

Of The Superpowers' Making: How the Tripolarity of the International System Primed Cambodia for Genocide, 1953-1979

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Abstract

Although there is a substantial body of literature analyzing the causes of the Cambodian genocide, the Cold War's influence on the rise of the Khmer Rouge and the subsequent genocide is often overlooked. Once the Cold War settled into Southeast Asia, social unrest, economic decay, and political impotency began to pool in the fault lines of Cambodia's domestic stability. These fault lines ultimately led to xenophobia, mass repression, and genocide under the Khmer Rouge. This connection, however, between the Cold War and the Cambodian genocide has been obscured in favor of intraregional issues. Although racial and ethnic tensions, struggles for control within the Pol Pot regime, and socioeconomic changes in the rural and urban areas illuminate crucial components of the genocide, such components do not explain why such deep social and political fractures developed in the first place. Essentially, this project will explain what cannot be explained through regional analyses. Cambodia's economic dependence on the United States, the ramifications of the Vietnam War, Democratic Kampuchea's alignment with China, and the ideological radicalism of the Khmer Rouge all allude to the greater Cold War context of superpowers manipulating smaller nations in pursuit of selfish geopolitical goals. This transregional source of genocidal causality has always existed as an undertone in genocide studies; it was simply not organized into a macrocosmic Cold War framework. Thus, this paper addresses this void in genocide studies and helps show the genocide for what it is—a product of the Cold War.

Keywords: Communism, Khmer, Genocide

1. Collapse Of The French Protectorate

Prince Sihanouk took political control of Cambodia on November 9, 1953 following Cambodia's independence from the French Protectorate. The National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) was established in December of 1954 and the riel took the place of the Indochinese piaster as the official currency of Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk, under the guise of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* movement, attempted to implement a mixed-economy enterprise, which put individual capital under the guidance of the state to safeguard against "privileged capitalists, national or foreign."¹ According to Phlek Chhat, the Director-General of Plan, it was necessary to rely on foreign aid to reach "sufficient volumes of investments to obtain satisfactory economic expansion since our national resources are too weak to reach such goals"; he recommended a process of economic decolonization that was "firm, but equitable to foreigners." However, the Sihanouk government recognized the dangers of forming alliances with exploitive Western states; thus, Sihanouk attempted to achieve economic neutrality, which according to the *Sangkum*, meant a "balanced adaptation of [capitalism and communism] for the organization of the country."² This meant accepting some economic aid from both Western and communist states; this nonalignment posture, however, created difficulties for

Sihanouk as close relations with both the East and the West was seen as suspicious by the superpowers—a posture that would eventually help lead to the overthrow of the Sihanouk government.

Despite these fears of Western exploitation, however, Cambodia still exported over \$36 million worth of goods to the United States before 1955. The United States also utilized economic assistance programs in an attempt to provide a solid foundation from which Cambodia could repel communistic infiltration. Through a section of the United States' aid program, organized by the International Cooperation Administration (ICA) in 1954, the United States funded the completion of le Barray Occidental d'Angkor, which provided "irrigation for 20,000 hectares." The United States agreed to "build a dam in Kompong-Cham" that provided irrigation for farming. In Prey-Chhor, 4,000 hectares of irrigation networks were organized and another small irrigation network outside of Kompong-Cham and Kompong-Thom provinces were constructed with the support of United States aid.³ As Jean Delvert noted, "the politics of water are indispensable."⁴

However, such agriculture reforms failed to have the lasting impact that the United States hoped the reforms would have. Sihanouk understood the geopolitical implications of "playing both sides." In one instance, in 1957, Sihanouk responded to a United States unwillingness to allocate more aid with the remark, "we might go Communist if you stop the aid."⁵ Consequently, the United States, in a diplomatic retreat, again became eager to supply Sihanouk with economic and military assistance. Also in 1957, the United States began constructing the Khmer-American Friendship Highway from Kompong Som to Phnom Penh at a cost of \$32 million for the 140 miles of roadway.⁶ In the same year, the French began reconstruction on the Port of Sihanoukville. However, according to Jean Delvert, the funds used to build the port were actually provided by United States and then funneled through a French economic aid program.⁷ Ironically, as the Vietnam War escalated, communist forces used this highway as an extension of the Ho Chi Minh Trail as well as the Port of Sihanoukville to transport weapons and munitions to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces.

