

# CAMBODIA UNDER THE POL POT REGIME (1975-1979). AN EXAMPLE OF A TOTALITARIAN COMMUNIST REGIME?

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## INTRODUCTION

The name of Pol Pot is associated with one of the most terrible politically motivated crimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Descriptions such as “Red Holocaust” (Horst Möller), “Genocide in Cambodia” (Ben Kiernan), “Holocaust in Cambodia” (Ariane Barth, Tiziano Terzani), “a political catastrophe with few modern parallels” (Chanthou Boua, Ben Kiernan), “Pol Pot’s reign of terror in Cambodia” (Manfred Hildermeier) show how difficult it is to name the crimes committed under Pol Pot’s regime. The above descriptions reveal the efforts to cover both the extent of the crime and its political background in one phrase. Some of the descriptions not only generally define a political background, but even specify a very particular background (‘Red Holocaust’, ‘holocaust’, and –to a certain extent– also ‘genocide’).

This paper will first explain the important terms in connection with Pol Pot’s regime, then go on to outline Cambodia’s historical-cultural development, describe life under Pol Pot’s regime, and finally provide the reader as far as possible with an answer to the question posed in the title.

## 1. CAMBODIA UNDER THE POL POT REGIME (1975-1979) – AN EXAMPLE OF A TOTALITARIAN COMMUNIST REGIME?

### 1.1. Definition of terms

The definition of terms starts with the naming of the unquestionably “inconceivable crimes”<sup>1</sup>. Such an engagement in the establishment of definitions could be considered unnecessary, possibly even irreverent. But certain terms imply political-historical classifications, and such classifications have so far only been very insufficient in the case of crimes committed under Communist regimes – as the intense reaction to the “Blackbook of Communism”<sup>2</sup> has demonstrated. Alex P. Schmid, who scrutinizes the terms “Repression, State Terrorism and Genocide”<sup>3</sup>, discusses the development of the term “genocide”, which was first used in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin in his book “Axis Rule in Occupied Europe”. Lemkin belonged to those who took the initiative for “the United Nations Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of Genocide (1948)”, in which genocide is defined as follows: “Genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, such as: (1) killing members of the group, (2) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, (3) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, (4) imposing measures intended to prevent birth within a group, and

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<sup>1</sup> Margolin, Jean-Louis, “Kambodscha: Im Land der unfassbaren Verbrechen“, in Stéphane Courtois et al. (eds.), *Das Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus – Unterdrückung, Verbrechen und Terror*. München 2000, 643.

<sup>2</sup> Courtois, Stéphane et al. (eds.), *Das Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus – Unterdrückung, Verbrechen und Terror*. München 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Schmid, Alex P., “Repression, State Terrorism and Genocide – Conceptual Clarifications“, in Timothy P. Bushnell et al. (eds.), *State Organized Terror – The Case of Violent Internal Repression*. Boulder, 1991, 23.

(5) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”<sup>4</sup>.

Besides the political-historical classification, there is another significant aspect to these efforts to define, namely the attempt to provide a legal framework by which to judge such crimes by means of their conceptualization. The Geneva Convention of December 9, 1948, defines genocide as a “crime under international law”<sup>5</sup>. In this context, the definition quoted above shows certain weaknesses, e.g., regarding the proof of intent concerning the macabre question of how many human lives are meant by the words “in whole or in part”. Herbert Jäger deals with the criminological problems of state-sponsored mass killings<sup>6</sup>. He points out that criminal law is basically not equipped to deal with the cold functioning and lack of human emotions which are typical features of mass killings carried out by a state. It is precisely this “phenomenon of coldness” which links all types of mass destruction – this applies to genocide outside of war situations and to modern warfare – and distinguishes it from individual crimes. Herbert Jäger has repeatedly underlined the difficulties of such comparisons, but he nevertheless strongly advocates it in order to recognize dangerous moments which “are not only of one-off, but of continuing importance”<sup>7</sup>, above all, though, to “find assessment criteria and categories which facilitate a moral and legal understanding of the phenomenon of mass destruction by the state”<sup>8</sup>.

Jean-Louis Margolin comments on this aspect: “This (the classification of the Khmer Rouge’s crimes / R.E.) is at the same time also a legal necessity: Many members of the leadership of the Cambodian Communist Party still live an active life

today. Do we have to accept the fact that they are living in freedom? If not, for what crime could they be sentenced?”<sup>9</sup>.

The Allies already posed these questions when they decided to hold the Nuremberg Trials: “The delegates unanimously agreed to hold the trials. They therefore tried hard to avoid any conflict among themselves”<sup>10</sup>. This means that they were not willing to include the genocide of the European Jews – which was not yet called holocaust at that time – among the charges in the Nuremberg Trials”<sup>11</sup>. They were afraid of a potential comparison, for in particular the United States and the Soviet Union had severely abused minorities in their own countries. This example demonstrates the high risk of the judgment of such macro-crimes and their comparison being politically instrumentalized. Above all, stating how many people were killed under a certain regime can easily give the impression that an attempt is being made to classify one crime as more or less severe than another one.

Steven T. Katz, who stands up for “the Uniqueness of the Holocaust”, realizes this risk: “In arguing for the uniqueness of the holocaust, I am not making a moral claim, in other words, that the holocaust was more evil than the other events (i.e., genocide / R.E.)”<sup>12</sup> Katz explicitly refuses to discuss the number of the victims. He gives the following reason for his insistent opinion that the holocaust – according to his own definition – is the intended murder of the European Jews during the Second World War: “[...] the holocaust is phenomenologically unique by virtue of the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people”<sup>13</sup>. Katz

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup> Jäger, Herbert, “Über die Vergleichbarkeit staatlicher Großverbrechen – Der Historikerstreit aus kriminologischer Sicht”, in Jesse Eckart (ed.), *Totalitarismus im 20. Jahrhundert – Eine Bilanz der internationalen Forschung*. Bonn 1996, 344.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 346.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 349.

<sup>9</sup> Margolin, Jean-Louis, “Kambodscha...”, op. cit., 138.

<sup>10</sup> Hennigsen, Manfred, “Der Holocaust und andere Demozide”, in Horst Möller (ed.), *Der rote Holocaust und die Deutschen – Die Debatte um das Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus*. München 1999, 138.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Katz, Steven E., “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust – The Historical Dimension”, in Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*. Boulder, 1996, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 19.

tries to verify his theory of the uniqueness of the holocaust by elaborating important differences between this and other genocides, e.g., of the Native Americans, who in his opinion were mainly eliminated by diseases brought in from Europe. David E. Stannard<sup>14</sup> disagrees with Katz's thesis by pointing out that "holocaust" is a very ancient term, which was already used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century "[...] as a term to describe mass destruction or slaughter"<sup>15</sup>, but primarily by emphasizing that although the holocaust of the Jews, the genocides in Cambodia, Eastern Timor, Ruanda and in other places of the world were unique because of the differences with regard to the number of people killed, the weapons used, the behavior of the perpetrators and other aspects, they have enough in common "to fall within a single large classification"<sup>16</sup>.

Another person who examines the problem of classifying such macro-crimes is Ben Kiernan, who also recognizes the risk of debating which crime is more or less severe but nonetheless sees enough evidence to classify the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime as genocide: "In Cambodia today, it is rather common to hear the view expressed that 'Pol Pot was worse than Hitler' ... 'the Nazis killed Jews but not Germans', whereas 'Pol Pot massacred his own Khmer people' ... The first claim is, of course, incorrect, but the second is undoubtedly true, a case of genocide under the definition of the 1948 UN Convention. The word "Auto-genocide" has even been coined to describe genocide of members of one's own race ..."<sup>17</sup>.

In this context, Henningsen points to the creation of the term "Democide", which stems from the American political scientist Rummel (University of Hawaii). Rummel wanted to avoid the problem of the term 'genocide': In accordance with the UN Convention, 'genocide' assumes an ethnic-racial group identity of the victims; this does not specifically apply to the victims of many reigns of terror of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Henningsen provides the

following definition: "Democides are the direct result of political commands issued by the functional centers of a regime. They do not arise as spontaneous pogroms or as the culminating action of an ideological development"<sup>18</sup>. Rather they are part of the "implementation of the mad plans to change the world pursued by leaders such as Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot"<sup>19</sup>.

This definition requires us to investigate the political conditions which make genocide possible in the first place. The first part of the definition implies that a regime under which macro-crimes are possible must by nature allow political commands from the center of political function to be directly executed; i.e., the center of political function is so omnipotent that it is not restricted by institutions, e.g., by a parliament or judiciary. This, however, presupposes a totalitarian regime. In Italy, the term totalitarianism was coined under Mussolini: "It was Amendola (i.e., the liberal Givonna Amendola / R.E.) who obviously first accused Mussolini of wanting to introduce a 'sistema totalitario' (totalitarian system)<sup>20</sup>. The Italian fascists occupied a term which was actually used against them; they called themselves "totalitarian" and thus instrumentalized the term 'totalitarianism' just a short time after its creation, i.e., similarly to the terms which named politically motivated macro crimes. This political instrumentalization became especially clear during the Cold War, which obstructed critical discussion for a long time. In the context of this paper, we cannot examine this aspect in more detail. There was, however, consent as to the virtually "objective" criteria according to which a nation could be classified as totalitarian: "In the 1950s and 1960s, the accepted view was that a totalitarian dictatorship could be identified as having all of the following six features:

1. A charismatic, imperial ideology,
2. one permitted mass party,

<sup>14</sup> Stannard, David E., "The Politics of Genocide Scholarship", in Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Is the Holocaust...*, op. cit., 19.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>17</sup> Kiernan, Ben, "Genocidal Targeting. Two Groups of Victims in Pol Pot's Cambodia", in Timothy P. Bushnell et al. (eds.), *State...*, op. cit., 207.

<sup>18</sup> Henningsen, Manfred, "Der Holocaust...", op. cit., 140.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>20</sup> Wippermann, Wolfgang, *Totalitarismustheorien – Die Entwicklung der Diskussion von den Anfängen bis heute*. Darmstadt, 1997, 9.

