hatchets....And we fought until we won against the Capitalists. We were not afraid of the American government or the other big powers.⁶⁸

For many Khmer Rouge, this myth was a form of self-deception. In all likelihood, it was propaganda Pol Pot and the regime's central leadership had created to win the people's support. However, it was dangerous. Like many other Khmer Rouge

⁶⁸ Haing Ngor and Warner, 133.

ideas, this myth was irrational. It ignored that the Khmer Rouge had never fought against the United States military; they had only fought against the Lon Nol military equipped with United States military supplies and weapons. The Khmer Rouge exploited the embellishment as a way to encourage the people's continued "struggle." The idea was that if the people's effort had already overcome the world's most powerful country, their continued effort could achieve the Party's aims.

The Khmer Rouge felt three principles were necessary to achieve the perfect society: to "attain independence-sovereignty," "rely on your own strength," and "take destiny in our hands."⁶⁹ These principles were essentially the same ones Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan had originally outlined. In *Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development*, Khieu Samphan argues for "self-conscious, autonomous development."⁷⁰ He stresses the need for the country to rely on its own natural resources and to reject the capitalist influence. Hou Yuon, in *The Co-operative Question*, calls for "the safeguarding of independence, peace, neutrality, territorial integrity, and development."⁷¹ During the evacuation, Haing Ngor overheard a Khmer Rouge cadre exclaim: "long live the independent, peaceful, neutral, nonaligned, sovereign, democratic, and prosperous Cambodia with genuine territorial integrity."⁷² The resemblance between Hou Yuon's

⁶⁹ Haing Ngor and Warner, 134.

⁷⁰ Khieu Samphan, 68.

⁷¹ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 137.

⁷² Haing Ngor and Warner, 91.

words and the principles the Khmer Rouge voiced over a decade later is unmistakable. It demonstrates that the Party's principles remained consistent over time.

Beyond the Khmer Rouge's principles were their actual social and economic aims, which they described constantly during their political meetings. Someth May, in his autobiography, mentions two important aims: "to get rid of class distinctions and to achieve equality for the population of the whole country."⁷³ Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon had stated these aims in their works. Both leaders believed that economic inequality and class distinctions had been created through foreign investment and capital. Foreign intervention caused the usury and exploitation of the peasant. Their ideology centered on the elimination of these conditions and the consequent establishment of social and economic equality. Hou Yuon, in *The Co-operative Question*, states: "The internal conflict can be solved by reconciling one another's interests, finding justice for one another based on democracy, equality, and fraternity, and avoiding greedy exploitation of one class by another."⁷⁴

To achieve their vision, the Khmer Rouge leadership had developed a specific socio-economic plan. However, before implementing it, traditional society needed to be destroyed. In part, this explains why the Khmer Rouge evacuated Phnom Penh, set fire to the city's markets and business centers, sealed the country's borders, expelled all foreigners, and abolished money, books, and other goods, and liquidated groups of

⁷³ Someth May, 119.

⁷⁴ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 137.

people, including all former army officials and capitalist or rich individuals. Following these actions, they began to implement the first stage of their design.

Stage one was the establishment of a cooperative agrarian system. Each village served as a cooperative. The system's purpose was primarily to produce rice, although other crops were harvested. The country's land and natural resources were well-suited to this plan. But to increase the country's rice-growing potential, more land required cultivation, which meant clearing the land and constructing irrigation systems to provide a steady water source. Without irrigation systems, the regime had to depend on the natural flow of the rivers, especially the Mekong and the Tonle Sap. This need for water subjected the rice production to the "whims of nature."⁷⁵ The Khmer Rouge believed that if they regulated the rivers' water flow they could overcome this vulnerability. Thus, they directed the cooperatives to construct dams, dikes and other irrigation works. Their ultimate goal was to produce three rice harvests per year, rather than one.

The plan's second stage was centered on industrial development. Similar to Khieu Samphan's thesis, it began with the country's complete electrification. Employing dams and other waterworks constructed during stage one, the Khmer Rouge planned to build a national electrical system strong enough to power the country. This, in turn, would spurn industrial development. The cooperative structure would then gradually be applied to industrial development. Factories would be constructed and the domestic production of industrial goods would increase. Later, these goods would be utilized to improve

⁷⁵ Ponchaud, Francois, *Year Zero* (New York: Holt, Reinehart, and Winston, 1978) 75.

domestic agrarian productivity. Chea Houn was a top Khmer Rouge official under Pol Pot. In 1977, Haing Ngor witnessed a speech that he delivered, which outlined the regime's socio-economic plan. It celebrated the construction of a major dam and concentrated especially on the country's transformation from a purely agrarian state to a partially industrial one. According to Haing Ngor, Chea Houn explained:

It is a big project. When it is finished and we have connected the mountains, we will have a water supply the full year around. We will use the water to grow two or even three annual rice crops. We will never go hungry again....And when we have electricity we will build factories. We won't need oxcarts anymore! We will build our own cars and trucks in the factories. Each family will have at least one car. And each house will have its own electrical lights, to turn on and off whenever we like. And--this is not all--after we build factories, we will build sky scrapers near the reservoir! Anyone who wants an apartment to live in will have one! Our nation will be developed! Our factories will build our own bulldozers and tractors! We will use our machines to perform all the labor we need! *And we will never use human beings to farm again!*⁷⁶

In broad terms, the Khmer Rouge socio-economic plan was simple. First, tear down the existing socio-economic framework and all the institutions and businesses that traditionally maintained it. Evacuate the cities. Afterwards, rebuild society based on a new socio-economic framework that includes principles of autonomy, equality, and democracy. At the same time, establish a cooperative structure directed towards agrarian production. Later, gradually shift the focus of the cooperative production from agriculture to industry. The desired result of the plan: a strong and vibrant economy

⁷⁶ Haing Ngor and Warner, 277-278.

centered on national production and resources and the realization of the above mentioned principles.

The plan's basic framework somewhat paralleled the plans Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon created as academics. However, there were some important differences. Hou Yuon, for instance, advocated the immediate use of technology and "modern methods" to aid the peasants' production. The Khmer Rouge refused to allow the people to apply either. Also, as previously discussed, the Khmer Rouge's cooperative strategy was more extreme than even the final cooperative stage that Hou Yuon described in *The Cooperative Question*. The regime deserted the gradual development of the cooperative system. Nevertheless, it successfully implemented a universal one as a consequence, perhaps, of Hou Yuon's explanation that the cooperative strategy will fail if only a few, isolated cooperatives are established. In this case, he believed, capitalism would quickly destroy the isolated cooperatives. Finally, Hou Yuon argued that the cooperative system must be democratic and free. However, he did not define freedom in a western sense as individual liberty. Instead, in Marxist fashion, he defined it as economic equality. He believed that the capitalist notion of individualism promoted economic subjugation and class struggle and inequality. Taken literally, the Khmer Rouge, outside of themselves, created relative social and economic equality. But, as any survivor would attest, under their system the people, the ones left alive, were not free. The Khmer Rouge had taken their experiment to the elimination of all personal individuality.