In return for promises of exclusive trade agreements, however, Prince Sihanouk gained considerable leverage in his negotiations with the various Cold War superpowers. Upon returning from his trip to China in 1958, Prince Sihanouk, in an obvious attempt at manipulation, informed United States officials that the Chinese Communists had offered him substantial military and economic aid increases, but he took only an additional \$5.6 million to supplement the existing Chinese aid package of \$22.4 million. Sihanouk claimed that he felt uneasy accepting "such aid from both sides" and that he was happy with the aid packages offered by the United States.⁸ Sihanouk, in effect, was being courted by both the East and the West and he used it to his advantage to acquire the maximum amount of aid from all three superpowers.

The more aid Prince Sihanouk asked for, the more he received. By 1963, the United States was providing the salary for a large portion of the Cambodian army, which consisted of 30,000 soldiers. The United States, between 1956 and 1963, provided Cambodia with \$365 million in aid. Yet, there was still cause for concern as Cambodia began to gravitate towards the two Communist orbits of influence. According to an article in *The Economist*, "the Americans called Prince Sihanouk a maniac. The Prince replied by saying that the face of the United States was 'not noble,' and that he could not bring himself to hold out his hand to take the American aid which, regrettable, was so necessary for his country."⁹ Thus, in November 1963, Sihanouk publicly broke ties with the United States. This allowed China and the Soviet Union the opportunity to consolidate an economic partnership with Cambodia. Consequently, China armed 27,000 Cambodian soldiers in late 1964, armed an additional 10,000 soldiers in early 1965, supplied anti-aircraft weapons, helped fund the National Olympic Stadium, built an international airport in Siem Riep, and provided eleven combat planes to Cambodia.¹⁰ During this period, the Soviet Union built a Soviet-Khmer Friendship hospital in Phnom Penh, a "superior technical school for 1000 students," provided 500 million riels in monetary aid, and supplied Cambodia with four jet fighters including a MIG 15 and a MIG 17.¹¹ Then, in 1966, Chinese officials asked Sihanouk to allow supplies to be shipped into the port of Sihanoukville. Assuredly, not only did the Chinese and Soviets provide Cambodia with such large allotments of aid to bring Cambodia closer to the Chinese and Soviet orbits, but, viewed through a Cold War lens, such aid was also to persuade Cambodia away from the West. Regardless of the reason, however, such superpower involvement in Cambodia began to chip away at Cambodia's ability to govern itself.

Moreover, despite Sihanouk's renouncement of the West in November 1963 and his closer ties to the East, the United States still retained an intensive economic partnership with Cambodia. As Sihanouk described in 1963, Cambodia "will never realize an independent economy" if Cambodia continues to associate with a state "organized around corruption, which as a consequence, creates dependence for our country."¹² Yet, Sihanouk desired United States' assistance more than a cessation of the assassination plots against him. Although Cambodian exports to the United States declined from \$9 million in 1963 to \$2.2 million in 1965, this cannot wholly be attributed to Sihanouk cutting off economic relations with the United States as Cambodian exports had steadily declined since 1959. This had more to do with the increased Cambodian dependence on imports and external foreign investment, both of

which did not create domestic revenue or a base of exportable goods. The United States was still importing at least \$2 million worth of rubber throughout the early 1960s, which the United States even admitted was Cambodia's only viable trade commodity in the West. The Cambodian imports from the United States actually increased in the years after breaking economic ties. The United States' exports to Cambodia increased from \$8.2 million in 1963 to \$26.3 million in 1965.¹³ This illuminates the point that despite Sihanouk's distaste for the United States' imperial tendencies, such distaste did not significantly hinder trade between these two states.