3. a command economy,
4. a terrorist secret police,
5. a monopoly of weapons,
6. a monopoly of news and propaganda<sup>21</sup>

These six features provide important orientation for the assessment of a regime; however, the concept shows certain weaknesses. It is rather rigid and does not leave any room for a change of regime (e.g. in the former Eastern Block). Moreover, it fails to take into account some important aspects which are characteristic of a democratic regime and the absence of which points to a totalitarian state, i.e., an independent administration of justice and the possibility to non-violently remove the ruler from power. The following definition of Manfred Funke seeks to capture the process-like nature and avoid the mentioned weaknesses: "Thus, totalitarian dictatorship means the ambition to achieve undivided power and ensure its specific safeguarding through the application of most modern steering strategies ... We can speak of a totalitarian regime when it combines the abolition of political party pluralism and of democratic control by means of secret elections, and the elimination of an independent judicial system while at the same time ensuring complete control of the instruments of power, legitimized through an ideology which aims at enforcing a new model of society"<sup>22</sup>.

From the very beginning, the term 'totalitarianism' was *inter alia* characterized by a specific reference to modernity, to the specific novel nature of a totalitarian regime. The novelty is represented by the desired model of society, on the one hand, and by the "steering strategies", on the other. The latter were highlighted by Friedrich Brzezinski: "The distinctive characteristics –and thus the novelty of the totalitarian regimes– are the organizations and methods developed and supplied by means of modern

technical equipment, designed to secure total control"<sup>23</sup>.

Both authors consider the use of modern technology to be so essential that from their point of view, some former states (e.g. Sparta) or other entities such as monasteries could not be called "totalitarian" because of the absence of such means, although they substantially controlled and regulated the entire lives of the population (members / inmates).

Burkhard Hirsch deals with the problems involved in the use by the state of modern technology to supervise and control the citizens. In his opinion, "the disregard of privacy is the fingerprint of totalitarian states"<sup>24</sup>. This "right to privacy" is increasingly jeopardized by the use of modern monitoring technology –which has meanwhile been legalized by appropriate laws–, since the right to safety, which originally, "according to the European Human Rights Convention, was a right to protection against arbitrariness by the state"<sup>25</sup>, is given a completely different interpretation, namely as the government's right to limit individual liberties in favor of the protection of a super-individual legal system. Even if Hirsch regards the disregard of privacy as a general feature of totalitarian states, the idea of conflict between individual liberties, on the one hand, and the general legal system of the state, on the other, is characteristic of Western Christian culture. It is questionable whether such a concept can be applied to a country such as Cambodia, which has an entirely different cultural and religious background and is in a different stage of development; the question is not about the degree of damage, because the Pol Pot regime was established within a different cultural context: "Individual freedom and human dignity are inalienable values to which every system should aspire"<sup>26</sup>. The historical/cultural development of Cambodia will be described in a separate chapter in order to facilita-

<sup>21</sup> Funke, Manfred, "Braune und rote Diktaturen – Zwei Seiten einer Medaille? Historikerstreit und Totalitarismustheorien", in Jesse Eckhard (ed.), *Totalitarismus...*, op. cit., 153.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 152-153.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich, Carl Joachim; Brzezinski, Zbigniew, "Die allgemeinen Merkmale der totalitären Diktatur", in Jesse Eckhard (ed.), *Totalitarismus...*, op. cit., 226.

<sup>24</sup> Hirsch, Burkhard, "Der Große Bruder und das Recht auf Privatheit". *Vorgänge*, 3 (2001), 368.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 369.

<sup>26</sup> Backes, Uwe; Eckhard, Jesse, *Totalitarismus, Extremismus, Terrorismus – Ein Literaturführer und Wegweiser im Lichte deutscher Erfahrung*. Opladen, 1984, 63.

te an understanding of the historical context, the workings of Cambodian society (before Pol Pot) and the differences to our system, as well as of the different cultural and religious background, and to avoid the disparaging tone of J.-L. Margolin, which is particularly striking in the chapter “The Causes of a Deranged Policy”<sup>27</sup>, where he states: “The nationalism of the Khmer Rouge is strangely reminiscent of the nationalism of their predecessors Sihanouk and Lon Nol: A fanatical ideology of suffering mixed with megalomania”<sup>28</sup>. If we disregard Lon Nol, Margolin fails to provide any evidence of Sihanouk’s fanatical ideology of suffering and his megalomania. On the other hand, the arguments used by Margolin almost give the impression as if the author criticizes pre-Pol Pot Cambodia for not being a Western industrialized state: “There were few companies, a small middle class, almost no experts and skilled workers, and the agricultural sector was predominantly characterized by subsistence farming”<sup>29</sup>.

The references to the different culture, religion and society system of Cambodia point to the need to look at the ideology which, by definition, is a prerequisite for the existence of a totalitarian state system; in the case of the Pol Pot regime, the underlying ideology was communism and, more specifically, Asian communism, because: “Compared to the communist regimes in Europe, the Asian regimes have three important characteristics. With the exception of North Korea ... they developed without foreign interference and therefore were able ... to constitute independent political systems with a reference to their own history and to Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism, each system being strongly influenced by nationalism”<sup>30</sup>.

This paper will in particular focus on communism / Marxism as practiced in China and Vietnam, which both had an important impact on Cambodia’s development. One particular difficul-

ty, although described with regard to China, nevertheless applies to Asia in general: “A recurring theme in Chinese Marxism has been the attempt to make an ideology born of the social conditions of nineteenth century industrialized Europe into an ideology of practical significance in an unindustrialized context with a predominantly peasant population”<sup>31</sup>.

Thus, at the beginning of the last century, Chinese intellectuals considered the writings of Marx to be too much influenced by historical conditions in Europe to be useful for China’s development. This view changed after the Russian revolution of 1917: “Russia’s society was predominantly agrarian, and her population largely peasant, her economy backward and largely traditional like China’s”<sup>32</sup>.

From this point on, radical Chinese intellectuals –in particular Li Dazhao– associated Marxism with the hope for a solution to China’s immense problems. Li Dazhao, –one of the authors of the influential magazine *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth) and librarian at the university of Peking– had considerable influence on intellectual young people, among them Mao Zedong, who shared his teacher’s “emotional attachment to the peasantry and the belief that the Chinese revolution would be an essentially peasant revolution”<sup>33</sup>.

Mao developed these ideas further, emphasizing that the rural population significantly favored the idea of a Chinese revolution; but he insisted that the peasants needed the leadership of the proletariat if the aim was a revolution, and not just atavistic protests of the rural population. Mao saw the class divide between the landowners and the masses of landless peasants. But despite his awareness of the class divide, Mao’s ideas differed significantly from the original Marxist doctrine which believes in antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie.

<sup>27</sup> Margolin, Jean-Louis, “Kambodscha...”, op. cit., 82.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 682.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 683.

<sup>30</sup> Margolin, Jean-Louis, “Kommunistische Regime in Asien: Zwischen Umerziehung und Massenmord – China, Vietnam, Laos und Kambodscha”, in Stéphane Courtois et al. (eds.), *Das Schwarzbuch...*, op. cit, 508.

<sup>31</sup> Knight, Nick, “Mao Zedong and the Signification of Marxism”, in Colin Mackerras; Nick Knight (eds.), *Marxism in Asia*. New York, 1985, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 65.

Mao believed that the typical characteristic of Marxism was class analysis and that by contrast, in the case of China, a good Marxist had to recognize the revolutionary potential of the rural population and use it for a political strategy. This included the development of the Red Army, an army “subordinate to party direction and control”<sup>34</sup>. These ideas led to conflict between Mao and the “Returned Students Fraction” (i.e. the students who had come back from their studies in Moscow), who advocated for China’s communist party a Russian / Soviet-style course oriented on traditional Marxist ideas.

There is a certain parallel to the situation in Cambodia about 20 years later, when the students influenced by France’s CP - including Pol Pot and his circle of friends - met the executives of the communist party that had developed locally. The resulting power struggle, however, produced entirely different results: While in China, Mao and the local cadres stood their ground, the “Returned Students” prevailed in Cambodia. Mao remained relatively close to traditional Marxist ideas by conceding that China would have to undergo certain stages on its way to Socialism and that an immediate transition was impossible. There are other key aspects of this “sinicized” Marxism which are of importance to the situation as it emerged in Cambodia in later years: The enforcement of a Chinese nationalism, which was still considered a problem: “Can a communist, who is an internationalist, at the same time be a patriot? We hold that he not only can be, but must be...”<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, Mao’s aversion to “book learning for its own sake or intuitive theorizing was based on his conviction that knowledge only derived from actively seeking out the ‘facts’ of empirical reality, ...”<sup>36</sup>.

Mao’s aversion to mere book knowledge was in no way tantamount to an aversion to the development of theories as a whole or to debate on these theories; the statement quoted above was also used in disputes with the faction of the students who had returned from Moscow. His belief in the peasants’ revolutionary potential stemmed from, or

was at least confirmed during, some years spent among the rural population. With regard to the role of culture in general, Mao kept his orthodox Marxist position and considered that literature and visual arts were tightly connected to class structure. Mao believed that artists and authors should work for the people. Their works should be understandable for the often illiterate workers and peasants. Given this idea of a virtually educational function of the visual arts and of literature, it is worthwhile looking at the question of how Mao viewed the role of marriage and family the primary education institution. In his early writings, he called for the liberation of women and stated his negative attitude vis-à-vis the traditional Chinese family. The underlying assumption was that problems would largely solve themselves with the emergence of political and economic “success stories”. In those regions which were already under the control of Chinese Communist Party, the authorities mostly focused on reforms rather than on tearing families apart. However, they expected the influence of the family to decrease as the Soviet-style cooperative models were established. The nature of this “sinicized Marxism” can be summarized as follows: “[...] for Mao, Marxism was a complex ideological system constituted of various elements and only capable of finding complete definition within a historically specific setting. [...] Mao believed that this union of the universal and the particular allowed the completion of the Marxist system, and created a genuinely Chinese Marxism [...]”<sup>37</sup>.

Marxism / communism in Vietnam also contains some genuine elements, which do, not, however, correspond to a noticeable elaboration of the ideology, but primarily focused on the strong patriotism aimed at freeing Vietnam from the yoke of colonialism. Marxism / communism had a somewhat instrumental function, i.e. as a set of instructions for liberation. “The father of the Vietnamese revolution, Ho Chi Minh”<sup>38</sup>, writes: “At first, patriotism, not yet communism, led me to have confidence in Lenin. [...] I gradually came upon the fact

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>35</sup> *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*. Peking 1967, cit. according to Knight, Nick, “Mao...”, op. cit., 78.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>37</sup> *Selected Works...*, op. cit., 89.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly, Sean; Mackerras, Colin, “The Application of Marxism-Leninism to Vietnam”, in Colin Mackerras; Nick Knight (eds.), *Marxism...*, op. cit., 203.

that only socialism and communism can liberate the oppressed nations. [...] Leninism is [...] the radiant sun illuminating our path to final victory [...]”<sup>39</sup>.