In *Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development*, Khieu Samphan discusses the relationship between the government, economy, and industry. He argues that the

government's primary role should be to "support and sponsor peasant producers or artisans, individually or in cooperatives, and private industrialists, and struggle against speculators who try to buy cheap and sell dear."⁷⁷ Consequently, the Khmer Rouge plan eliminated private artisans, producers, or industrialists. Further, the Khmer Rouge not only supported the cooperative structure, they were the cooperative structure. As a result, because the Khmer Rouge conducted all production, no competition existed between cooperatives or individual producers.

The plan failed to reach the second stage before the regime collapsed, but stage one was implemented. Within months after the Khmer Rouge took over, the country had been transformed into a giant work camp. The rice fields were speckled with workers. Armed only with locally produced hand tools--mainly sickles, shovels, and spades--they relied primarily on their own effort and strength. They "plowed, dug ditches, cleared jungles, and built dikes" all by hand.⁷⁸ Sometimes, they replaced oxen and were hitched to heavy plows to till the fields. The Khmer Rouge had abolished all machinery, modern or technical devices, and foreign goods and services. They argued that such production tools would eventually be manufactured domestically, and would then be applied in the fields.

Moreover, as the revolution proceeded, the Khmer Rouge enacted more oppressive laws and rules. They abolished religion, displays of emotion or friendship,

⁷⁷ Khieu Samphan, 110.

⁷⁸ Criddle, 65.

travel, colorful clothing, communication, and sports and recreation. They wanted to eliminate anything that distracted the people from working towards the revolution's aims. Pin Yathay, in his autobiography, summarizes the extent and nature of the conditions they imposed:

There was no relief from it. Cosmetics and fashionable clothing were all considered vestiges of capitalism, foreign imperialism, Western decadence....We were told we should become as much like the ancients as possible, and advised to dye our clothing either by trampling it in the darkest mud we could find or by staining it with *macloeur*, the darkest juice of local fruit. Even spectacles, for some reason, were banished....Friendship was subject to caprice, for work teams changed often. We could not travel, even to other villages....Foreign food and drinks had disappeared....Postal services, telephones and schools belonged to the past. Sport--all recreation--was forbidden. There were no medical facilities....⁷⁹

Under the Khmer Rouge, medical centers and schools existed, but not in a "foreign" or "capitalist" sense. Schools were transformed into indoctrination centers. The Khmer Rouge realized that the regime's survival depended on the children's ideological education. Thus, they encouraged the children to believe that *Angka* was their only family. Often, the children were converted into spies, or *chhlops*, as the people called them. They were instructed to inform *Angka* if any family member misbehaved, skipped work, or stole food. The Khmer Rouge placed them in the fields to spy on the people. The strategy worked. For many children, *Angka* became their family. From their perspective, *Angka*, unlike their parents, provided food, support, and structure. Tragically, when this happened, the family unit was destroyed.

⁷⁹ Pin Yathay, 47-48.

The Khmer Rouge's medical centers were completely inadequate. Following the Party's ideology, the Khmer Rouge "doctors"--with no real medical training or experience--ignored foreign medicines and methods. As a result, sickness and disease spread throughout the villages. The city people, already weakened by starvation, were exposed to many rural diseases foreign to their immune systems. According to Haing Ngor, a Khmer Rouge cadre exclaimed: "We don't need doctors anymore. They are not necessary. If someone needs to have their intestines removed, I will do it. It is easy. There is no need to learn how to do it by going to school."⁸⁰ Thus, the medical situation typified the Khmer Rouge's irrationality. Instead of prescribing Western medicine, their doctors would indiscriminately dispense the same few natural products. Multi-purpose pills, or "rabbit droppings" as the people referred to them, were the Khmer Rouge's favorite remedy. Made of crushed roots, the pills were useless. Interestingly, Someth May believes the Khmer Rouge knew this. Like the general population, they hesitated to use the regime's natural medicine.⁸¹

Throughout the revolution, the Khmer Rouge continued to torture and kill the people. According to Haing Ngor, two parallel systems of punishment existed: "A prison system, part of a bureaucracy that needed to be fed to justify its existence. And another informal system that gave the cooperative leader freedom to hand out the

⁸⁰ Haing Ngor and Warner, 139.

⁸¹ Someth May, 166.

punishment."⁸² In his opinion, both methods were equally harsh. The people were punished for stealing food, skipping work, traveling between villages without the proper authority, or hiding material goods. Pu Ma, a mother, widow, and survivor, remembers visiting a formal torture camp where her husband was abused and later executed:

The Pol Pots kept my husband and about 700 other men in chains in a filthy room, and starved them day after day. The men looked like skeletons, but mosquitoes still bit them all night through. Unable to move, they defecated and urinated where they lay, and the room stank dreadfully. Although we couldn't visit them, a soldier who liked me because I sew his torn sweater allowed me to see my husband every now and then for ten or fifteen minutes.⁸³

The Khmer Rouge employed crude methods to punish and kill the people. Haing Ngor, who the Khmer Rouge tortured a remarkable three separate times, remembered well their cruel devices. Using hatchets, pliers, hoes, water, electricity, fire, insects, and starvation, the cadre mutilated their prisoners. For many young soldiers the chore was routine; a duty, perhaps driven by revenge. However, Haing Ngor believed that the especially older and higher-ranking officers enjoyed the task.⁸⁴ They were "sadists" he remarked.⁸⁵

⁸² Haing Ngor and Warner, 220.

⁸³ Welaratna, Usha, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America* (California: Stanford University Press, 1993)

⁸⁴ Haing Ngor and Warner, 230.

⁸⁵ However, it is important to note that some debate exists over the true extent and nature of the killing. Certain scholars and historians have asserted that the more unbelievable stories of Khmer Rouge behavior were Vietnamese propaganda. On the other hand, many survivors describe horrifying acts committed by the Khmer Rouge. The truth is hard to decipher.

Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon did not advocate the mass extermination of people. But, sections of their writings, in retrospect, seem to foreshadow the Khmer Rouge's genocide. Hou Yuon, for instance, in *The Co-operative Question*, discusses the rich and capitalist portion of society. He states: "According to the co-operative concept, the stingy capitalist and stingy landowner may not join the co-operatives with the poor peasants; otherwise, the interests of the poor peasants will be eliminated and the cooperatives transformed into instruments of 'big important people.'"⁸⁶ Under the Khmer Rouge, the entire country was transformed into a giant cooperative structure. According to Hou Yuon's ideology, there was no place for the stingy landowner or stingy capitalist in such a society, except perhaps underground--which is exactly what occurred during the revolution. Khieu Samphan, in his thesis, discusses the position of the rich and land owning in his socio-economic plan:

We are not proposing to eliminate the classes having the highest incomes. The structural reform which we are proposing does not tend to eliminate the contributive capacity of these groups. Rather, we believe ways can and must be found to bring out their contributive potential by attempting to transform these landlords, retailers, and usurers into a class of industrial or agrarian capitalist entrepreneurs.⁸⁷

Instead of transforming these classes, the Khmer Rouge chose to eliminate them. However, Khieu Samphan's argument that the classes must be transformed raises an interesting set of questions: How do you transform a class of people? What if they do

⁸⁶ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 157.

⁸⁷ Khieu Samphan, 74-75.

not willingly agree to be transformed? Khieu Samphan ignored the latter questions in his thesis. The scholar passed them over, like other reasonable and important issues, in favor of his socio-economic vision.

While "the wheel of history turned," according to the Khmer Rouge, the revolution proceeded. The days melted into each other as the people worked non-stop. It was always the same routine: work, eat, work, sleep... The liquidation continued. An increasing number of people were tortured or executed as the veneer of politeness and respect, present at the regime's beginning, quickly faded. In the fields, the people's situation worsened. The Khmer Rouge's expectations of the workers' production continued to increase, while the people received fewer rations and sleep. Symbolic of the revolution's paradoxical nature, the workers were often forced to sing as they labored. On the surface, the scene resembled the ideal Hou Yuon described in *The Co-operative Question*. The peasants worked cooperatively while singing "well-known songs."⁸⁸ However, in truth most people never elected to work cooperatively; the regime forced them to. Also, only certain songs were allowed during the revolution, including the Democratic Kampuchea National Anthem, entitled, "Glorious April 17th."

Bright red Blood which covers towns and plains
Of Kampuchea, our motherland,
Sublime Blood of workers and peasants,
Sublime blood of revolutionary men and women fighters!

The Blood changing into unrelenting hatred
And resolute struggle,
On April 17th, under the Flag of Revolution,

⁸⁸ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 103.

Frees from slavery!

Long live, long live Glorious April 17th!
Glorious Victory with greater signification
Than the times of Angkor!

We are uniting to edify
Splendid and democratic new Kampuchea and new society
With equality and justice,
Firmly applying the line of independence, sovereignty
And self-reliance.
Let us resolutely defend
Our motherland, our sacred Soil
And our Glorious Revolution

Long live, long live, long live,
Democratic and prosperous new Kampuchea
Let us resolutely raise high
The red Flag of the Revolution!
Let us edify our motherland!
Let us make her advance with great leaps,
So that she will become more glorious and marvelous than ever!⁸⁹

In the anthem, the passage "blood changing into unrelenting hatred" reveals an important element of the revolution: revenge. In part, although it was not an announced objective, revenge infected the revolution after 1975. How could it not have? The "bright red blood of the people which covers towns and plains" refers to the effects of the war and bombing. US planes dropped "three times the amount [of explosives] dropped on Japan in the closing stages of world war II."⁹⁰ How responsible, then, is the United

⁸⁹ Pol Pot, "Long Live the 17th Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea," Translated by a Group of Kampuchean Residents in America (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1977) 71.

⁹⁰ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 225.

States for the Khmer Rouge's genocide? William Shawcross, author of the controversial work, *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger and the Destruction of Cambodia*, argues: "It was American policy that engulfed the nation in war. That war did not end when helicopters lifted Americans out. It took another form....the Khmer Rouge were born out of the inferno that American policy did much to create."⁹¹

There is logic to his statements. US bombing inflicted immeasurable physical and psychological damage on the peasantry and Khmer Rouge who lived in the countryside at the time. It developed within the Khmer Rouge and the peasantry a severe contempt for anyone associated with the United States or Lon Nol, which included the city people who were by circumstance identified as their supporters. In this way, US bombing unleashed a cycle of revenge, which Someth May's father wisely noted before he was murdered, had "no end."⁹²

The anthem also refers to "the times of Angkor," a common Khmer Rouge theme. All Cambodians regard the Angkorean period as the gloried height of their national history. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership constantly compared the achievements of their revolution to the period. In 1977, Pol Pot delivered a speech to the Khmer Rouge leadership in Phnom Penh commemorating the 17th anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. He compared the communist revolution to the Angkorean period:

We all know the Angkor of past times. Angkor was built during the slave period. It was our slaves who built it under the yoke of the exploiting

⁹¹ Shawcross, 396.

⁹² Someth May, 122.

classes at the time, for the enjoyment of the king. If our people were capable of building Angkor they can do anything. Our people brought about the glorious April 17, 1975. We must lift up our nation's soul, our nation's pride, to carry out the work of national defense and construction and secure our country's future.⁹³

Ironically, Pol Pot compared the revolution to the Angkorean period, despite denouncing it as a period of slavery and exploitation. This contradiction symbolized the revolution. For example, the Khmer Rouge national flag was red on yellow, with the three towers of Angkor in the middle. The three towers, or three mountains as they were sometimes called, represented the three principles of the regime: to "attain independent sovereignty," "rely on our own strength," and "take our own destiny in our own hands."⁹⁴

Khmer Rouge Administrative Structure and Hierarchy

The Khmer Rouge divided the country into eight zones, which reflected military areas.⁹⁵ Beyond the zones, they further dissected the country into many administrative regions. However, at the zone level the regime's disunity was apparent. For instance, in the Southeast the conditions were easier. There, the Khmer Rouge were moderate compared to their counterparts. Also, the area's natural resources were rich and abundant. Malnutrition, starvation, and killing were less prevalent in the region. On the other hand, the North and Northwest zones were extremely rough. Many new people were

⁹³ Pol Pot, 49.

⁹⁴ Ponchaud, 73.