The increased imports despite "poor" relations with the United States during this period can be partly attributed to elite pressure on Sihanouk to continue trading with the United States. This can be seen in the items that were imported during the 1960s as they were not items used by the peasantry. The third highest category, in millions of riels, of imports in 1963 was "Distractions, Culture, and Hygiene." It is doubtful that a peasantry, overcome with debt by this period, would have the funds to spend on imports labeled "distractions" or "culture." Moreover, the highest import in 1963 was "Clothing and Apparel." Logically speaking, the peasantry may have contributed to the imports for this category, but, considering nearly 90% of the households in Phnom Penh in 1962 that spent money on clothing spent between 600-1,200 riels a month on clothing, it is doubtful that the high importation of clothing was due to spending by the peasantry, who by 1969 still did not make over 2,000 riels per year.¹⁴ Thus, during the period of icy relations between Cambodia and the United States the influence of the elite class on the government's decision-making process coupled with its taste for Western goods likely contributed to the continuation of trade between these two states.¹⁵ The significance of trade between the United States and Cambodia during the early 1960s helps replace diplomatic rhetoric with reality. Although Sihanouk had denounced any future interactions with the United States, they still retained a significant trading partnership. Thus, not only was there a Western-oriented elite class continuing to solidify itself within Cambodia, but by the early 1960s the United States, China, and the Soviet Union were eroding Cambodia's ability to support policies and programs aimed at self-governance and a self-sustaining economy by permitting aid to transform into an economic lifeline.

2. The Khmer Republic: Corruption and Cronyism

After Prince Sihanouk denounced the West in 1963, Cambodia's ties to the Communist forces dramatically increased. Consequently, the extension of the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Cambodia, known as the Sihanouk Trail or in some cases Route 110, opened in May 1966. Instead of only shipments coming into the port of Sihanoukville, a large supply chain of soldiers and resources began to regularly flow through Cambodia. The North Vietnamese Army already occupied parts of Cambodia and moved materials along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but Prince Sihanouk helped make it official and more pronounced. In 1967, the CIA observed, "South of Attopeu, Route 110 underwent considerable improvement...Route 97 which provides the road connection between Route 110 and Siem Pang, Cambodia was reopened to traffic in early January."¹⁶ In an effort to disrupt the "expanded pace" of the Sihanouk Trail, the U.S. began conducting SHOCK II bombing run intended to destroy enemy shipments along the Sihanouk Trail both in Laotian and Cambodian territory.¹⁷ Also in 1967, Operation Salem House, later code-named Daniel Boone Operations, involved top-secret teams of U.S. soldiers that would penetrate into Cambodia to seek out Communist sanctuaries. Once the missions commenced, it became clear that Communist forces were utilizing Cambodian territory to a much greater extent than previously imagined. These reconnaissance missions led to the first major bombing conducted in Cambodia.

Operation Breakfast, conducted on March 18, 1969, against Base Area 353, would indefinitely change the impact of the Vietnam War in Cambodia. Over the course of the bombing campaigns, over 2,500,000 tons of explosives were dropped over Cambodia; more tons were dropped over Cambodia than the entire Allied Forces dropped in all of the Second World War. It is conservatively estimated that between 50,000 and 150,000 Cambodian civilians were killed during the roughly eight years of the duration of the U.S. bombing campaigns.¹⁸ The United States bombing campaign, initially code-named Operation Menu, inflicted such hardships upon the civilian populations that it would prove to be one of the most disruptive U.S.-originating factors leading to the subsequent genocide. Although indirect, these bombing campaigns disrupted Cambodia in several ways that contributed to the rise of radicalism under Pol Pot. By affecting Cambodian life economically, politically, and socially, the heavy bombings strengthened the thrust by which the pendulum of the Khmer Rouge was able to swing towards the unimaginable.

It was not only those who joined the Khmer Rouge who disapproved of the carpet-bombings, but also civilian survivors of the genocide. For many Khmer Rouge soldiers, the bombings were the impetus to join the Khmer Rouge; for civilians, the bombings were a major reason for celebrating the rise of the Khmer Rouge. In one instance, in the town of Chantrea in southern Cambodia, the city was completely destroyed by 2,245 tons of U.S. explosives.

As one survivor of the Chantrea bombings stated, “the people were angry with the US, and that is why so many of them joined the Khmer Communists.”¹⁹ As one Khmer Rouge soldier reported, although he did not understand the ideologies of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, due to “how much pain [he] suffered from such aerial bombardment” and because of how angry he was with the “American imperialists” for such arbitrary attacks, he joined the revolution anyways.²⁰ Yun Kim, a low-ranking Khmer Rouge soldier, remembered how he was told by a Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) member that the revolution would “liberate the country from the American imperialists.” Consequently, the year Yun Kim decided to join the revolution overlaps with the several years he witnessed “aerial bombardments in Kampong Thom...both at nights and during the daytimes.”²¹ Although such support for the Khmer Rouge did not come entirely in response to the U.S. bombing campaigns, it was indeed a major factor that permitted the Pol Pot regime successfully to capture Phnom Penh.