One major characteristic of Vietnamese communism / Marxism, unlike in China under Mao and the Soviet Union under Stalin, is the almost complete absence of a personal cult. Ho Chi Minh is considered the father of Vietnamese communism with regard to both its theory (during his years in France around 1920, he studied the works of Marx and Lenin and published theoretical papers) and organizational structure (in June 1925, he founded “the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, the first truly Marxist Organization in Indochine”<sup>40</sup>). There was, however, a large number of renowned and influential political leaders – I would like to refer to the theoretical writings of authors such as le Duan, Truong Chinh, Vo Nguyen Giap. The Vietnamese leadership was much more of a collective than was the case in other communist parties in that it was able over decades to resolve its internal conflicts in a way that enabled it hold on to power as a unitary group, unite Vietnam and lead it to independence. Ho Chi Minh considers the emphasis of unity to be a special characteristic of Vietnam. Shortly before his death in 1969, he called for its preservation in what could be considered his personal legacy: “[...] unity is an extremely precious tradition of our Party and people. [...] all comrades, from the Central Committee down to the cell preserve the unity and oneness of mind in the Party like the apple of their eyes”<sup>41</sup>. This urgent desire for unity may have been what gave rise to the various efforts of Vietnamese leaders to establish and maintain a unitary communist party of Indochina – inevitably dominated by Vietnam.

To a far greater extent than Mao, the Vietnamese leaders emphasized the role of internationalism. This was due to Vietnam’s status as a French colony, as the fundamental class antagonism between the Vietnamese proletariat and the French bourgeoisie was clearly recognized. All important positions in Vietnam were held by members of the French bourgeoisie. Therefore, Vietnam itself deve-

lop only a very weak middle class which was absolutely Francophile and did not have the same interest as the Vietnamese people. Since pre-colonial Vietnam was a feudal and predominantly agricultural country, Ho Chi Minh and others –in a similar way as Ma– addressed the role of the rural population for the revolution. An awareness existed of a specific class divide between the rich land owners and the large number of landless peasants: “[...] they identified some stratification among the peasantry and noted that the interests of rich peasants tended to be similar to those of the bourgeoisie, while the poor and landless peasants have interests closer to the proletariat”<sup>42</sup>.

As a result, the Vietnamese leadership had two inseparable aims for the revolution (in Vietnam), firstly, to expel the imperialist aggressor (at first France, then the United States) and, secondly, to overcome the internal feudal structures, i.e. enforce land reform. The achievement of this aim or these aims was also the reason why the Vietnamese leaders –depending on the general political mood of the moment– sometimes sought closer relations with China, at other times with the Soviet Union, depending on the level of support offered. As regards the specific ideas about what a revolutionized society should look like, they were not backward-looking, unlike Mao’s approach (the “Great Leap Forward” paradoxically built on very low standards of technology) and, in an extreme way, that of Pol Pot. On the contrary, the Vietnamese plans corresponded more to the Soviet industrialization policy. The new culture was to emphasize the Vietnamese identity, and the change in social structures was to bring equal rights for women, whose situation was similar to women in feudal China and Cambodia, the historical development of which will be outlined in the following chapter.

## 1.2. Outline of Cambodia’s Historical Development

### 1.2.1. Short Description of Cambodia’s History

Cambodia is part of Southeast Asia, a name that denotes “a region that comprises what are to-

<sup>39</sup> Chi Minh, Ho, “The Path which led Me to Leninism”, cited according to Kelly, Sean; Mackerras, Colin, “The Application...”, op. cit., 203.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>42</sup> Chinh, Truong; Giap, Vo Ngaych, *The Peasant question (1937-1938)*. Trans. Christine P. White, cited according to: Kelly, Sean; Mackerras, Colin, “The Application”..., op. cit., 207.

day the countries Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The term was first used in 1943, when the Supreme Command for Southeast Asia was formed to conduct the military operations against the Japanese in these areas<sup>43</sup>.

There is no doubt that the peoples of this region are very different from each other with regard to language, religion, level of development and experience with colonial rulers, to mention but the most significant differences. Nevertheless, the geographical position, characterized by relatively steady temperatures, high air humidity and regularly returning Monsoon winds, has led to numerous similarities between the various cultures in this region. "It was a culture characterized by the cultivation of artificially irrigated rice both on hill terraces and on the plains, by advanced methods in fishing and the cultivation of fruit, by the development of village communities under a chieftain and by a religion based on nature and ancestor worship and fertility cults"<sup>44</sup>. This religious basis has survived to different degrees, despite the Indianization of the region and the resulting expansion of Buddhism in particular, as well as of Islam, due to Arabic-Persian influences, and – in later centuries – of Christianity, which was introduced by European missionaries. Since pre-Christian times, Southeast Asia has been part of an important commercial and transport network which connected the Mediterranean in the West with Japan in the East, but which also boosted regional trade.

Present-day Cambodia was not just a stable part of this network for thousands of years; it also demonstrated extraordinary stability in many other regards: "[...] it is likely that by the beginning of the Christian era the inhabitants of Cambodia spoke languages related to present-day Cambodian, or Khmer"<sup>45</sup>.

There is also evidence that the cropping methods used in agriculture, nutritional habits, certain traditions, especially in rural areas (e.g., cele-

bration of the new moon year), as well as animistic ideas and practices (belief in dragons and water spirits) have remained almost unchanged for very long periods: "The 'changelessness' of Cambodian history was often singled out by the French, who in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw themselves as introducing change and civilization to the region. Ironically, this theme was proked up by Pol Pot's revolutionary regime, which claimed that Cambodians were asleep or enslaved for two thousand years"<sup>46</sup>. This remarkable perseverance may be due to the fact that the population considered the existing system (including the social system) a good one and that any experiments were associated with the fear of deterioration, and especially famine.

Nevertheless, there have been noticeable development processes in the history of Cambodia, the most important one of which was the "Indianization", which began around the beginning of the Christian calendar and continued for about 1000 years. During this process, "[...] elements of Indian culture were absorbed or chosen by the Cambodian people"<sup>47</sup>. It was a peaceful process, extended to most spheres of life, but did not destroy the original culture. Thus, the Cambodian cultural identity developed from the amalgamation of Indian culture in the broadest sense (literature, poetry, social and political ideas, astronomy, architecture, religion) with the geographical characteristics and with social and religious traditions. It is significant that the Indian cast system was never adopted by Cambodia. The adoption of the Indian religions, i.e. Hinduism and Buddhism, plays a special role here, with the latter still being the predominant religion in present-day Cambodia. The expansion of Buddhism was supported by a relatively clear health doctrine and by the fact that "you can become Buddhist..., but you are born a Hindu..."<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, Buddhism tended to syncretism with both Hindu and indigenous animistic cults. This contributed to the development of a Cambodian culture which, while being influenced by Indian Buddhism, still retained its original character.

<sup>43</sup> Villiers, John, *Südostasien vor der Kolonialzeit*. Frankfurt, 1993, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Chandler, David P., *A History of Cambodia*. Boulder, 1983, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Villiers, John, *Südostasien...*, op. cit., 47.

Buddhism spread to present-day Cambodia not only directly from India, but also through the influence of missionaries and merchants from Chinese Buddhist centers. It is for this reason that the earliest sources about a state in the area of present-day Cambodia are Chinese ones; this state was a kingdom which is only known under the Chinese name “Funan” and which expanded in the Mekong Delta region during the first post-Christian centuries. It was organized according to the Indian model “with a maharajah or highest ruler and many vassal kings”<sup>49</sup>.

The foundation of this state is of special importance in that it facilitated accomplishment of enormous collective tasks, e.g. erection of big buildings and installation of irrigation and drainage systems for rice cultivation.

Cambodia’s great period lies between 800 and 1400: “At various times in these six hundred years, and only then, Cambodia –known in its own inscriptions as Kambuja-desa– was the mightiest kingdom in Southeast Asia, drawing visitors and tribute from as far away as present-day Burma and Malaysia as well as from what were later to be Thai kingdoms to the west”<sup>50</sup>.

This powerful kingdom seems to have developed from a former vassal state of Funan, which conquered territories including Funan. The capital of this kingdom was Angkor, which was founded at the beginning of that era and was gradually developed. The Angkor era was a golden age of culture, not only with regard to architecture and sculpture (the temples of Angkor Wat which exist to this day) but also in poetry (in Sanskrit), in the development of religious rituals and social structures. Written evidence exists both in Sanskrit, the language of poetry, and in Khmer, the language of justice and administration. There are, for example, Khmer records of the type and number of slaves, although it should be pointed out that our language gives only an inadequate idea of what that term meant. There were slaves who themselves held slaves, slaves who had close relations with the royal family and who,

although paying tribute, were essentially free people. This social system was “outside history”<sup>51</sup>. It existed up to the beginning of the French colonial period (Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863): “We know very little, in quantitative or political terms, about the mass of Cambodian society, many of whom, for most of their history, appear to have been slaves of one sort or another”<sup>52</sup>.

The kings of the Angkor era considered it very important to be seen a close relationship with the –initially predominantly Hindu– deities, and especially Siva. There were sophisticated ceremonies for this purpose, which helped to mystify the kings, thus keeping them apart from the hierarchically organized society, while still allowing the people to rally around them.

It was an almost revolutionary act when, in the later Angkor era, a king took up the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism and thus established a Buddhist Cambodian kingdom. Probably the cause was the assault of the Hindu Cham on Angkor. Thus Buddhism might – among other things – have served the purpose of delimitation against the Cham. The beginning of a declared Buddhist kingdom did not affect people’s lives very much, but “the difference between a Buddhist king and a Hindu one resembles the difference between a monologue that no one overhears and a soliloquy addressed to an audience of paid or invited guests”<sup>53</sup>.