⁹⁵ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 267.

transported to them after the evacuation causing overpopulation. In addition, the zone's leaders were inexperienced and ignorant, and the war and bombing had destroyed most of the location's natural resources and food supply. Thus, the zones continuously suffered terrible food shortages, which resulted in large-scale famine and disease.

The Khmer Rouge administrative structure was a complex hierarchy. At the top level was the High Revolutionary Committee, which in reality was *Angka*. However, *Angka* also "meant the regime at all levels, from the topmost leader down to the lowest spy."⁹⁶ The High Revolutionary Committee was led by Pol Pot and included Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan, among others. Directly below it were the zone or regional leaders. Within the zones were a number of villages. Each zone had its own, separate administration that was subordinate to its regional leadership.⁹⁷ The village administration at the highest level included three officers--chairman (village leader), vice chairman, and secretary--who were responsible for the two or three cooperatives within the village. Each cooperative was governed by a cooperative leader who was often an old person. The cooperative was further divided into groups of ten people. Each group was governed by a new person whom the Khmer Rouge felt embodied the revolution's principles. New people rarely sought to become group leaders because of the position's responsibility. A group leader was liable for the conduct of his or her entire group, and if any person misbehaved the leader was also punished.

⁹⁶ Haing Ngor and Warner, 199-200.

⁹⁷ Haing Ngor and Warner, 200.

At every administration level, the Khmer Rouge were clearly above the people. In the fields, the people worked while the Khmer Rouge watched, or "supervised." In the villages, the Khmer Rouge lived apart from everyone else. They ate better food, slept more, and were able to acquire and retain material goods which they confiscated from the new people. Below the Khmer Rouge, but clearly above the new people, were the old people. They also lived separate from the new people, and they enjoyed comparatively greater freedom.

Hou Yuon, in *The Co-operative Question*, warns against this exact type of leadership:

Cliquism and Nepotism, the inclination to create privileges for oneself or one's own group, are tendencies which usually exist in any established organization and in the minds of those who hold power. These two tendencies are disastrous for the organization and for the co-operative consciousness. When these two tendencies exist and spread, the organization no longer stands on unity and the leaders no longer represent the interests of the masses.⁹⁸

Hou Yuon's belief proved correct. Throughout the revolution, the Khmer Rouge consolidated power and privileges into their own hands. Consequently, cliquism and nepotism spread and the people's unity was further destroyed. The Khmer Rouge leadership had despised this type of authority and political environment as students. Ironically, they later created it as leaders of their country.

The Khmer Rouge administration's primary task was to oversee the collection and distribution of the country's rice production. Mostly, the Khmer Rouge did not feed the

⁹⁸ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 153.

local peasantry with locally grown rice; the people did not enjoy the fruits of their labor. Instead, it was collected and shipped, by government trucks, to regional storage sights. It was then distributed according to the High Revolutionary Committee's economic plan. A meager amount was designated to feed the national population, and the rest was exported to China in return for Chinese military aid and material goods. In his speech commemorating the 17th anniversary of the Communist Party of Democratic Kampuchea, Pol Pot described the process:

During 1976, we collected about 80% of the rice crop in accordance with our plan. This provided us with enough food for our people, an average of 312 kilograms per capita, and also enabled us in 1977 to begin exporting tens of thousands of tons of rice, in order to accumulate capital for our national defense and construction efforts.⁹⁹

As a student, Khieu Samphan called for the nationalization of certain crops, such as rubber, rice and corn. Also, during the initial stages of industrial development, he suggested that foreign trade be held to a minimum. He believed the country should import only the capital goods necessary to promote national industry, which could not have been produced domestically. In this sense, his writings agreed with the regime's rice collection and exportation. However, he also felt that the state should purchase major commodities, such as rice and corn, from independent producers or cooperatives. In his plan, money remained a medium of exchange. Consequently, the Khmer Rouge's socio-economic plan could be viewed as a more extreme version than the one Khieu Samphan

⁹⁹ Pol Pot, 66.

had described. The regime had eliminated money and individual production, which Khieu Samphan had included in his socio-economic analysis.

Collapse

The High Revolutionary Committee established rice production quotas, which they required the villages to fulfill. Often, because of unrealistic demands and poor production conditions, the villages failed to produce enough rice to feed their populations and fill their required quotas. When this happened, local administrations elected to fill their quotas and allowed the people to starve. This solution only perpetuated the problem: already starving and discouraged by the exportation of local produce, the people worked less and produced less rice.

Unrealistic demands contributed to the situation. The Khmer Rouge plan called for three annual rice harvests. To provide a stable water source, the Khmer Rouge administration ordered the construction of reservoirs and irrigation works. Because many engineers, architects, and other professionals had already been executed or were afraid to offer advice and perhaps contradict *Angka*, the project's architectural and engineering aspects were flawed. The Khmer Rouge repeatedly forced the people to build by hand irrigation works or reservoirs, which ultimately were inoperable. As a result, instead of producing three rice harvests per year, the regime struggled to produce even one. In his autobiography, Pin Yathay summarizes the Khmer Rouge architectural and engineering problems:

The weird thing about this peasant revolution was that none of the accumulated wisdom of the peasants went into it....If a skilled engineer

looking at what they were doing had laid down his spade and offered to design a wonderfully functioning reservoir, he would have been killed for not being a peasant. The whole society was working at a maximum--brutally enforced--inefficiency.¹⁰⁰

The system also broke down because the village administrations were afraid to report the truth to their regional leaders or the High Revolutionary Committee, which was therefore uninformed about the country's rice shortages. They believed their quotas were being met and the revolution was proceeding as planned. However, in reality, the country's agriculture system was in shambles. Mired in a host of problems, it had virtually collapsed. Anarchy was rising underneath the fragile cooperative structure and bureaucratic leadership. In some cases, village leaders were secretly defecting. By late 1977, a few were even selling rice to counter-revolutionaries along the Thai border, hoping to make a profit before the regime collapsed.¹⁰¹

Whether the High Revolutionary Committee believed the positive reports they received from their subordinates is difficult to judge. Certainly, a few, who had toured the countryside, recognized the truth. Pol Pot may not have. During the regime, he lived heavily guarded in isolation. He constantly moved from one residence to another and rarely appeared in public. At the heart of his self-appointed isolation was his fear of assassination. It grew as the revolution continued.¹⁰² However, the result of his isolation

¹⁰⁰ Pin Yathay, 209.

¹⁰¹ Someth May, 189.

¹⁰² Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 139.

was that he had little first-hand knowledge of how the country was fairing. He was forced to rely on information from his subordinates, and he trusted few of them. Also, he despised criticism. Few dared to disagree with him. Thus, as his paranoia increased, he sank deeper into isolation and fear. His disillusionment, left unchallenged, festered and expanded.