Sihanouk, coupling his fear that the U.S. would help overthrow him as they did Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam with his realization that the U.S. was losing the War, attempted to situate himself as best as possible if South Vietnam did fall to Communism. Thus, by the late 1960s, U.S. saw their influence beginning to flounder under Sihanouk and began exploring available avenues that might turn this around. The issue of political power in Cambodia was seen through a strict geopolitical lens at the expense of the integrity of the Cambodian domestic structure. President Nixon, on the possibility of a new government, ordered the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard M. Helms, to “develop [and] implement a plan for maximum assistance to pro U.S. elements in Cambodia...[Keep it quiet]. Handle like our air strikes.”²² In fact, once it was determined that a Lon Nol government would best support U.S. interests, the U.S. began utilizing CIA outlets in Southeast Asia to promote and ensure that Prince Sihanouk’s power was usurped. President Nixon told Henry Kissinger to have the CIA “print one million leaflets with NVN and a picture of Sihanouk, saying ‘liberate Cambodia.’ Get my point?” and to broadcast over the radio that “Sihanouk is coming in with NVN liberators.”²³ However, the U.S. influence and the corruption of the Lon Nol regime would act as a catalyst for the maturation of an even more hostile, violent regime to rise from the ashes of Cambodia’s political integrity. Although it undoubtedly benefited U.S. interests, the Lon Nol regime, which lasted from 1970 until 1975, only further crippled Cambodia’s domestic political structure and helped lay the path to militancy and radicalism under the Pol Pot regime.

By the early 1970s, the peasantry was in desperate need of humanitarian aid. However, humanitarian aid was often misappropriated as well. Lon Nol allocated the majority of economic aid to support the lavish lifestyles of his government cohorts. The opportunistic and predatory elite took advantage of the loose controls on foreign aid. By some estimates, roughly half of the \$350 million in U.S. aid provided in 1974 went directly for private gain. When Lon Nol’s brother, Lon Non, left Cambodia in 1973, he had made over \$90 million dollars in an inhospitable economic climate.²⁴ Corruption was not only widespread, but it came at the expense of the peasantry. As the Prime Minister of the Khmer Republic, Long Boret, stated in 1973, “the elite, which consumes a large part of imported merchandise, have suffered rises in the cost of living far less noticeable than the middle and working classes.”²⁵ The prosperity of the elite was an unsettling fact for a starving and landless peasantry whom was turning towards the Khmer Rouge in greater and greater numbers as a means of taking back Cambodia from the United States imperialists and the corrupt Lon Nol cronies.

As James C. Scott illustrated in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, there are two conditions that cause the usually risk-averse peasantry to revolt against the oppressive class: when the wages, as dictated by the moneylenders and elites, become too low to survive off of, and when there is such a poor distribution of the land that the peasantry do not have a guaranteed “subsistence niche.” The peasantry accepts exploitation to a degree, or its “moral economy” as Scott refers to it as, but at a certain point, the peasantry will revolt.²⁶ By the early 1970s, the Cambodian peasantry’s survival was no longer guaranteed in a society dictated by the encroaching Western capitalist system. Beginning with the economic disparities between the peasantry and the foreign-aided elites in the early 1950s, unequal taxation practices, predatory use of the imported Western markets, and the reprehensible corruption during the Lon Nol period, the Cambodian peasantry had reached this point and the Khmer Rouge ceased to be a marginal Hanoi-dependent faction. James C. Scott asks, “how much worse is [the peasantry’s] next best alternative?”²⁷ The crippling effect of Cambodia’s dual economy had reached a point where the Khmer Rouge was the peasantry’s next best alternative to the Lon Nol government.