Even if the installation of the Buddhist kingdom went on rather peacefully, it is important to point out in the context of this paper that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a king named Jayavarnan VII forced the people to convert from Mahayana Buddhism to a variant of the Theravada Buddhism; the type of enforcement shows many parallels to the Pol Pot regime (even if such a comparison should be made with caution). It is significant that “the only feature of Angkorean life singled out for praise by Democratic Kampuchea was precisely the full-sale mobilization of the people that Jayavarnan VII... managed to carry out”<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>50</sup> Chandler, David P, *A History...*, op. cit., 29.

<sup>51</sup> Kiernan, Ben; Boua, Chanthou, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-1981*. London, 1982, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Chandler, David P, *A History...*, op. cit., 57.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 68.

This conversion should perhaps be seen against the background of the growing influence of Mon and Thai-speaking ethnic groups, who had already adopted Theravada Buddhism. At the same time, China's influence grew. In particular, commercial relationships were intensified, which contributed to the relocation of the capital in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was easier to maintain trade with China from present-day Phnom Penh, which is situated in the Mekong estuary, then it was from Angkor. This period of Cambodian history is mainly documented by Chinese sources.

In European source texts, Cambodia emerges for the first time in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Portuguese and Spanish monks set out to christianize the region. Christianization of the rural population without the king's consent was considered virtually impossible, because of the king's enormous influence on everyday life and the loyalty of the people for the Buddhist monks. The emergence of Cambodia in written European history came at a time of external and internal unrest for the country, characterized by a recurring internal power struggle for the throne and – with regard to foreign affairs – repeated armed conflicts with the neighbors, the Thai and the Vietnamese. The weakness of the Khmer state did not only lead to an invasion by the neighboring states, but also to “a century of Western attempts to dominate Kampuchea”<sup>55</sup>.

In 1863, Cambodia became a French protectorate, partly because King Norodom had hoped that the presence of France would protect Cambodia from the attacks of the two neighbors. By and large, this hope was fulfilled until the Second World War. However, there was no real peace: “French Colonists preferred to reconstruct Cambodia's ancient temples, nurture a small elite, and modernize the economy to provide surplus of rice and rubber”<sup>56</sup>.

There were local gangs which committed robbery, and there were politically motivated activities to fight against the French occupation troops. Most Cambodians lived in rural areas, in a similar way as they had been doing for many centuries, often in some form of slavery. By our standards, the

rural population was poor and uneducated, but had enough to eat. People had only mystical ideas of the external world, and the contact to this world was mostly maintained by minorities: “Nearly all the people were ethnic Khmer, who occupied themselves with rice farming and with monastic and official life. Commercial and industrial tasks were handled by minority groups”<sup>57</sup>.

The Vietnamese represented a minority which gained increasing influence, often working on the newly cultivated rubber plantations, but in many cases also for the French, who brought a growing number of Vietnamese into the country. Vietnam developed at a much more rapid pace than Cambodia under the French colonization. In Vietnam, new publications in the country's language became available at an earlier stage than in Cambodia. Until the 1930s, publications in Khmer were largely confined to Buddhist texts, “published” by monks. As late as 1936, the first *lycée* was founded, replacing a precursor institution, providing the opportunity to prepare for university studies in France. Around that time, the *Institut Bouddhique* was founded with the assistance of French scholars, and the magazine *Nagara Vatta* was first published – the first magazine to deal with political issues. It had a distinctly “pro-Cambodian” slant, without being anti-French, at least at the beginning, but with an increasingly noticeable anti-Vietnamese tendency: “One editorial even went so far as to compare Hitler's territorial aggrandizement in Europe to that of Vietnam in nineteenth-century Cambodia”<sup>58</sup>. From Cambodia's independence to the Vietnamese invasion (1978-1979), this anti-Vietnamese attitude influenced every Cambodian government.

The effects of the events in the years between about 1930 and 1945 for Cambodia and the whole region which are still felt today. There were more fundamental changes than in the previous centuries. The Great Depression strongly affected Cambodia. Rice sales on international markets decreased. France tried to improve its own economic situation, among other things by imposing increasingly higher taxes. This led to a massive impoverishment of the population, an increasing inclination

<sup>55</sup> Kiernan, Ben; Boua, Chanthou, *Peasants...*, op. cit., 1.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Chandler, David P., *A History...*, op. cit., 100.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 164.

for violence both against the French colonial rulers and among the Khmer people themselves. The Cambodian communist party developed during the same period as Cambodian nationalism and became more and more intertwined with it. Communism was first introduced in Cambodia by the Vietnamese and the Chinese, e.g. by Vietnamese workers in the rubber plantations or by Chinese who were born in Vietnam or Cambodia: “Not surprisingly, the first communists reported to be active in Kampuchea were Vietnamese. [...] They included members of three different anti-colonial organizations”. “In early April 1930, the first Chinese Communist Party cell in Kampuchea was established in Kampot province / the region of the greatest concentration of Chinese residents”<sup>59</sup>.

This was the situation in Cambodia when the country was affected by the events of the Second World War, when Japan expanded its influence throughout the whole of Southeast Asia, partly presenting itself as a colonial power, but also partly leaving the everyday business to local leaders, all of them opponents of the previous colonial powers. After France’s defeat in 1940, the Vichy regime handled the situation in Indochina quite cleverly, hoping that it would find an integral French “empire” after a later victory over Germany. “[...] France was the only colonial power in the region to retain day-to-day control of its possessions for the greater part of World War II. The French managed to do so by making substantial concessions to the Japanese and by not declaring war on them”<sup>60</sup>.

Internally, the political course of the representative of the Vichy regime was characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, Cambodian nationalism was favored to a certain extent; on the other hand, a Cambodian elite was entrusted with more responsibility. Salaries were increased. The formation of paramilitary groups of youngsters was encouraged, enabling thousands of young Cambodians to make their first experiences with affiliation to a group other than their families. On the other hand, the regime was repressive; thus members of the Cambodian opposition were imprisoned for long periods of time, which led to the big demonstration of Buddhist monks in July 1942. This hap-

pened after the French-Siamese war from 1940 to 1941. Encouraged by the Japanese, Thailand took advantage of France’s weakness and conquered parts of Cambodia and Laos which it had lost to France in former times. Under Japanese pressure, France and Thailand signed an agreement in Tokyo in January 1941, which granted Cambodia at least Angkor. King Monivong, who was reigning at the time, felt humiliated by the French and rejected any contact with them in the remaining months of his life. His successor was Norodom Sihanouk, who was promoted by France, and –as every member of the royal family– was a French-educated, culturally interested young man, who the French believed would be easy to influence. In fact, there was a certain dependence on the French advisors in the first two years, but in the approx. 40 years of his political life, Sihanouk by and large nevertheless acted “pro-Cambodian”. In March 1945, for example, Sihanouk annulled the “Romanization” (i.e. introduction of Latin writing to render the Khmer language) which the French “residents” had tried to introduce in 1943. With Japanese support, he declared Cambodia’s independence. He emphasized the cultural self-determination by changing the name of the country “Cambodge” (as it is called in French) into “Kampuchea” – in accordance with the Khmer pronunciation. Moreover, the ministries were given Khmer names. The Gregorian calendar was abolished, and the Buddhist moon calendar re-introduced. Unlike Vietnam, which defeated the colonial power France in armed conflicts, Sihanouk tried to achieve Cambodia’s independence through negotiations with France. The French reaction was very hesitant, granting just marginally more sovereignty. Cambodia did not achieve full independence until 1954, when Indochina was restructured at the Geneva conference following France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam. Sihanouk declared Cambodia to be a neutral country with regard to its foreign policy. He tried to maintain a careful distance to Vietnam. He fought the newly formed Red Khmer when they instigated riots. However, he also allowed “left-leaning” ministers, who had been educated in France, to his cabinet: “The leftist balance in Sihanouk’s international and domestic neutralist scales was thus constructed to divide the domestic and international left. Of cour-

<sup>59</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *How Pol Pot Came to Power – A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975*. London, 1985, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Chandler, David P, *A History...*, op. cit, 166.

se, there were other factors such as Sihanouk's need for educated ministers"<sup>61</sup>.

The education sector of newly independent Cambodia showed considerable progress. Many new schools were founded. For the first time, an exclusively urban middle class developed, the members of which were educated in public schools and not by Buddhist monks.

But in many other regards, Cambodia's situation was very complicated. The people, including the rural population, held Sihanouk in high esteem, as they gave him credit for the improvement of the situation after the French retreat. On a personal, and therefore inevitably on a political, level, Sihanouk preferred younger, French-educated intellectuals who remained a relatively small group. Besides the different leftist groups, there were two other political parties which were led by princes. Their political concepts were quite vague. Among the communists, there was a more China-oriented faction with mainly intellectual members, and a more Vietnam-oriented one which predominantly consisted of peasants or farm laborers. Members of both factions underwent training in one of these two countries, depending on their allegiance. There were a certain number of Vietminh activists living in Cambodia who had already fought against the French, and there were the Khmer Rouge, some of whom stayed in the country, while others fought with the Vietnamese in Vietnam and / or Cambodia. Last but not least, there was the Royal Khmer Army, which changed allies depending on circumstances. There were internal political conflicts during which Sihanouk at times did not prevent military action against the left; but more importantly, Cambodia became involved in the Vietnam war despite its declared neutrality, mainly because parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail went through Cambodian territory. The Khmer Rouge joined the fight against the United States, both in Vietnam and in Cambodia. The US had continuously expanded its military operations against Cambodia since the 1960s, and the civil population suffered severely from the bombings, which included Phnom Penh.

### 1.2.2. *Pol Pot's Political Biography*

Pol Pot's biography is closely intertwined with the history of Cambodia. This connection is clearly reflected in the difficulties encountered by historians in establishing facts from Pol Pot's life or even his identity. Pol Pot was born as Saloth Sar, and it was not until after his rule that his identity was established beyond doubt: "After 1976 it took analysts over a year to identify him with certainty as a former schoolteacher named Saloth Sar who had been the secretary of the Cambodian Communist party since 1960"<sup>62</sup>. Some other communist leaders (Stalin, Ho Chi Minh, Tito) had also changed their names before Saloth Sar / Pol Pot did so, but they did it before they came into power in order to protect themselves against prosecution. When Pol Pot changed his name, he was already governing and tried to conceal his true identity from his own people. Therewith, he joined the tradition of previous Khmer rulers who had chosen to be distant from the people.