Pol Pot, in a speech delivered on December 1976 to the upper echelon of the Khmer Rouge leadership, claimed that "enemies can easily infiltrate the Party."¹⁰³ He added, "they remain--perhaps only one person, or two people. They remain." By 1977, large sections of the Party's leadership were being purged. On Pol Pot's command, an interrogation and torture center known as S-21 was established in Phnom Penh. The center is often referred to as Tuol Sleng, the name of the suburb it is located in.¹⁰⁴ Before becoming a torture and interrogation center, it was a high school where many local children were educated. Under Pol Pot, Tuol Sleng provided a different, terrifying sort of education. Any Khmer Rouge suspected of being "disloyal" or "conspiring against the regime" was transported to S-21. There, in the empty class rooms, the people were abused and then killed. It was a horrifying process, reminiscent in a general sense of the death camps in Nazi Germany.

The head of S-21 was a man named Deuch. Along with his family who seemed to delight in the people's misery, he ruled the death camp. But S-21 cannot be dismissed as

¹⁰³ Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 285.

their own warped creation. Underneath it all lay a meticulous and purposeful procedure that they followed, which emanated from the highest level of the regime. After prisoners were brought into the camp, they were asked to admit their crimes. The interrogators accused them of ridiculous offenses, such as being CIA members, or participating in an underground resistance effort against the regime. Undoubtedly, the prisoners denied the accusations and praised *Angka*. These initial responses the S-21 administration carefully recorded. However, after months of abuse and torture, exhausted and near death, the prisoners would reveal the "truth." They would confess to having been disloyal and perhaps to having been CIA agents. Often times, they were ordered to write and sign their confessions. Later carbon copies were made, and both sets of copies were filed and saved in a large vault along with similar confessions. The prisoners were then photographed and killed. Altogether, S-21 claimed the lives of over 20,000 Cambodians, most of them Khmer Rouge.¹⁰⁵

As the purges increased, the flow of accurate information between the different administrative levels was further limited. Village leaders continued to fill the required quotas, while the people underneath them starved. The High Revolutionary Committee received more false reports. Ironically, through their fear of subversive activity, they had created an environment in which the truth was concealed. Hou Yuon, in *The Co-operative Question*, defends the importance of criticism and truth as part of the cooperative strategy: "Mutual criticism, exchange of opinions and experiences,

¹⁰⁵ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 285.

coordinated resolution of problems will certainly be in the interests of all the organizations and of the national economy as a whole."¹⁰⁶ In all likelihood, Hou Yuon was killed for holding this belief.

As the regime's framework collapsed, chaos grew. In many instances, disease and famine incapacitated the people, and they were unable to work. Their stomachs, infected and weak, rejected even rice. Slowly, their bodies withered away. Similarly, the land deteriorated. Impaired by the attempt to harvest three rice crops and by dysfunctional irrigation systems, it produced little food. Meanwhile, many Khmer Rouge and old people, sensing the regime's political fortunes shifting, started preparing for life after Democratic Kampuchea. They began hoarding rations for themselves. The administration's regulations were ignored. Instead, the local leadership established their own rules. Paranoia increased the killing and torturing, and the regime's revengeful nature was further exposed.

To complicate matters, the Khmer Rouge were secretly fighting the Vietnamese. This war, over disputed territory along the border between the two countries, had been shaping up since the two communist movements split during the early 1970s. The Khmer Rouge leadership, seeking to establish their country's territorial integrity and independence, fought to reclaim land previously lost to the Vietnamese. In 1977, taking an aggressive but reckless stance, Pol Pot and his military command instigated military attacks against the Vietnamese. As the leadership's insanity grew, the military

¹⁰⁶ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 164.

confrontations occurred more often. Slowly, the war heated up. Angered and annoyed at first, the Vietnamese quickly became intolerant of the Khmer Rouge's aggression. In 1979, after eighteen months of confrontation and war, the Vietnamese entered Cambodia and attacked the Khmer Rouge. Already self-destructing, the Khmer Rouge offered little resistance. Within weeks the Vietnamese had defeated the Khmer Rouge and taken control over the country. The years of starvation and death under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were ended.

When the Vietnamese entered Cambodia, they were shocked by the country's state. They discovered a nation once rich with tradition, religion, and agriculture completely destroyed. Phnom Penh, before a vibrant and colorful city, was empty. The bombing coupled with the Khmer Rouge's agricultural system had ruined the countryside. Everyone except the Khmer Rouge was starving and without family. The people resembled walking skeletons with shadows. The Vietnamese had never seen anything like it.

After the war, the Vietnamese quickly established a puppet government in Phnom Penh under Heng Samrin, an ex-Khmer Rouge military commander in the Eastern Zone. They informed the world their occupation of Cambodia would last only ten years. Enough time, they stipulated, for the country to stabilize itself and repair a significant amount of the damage the revolution had caused. For the Cambodian people this news was frustrating. Although they hated the Khmer Rouge, many hated the Vietnamese even more. Historically, the Vietnamese had been Cambodia's number one enemy.

Thus, for the Cambodian people, the struggle continued. The years under the Khmer Rouge had "retarded" their economic progress and set them back indefinitely. Roughly two million Cambodians had died during the revolution, slightly more than one-third of the country's population.¹⁰⁷ Included in the death toll were the country's most educated, knowledgeable men and women. Few doctors, engineers, architects, or other professionals had survived the regime. Haing Ngor estimates that out of the 527 medical students that graduated in his class, only 40 survived.¹⁰⁸

To further complicate matters, international economic and humanitarian aid was withheld for a time because of political considerations. The United States, having recently lost a tragic and divisive war against the Vietnamese, was reluctant to provide aid to a country being run by a puppet government of the Vietnamese. Many countries supported the United States' position. Once again, the Cambodian people were the victims of the conflict between the United States and Vietnam. Perhaps, many thought, it was their fate. It was a karma: the idea that the gods were punishing them for sins committed in past lives or for other reasons.

¹⁰⁷ The human cost of the DK regime is highly controversial. The Thai and Vietnamese governments assert that the Khmer Rouge were responsible for approximately 3 million deaths. While the CIA reports that the Khmer population decreased from 7 million to 5.8 million between 1975 and 1979. Michael Vickery, a renowned Cambodian scholar, estimates that 1 million Cambodians died under the Khmer Rouge. The authors opinion, based partially on a compilation of various estimates, is that nearly 2 million Cambodians died throughout the DK regime.