3. Phnom Penh: A Chinese Hanoi

The ties between the Khmer Rouge and the Chinese Communist Party also became increasingly apparent as the Lon Nol government continued to decline; the Chinese even helped the Khmer Rouge block and mine the Mekong River

in the early months of 1975.²⁸ After the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, China solidified itself as one of only two states with functioning diplomatic relations with Democratic Kampuchea—a budding relationship that would stand at the crux of the impending genocide. China did not simply provide economic aid to Democratic Kampuchea; China provided support in an attempt to balance the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance by aligning itself with Cambodia. As there was a greater geopolitical purpose in supplying aid, the Pol Pot regime received greater latitude in its radicalism. The U.S., in a conversation with the Thai foreign minister, acquiesced that the U.S. would “support the growth of Chinese influence in Cambodia and Laos as a barrier to Vietnamese dominance.”²⁹ By the latter half of 1975, when it appeared that the situation in Cambodia was worsening under the Khmer Rouge, the U.S. chalked it up to “ideology and special circumstances”; further problems in Cambodia would be tolerated as both the U.S. and China distrusted “a powerful Hanoi backed by Moscow.”³⁰ Consequently, with the hope that Sino-Democratic Kampuchea relations would stabilize the world order, the superpowers ignored the Pol Pot regime’s radicalization of Cambodia.

The relationship between Democratic Kampuchea and the People’s Republic of China consisted of several different economic, diplomatic, and military facets—one of the most crucial facets being the trade agreements between the two states. China provided the Pol Pot regime with arms and ammunitions and Cambodia provided China with millions of tons of rice exports. By the conclusion of the first Four-Year Plan, almost 93% of Democratic Kampuchea’s capital was designated to come from rice exports. This astronomical figure, despite its realistic impracticality, was perfectly aligned with the Khmer Rouge’s plan to “export agricultural products and...import industrial products,” yet China pushed for more rice exports than even the Khmer Rouge had anticipated.³¹ Pol Pot planned to have 400,000 tons of rice exported in 1977, but China demanded no less than 625,000 tons of rice that year.³² This put a great strain on the civilian populations within Cambodia as only about one ton of rice was allotted for 10 people each year. As one survivor noted, the Khmer Rouge made “the people work all the time, but the people were undernourished because the traitors sent the harvest to their masters in Peking.”³³ Setting aside the tortures and executions, starvation under such extreme working conditions coupled with extreme malnourishment contributed to, by some estimates, 25% of the roughly 2 million deaths under the Khmer Rouge.³⁴ The Pol Pot regime earmarked a good portion of their future dominance on insulating Cambodia through agricultural exports to China and military imports from China. This, unfortunately, came with devastating consequences.

An explanation for these policies of arms and exports, proliferated to such great lengths, can be found, in part, by looking at the previous political, educational, and wartime experiences of influential members of the Khmer Rouge, such as Pol Pot, Son Sen, Khieu Samphan, and Ieng Sary. The destruction of the Cambodian economy under the Sihanouk and Lon Nol administrations—where the export to import ratio went from roughly equal to imports of (in millions of riels) 19,871 and exports of (in millions of riels) 675 by 1973—drove leaders like Samphan to more radical methods of revolution. As Samphan reasoned, U.S. aid tends to be “more a part of the U.S. ‘security’ program than aid for Cambodia’s economic development.” Furthermore, he concluded in one article with a quite prophetic acknowledgement that accepting such aid from the international system encourages the “structural disequilibrium [to deepen], creating instability that could lead to violent upheaval if it should become intolerable for an increasingly large portion of the population.”³⁵ Thus, with a declining economy under the Lon Nol regime, the economic policies of the Khmer Rouge were touted as a way to correct Cambodia’s economic stagnation. Such economic propaganda prompted even more civilians to join the revolution. As one Khmer Rouge soldier recalled, “I educated [the People] about building the economy.”³⁶ Collectivization projects, deindustrialization, and genocide, however, were not what the civilian populations had in mind.