The son of the relatively wealthy farmer Pen Saloth and his wife Sok Nem, Saloth Sar was born in a rural area north of Phnom Penh on May 25, 1928. He was the eighth out of nine children. Both parents were ethnic Khmer, just as the whole environment, but "what set the family apart from others in the region were its connections with the royal palace in Phnom Penh"<sup>63</sup>.

These connections were based on the fact that a cousin of Saloth Sar was a member of the royal ballet, later becoming its director, until the early 1970s, as well as a mistress of Prince Monivong. Moreover, one of Saloth Sar's older sisters belonged to the *Corps de Ballet* for several years. An older brother was an employee in the royal palace and married a dancer.

The ballet had a very good reputation and was considered an important part of Khmer culture. During his childhood and youth, Saloth Sar came into close contact with this culture. When he was six years old, his father sent him and his slightly older brother to his relatives in Phnom Penh. The difficult economic situation may have played a certain role here. In any case, this was not unusual. "Informal adoptions by prosperous relatives are a traditional feature of Cambodian life and therefore

<sup>61</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *How....*, op. cit., 183.

<sup>62</sup> Chandler, David P., *Brother Number One – A Political Biography of Pol Pot*. Boulder, 1992, 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

should not be taken as indicating estrangement between children and their natural parents”<sup>64</sup>.

Saloth Sar learned to read and write at various religious institutions, first in the Khmer language, at a Buddhist monastery near the royal palace, and then, for six years, at a catholic elementary school near the palace. This school, for which Saloth Sar’s cousin paid the tuition, was mainly frequented by children of French colonial officials and of catholic Vietnamese. Until the end of his school education in 1942, Saloth Sar lived with his relatives, leading a relatively isolated life in the entourage of the royal palace. This environment included the “Institut Bouddhique”, the Lycée Sisowath (the only Cambodian grammar school at that time) and finally the only newspaper which was published in Khmer at that time. Many politicians who held leading positions later on originated from this environment, including a number of future prime ministers. Saloth Sar also met his wife here (wedding ceremony in Phnom Penh in 1956), Khieu Ponnary, who was 8 years older than him. She was the first Cambodian woman to gain the Baccalauréat.

The end of primary schooling concurred with significant political changes, i.e., France’s defeat against Germany, the invasion of Japanese troops into Cambodia, which France had to stand by and tolerate; and finally France’s defeat against Thailand, which led to the cession of Cambodian territory to Thailand. The gradual expansion of a small (European, or rather French) educated class supported the development of a political awareness which found its expression for example in demonstrations. After the death of his grandfather in 1941, the young prince Norodom Sihanouk was proclaimed the new king. He belonged to the French-educated elite, which was so small that virtually all its members knew each other or were even related by blood or marriage. This was undoubtedly also due to the fact that there was only a very small number of educational institutions: “[...] Sisowath High School in 1950 had already become the training centre for the Khmer educated class, many of whom [...] were to become communists”<sup>65</sup>.

Saloth Sar was not admitted to this school. Instead, he was elected as representative of his home region for the newly founded French Collège Norodom Sihanouk in Kompong Cham, Cambodia’s third largest city. The city was surrounded by rubber plantations and tobacco fields, and was a location for sericulture. Many ethnic minorities lived in Kompong Cham. In the Collège Norodom Sihanouk, which was a boarding school, Saloth Sar came into close contact with upcoming communist leaders, e.g., Khieu Samphan, the future Cambodian head of state.

The biographer David Chandler points to many contradictions which Saloth Sar was confronted with during his school days. To start with, while the royal ballet bore witness to a great culture founded on Hinduism and Buddhism, its accommodation was appalling. The Institut Bouddhique concerned itself with the cultural achievements of ancient Cambodia while its pupils were expected to speak French, not Khmer, in their “private” lives. Ultimately: “As the students learned about France’s ‘civilizing mission’ (*mission civilisatrice*), they knew that France was occupied by Germany, that Battambang and Siem Reap had been taken over by Thailand, and that Japanese troops were stationed in Kompong Cham”<sup>66</sup>.

Saloth Sar was described as a mediocre pupil, quiet, courteous and conformist. His fellow students experienced him similarly during his studies in France.

After being rejected once more by the reputable Lycée Sisowath, Saloth Sar learned carpentry from 1947 to 1949 at a type of technical school in a suburb of Phnom Penh. This school was frequented by pupils who came from lower social classes than those of the institutions Sar had previously attended. However: “As he dirtied his hands, stepping down from his French education and his palace connections, he was still part of a privileged minority”<sup>67</sup>.

During this time in Phnom Penh, he began his lifelong friendship with Jeng Sary (they married two sisters), who, however, was considered intellectually brilliant, received scholarships for renowned

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>65</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *How...*, op. cit., 28.

<sup>66</sup> Chandler, David P., *Brother...*, op. cit., 19.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 19.

French educational institutions, and achieved degrees. Jeng Sary had already been “a political animal”<sup>68</sup> before Saloth Sar, when he still lived in Phnom Penh. They both belonged to the tiny minority sent to study in France on scholarships granted by the Cambodian government – Saloth Sar in 1949, Jeng Sary about two years later. This period spent in France had a substantial influence on Saloth Sar’s / Pol Pot’s political career and –at the same time– on the fate of Cambodia.

Despite his language proficiency, Saloth Sar had almost no contact with the French in Paris. His friends / acquaintance were other Cambodian students from whom he also adopted political ideas. At the most, Sar only pursued his technical studies (“radioelectricity”) during his first months in Paris. After spending a period of time in Yugoslavia doing voluntary work in summer 1950, his studies had become completely irrelevant. Together with French and other Cambodian students, Sar worked for several weeks in Zagreb. This experience very much influenced him since Yugoslavia, under Josip Broz, known as Tito, was in a very desperate situation. Tito had just separated from the Stalinistic Eastern Bloc but was not yet supported by the West. There was the menace of a Soviet invasion and –due to an extreme drought– the food supply for the population was at risk. Yugoslavia mastered this dramatic situation quite successfully “by mobilizing the people’s revolutionary will. Sar followed this example when he came to power”<sup>69</sup>.

Sar, however, did not realize that Yugoslavia had rejected its increased efforts to collectivize its agriculture in favor of urban and industrial development in the fall of 1950. Saloth Sar spent his remaining time in France outside of the “official” educational institutions. According to his fellows of the time, he read a great deal, participated in discussion groups engaged in reading communist texts, e.g., papers of Stalin and publications of the French Communist Party, the western communist party most influenced by Stalinism.

Sar had to leave France in 1952 (together with several other members of the mentioned circle, first

and foremost Jeng Sary): “As I neglected my studies, the authorities cut off my scholarship”<sup>70</sup>.

Having returned to Phnom Penh, where King Sihanouk was just trying to cooperate with France to strengthen Cambodia’s independence, Saloth Sar was brought into contact by his older brother Saloth Chhay, a journalist, with groupings of the UIF (Unified Issarak Front): (Khmer Independence Movement), who resided near the Vietnamese border. Sar introduced himself as a member of the French Communist Party and joined a cell of the ICP (Indochinese Communist Party) which comprised both Khmer and Vietnamese members. There were several cross-links between these different groupings and even attempts to unify. During these months near the Vietnamese border, Saloth Sar / Pol Pot was able to more or less complete his political education. He gained experience in underground activities and in mobilizing ordinary people. It is notable that during this time Saloth Sar made contact with Tou Samouth, a political mentor and fellow (for the next nine years), a former French-educated Buddhist monk, who came from a wealthy family. Samouth was an idealist and passionate teacher; he joined the SCP for patriotic reasons in 1946: “[...] Samouth’s Buddhist rather than French education ... may have appealed to Sar in his apparent eagerness to become less French and more Khmer”<sup>71</sup>.

Since Saloth Sar / Pol Pot neither spoke Vietnamese, nor had any experience in the field of Guerilla tactics, it might have been his contacts with Phnom Penh which the party considered valuable, especially those with the upper class. Samouth and –inferior to him– Pol Pot were put in charge of organizing an urban wing of the party.

Having returned from France, however, Pol Pot lived what amounted to a double existence. He remained in contact with his relatives in Phnom Penh, visited them from time to time, but did not really inform them about his political activities or about the question of how he earned his living. Pol Pot had various secret contacts with different political groupings. He used different names and no-

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>70</sup> “Interview of Comrade Pol Pot to the Delegation of Yugoslav Journalists in visit to Democratic Kampuchea”, Democratic Kampuchea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 1978, cited according to Kiernan, Ben (ed.), *How...*, op. cit., 122.

<sup>71</sup> Chandler, David P., *Brother...*, op. cit., 45.

body –not even his comrades, some of whom also lived a double life– really knew him or had a clear picture of his activities.

In 1956 –after the Geneva Indochina Conference– Saloth Sar built up a legal existence for some years by marrying Khieu Ponnary, who then had already been working as a teacher at the Lycée Sisowath for quite some time. Since, owing to his lack of qualifications, he was not allowed to work in the public school system, Sar took on a position as a teacher in a private school, where he taught French, history and geography. He was considered to be a good teacher, who was known to be a communist, but of whose exact function no-one was properly aware. This legal existence (including his Phnom Penh residence) had become necessary because there was a decision at the Geneva Conference on Indochina to provide a reception area for Laos, but not for Cambodia, i.e. for those of the Khmer who had fought with the Vietminh or the Khmer Rouge. Therefore, the Cambodian “fighters” had no choice but to build up a legal existence, which most of them did. The only other alternative was to retreat to Hanoi and go into exile.

In 1960, Pol Pot and his brother-in-law Jeng Sary participated in the secret founding of the Worker’s Party of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. The establishment of this party was initiated by Vietnam. Pol Pot, Tou Samouth and Jeng Sary were members of the Central Committee. This secret founding marked the end of Pol Pot’s and Jeng Sary’s legal existence. Tou Samouth disappeared in 1962. In all probability he was killed by Sihanouk’s police. It is not clear whether Pol Pot was involved in this operation. One thing is certainly clear: “Saloth Sar becomes acting secretary of Central Committee”<sup>72</sup>.