¹⁰⁸ Haing Ngor and Warner, 407.

In reality, the genocide and destruction that occurred under the Khmer Rouge emanated, in part, from the Party's revolutionary socio-economic plan. The plan had, in certain ways, resembled Hou Yuon's and Khieu Samphan's earlier conception. Many structural and ideological components were similar, such as the agrarian cooperative structure, the rejection of foreign influence and aid, the extreme emphasis on "work productivity," the attempt to create a national power source, and the mass ideological education system. Also, the revolution's aims and principles had remained constant: equality and self-sufficiency, autonomy and independence, democracy and freedom. These were noble desires based on reasonable economic, social and political analysis. Why, then, did they result in the tragedy that occurred under the Khmer Rouge? What explains the regime's tyrannical nature?

The Khmer Rouge failed for a number of reasons: poor irrigation and agricultural systems, corruption, paranoia and mania, lack of communication between the administration, time, outside circumstances, and the war before the revolution. But it is important to advance these practical reasons and understand what general underlying factors led to the tragedy that took place in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. After all, similar tragedies have taken place in other countries at other times: China under Chairman Mao and the Soviet Union under Stalin. Obviously, each of these cases presents some different circumstances, characters, and details. But, in general, the result of each was the same: a socio-economic and political vision, when carried out, resulting in the purges and deaths of millions of people. In Cambodia's case, how did seemingly

well-intentioned ideology transform into such grotesque human suffering? What elements must be present to result in such wholesale disillusionment?

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Cambodian communist movement's development and rise to power, its socio-economic ideology and vision remained constant. Its members repeatedly endorsed the same principles: democracy, freedom, equality, independence, autonomous rule, national unity, and economic strength. Hou Yuon's and Khieu Samphan's works in the 1950s and 1960s had identified these principles; the Khmer Rouge marching in Phnom Penh after their victory in 1975 proclaimed them; and party literature that the High Revolutionary Committee distributed during the late 1970s defended them. However, as certain as the Khmer Rouges' belief in these principles was their lack of ability to accomplish them. Perhaps, this was the regime's greatest failure. The revolution's leaders were willing to sacrifice everything--including human life--to achieve their vision. But their revolution ended without the fulfillment of a single objective. Their efforts succeeded only in pushing their country farther into anarchy and deprivation. What caused this failure?

The Khmer Rouge could never implement the socio-economic plan they had envisioned. The civil war between 1970 and 1975, as previously noted, created a number of prohibitive circumstances. The American bombing and war had demolished the countryside and created considerable homelessness and starvation. Pol Pot conducted a rare interview with a Belgian reporter in 1978, in which he explained the main reason

why the Khmer Rouge decided to evacuate Phnom Penh: "The first reason was an economic one, that is to ensure [a] food supply for many millions [of] inhabitants in the cities. If in the cities, the population died by starvation, they would not have any confidence in the revolution."¹⁰⁹

Additionally, the war had divided the population. The city people, by circumstance, were represented by the Lon Nol regime and the United States. The country people, on the other hand, joined the Khmer Rouge to oppose the American bombing and the corrupt regime. Thus, some of the Khmer Rouge support was based on opposition to the American bombing instead of genuine enthusiasm for the regime's vision. This reality differed with Hou Yuon's and Khieu Samphan's writings. They argued that a cooperative strategy needed to be gradually implemented with the people's continuous understanding and consent. This was necessary, in part, they correctly observed, because their cooperative strategy differed radically from traditional Khmer society. To ensure its successful implementation a "genuine and very detailed education program" must be established.¹¹⁰ Only at the "necessary point" they felt, when the people had been properly educated, could they institute each progressive cooperative stage. Unfortunately, famine and the war dramatically shortened the revolution's education period. The Khmer Rouge

¹⁰⁹ Department of Press and Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Democratic Kampuchea, *Pol Pot Talks with the Delegation of the Association Belgium-Kampuchea* (Phnom Penh, August 5, 1978) 9-10.

¹¹⁰ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 156.

leadership implemented the cooperative structure prematurely, before the people understood or agreed with their program.

The environmental and educational differences between the Khmer Rouge leadership and their followers compounded the problem. As children, the Khmer Rouge leaders were raised in middle class, suburban homes around Phnom Penh. They led "city" lives and never gained the rural experience they would eventually need to implement their plan's agricultural component. They later based their country's economy on agricultural plans they had neither experienced nor performed. During their academic careers, the Khmer Rouge leaders spent years studying and debating Cambodia's social and economic condition. In Paris, they developed complex economic theories to explain the Cambodian peasant's poor socio-economic state. However, their cooperative solution to their country's economic problems was modeled somewhat on a revolutionary, Marxist ideology, which focused on how to divide wealth, not create it. In contrast, the Cambodian peasants in the countryside were primarily farmers and fishermen. Most had never visited a city. Their education consisted of practical, hands-on work in fields and rivers. For them, abstract theories and principles held little meaning. Books, classrooms, or Marxist theory did not provide their families with food or shelter.

The American bombing between 1969 and 1973 further confused the peasants. Why were the Americans bombing them? What did their lives or their villages have to do with the American government? Night and day, for roughly three years, B-52 bombers covered the sky and rained down mass weapons of destruction on the countryside. The people's families, homes, and the land, rivers, and trees that sustained their livelihood

were destroyed. The cold war--an ideological conflict between two foreign countries--did not concern the peasants. The bombing concerned them. It developed within them an anger against anyone responsible for their suffering. Thus, the Khmer Rouge represented an opportunity for revenge. The peasants were not simply inspired by Pol Pot's or Khieu Samphan's economic theories or their cooperative concept. They wished to see the Lon Nol regime and its supporters, the Americans, and anyone else associated with the bombing and killing, suffer as they had. So they joined the revolution.

Following the evacuation, the Khmer Rouge leadership attempted to implement their detailed socio-economic plan, but their support waned. Their cadre, in general, would comply with their demands, but the revolution's ideology and intent were obscured. The peasants--both Khmer Rouge and old people--employed the revolution to reverse their position in society; to secure wealth and status. For example, each day after the new people left to work in the fields, the cadre searched their huts. They looked for hidden material goods and wealth--jewelry, expensive clothing, family heirlooms, or gold--which were illegal under the regime. Any objects they discovered they confiscated and later enjoyed themselves. At night, female Khmer Rouge would dress in rich, colorful clothing and jewelry and paint make-up on their faces. All were stolen items. The new people were forced to concede their possessions. If they protested, they were punished or, in some cases, executed.

