

have not materialized. As Buszynski concludes: "Russian security concerns and foreign policy interests would be focused upon Northeast Asia without the pretensions for universal influence that characterized Soviet diplomacy. Residual political interests in Southeast Asia would remain but in general the region would be of peripheral interest to the Russians."

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Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot. By David P. Chandler. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992. 254 pp.

The name Pol Pot is associated with death and destruction. On seizing power in April 1975, the first thing that Pol Pot — leader of the Cambodian communists whom Prince Sihanouk called the Khmer Rouge or Red Khmers — did was to empty the cities of their inhabitants. Subsequently, he ordered the abolition of money and private property, banned religion and cultural practices, and broke up families by insisting that everyone ate at mass dining halls, and lived and slept in common quarters. People from the cities were sent to the countryside to work on large irrigation projects, the purpose of which was to increase agricultural production, particularly rice. The objectives were to attain self-sufficiency in food as well as to sell the surplus produce overseas in order to finance the building of light, and later, heavy industries.

Pol Pot was obsessed with two things. First, Cambodia was to be completely independent, that is, it should not rely on any country. Secondly, he wanted to build a socialist state within four years. To achieve these two objectives, he opted for a radical agrarian programme. He also set about destroying everything that contributed to, or was associated with, the decadent past, thereby starting from what French missionary Francois Ponchaud aptly called "year zero".

Pol Pot's obsession — to create a new Cambodia — brought death and destruction to his country and its people. Thousands died from malnutrition, disease and overwork. Later, more (including his closest comrades such as Hou Youn and Hu Nim) were executed by Pol Pot who was seized with paranoia, believing that his "enemies" (which included the CIA as

well as Vietnam) were out to destroy him, his regime and the dream of building the first prosperous classless society.

Based on the accounts given by survivors of the so-called “killing fields”, we now have a clear picture of what happened inside Cambodia between 1975 and 1978. Our understanding of that period may, however, be coloured by two things. First, the Western media (and some Western scholars) have inflated the number of Cambodians who actually died (particularly the number executed) during that period. The figures that have often been quoted in Western news reports have ranged from one-and-a-half million to as high as three million. Secondly, Pol Pot has often been portrayed as a mad man, whose simplistic understanding of Marxism led him to implement a radical programme that was doomed to fail.

In order to deepen our understanding of the Pol Pot era, it is essential that we study the man who made all this happen. Pol Pot was not his real name. It was the *nom de guerre* (revolutionary name) for Saloth Sar, son of a prosperous farmer from Kompong Thom province. Why did Pol Pot pursue those policies? Was he born with an evil streak in him, or was there a method to his “madness”? If so, how did Pol Pot come to acquire the ideas for his radical agrarian programme. Another set of questions would be: was Pol Pot out to destroy Cambodian society totally, or was he trying to change it for the better but, somehow, something went wrong along the way. One possible reason could be that the cadres who were responsible for the implementation of his programmes had pursued their tasks too zealously. (Indeed, in later years Khmer Rouge leaders such as Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary admitted that some “mistakes” were made but they refused to concede that they were trying to eliminate those associated with Cambodia’s “decadent” past).

In his latest book, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, David Chandler, a notable Cambodia scholar and research director of Monash University’s Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, tries to provide answers to these and other pressing questions about the Pol Pot period. In essence, Chandler has documented the major influences that helped shaped Pot Pot’s ideological outlook, from the time he was born in 1928 until his public appearance as Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge name for Cambodia) in 1976. In this book, readers will be able to follow the remarkable transformation of a mild-mannered, gentle and charming Saloth Sar into a paranoid and ruthless Pol Pot.

Distilling from this chronology of Pol Pot’s life experiences, one would assert what a number of Cambodia scholars have known for some years, that is, that the top Khmer Rouge leadership had decided to embark on a radical agrarian programme to transform Cambodia into the first pure

socialist state, because they wanted to show that they were better Marxists than their neighbours, the Vietnamese. At a deeper, personal level, Pol Pot and his top lieutenants were convinced of the need to recover the past glory of the Angkorean empire, thereby demonstrating that the Khmer people were not inferior to the Vietnamese. It was the single-minded pursuit of these goals that saw Pol Pot implement his experiment ruthlessly, with total disregard to social and human costs.

The French were partly responsible for contributing to the inferiority complex that Pol Pot had tried to erase. According to Chandler, as colonial masters the French had preferred to recruit Vietnamese immigrants into the middle ranks of the colonial civil service because they were considered more “vigorous” and better educated (in French) than the Khmers. It must have made a strong impression on young Saloth Sar, who saw this discrimination firsthand as he was, since the age of six, living with his brother and sister-in-law in the capital, Phnom Penh. Pol Pot also resented the condescension displayed by the Vietnamese leadership (in particular, Ho Chi Minh’s successor, Le Duan) towards him and his party. He said the Vietnamese leaders treated him as a “son” or a “little brother”, and that they expected him to show the same “acquiescence” that Sihanouk expected of Lon Nol or what the Vietnamese later demanded of their protégé Heng Samrin.

To Pol Pot, the ultimate affront to Khmer pride was Le Duan’s insistence that the Cambodians postpone their revolutionary struggle until the Vietnamese had succeeded in winning theirs. To keep Cambodia out of the Vietnam war, Sihanouk had agreed to allow North Vietnamese troops to operate from Cambodian soil, provided that the inhabitants were not harmed. Hanoi was afraid that the Prince might renege on this agreement if the Cambodian communists were to launch an armed struggle in Cambodia. Indeed, losing the sanctuaries in Cambodia would have affected Hanoi’s prosecution of the war in South Vietnam. The Vietnamese were also concerned that if the Cambodian revolution was allowed to develop and strengthen on its own, they would not be able to control the Cambodian communists. In spite of the treatment meted out to him, Pol Pot decided to swallow his pride and wait for an opportune moment to break with the Vietnamese. This did not happen until after the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk in March 1970.