A little later, a list of “red” activists circulated which registered the members of the Central Committee. Pol Pot (Saloth Sar) and his brother-in-law Jeng Sary therefore decided to escape to the eastern part of Cambodia, which was controlled by Vietnam. As much as 12 years later, they returned to Phnom Penh together with the invading Khmer Rouge. At this time, Pol Pot and his closest supporters lived a life largely sealed off from the events going on in the world. His original family never

saw him again. Contact was maintained only with the closest Communist brother nations. Relations with Vietnam were problematic. In 1965, he presented the WPK’s program in Hanoi, after he had been appointed “official” secretary general. He was, however, heavily criticized, especially because of the program’s lack of international aspects. In 1966, on the other hand, he was welcomed very cordially in Beijing by Mao Zedong. It is important to mention here that Mao Zedong had just proclaimed the cultural revolution. But the close contact between Pol Pot and his associates and Hanoi remained. On the eve of the Vietnamese TET offensive, the Khmer Rouge attacked several governmental buildings in Battambang, the second largest Cambodian city (1968). Between 1969 and 1970, Saloth Sar spent six months in Hanoi.

To avoid a misleading impression, it should be pointed out that everything which is reported about Saloth Sar / Pol Pot and the Cambodian Communist Party, which appears under different names, derives from later reconstruction and research. During his whole active political period, Pol Pot lived a secret life. Almost nothing was known about himself, the leaders, the party and its structures; not even the current precise name of the Communist Party was made public.

Laurence Picq, the French wife of Sikoeun, a high official of Cambodia’s Communist Party, writes the following: “Je m’étais souvent interrogée sur ce que me cachait cette dénomination puissante et respectée d’Angkor. Littéralement ce terme Khmer se traduit en français par l’organisation, mais que recouvrait-il ? Personne ne le savait vraiment”<sup>73</sup>.

The fact that –according to Laurence Picq– “nobody really knew”, not even whether it was a Communist party, a certain grouping, or a single influential individual, which / who issued the instructions, doubtlessly provided an important tool for exercising political power; obviously, the personality factor of Pol Pot / Saloth Sar (and other leading cadres?) supported this. The further biography of Pol Pot is so inseparably associated with the regime that was named after him, that it can only be described in this context. I would like to mention that, after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, Pol Pot retained a certain amount of power in his environment (for some time in a region at

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 45.

the Thai border). It is said, for example, that in this environment “purges” were carried out within the Khmer Rouge<sup>74</sup>.

The aura of mystery surrounding Pol Pot and his closest allies even persisted beyond the end of the regime. There were often speculations about his life, illnesses and his death.

Pol Pot most likely died a natural death on April 15, 1998, at his last place of abode in the Thai-Cambodian border area<sup>75</sup>, a prisoner of his long-standing companions who had sentenced him to lifelong house arrest in 1997<sup>76</sup>.

### 1.3. Pol Pot's Regime

On the basis of the developments described so far, the beginning of the Pol Pot regime can be dated April 17, 1975, i.e., the day when the Khmer Rouge victoriously invaded Phnom Penh. This had been expected. On April 15 and 16, the secret radio station of Cambodia's Communist Party had urged the people to revolt in view of the imminent “liberation” of Phnom Penh. Moreover, the soldiers of prime minister Lon Nol (who was supported by the USA), who were in the capital, had been ordered by their general to capitulate on the morning of April 17. Lon Nol himself had already escaped to the United States on April 1, when a victory of the Khmer Rouge and the occupation of Phnom Penh could be foreseen. For a very short time, the civilian population felt relieved: “A certain euphoria came over Phnom Penh just towards the end of the war at the thought that the fighting was soon to be over. And many people seemed almost ready to welcome the communist troops”<sup>77</sup>.

The population's urgent wish for an end to the war becomes clear if we take a look at the previous years, during which the people had to suffer considerably in connection with the Vietnam war. In the decades of this war, Sihanouk succeeded in

avoiding Cambodia's involvement in the war by adopting a neutrality policy. This included –among other things– “obliging” both the United States of America and North Vietnam or the Vietcong. He supported the Vietcong by letting them transport their weapons through Cambodian territory, which the Americans regarded as a reason for: “The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969-1973”<sup>78</sup> with the following result: “Rural Cambodia was destroyed, and ‘Democratic Kampuchea’ rose in its ashes. The emergent Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) regime, led by Pol Pot, had profited greatly from the U.S. bombing”<sup>79</sup>.

For the CPK or Pol Pot and his supporters, the victory had the effect that it was easier to recruit Khmer Rouge (peasants joined the Khmer Rouge who had no ideological notions, but wanted revenge for their destroyed villages). On the other hand, the brutality of these bombardments and the resulting chaos (thousands of Khmer fled straight into the big cities) drew attention away from the brutality of the leadership which was dominated by Pol Pot and his supporters; only very few people noticed that moderate communists were being killed. The radio broadcasts announcing that Phnom Penh had to be evacuated due to the threat of an American bombardment appeared to the people to be credible, especially since the evacuation was said to be only short term. This was certainly one of the key reasons why the expulsion of the population from Phnom Penh met almost no resistance. Only Hou Yuon, a member of the Central Committee and a former minister of Sihanouk was reluctant with regard to the planning: “He said that it was not the right situation to evacuate the people from the cities. Pol Pot accused Hou Yuon of not agreeing to implement the Center's plan. Hou Yuon disappeared for ever”<sup>80</sup>.

The evacuation of Phnom Penh was enforced

<sup>73</sup> Picq, Laurence, *Au delà du ciel – Cinq ans chez des Khmers rouges*. Paris, 1984, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Barth, Ariane; Terzani, Tiziano, *Holocaust in Kambodscha*. Hamburg, 1980, 214.

<sup>75</sup> Sources: *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 89, Friday, 17 April 1998, 5. *Die Tageszeitung*, Saturday / Sunday, 18 and 19 April 1998. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Saturday / Sunday, 18 and 19 April 1998.

<sup>76</sup> “Das Ende eines Monsters“. *Der Spiegel*, 17 January 1998, 152.

<sup>77</sup> Fenton, James, ‘The bitter End in Cambodia’, cited according to Kiernan, Ben (ed.), *How...*, op. cit., ii.

<sup>78</sup> Kiernan, Ben, “The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969-1973”. *Viet-Nam generation*, 1 (1989), 4-41, 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-41, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Samrin, Heng, “Interview with Ben Kiernan 1991”; cited according to Kiernan Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime – Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge 1975-1979*. New Haven, 1996, 33.

within a few hours and was accordingly very chaotic. The street which led out of the city was very soon crowded and thus the refugee's trek to the various rural regions progressed very slowly. The behavior of the Khmer Rouge varied. Those from the eastern regions appeared less brutal. Some inhabitants of Phnom Penh were allowed to carry provisions while others were compelled by force to leave their homes straight away. Former soldiers of Lon Nol were shot. There were also – obviously – unplanned gunfights. Moreover, there were several fatalities due to the rushed evacuation of hospitals and the complete shortage of medical care. Like the capital, other Cambodian cities were also evacuated within very short periods of time and the inhabitants were expelled to the countryside. This kind of deportation did not go unrepeated: there were constant migration movements ordered by “Angkor”, which led to more and more losses due to increasing supply problems and the growing exhaustion of the population. Laurence Picq, the French wife of a top-ranking official reports: “Peu de temps après notre arrivée à B [...]”<sup>81</sup>. “Nous ne vécûmes qu’une dizaine de jours dans ce petit havre de paix”<sup>82</sup>.

The new regime was able consolidate power very quickly. This consolidation was useful for the conference on May 20, 1975 in Phnom Penh: “District and region secretaries came from all over the country, and representatives from all armed forces and units and regions, so there were thousands”<sup>83</sup>. There are no documents pertaining to this conference. Kiernan obtained his information from interviews with five different “sources”, three of which were participants of the conference (among them Heng Samrin).

According to these sources, the following were declared as targets of the new regime:

1. Evacuate all people from all towns.
2. Abolish all markets.
3. Abolish Lon Nol regime currency and withhold the revolutionary currency that had been printed.

4. Defrode all Buddhist monks and put them to work growing rice.
5. Execute all cadres of the Lon Nol regime beginning with top leaders.
6. Establish high-level cooperative throughout the country, with communal eating.
7. Expel the entire Vietnamese minority population.
8. Dispatch troops to the border, particularly the Vietnamese border”<sup>84</sup>.

At this meeting, moreover, it was presumably announced that religion (i.e., Buddhism) was not permitted. Monks should be fought as a special class. These plans were implemented with literally murderous consequences within a very short period of time. This is confirmed by eye witness reports:

Thoun Cheng, who came from a village, was interviewed in a refugee camp in the Northeast of Thailand in 1979: “Also in April 1975, Khmer Rouge troops came to live in the village. It was not long before they began imposing a very harsh lifestyle on the villagers. Everybody was now obliged to work in the fields or dig reservoirs from 3 or 4 a.m. until 10 p.m. The only breaks were from noon till 1 p.m. and from 5 to 6 p.m. ... Land became communal. Also from 1975, money was abolished ... In 1975, the Khmer Rouge also began executing rich people ... College students and former government officials and police ... During 1976-1977 most of the Khmer Rouge teachers in the village changed six times. More than 50 Khmer Rouge were executed in these purges”<sup>85</sup>.

Eye witnesses agree that the situation drastically deteriorated after the first 1 1/2 years, i.e., not only through the increase in supply problems, but mainly because of the increasing numbers of executions of whole groups of people who seemed in some way to be distinctive and thus a threat to the party's power. More and more top-ranking party officials became victims of these “purge activities”.

A general climate of denunciation began to develop which was bolstered by the destruction of

<sup>81</sup> Picq, Laurence, *Au-delà...*, op. cit., 55.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>83</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime...*, op. cit., 55.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>85</sup> Kiernan, Ben; Boua, Chanthou, *Peasants...*, op. cit., 332-333.

evolved social structures – not just due to the already mentioned “migrations”, but also due to the tearing apart of families. Men, women and children were accommodated in separate locations and could only see each other occasionally; they often completely lost contact with one other after a short time. Children had no school education, they had to work in the fields at the age of 8 to 10 years; at the same age they were accustomed to the use of weapons: “Pol Pot and Jeng Sary taught the children in Cambodia to hunt human beings [...]”<sup>86</sup>. In this way, the Khmer Rouge recruited their up-and-coming soldiers. A witness, who was interviewed in Australia after his successful escape, speaks of: “brutality and inflexibility at the youthful Khmer Rouge cadres, their unjustified and unaccountable power over life and death and their heartless unconcern for human suffering”<sup>87</sup>.