The Khmer Rouge repeated the words democracy, equality, and freedom often. These were the cadre's catch phrases. But they neither believed in nor understood them.

Their ignorance stemmed, in part, from their inexperience. Historically, they had been indentured servants--economically enslaved first to the country's feudal mandarins and later to foreign capitalists, Chinese moneylenders and middlemen. They had never enjoyed true freedom; the type created by an explicit bond between people, and between people and government, which respects certain rights--including the right to democratically elect representative government and establish law. Consequently, a Khmer Rouge seldom would elaborate on the meaning behind the words or how they related to the people's situation. Someth May, in his autobiography, recalls a particular exchange at a political meeting between an educated city youth and a Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Rouge shouted the word "equality" and defined it as "the same." The boy stood and asked the Khmer Rouge: "But why doesn't equality exist in every cooperative? Why do you all, who call yourself the Old People, have enough food to eat, when we don't?".¹¹¹ The Khmer Rouge responded: "Comrade, you should think very, very carefully before you open your mouth again to ask more questions. We Old People have been fighting very hard over the last few years to achieve equality and freedom for all you here...Do you think that what you did was fair to us? What right do you have to complain about the food you have eaten?".¹¹² Thus, for the Khmer Rouge, their notions of freedom and equality was limited to the condition of their own status and power.

¹¹¹ Someth May, 195-196.

¹¹² Someth May, 196.

These circumstances undermined the success of the regime's socio-economic plan. The Khmer Rouge imposed their plan upon Cambodia, whether or not it was ready. The plan failed from the start. The evacuation was the first concession. By lying to the people, the Khmer Rouge rejected the principle of truth. Likewise, the Khmer Rouge systematically compromised the rest of their principles. One after another they fell: truth, justice, law, equality, freedom, democracy, independence, and leadership. Anarchy, alone, stood in their wake. By the regime's end, the Khmer Rouge society bore little resemblance to the design outlined by the leaders in the 1950s and 1960s.

It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that if the plan had been implemented under the ideal circumstances it would have succeeded. Its economic analysis, as Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan's works prove, was accurate as to the faults of the predecessor government. Foreign competition was impeding national development, and moneylenders and middlemen were exploiting the peasant's economic position. But the plan was also based on the relationships between certain principles, as defined by Marxist theory: democracy, economic equality, "capitalist" individualism, and freedom. The Khmer Rouge, it seems, either misunderstood the real meaning behind the communist revolution Marx had envisioned, or were influenced by past communist revolutions that had already diverged greatly from Marxist doctrine. Consequently, they misapplied these principles to their revolution.

At the fundamental core of Marxist ideology are certain preconditions: a large working class, and advanced capitalist industrial state, and the ability for people to organize openly around political interests. None of these preconditions had existed in

Cambodia before the revolution. The Khmer Rouge, from their inception until the early 1970s, had been a small, clandestine party hiding in the countryside or “underground” in the cities. They had never represented the opinions of a large Cambodian working class, mainly, because they had never been one. As Khieu Samphan had aptly noted in his thesis, historically Cambodia had been a feudal country with a mostly peasant population.

In all likelihood, the Cambodian communist movement would have remained insignificant had the war between the United States and Vietnam not spread into Cambodia and handed them immediate leverage. By circumstance not merit, they were vaulted into a position of power, and they brought with them their ill-conceived notions of individualism, equality, and freedom. Accordingly, when they attempted through coercion to impress their own definition of these principles on the people and their cadre, they created the exact bourgeoisie environment Marx had reviled. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels describe the point at which they believed such a society would collapse:

It becomes evident that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an overriding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him.¹¹³

Besides its Marxist-inspired underpinnings, the Khmer Rouge socio-economic plan was also based on the assumption that instinctively people would rather work cooperatively than competitively; in other words, the “naturalness” of the cooperative

¹¹³ Engels and Marx, 26-27.

structure. Khieu Samphan correctly observed that historically the Khmer people would often organize themselves "to help each other with the transplanting and harvesting."¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, he was incorrect to assume that this phenomenon signaled the Khmer people's inherent desire to work cooperatively all the time; to share evenly their wealth, labor, tools, goods, and produce.

Hou Yuon acknowledged that "people don't want to abandon their old customs readily, so long as there is no actual evidence to show that such a break is possible and will lead to better results."¹¹⁵ Still, he believed that the revolution simply needed to "part the duckweed" in order to "allow the interests of the people to emerge."¹¹⁶ He further argued: "Production has long been a common task with a social character. In the task of increasing production, people are always working together. It is the weapon with which they confront nature; nobody can exist and produce in isolation. Individualism is not the workers' theory; it definitely is a theory of the capitalist system."¹¹⁷ These were vast assumptions, unproven and untested. The Khmer Rouge plan hinged on their validity.

Further, the plan called for the elimination of unproductive work. Concerning the general economic welfare of the nation, this was an ideal concept. It followed Khieu Samphan's belief that "the fundamental fact which economists ought to take into

¹¹⁴ Khieu Samphan, 103.

¹¹⁵ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 151.

¹¹⁶ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 151.

¹¹⁷ Chanthou Boua and Kiernan, 159-160.

consideration is therefore not the individual, but the nation."¹¹⁸ However, in reality it would have been impossible to achieve while maintaining the principle of freedom. According to Khieu Samphan, distilleries, soap factories, and weavers were "productive activities" while civil servants, public services, restaurant personnel, and hairdressers were "unproductive activities."¹¹⁹ These are subjective identifications. Many people, under any circumstances, would be unwilling to abandon their work because it was identified by an authority as "unproductive." The Khmer Rouge had a chilling response to this fact: they executed all unproductive workers.

At its core, the plan was created to achieve a communist vision. Pol Pot, in an interview in 1978, summarized this design: "Our aspiration is to edify a society where happiness, prosperity and equality prevail for everybody, a society where there are neither exploiting class nor exploited class, neither exploited people nor exploiting people, and where everybody participates in production works and national [sic] defence."¹²⁰ In this regard, the revolution's intent and ideology was similar to other ones that have taken place. Yugoslavia, China, and the Soviet Union in particular underwent revolutions based on Marxist doctrine. But what defined the Khmer revolution was its ideological

¹¹⁸ Khieu Samphan, 76.

¹¹⁹ Khieu Samphan, 54.

