

**EXHUMED MEMORIES: HO CHI MINH, POL POT, AND  
NATIONALIST STRUGGLE IN INDOCHINA**

**BY JONATHAN FORMELLA**

Since the chaos that was the Indochinese Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, both Vietnam and Cambodia have been etched into global memory accompanied by visions of hellscape, bloodshed, and a common human experience of terror. Under Ho Chi Minh and Pol Pot, respectively, the nations of Vietnam and Cambodia engaged in vicious struggles to realize their dreams of nationalism and independence. Beneath the rhetoric and actions of the two nations and their leaders is a complex array of historical factors, culture, and ideologies which led to the manifestation of Ho Chi Minh and Pol Pot as leaders of their respective nations. By analyzing the origins, backgrounds, and leaders of the nationalist movements of Vietnam and Cambodia, it becomes clear what characterized the respective nationalistic movements of each nation and to what degree they were successful. Ho Chi Minh used the rhetoric of communist liberation to unite the masses in a nationalist struggle utilizing guerrilla strategy and mass uprising, while Pol Pot reactively employed tactics of xenophobia and anti-foreign propaganda to establish a violent regime amidst the chaos of the Indochinese Wars.

For Vietnam, resistance to foreign aggression had been infused in Vietnamese blood for centuries. Beginning with the anti-Chinese resistance in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, the Vietnamese engaged in what would become a time-honored tradition of struggle against foreign oppression. Vietnamese heroes such as the Trung sisters would be celebrated as defiant warriors against the Chinese, and this legacy would carry into the age of imperialism and nationalism as a major aspect of the Vietnamese nationalist movement.<sup>1</sup>

At the onset of French colonialism, proto-nationalist resistance occurred in a variety of forms. The Confucian scholars at the village level historically made up some of the most fundamental social and political structures in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh would later remark that the collective village structures espoused by Confucian teachings made

---

<sup>1</sup> Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 40.

Vietnam a nation which could easily adopt communism.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the military might of the French colonial forces was able to overcome proto-nationalist resistance and establish a colonial regime in Vietnam. Both the Confucian elites and the peasant guerillas were defeated, and the Nguyen court, once a formidable power in Southeast Asia, now became a puppet for the French colonial regime.<sup>3</sup> The origins of the later Saigon regime's patron-client relationships with the French and Americans can be seen in this arrangement. In both the puppet Nguyen court and Saigon regime, these client regimes would suffer from a chafing lack of popular support.

By 1900, a new generation of nationalists threatened French colonial regime in Vietnam. Unlike the Confucian patriots who had resisted French domination in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were largely influenced by traditional Confucian values, these new scholar-patriots sought to bring about the modernization of nationalism in Vietnam. The iconic figure who represented the character of this nationalistic movement was a talented scholar by the name of Phan Boi Chau. Like many of his nationalist peers, Chau was born into an elite family.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the Confucian patriots of the century prior, Chau and his cohort believed they must look to modernization rather than the past to assert the national identity of Vietnam. Chau saw the rapid changes taking place in other countries in Asia and the influences of the West upon Chinese and Japanese modernization. They greatly admired the successes of the Meiji Restoration and the revolution of Sun Yat-sen in China. Unfortunately, Chau and his comrades failed to grasp the potency of the masses in order to achieve modernization and social change. While Chau and his nationalists were passionate and determined in their patriotic cause, they were unable to spread their nationalistic fervor beyond their elite scholarly circles to the Vietnamese people.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the Viet Minh, there were many factions within Vietnam vying for the mantle of nationalist leadership and legitimacy during the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The VNQDD was a right-wing Vietnamese nationalist faction which organized semi-effective

---

<sup>2</sup> Son Ngoc Bui, "The Confucian Foundations of Ho Chi Minh's Vision of Government." *Journal of Oriental Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 35-59.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Duiker *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview, 1996), 7.

<sup>4</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 25-26.

<sup>5</sup> Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 7-9.

operative groups but ultimately proved unviable as an option for mass nationalistic mobilization.<sup>6</sup> In Southern Vietnam, a rival communist faction known as the Trotskyites would initially form nationalist cells among the workers. However, the tight grip of direct French imperial rule proved to be a hindrance for would-be successful nationalist activities. The pro-French collaborationist class of South Vietnam also saw some moderate attempts to reform the imperial regime. However, the French were reluctant to sacrifice too much power to these elites. Once the French departed Vietnam, the Saigon ruling elite were incapable of cultivating sympathy among the masses because of their reputation as imperialist collaborators and their own inexperience at political administration.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, the Communist Party of Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh emerged as the dominant nationalist movement in Vietnam. Unlike other nationalist movements, Ho Chi Minh's nationalism was characterized by a hybrid of Marxism-Leninism, popular nationalism, and anti-imperial resistance. From an early age, Ho Chi Minh was engaged in the struggle to end the brutal French colonial regime. French clampdowns on his nationalist protests at school forced him to flee to Saigon where he found work as a shipboard cook. After moving on to France in 1919, Ho encountered a number of colonial expatriates as well as the leftist European intellectuals who first attracted Ho Chi Minh to radical socialist politics. Ho later wrote that they have "...shown their sympathy towards me, towards the struggle of the oppressed peoples."<sup>8</sup> Ho was further persuaded to pursue the interests of anti-colonialism in the French Socialist Party after his plea for assistance at Versailles was ignored by the Allied Powers.