Many authors emphasize that the treatment of the various ethnic groups differed greatly. The established rural population was cared for slightly better than the “new-comers”, i.e., the expelled city dwellers. The latter received almost no agricultural equipment to cultivate the soil in the newly founded villages. Special attention must be paid to the handling of ethnic minorities, the largest of which were the Muslim Cham in Cambodia, the majority of which was Buddhist. This Cham minority lived both in Vietnam and in Cambodia. It came from an originally Hindu-Buddhist-oriented Southeast Asian state called Champa, which had been conquered by the Kingdom of Vietnam in 1471. Some thousands had remained in their ancestral region in the middle South of Vietnam. “But 200,000 more Chams lived in Kampuchea, where their ancestors had fled. There they had adopted the religion of Islam and had intermarried with “Malays” to form a staunch Muslim community”<sup>88</sup>.

The Cham were distributed throughout Cam-

bodia, but there were bigger groups in many villages near the banks of the Mekong or in the suburbs of Phnom Penh. The Cham worked as fishermen, butchers, foresters and weavers. The degree to which they had adapted to mainstream life varied. Some of them kept their own language, others only stood out from their environment through their religion. In some regions, a certain kind of symbiosis developed: “Since Buddhism prohibits the slaughter of stock for food, Khmers often prefer to sell stock to the Chams”<sup>89</sup>.

As a typical rural ethnic group, the Cham by and large co-existed peacefully with the Buddhist Khmer majority, even if they could only rarely achieve a higher position within the army. This situation changed massively under the Pol Pot regime. According to Bernd Kiernan, the Cham were pursued “for being Cham, that is, for racial reasons”<sup>90</sup>; he indicates the following reason: The Cham were expelled from their ancestral villages in very small groups, which were not allowed to have any contact with each other and which were dispersed throughout Cambodia. Their language and religion were forbidden (due to the permanent monitoring they could not practice them in secret). They were forced “to eat pork at the communal meals and finally there was a higher percentage of losses among the Cham than among the Khmer majority). It must be pointed out that the Cham’s fate was hardly noted by the Islamic world, although one of them tried to draw the UN’s attention to this fact: “The survivors of the Cham people are not merely ‘orphans of genocide’. They are also disinherited of the Muslim world, the ‘lost children’ now of Islamic culture”<sup>91</sup>.

This does not, of course, apply to the other ethnic minorities, the biggest of which were the Chinese and the Vietnamese. The Khmer Rouge said about them: “Chinese are going to China, Viet-

<sup>86</sup> “Spiegel-Gespräch mit Kambodschas Exil-Regent Prinz Norodom Sihanouk”, in Barth, Ariane; Terzani, Tiziano (eds.), *Holocaust...*, op. cit., 104.

<sup>87</sup> Stuart-Fox, Martin, *The Murderous Revolution – Life & Death in Pol Pot’s Kampuchea – based on the personal experiences of Bunheang Ung – Drawings by Bunheang Ung*. Sydney, 1985, 81.

<sup>88</sup> Kiernan, Ben, “Orphans of Genocide – The Cham Muslims of Kampuchea under Pol Pot”. *Bulletin of concerned Asian Scholars*, 20 (1988), 2-33, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Jauffret, R., “Possibilités de l’élevage bovin et bubalin dans les Provinces du secteur vétérinaire du Cambodge”, cited according to Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime...*, op. cit., 255.

<sup>90</sup> Kiernan, Ben, “Orphans...”, op. cit., 2-33, 30.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

namese to Vietnam, Khmers to (stay in) Kampuchea”<sup>92</sup>.

At the beginning of the Pol Pot regime, there were indeed ethnic Vietnamese who tried to return to their native country Vietnam. There were, however, no efforts to arrange an organized evacuation of ethnic Chinese to China. The significant Chinese minority typically belonged to the urban middle classes. In fact, the ethnic Chinese earned their living mainly from trade; even if they originally came from rural regions, they almost never worked as farmers. Consequently, the survival chances decreased for many of them, since they were forced to work as agricultural labourers under extreme conditions, as were all Cambodians expelled from the cities. Many of them starved or died of diseases (malaria). Although they were generally not pursued (or sometimes even executed) for racist reasons, but because of “a general prejudice against city dwellers”<sup>93</sup>, the following is true: “For Cambodia’s ethnic Chinese, Democratic Kampuchea was the worst disaster ever to befall any ethnic Chinese community in Southeast Asia”<sup>94</sup>.

For the ethnic Vietnamese minority, which was also a large group, the regime was a disaster. After a repatriation attempt in 1975, the Vietnamese were no longer allowed to emigrate – which means that they were caught. They simply died because they were Vietnamese: The hatred against Vietnam, which Kampuchea Krom had seized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (it became part of Cochinchina), increasingly became a central element of the propaganda”<sup>95</sup>. The obsessive persecution and killing of all people who could somehow be connected with Vietnam was extended to all those who spoke Vietnamese, who were friends of Vietnamese, and finally to more or less all inhabitants of the eastern region which bordered on Vietnam.

The Khmer Krom were affected to different extents, depending on the local circumstances They

was an ethnic Khmer minority who lived in Vietnam as a result of the many conquests. Many of them who spoke Khmer with a Vietnamese accent had moved to Cambodia before the Pol Pot regime, mainly to Phnom Penh. Some leading CP members also belonged to the Khmer Krom: “[...] such as Jeng Sary and Son Sen, both of whom were born in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta”<sup>96</sup>.

Small ethnic groups from the northwest mountainous region were treated clearly very differently. They were treated with priority for a longer period of time. The CP leaders, e.g., Pol Pot and Jeng Sary, recruited their bodyguards from this “Khmer Locu” group because these illiterate young men –who mostly spoke only broken Khmer– were the only ones who gave the impression that they: “dared to sacrifice their lives to save their chiefs”<sup>97</sup>. Therefore, they were rewarded with positions in the foreign office as reported by Laurence Picq for example.

Several small ethnic groups from other mountainous regions were in a worse situation. They were partially forced to grow rice in the lowlands; their ceremonial equipment was taken away from them to produce weapons. As all inhabitants of Cambodia, these ethnic groups suffered from the deteriorating logistical situation. What is more, in the regime’s last one and a half active years, members of these minorities were even executed on the grounds that they were “traitors”.

Besides the assassination or the “causing the death” of certain groups of the population, there were also “individual executions following imprisonment and interrogation”<sup>98</sup>. There was a network of prisons distributed all over Cambodia which were torture centers and which almost no prisoner survived. The Khmer Rouge leadership believed that the desired new social order could be achieved sooner by getting rid of those who had “lingering attitudes of ‘privateness’ or ‘propertyism’”<sup>99</sup>. There were ritual inquiries, confessions –sometimes even

<sup>92</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime...*, op. cit., 252.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>95</sup> Margolin, Jean-Louis, “Kambodscha...”, op. cit., 609.

<sup>96</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime...*, op. cit., 298.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 302.

<sup>98</sup> Hannum, Hurst, “International Law and Cambodian Genocide: The Sounds of Silence”. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 11 (1989), 82-138, 89.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 90.

absurd ones— were extorted by means of torture; the prisoners documented these confessions in writing and signed them with their name and fingerprint. The largest of these torture centers was the so-called “S 21” in Phnom Penh, today known under the denomination ‘Tuol Sleng’, which was directly controlled by the top rank of the regime. Hardly any prisoner survived. But records were kept to an extraordinary degree (confessions, daily reports), and we can truly speak of a regular “bureaucracy of death”<sup>100</sup>. Today, Tuol Sleng is an important documentation center with thousands of files, many of which must still be processed from the point of view of historic and legal aspects.

Pol Pot’s regime was ended by the Vietnamese invasion. During the first two years, the regime was murderous towards its own people. However, it co-existed relatively peacefully with its two bigger neighbors Thailand and Vietnam. The internal aggression, which reached a blood thirsty pitch, went hand in hand with an increase in aggressive action and threats mainly against Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge attacked ever more Vietnamese border villages. From mid-1977, the leading group spread the idea of a Vietnamese re-conquest of Kampuchea Krom. On December 21, 1978, the then Vietnamese minister of defense Vo Nguyen Giap announced the invasion of Cambodia: “Four days later, [...] one hundred fifty thousand Vietnam troops and fifteen thousand Cambodian insurgents stormed across the border”<sup>101</sup>. “By 11 a.m. (January 6, 1979), Phnom Penh was in Vietnamese hands”<sup>102</sup>. Sihanouk, who had been under house arrest in Phnom Penh under the Pol Pot regime —though living in very comfortable conditions— was to some extent liberated by the Vietnamese. On the afternoon of January 6, 1979, he flew to Beijing, after he had promised Pol Pot to confront the UNO with the Cambodian question. The Khmer Rouge escaped towards the Thai border. In this border region, Pol Pot and his entourage managed to maintain a certain local influence. The majority of the surviving Cambodian population appreciated

the Vietnamese invasion, since this meant the end of the reign of terror: “Festivities to celebrate the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge were quickly organized at which traditional dances and songs were performed for the first time in almost four years. Vietnamese troops joined the celebrations, mingled with the Khmer crowds, and took part in the dances”<sup>103</sup>.

The Vietnamese supported the appointment of a new Cambodian government. The survivors tried very soon to return to a kind of normal life. Up to today, Cambodia has remained a very poor country beset with problems, which very soon vanished from the limelight of the world’s attention.

An analysis of the question of how it was possible for the Pol Pot regime to develop has at the most been examined only very marginally. The Khmer Rouge cadres have not yet been accused. Hurst Hannum examines this topic<sup>104</sup>. He proves that the crimes which were committed under the Pol Pot regime correspond to the definition of genocide in accordance with international law: Acts of genocide against ethnical and racial groups: this means the described actions against the ethnic minorities, primarily against the Cham and the Vietnamese.

#### 1.4. Acts of genocide against religious groups

The Khmer Rouge’s violent course of action against the practice of religion mostly affected Buddhism, which was the national religion of Cambodia - and which was much more than just a religion for this country. It was and is the core of Cambodian culture. The monks were important bearers of this culture, e.g., they handed down the language. According to Hannum, the destruction of Buddhism as an organized religion and the physical destruction of the vast majority of the monks correspond to the meaning of the Genocide Convention.