¹²⁰ Department of Press and Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Democratic Kampuchea, *Interview of Pol Pot to the Delegation of Yugoslav Journalists in Visit to Democratic Kampuchea March 17, 1978* (Phnom Penh: Red Flag Publications, 1978) 5.

purity and excess. Inspired by the Angkorean myth, the Khmer Rouge were proud of their radicalism. They sought to create the ideal nation and would accept no less. Pol Pot, in an interview with Yugoslavian journalists in 1978, exclaimed: "We have no model in building our new society."¹²¹ In a sense, his statement was true. Although, the Khmer revolution was influenced by prior international movements, its radical nature surpassed all of the revolutions of its predecessors.

Unfortunately, the revolution's failure was equally extreme. Instead of achieving its principles, it created a totalitarian dictatorship based on injustice and inequality. The end result was a massive genocide: Cambodians killing Cambodians. As demonstrated above, more than one factor led to this tragedy. Outside circumstances--the war, American bombing, and educational and environmental differences between the Khmer Rouge leadership and their supporters--all adversely affected the regime's implementation of its socio-economic plan. But the plan was also implicitly defective. This point is important for the following reason: the Khmer revolution, in many ways, paralleled other Marxist-inspired revolutions. The purpose of these thesis is not to compare and contrast these revolutions. Nevertheless, the Khmer revolution provides a clear example, arguably the purest, of Communist doctrine failing when put to use. A difficult but vital question is why this failure occurred.

The revolution's survivors have their own theories on the question. Haing Ngor, in his autobiography, discusses *kum*, a Cambodian type of revenge:

¹²¹ Press and Information, *Yugoslav Interview*, 5.

Kum is the word for a particularly Cambodian mentality of revenge--to be precise, a long standing grudge leading to revenge much more damaging than the original injury. If I hit you with my fist and you wait five years and then shoot me in the back one night, that is *kum*. Or if a government official steals a peasant's chickens and the peasant uses it as an excuse to attack a government garrison, like the one in my village, that is *kum*. Cambodians know all about *kum*. It is the infection that grows on our national soul.¹²²

According to Haing Ngor, *kum* resonates below the surface of traditional Cambodian society. Underneath the people's wispy smiles and relaxed lifestyles hides a darker side of Cambodian life. It is, says Haing Ngor, a "deep, hidden discontent."¹²³ His theory is that the war and bombing unleashed *kum* on a tragic scale. And the city people reaped its effects.

However, perhaps the most basic explanation is also the most plausible: any attempt to achieve a utopian state is doomed to failure. Throughout the centuries, the notion of perfect equality has captured the imaginations of people. Always, the same ingredients combine to fashion its appeal, at least in the communist version: economic subjugation and class struggle. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx put forth his basic theory that the working class, under the proper conditions, will overthrow the ruling elite and create a classless, economically equal state. However, in Cambodia's case, as in the case of other communist revolutions, the ruling elite was overthrown by another minority who then assumed its position. It is important to understand exactly why this occurs.

¹²² Haing Ngor and Warner, 9.

¹²³ Haing Ngor and Warner, 9.

One explanation is that the struggle for power or authority is in human nature. This argument has biological roots. Beneath people's conditioned behavior molded to obey society's laws, lies an instinctual, animal state. This state drives people to satisfy their basic needs--such as food, water, shelter, and territory--in order of importance. The strength of each instinct directly relates to the importance of its accompanying need. Robert Ardrey, in his work entitled *The Territorial Imperative*, stresses the unappreciated territorial instinct in humans. He argues that humans have an "inward compulsion" to "possess and defend" territory,¹²⁴ and that this compulsion contributes to war.¹²⁵ His theory is worth contemplating. American democracy was born in a revolution against confiscation, deprivation of rights, and sovereign arrogance.

For a society to achieve perfect equality, its people would have to disregard their basic instincts. They would have to comply exactly with society's mandates and only eat, sleep, and work a certain amount. They would also have to suppress their desire to establish and rule their own territory--their territorial imperative. In theory, this state could be accomplished at some level, if the people completely trusted each other and their government and were willing to entirely repress their own interests. But as the Khmer Rouge proved, leadership and restraint are elusive. The Khmer Rouge themselves were unwilling to fully sacrifice their own desires to achieve their ideals. Throughout the

¹²⁴ Ardrey, Robert, *The Territorial Imperative* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966) 3.

¹²⁵ Ardrey, 6.

revolution, they maintained an elevated status and power. They seized the opportunity to rule Cambodia, and they were unwilling to relinquish it even when their own ideology called for it. Their ambitious, perhaps instinctual, actions set a precedent. How then could their followers or the Cambodian people ever be expected to comply fully with their ideology or mandates?

Most people are stricken by the notion of genocide. Killing on such a massive scale raises an important set of questions about human nature and frailty. The Khmer Rouge genocide is especially perplexing. How could Cambodians--traditionally quiet and passive people--so casually have slaughtered their fellow countrymen? The banality is arguably the most terrifying part of the question. But, as the Khmer Rouge demonstrated, banal killing often stems from banal ideology. The Khmer Rouge's revolutionary experiment proves that it does not necessarily take evil, grotesque people with inhumane ideas to cause extreme human suffering or tragedy; it may only take people blinded by an ideological vision unconnected to the reality of human nature or existence.

EPILOGUE

Pol Pot is dead. He died peacefully a few weeks ago of a heart attack, while I was concluding this work.

One of the world's greatest mass murderers, he escaped justice. In the wake of his death, the US government has been lobbying to try his comrades, before they also elude punishment. Provocative talk for a country allied with Pol Pot for years after his regime's collapse. Where was this effort two decades ago?

More important than retribution is understanding and truth. Undoubtedly, Pol Pot's legacy will haunt the Khmer people's psyche for generations. It might also stir our own. The United States affected his rise to power. US bombing of the Cambodian countryside gave life to the Khmer Rouge. When the United States abandoned Vietnam, it also abandoned Cambodia.

As the leader of the free world, the United States must consider the premises on which its foreign policy is based. Time and time again, the political welfare of our leaders dictates our foreign policy. In the early 1970s, Nixon and Kissinger recognized the political need to end peacefully but "with honor" the war between the United States and Vietnam--at any cost. That cost in Cambodia was high: half a million tons of US bombs dropped.

Pol Pot's death should not relax consideration of why the Khmer Rouge genocide occurred. Sentencing his comrades might add closure to the tragedy, but important

questions remain. Someday, the Khmer Rouge could reappear in another form and in another place. As a reminder of the genocide, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh stands a monument filled with human skulls. Although it daily horrifies the people that live near it, they do not want to forget their past. We must share this attitude and look honestly at the Khmer Rouge atrocity. We must continue to ask "Why?"

A.J.

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