In the period 1966–67, Pol Pot took two decisions that signalled his disaffection with the Vietnamese and laid the basis for the launching of his radical agrarian programme. The first decision was to change the party’s name from the Revolutionary Workers’ Party to the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). According to Chandler, some scholars view the change of name as a slap in Vietnam’s face, because it meant that

the Vietnam Workers' Party would have dropped semantically to a lower stage of development than the CPK. At that early stage, ideological competition between the Vietnamese and the Khmer was already apparent. The other decision was to move the Khmer Rouge headquarters to the remote province of Ratanakiri in the northeast.

Why was the move to Ratanakiri so significant to the understanding of the Pol Pot period? The province of Ratanakiri was inhabited by tribal minorities — for example, the Jarai, Tapuon and Brao peoples — who spoke different dialects and were engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture. Over the years, these tribesmen, together with those from Kratie and Mondulakiri provinces, had grown increasingly hostile to the Phnom Penh government because modernization and development had deprived them of their lands. Without access to money, markets, or the state, these tribesmen enjoyed what appeared to be deeply rooted traditions of autonomy, solidarity, and mutual aid. In the Marxist scheme, these people practised “primitive communism”. They were “noble savages”, uncorrupted by social differentiation or money. They were also, in Maoist terms, “poor and blank”, thereby susceptible to communist teaching. A number of these tribesmen later became trusted bodyguards, messengers and party members. No doubt, some of the killings during the 1975–78 period were committed by these people. Having lived among them for a number of years, Pol Pot and his top lieutenants must have felt that some of the traditions practised by the tribesmen would be appropriate for a Cambodia that was aiming to be the first pure socialist state.

Apart from the tribesmen in Ratanakiri, Pol Pot's thinking was also shaped by his experience in Yugoslavia and the cultural revolution in China.

In the summer of 1950, Pol Pot visited Yugoslavia and, while there, worked as a manual labourer. He was impressed by several things he saw. First, Yugoslavia's leader Josip Tito had broken away from the Soviet camp, and despite condemnation from Moscow and other East European states, and isolation by the West, he stood firm and alone. That summer, Yugoslavia was suffering from a severe drought and famine. There were food riots, and a Soviet invasion was a genuine possibility. To confront these challenges, Tito decided to mobilize the people's revolutionary will by engaging them in massive construction projects. According to Chandler, Pol Pot had never seen social mobilization for public works on such a large scale. When he came to power, Pol Pot was confronted with similar challenges. Like Tito, he adopted the same tactics to meet those challenges.

In 1966, Pol Pot visited China, which was then in the early phase of the cultural revolution. According to Chandler, Pol Pot must have been impressed by what he saw. Some of the measures introduced in China at

that time — for example, the partial evacuation of cities, “storming” attacks on economic problems, and the abandonment of differential military ranks — were later adopted by the Khmer Rouge leadership. Chinese-style purges of “class enemies” were also widespread in Democratic Kampuchea, and Cambodia’s economic ambitions were described as the “Great Leap Forward”, a phrase borrowed from the extravagant industrialization programme launched in China in the 1950s which, as with Pol Pot’s own experiment, ended disastrously.

Like leaders in other countries, Pol Pot was also motivated by a deep personal vision when he launched his radical agrarian experiment. But while others succeeded and were lauded, he failed disastrously and was condemned world-wide. Pol Pot’s experiment might have met with some success if not for two major factors. One was that the top Khmer Rouge leadership had, on coming to power, cut themselves off from the rest of the world. Pol Pot relied on his own beliefs and the assessments of his top lieutenants. For example, the data they had relied on to draft the bold economic plan were outdated, as the information was collected in the 1960s. The second factor was that as the economic programme ran into trouble, the effect was to heighten Pol Pot’s paranoia about the organization (or *Angka*, as the party was called) being infiltrated by enemy spies (Vietnam and the CIA, especially the former) who were out to sabotage his economic plan and destroy his vision of a socialist Cambodia. In response, Pol Pot ordered a massive purge within the Khmer Rouge ranks. Fearing for their lives, Khmer Rouge cadres submitted false reports or inflated ones, thus further distorting the plan. At the same time, they pushed the collectivization programme even more zealously.

Since the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, bits and pieces about Pol Pot’s life experiences have been written and discussed among a small group of Cambodia scholars. Chandler has pulled these accounts together and succeeded in producing a revealing and very readable biography of the man the Cambodian people have feared and hated. He has supplemented the findings of other scholars with his own personal interviews with members of Pol Pot’s family, his colleagues, those who had met him or were taught by him (Chandler), survivors of the so-called “killing fields”, and the confessions of Pol Pot’s close friends and comrades.

Given the Khmer Rouge’s penchant for secrecy, Chandler’s book is an important contribution to our understanding of Pol Pot and recent Cambodian history. One of the great strengths of the book is the author’s objective handling of his subject, which must have required great discipline on his part, given the atrocities committed by the regime. Indeed, reading the confessions by Pol Pot’s closest comrades, must have been a painful experience for the author. But instead of passing judgement (that is, condemnation)

on Pol Pot, the author seeks to understand what made him tick. On the whole, Chandler has treated his subject quite fairly, and in some aspects, even sympathetically. In doing so, he has made Pol Pot appear human again.

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