<sup>100</sup> Boua, Chanthou; Kiernan, Ben and Barnett, Anthony, “Bureaucracy of Death: Documents from Inside Pol Pot’s Torture Machine”. *New Statesman*, 2 may 1980, 669-676, 669.

<sup>101</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime...*, op. cit., 450.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 452.

<sup>103</sup> Stuart-Fox, Martin, *The Murderous Revolution...*, op. cit., 170.

<sup>104</sup> Hannum, Hurst, “International Law...”, op. cit., 82-138.

### 1.5. Acts of genocide against the Khmer national group

The Pol Pot regime's actions against its own people also falls within the definition of genocide, since certain groups were eliminated "in whole or in part" as "such" e.g., the officer corps of the defeated army, top-ranking officials of the two previous governments, the highly educated classes. Hannum compares the actions against certain Khmer groups with the Nazi's actions against, for example, homosexuals or socialists.

Hannum also explains that, according to the Convention, genocide not only means the direct killing of the named groups, but also the infliction of "serious bodily or mental harm", or "deliberately inflicting conditions of life". This includes exhausting marches and labor, separation of families, famine, the non-treatment of diseases. All this clearly happened under the Khmer Rouge regime. It can therefore be established that the Pol Pot regime committed genocide in accordance with the definition of the Geneva Convention of 1948.

As explained at the beginning, the perpetration of such macro-crimes presupposes the existence of a totalitarian regime. It must therefore be verified whether Cambodia under Pol Pot falls under the definition of a "totalitarian" regime. On the basis of Funke's definition (which states that we can speak of a totalitarian regime if it combines the overcoming of the separation of power, the abolishment of party pluralism and the control of power through secret ballots and the abolishment of an independent judiciary, and if it at the same time has complete control over the means of power, legitimized by an ideology which aims at enforcing a new social model), the latter can be proved very easily, since ample evidence exists. There is, for example, the following statement made by Jeng Sary: "The Khmer revolution is unprecedented. What we are trying to realize has never been achieved in the past history"<sup>105</sup>, or a statement made by Sihanouk: "The Khmer Rouge wanted to be the first true communists in the history of humankind [...].

For them, China was not communist enough. We, the Khmer Rouge, are the only party which can enforce total communism within one year!"<sup>106</sup>.

It is also clearly documented that the regime refused to grant the Cambodians the right to privacy as postulated by Hirsch. However, in this case, the right to privacy was not violated by the use of modern monitoring techniques, but by generally preventing the people from leading private lives (no private property, only public meals, separation of families, no choice of workplace, enforced mobility, etc.). The people themselves had no means of power (no freedom of assembly, no means of communication). Indeed, the situation was that "after 1975, at least, the CPK Center won every confrontation. It concentrated more and more power, progressively provoking and eliminating regional challenges as well as dissidents and rivals in the capital"<sup>107</sup>.

The fact that there was no party pluralism seems to have been considered self-evident. Certainly, no documents have been found to prove that there was an explicit ban on other parties (which, however, were only just developing in 1975) apart from the CP. The situation was similar with regard to the overcoming of an independent judiciary. There was without doubt no independent judiciary under Pol Pot, but it is doubtful whether there had been anything like an independent judiciary before Pol Pot. The people had no possibility of exercising "power control through secret ballots". In March 1976, there were elections at which not every adult had the right to vote ("only workers at worksites voted")<sup>108</sup>. Moreover, there was no election campaign. The CP center chose the 250 successful candidates who assembled only once: "The CPRA (=Cambodian People's Representative Assembly) assembled for the first time on 10 April for a one-hour evening meeting ... the next morning everyone re-convened ... They never reconvened"<sup>109</sup>.

All in all, it can be said that Cambodia under Pol Pot corresponds to the definition of a totalitarian state, if it is taken into account that – before 1975 – Cambodia had not been a state with a de-

<sup>105</sup> Chandler, David P., *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, cited according Margolin, Jean-Louis, "Kambodscha...", op. cit., 682.

<sup>106</sup> "Spiegel-Gespräch mit Kambodschas Exil-Regent Prinz Norodom Sihanouk", in Barth, Ariane; Terzani, Tiziano (eds.), *Holocaust...*, op. cit., 103.

<sup>107</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime...*, op. cit., 464.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 326-327.

mocratic tradition, i.e., certain structures could not be eliminated (overcome), because they did not exist or only partly existed.

There is still the question of whether the Pol Pot regime was communist, a fact which only appears obvious. There is no doubt that Pol Pot and his clique understood themselves to be communists. There is substantial evidence here (the members of the leadership had contact with the CPF in France or were members of it). Pol Pot had never known a non-communist country apart from France, where his only contacts were groups of Cambodian students. The ideology of Pol Pot and the leading cadres was explicitly oriented to the Maoist or the Chinese variant of Communism. They wanted to be even better communists than the Chinese. “Democratic Kampuchea claimed to be the Number 1 Communist state”<sup>110</sup>.

Moreover, Pol Pot and his entourage were in close contact with Vietnam’s CP before 1975, which –as stated earlier– criticized the absence of international aspects in the Cambodian CP’s program. It must be pointed out that the other Asian communist parties were also clearly nationally oriented. They saw themselves as struggling for the liberation of their countries from colonialism, as described by Vietnam’s CP under Ho Chi Minh. Pol Pot’s nationalism was of a different character than the one of Ho Chi Minh, who was committed in a credible way to a better future for his people. For Pol Pot and his entourage, being Khmer meant harking back to Cambodia’s past glory: “history was to be undone”<sup>111</sup>. It can thus be said that the pursued aims were clearly reactionary, whereas the communist parties of China and Vietnam were more future-oriented. Even if they focused on rural development, they realized that there was a need for industrialization. Although Mao –as mentioned before– had a certain dislike of ‘book knowledge’ and felt the necessity to learn by doing (rural life), this anti-intellectualism was not decisive for his ideological orientation. In Kiernan’s opinion, Maoism was significant also for the following reason: “Here Maoism proved a useful ideological tool, for it stresses the capacity of human willpower to triumph

over material conditions and so reverse historical trends”<sup>112</sup>. Therefore, Pol Pot and his clique were not communists in the sense that they considered history to advance in processes but in the sense that they utilized Maoist instruments to implement their backward-looking aims - literally at all costs.

The biggest problem with regard to classifying the Pol Pot regime as communist is its racism: “To that end (to ensure the perenniality of the Khmer race), the Khmer Rouge adopted a philosophy of racial superiority and purity that resembled that of Nazi Germany, including the use of programs to eliminate minorities”<sup>113</sup>.

As described earlier, this racism became especially blatant against the Cham. In this context I want to refer to a document which the Vietnamese representative Ha Van La presented to the UN on October 12, 1979. This document was obtained in connection with the trial in August 1979 conducted by the leading representatives of the Vietnamese occupying power against the Pol Pot regime: “The Cham nation therefore no longer exists on Kampuchean soil belonging to the Khmer. Accordingly the Cham mentality, Cham nationality, the Cham language, Cham usages and customs, and Cham religious beliefs must be immediately abolished”<sup>114</sup>.

Even if the racism was particularly blatant towards the Cham, it was not directed at them alone. Cambodia’s CP under Pol Pot exterminated everyone who had a long revolutionary experience but did not fit in with the Pol Pot group’s perception of an “approved Khmer”. This was the fate of many whom the urban Pol Pot group fixed on after their return from France.

In Kiernan’s opinion, the race concept was at the forefront compared to the class conflict: “...Khmer Rouge conceptions of race overshadowed those of class”<sup>115</sup>.

To sum up, we can answer the question of whether or not the Pol Pot regime was communist by saying that the regime saw itself as such, drawing its ideological instruments from communism, mainly in the form of Maoism. The Khmer Rouge

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>113</sup> Haunum, Hurst, “International Law...”, op. cit., 82-138, 86.

<sup>114</sup> Kiernan, Ben, “Kampuchea and Stalinism”, in Colin Mackerras; Nick Knight (eds.), *Marxism...*, op. cit., 249.

<sup>115</sup> Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime...*, op. cit., 26.

shared its national orientation with other Asian communists as well as with many Cambodians. The idea that the clock could be turned back and the emphasis on racial purity, however, do not correspond to the communist ideology.

## CONCLUSION

The answer to the question of whether or not Cambodia (Kampuchea) under Pol Pot (1975-1979) was a totalitarian regime is that the regime can without doubt be called totalitarian. However, the fact must be taken into account that Cambodia was (is?) a country without democratic tradition, and that therefore certain structures –such as an independent judiciary– had not existed prior to the regime or were just starting to emerge.

The regime was communist in the sense that the leadership clique's ideology was oriented towards certain communist variants, i.e., the leaders, who had been educated in France, were influenced and formed by the CPF, which was Stalinist in the period after World War II. Moreover, they took their lead from Mao's concepts. Finally, Cambodia's CP - of which Pol Pot became the chairman after his return from France - started to develop in close association with the Vietnamese CP. The national orientation united both parties, who considered themselves to be liberation movements.

Unlike the Vietnamese nationalism, the nationalism of the Cambodian leading cadres was directed

only backwards and harked back to the former glory of Cambodia. The leading clique shared this kind of nationalism with very many Cambodians. The aura of mystery which surrounded Pol Pot at all times matched the tradition of Hindu and Buddhist Cambodian kings rather than that of communist leaders, who in some cases did adopt another name, but did not remain as mysterious as Pol Pot.

The attempt by Pol Pot (and his clique) to undo historical processes (instead of comprehending history as "inevitable progression"<sup>116</sup>) and above all his distinct racism, which reminds certain authors of the nazis, cannot be reconciled with communist ideas. This racism was a key element of the committed genocide. The historic development of Cambodia outlined earlier and above all the involvement of Cambodia in the Vietnam war (particularly the tremendous damages caused by the bombardment by the United States at the end of the war) supported the establishment of the regime and therewith provided the prerequisites for the genocide. Many questions in connection with the Pol Pot regime and the genocide are not yet clarified. Therefore, there is considerable need for further research, e.g., on the role of Buddhism or on the structure of the psycho-social conditions and the partly close relationships of the individual members of the leading clique with each other. It is highly regrettable that the matter has not yet been fully dealt with and that therefore those responsible were never punished.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 27.

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