While in France, Ho attempted to unite colonial expatriates along with French socialists and communists to lobby against French imperialism. The Intercolonial Union was masterminded by Ho and made up mainly of Vietnamese, Algerian, and Madagascar nationals united by a common cause of anti-colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Though his comrades often disagreed and argued among themselves, Ho's experience with the Intercolonial Union in Paris also gave the young nationalist training in creating broad-based coalitions that would become invaluable during

---

<sup>6</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, "Modern Nationalist Movements." Lecture, Southeast Asia Since 1800, Vilas Hall, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, March 17, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Ho Chi Minh. *The Selected Works* (New York: Prism Key, 2011), 141-143.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, 8-46.

the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party and Viet Minh later on.

It was during his stay in France that Ho Chi Minh encountered the writings of the Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. Lenin's particular concern for oppressed colonial peoples in writings such as "Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions" attracted the aspiring Vietnamese revolutionary and would have a profound effect upon his political strategies for the rest of his life. In his article, "The Path Which Led Me to Leninism", Ho Chi Minh explains how Lenin's articulation on the strategic importance of promoting anti-colonialism would ensure a global communist society. Ho writes, "...by studying Marxism-Leninism parallel with participation in practical activities, I gradually came upon the fact that only socialism and communism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery."<sup>10</sup> Beguiled by Lenin's emphasis on anti-colonialism, Ho Chi Minh subsequently incorporated many Leninist tactics into his own revolutionary style.

As a major supporter of Lenin's works, Ho Chi Minh believed in the Leninist strategy of toppling a feudal regime by organizing a common front of communists and liberal bourgeoisie to work for a first revolution. Ho Chi Minh was also fiercely determined to avoid the same mistakes as Phan Boi Chau and other nationalist factions such as the VNQDD and the Constitution Party, whose localized and small cell-based movements inspired little excitement among the Vietnamese masses. Adopting Leninism and learning from previous nationalist failures, Ho Chi Minh became a successful nationalist leader because he reached out across social classes and the political spectrum to rally anticolonial forces to his cause. This step was a key element in Ho Chi Minh's greater plan to harness the disorganized and spontaneous nationalist revolts into a lethal weapon for the eventual establishment of the mass-based Viet Minh coalition in the 1940s.<sup>11</sup>

This tactic was not only ingenious in that it appealed to a wide variety of Vietnamese, but also saw the front grow, specifically under the leadership of the Viet Minh and the Indochinese Communist Party. Although The Viet Minh was a collection of nationalist groups, at its core it was communist in nature. This strategy of a communist-directed alliance would later recur in the Vietnam War as the National

---

<sup>10</sup> Ho Chi Minh. *The Selected Works.*, 141-143.

<sup>11</sup> Ho Chi Minh, and Jack Woddis. *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Articles and Speeches, 1920-1967* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 15-72.

Liberation Front, or Viet Cong, which formed in South Vietnam as a coalition of anti-Saigon forces including former elements of the Cao Dai religious sect under the leadership of Hanoi and communist direction.<sup>12</sup>

With the turn of the century in colonial Vietnam, the French system of high imperialism instituted major socioeconomic changes into Vietnam. Many Vietnamese were forced from their homes to work as coolies in plantations or factories. These changes and increased interaction resulting from the changing socioeconomic situation in Vietnam allowed for a greater horizontal unity among the Vietnamese peasants and proletarians while allowing for nationalism to mature among the populace. Soviets were established to help protect the livelihood of workers. The Vietnamese communists would infiltrate these Soviets in order to achieve a greater massed following that many of their nationalist contenders failed to procure. To Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, nationalism was necessary to liberate the Vietnamese peasants and proletarians from the bondages of French imperialism. Their moderate land reform measures pragmatically encouraged the sympathy of the masses while retaining broader, multiclass support.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately for the Viet Minh, the distress and rage of the Vietnamese workers, and peasants boiled over before Ho's stratagem came to full maturity. Though overall unsuccessful in overthrowing the French colonial rule, the Nghe-Tinh labor revolts from 1930-1931 enhanced the strategy which would come to characterize the nationalism of the Viet Minh. The failure of Nghe-Tinh taught Ho Chi Minh many valuable lessons. They had considerable mass support among the proletariat and peasants, yet more strategic planning and patience was needed. Following the suppression of the Nghe-Tinh Revolt from 1930-1931 and the failure of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in 1928, Ho understood that a successful uprising required more than raw revolutionary fervor. Ho Chi Minh and his comrades in the ICP realized that the Vietnamese required arms and meticulous strategic planning to overthrow their colonial oppressors.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Young, Marilyn Bratt. *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Scott, James C. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Fitzgerald, Frances. "Half Lenin, Half Gandhi." *New York Times* (New York), October 15, 2000.