For men such as Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, Stalin’s Great Terror and Mao’s Cultural Revolution provided an ideological base from which to launch an attack against the superpowers that had perpetuated Cambodia’s suffering. Even in the initial months of the Pol Pot regime’s reign, over 100,000 Vietnamese were expelled from Cambodia and 150,000 Chams were deported from regions along the Mekong River. Nearly half of the Cham population would eventually be killed and thousands of ethnic Vietnamese met a similar fate.³⁷ To combat another enemy, Pol advocated for a radicalized “collective path to socialism,” so that “imperialists can’t enter the country.”³⁸ Moreover, eventually 60% of the rural population that helped bring the Khmer Rouge to power would also be designated as internal enemies in the eyes of the *Angkar*.³⁹ There was an innate fear within the Pol Pot regime—a fear similar to that of the Stalinists of the 1930s—that their attempt at constructing a healthy Kampuchean society would be undermined by the CIA, the KGB, Vietnamese, capitalists, and Lon Nol supporters.

This fear coupled with various communist ideologies helps explain and build upon two important facets to this study. Firstly, in an effort to protect itself from the numerous “enemies” of Democratic Kampuchea, this fear of internal subversion helps explain why the Khmer Rouge felt compelled to import such a large military arsenal. Secondly, this fear helps illuminate the realistic impact that the superpowers had on the mindset of the Khmer Rouge as the enemies they feared were enemies that were brought in with the introduction of the Cold War in Southeast

Asia. Years of falling prey to the whims of the superpowers resulted in an equal reaction in the opposite direction as the Khmer Rouge attempted to fortify themselves against these self-perceived enemies.

Mao Tse-tung's failed urbanization and industrialization policies of the Great Leap Forward led ultimately to the Cultural Revolution, which focused less on mass industrialization projects and more on mass agricultural projects. While studying in Peking during the height of the Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot and Son Sen spent their time attempting to understand Maoism, the ideologies behind the Cultural Revolution, and the failures of the Great Leap Forward. In 1977, Pol reflected how Mao and the Cultural Revolution had had "an important impact for [them]."⁴⁰ Specifically, it was the idea of placing less emphasis on capitalism and industrialization that resonated so well with Pol Pot as Cambodia, especially under the Lon Nol administration, saw hard currency devalued, an industrial system that supported foreign states, and a domestic economy that fell prey to an international capitalist system. As Khoem Ngorn, a Khmer Rouge soldier, recalled, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) used the word "revolution" to mean that they "had to liberate the poor." Moreover, after 1971, the CPK felt only poor peasants could be trusted in Democratic Kampuchea—since the landowners, middle-class peasants, and capitalists associated with the Lon Nol regime had the potential to undermine the revolution. According to CPK documents, soldiers were selected from "deep down in [rural] areas...extracted from the earth like diamonds."⁴¹ From the *Angkar's* perspective, radicalized Stalinist and Maoist policies adequately addressed the very essential problems that they thought to be ruining Cambodia. Although the ideologies of Marxism-Leninism were radicalized and carried out by the Pol Pot regime itself and cannot be blamed on any superpower influence, why the Khmer Rouge felt compelled to pursue such policies, cleanse Cambodia of enemies, and right the corruption and backwards imperialist policies can be duly traced back to Cambodia's fifteen-year involvement in the Cold War that had left Cambodia in a state of economic, political, and social upheaval by the beginning of 1975. What had begun as a communist ideology intertwined with the radicalism of the Great Terror and the Cultural Revolution spiraled into another opportunity for the CPK to display its insecurities and develop an isolationist stance within the international order.

4. The Economics of Genocide

As the genocide raged in Cambodia, the killings were often expressed simply as security breaches that hindered the goals of the Khmer Rouge. In a meeting with Chinese officials in 1977, Khmer Rouge officials reported that they had "liquidated the Vietnam agents in the main...we similarly liquidated in main the forces of the CIA." The Pol Pot regime was quite emboldened by having the Chinese as their "big brother"; there was a sense that they would finally have the power to protect Cambodian sovereignty from their enemies now that they possessed a "strong offensive posture, being backed by 800 million Chinese people."⁴² Attaching themselves to the People's Republic of China allowed the genocide to extend itself in ways that a deindustrializing Democratic Kampuchea could not have supported alone. The difference between a truly non-aligned Cambodia and a Chinese-aligned Cambodia may have been the assistance allotted in the latter case, which provided the Khmer Rouge with the means to perpetrate genocide.

Still more harrowing, the Chinese did not simply support Democratic Kampuchea militarily and by way of forcing the Soviet Union to show restraint in Southeast Asia. There are many examples of instances when the Chinese acknowledged or participated in the genocide. When the Khmer Rouge began to encourage Cambodian intellectuals studying abroad to return to Cambodia, they were flown from Paris to Peking and then on to Phnom Penh on China Air Lines flights and Chinese Boeing 707s. Most of these students, tricked into returning home, did not survive to see the capitulation of the Khmer Rouge. During the Pol Pot and Ieng Sary trials, it was also reported during several witness testimonies that "Chinese advisers [came] to the place of the killings. Sometimes they were accompanied to the grave sites." Several survivors stated that there were "more than forty Chinese advisers" who lived in houses of former plantation owners. These advisers would order the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary agents about as puppets." In addition, as previously discussed, Democratic Kampuchea exported heavily to China, but some of the exports should have raised questions in China—such as a dramatic increase in gallbladder exports. Often used as medicine in China, the gallbladders were priced depending on the amount of fluid present in each gallbladder; thousands of gallbladders were given to the *Angkar* by Khmer Rouge soldiers, which were then sold to China.⁴³ For its part, China benefitted from the large rubber and rice imports while also gaining a solid strategic foothold in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, as one Chinese official stated, "a lesson for Vietnam is also a lesson for the Soviet Union."⁴⁴ China had a strategic interest in Cambodia and, clearly, distancing themselves from a revolution gone awry did not take precedent over the geopolitics of the still heated Cold War.

There was even hesitation in addressing the genocide with China, which even the U.S. government knew was occurring, because to address such issues, as the Assistant Secretary of State Douglas J. Bennet stated, “would seriously complicate [the normalization process with China] without significant positive impact on the situation in Cambodia.”⁴⁵ It is clear that even as the genocide was coming to a close, by wanting to keep the Khmer Rouge in power, the U.S. still viewed Cambodia through a geopolitical lens without any sizable concern for the domestic welfare of Cambodia. The primary concern of the U.S. still rested on preventing Cambodia from plummeting into the grasp of the Soviet Union as it would unbalance the global system—a reoccurring Cold War theme that contributed greatly to Cambodia’s untimely demise. Once the Khmer Rouge had finally capitulated, mass graves began to be uncovered in Cambodia. However, many of these graves were not hand-dug. Many of these graves were large bomb cavities left from the U.S. B-52 bombing campaigns during the Vietnam War—one last symbolic link between the Cold War and the Cambodian genocide.

5. Conclusions

One common slogan of the CPK sums up the goals of the Pol Pot regime, “Long live the policy of independence, peace, neutrality, and non-alignment of the glorious Democratic Kampuchea!”⁴⁶ The criminality of the Khmer Rouge arises not from these four very understandable, worthy ideals, but from the genocidal means at which they attempted to achieve them. In pursuit of independence, they rooted out internal “enemies”; in pursuit of peace, they brought violence; in pursuit of neutrality, they instituted paranoia; in pursuit of non-alignment, they managed only hypocrisy. By tracing the Communist Party of Kampuchea back to its beginnings as an understudy of the Viet Minh and then moving forward through the Sihanouk and Lon Nol administrations, it begins to become clear why the Pol Pot regime rose to power.

Following the collapse of the French Protectorate, independence quickly became interdependence. Once Cambodia was designated as a strategically crucial area, the superpowers infused Cambodia with such large allotments of economic and military assistance that cronyism, corruption, social inequality, and a proliferation of military conflict within Cambodia soon became incredibly common and increasingly detrimental to Cambodia’s domestic stability. Undoubtedly, the Khmer Rouge perpetrated the genocide, but the Cold War superpowers provided the necessary precursors to pursue such iniquitous crimes. Thus, such iniquities must be traced back to the macrocosm of the Cold War; the genocide cannot be fully explained through analyzing regional animosities, racial and ethnic tensions, or traditions of Cambodian leadership. Economic assistance during the Sihanouk era, the extension of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Cambodia, Lon Nol’s ties to the United States, the United States’ bombing campaigns, and the overarching geopolitics of the Cold War all, while seemingly unrelated to a genocide conducted by an isolationist government, illuminate what regional studies cannot illuminate. Through utilizing this transregional approach, genocidal causality is much more apparent, the catalysts that brought the Khmer Rouge to power are better conceptualized, and the seeds of genocide are less obscured by the complexities of the Cold War.

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