The answer to the protracted struggle--and a major characteristic of nationalism in Vietnam which would come to be fundamental to the Viet Minh movement--was the guerrilla, unconventional nature of its forces. Vo Nguyen Giap, the legendary Viet Minh general, saw his communist soldiers as a nationalist army working for the people against imperialism. Giap remarks, "The Vietnamese Army is indeed a national one. In fighting against imperialism and the traitors in its service, it has fought for national independence and the unity of the country."<sup>15</sup> Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap cleverly used their military forces not only to engage in military action but also to demonstrate solidarity with the people and spread communist propaganda among the population. As the title of his book, *Military Art of People's War*, suggests, the foundation of the Viet Minh struggle lay with the people. Military victories were followed closely with pushes for education in Ho Chi Minh's communist ideology.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the Viet Minh successfully empowered and directed Vietnam's nationalist movement by defeating imperialist forces and winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Unlike competing nationalist movements, Ho Chi Minh and his communist movement emerged successful in Vietnam. Waiting for the right moment to unleash their uprising, the moment of maximum opportunity was determined by Ho and his comrades to be the surrender of the Japanese empire in the summer of 1945.<sup>17</sup> The August 1945 Revolution in Vietnam was a turning point in the history of modern Vietnamese nationalism as the previously unorganized nationalist movement in Vietnam was successfully led by Viet Minh cadres and other patriots in overwhelming the Japanese-led puppet government. However, Ho's pragmatism towards Vietnamese progressives and the returning French after 1945 angered many of his comrades in the ICP. Ho believed it was necessary to preserve the legitimacy of his government by compromising with non-occupant forces. Duiker writes, "By portraying the Vietminh Front as a broad-based movement armed with a program that could appeal to all progressive and patriotic forces, Ho not only managed to extend its appeal well beyond the normal constituency of the Communist Party,

---

<sup>15</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap. *The Military Art of People's War* (New York: New York: Monthly Review, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>17</sup> "Peace in Indo-China?" *New York Times* (New York), March 10, 1939.

but he also put into position to lobby for recognition by the victorious Allies as the legitimate voice of Vietnamese nationalism.”<sup>18</sup> With the Viet Minh in a strong position to negotiate with the Allies, Ho prepared his famous Declaration of Independence speech to be delivered on September 2, 1945 in Hanoi.

Though in many ways similar to Vietnamese nationalism, the nationalist movement in Cambodia reflected its nation’s status as a former Southeast Asian power now in decline. The glorious Angkor Empire which reigned in splendor in modern day Cambodia had long decayed by the arrival of French colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cambodia was then constantly struggling to maintain its borders against constant military threats and the expansionism of Vietnam and Siam. Unlike Vietnam, which was a relatively powerful Southeast Asian state at the onset of French imperialism, Cambodia was a weak state which relied upon diplomacy and political maneuvering to assert autonomy. This chaotic political state became increasingly imbalanced following Cambodian independence from France in 1953 and allowed for rival factions to compete for power.<sup>19</sup> This situation afforded the ruthless and irrational Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge the opportunity to seize power for a brief but shockingly brutal four years.

While the Vietnamese and the Burmese were being crushed by the might of the European imperial militaries, the Cambodian court lead by King Sihanouk came to see that diplomatic negotiations might be the best course to protect some notion of national autonomy. King Sihanouk saw making concessions to the French and peacefully agreeing to imperialism as a way not only to avoid the destruction of Cambodia but also to establish security of the borders against the Vietnamese and the Siamese which had been eroded in recent decades.<sup>20</sup>

Under the French colonial regime, Cambodia was a highly taxed yet relatively peaceful part of French Indochina. It was a multiethnic country with a Khmer majority of 80%. Nearly five percent of the population was minority with many Vietnamese, Chinese, and

---

<sup>18</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, 344.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, Daniel George Edward. *A History of South East Asia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 99.

<sup>20</sup> Steinberg, David Joel., ed. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 123-127.

Cham people. A Cambodian nationalist movement began to gain steam in the 1930s. A local communist party was formed in 1951.<sup>21</sup>

During WWII, the Thai incursion into Cambodian territories showed the vulnerability of Cambodia to Cambodian nationalists. The recurring theme of the Cambodian nationalists from the 1940s onward was the nightmare of losing territory. Historically, there had been many genocidal wars in Cambodia against the Vietnamese. Pol Pot's form of nationalism, once he and the Khmer Rouge gained power, was fiercely opposed to what he and his followers believed to be Vietnamese expansionism. Pot and his followers drew upon centuries old animosity towards the Vietnamese to fuel the flames of nationalism in their conflict against Vietnam in the 1970s. Though Pol Pot was not successful as a revolutionary in the same way as Ho Chi Minh and the ICP, he represents Cambodian nationalism in its most radical and violent form and therefore he and the Khmer Rouge are worthy of examination for what they can explain about Cambodia and its own nationalist struggle.

Before the rise of the Khmer Rouge, however, official nationalism best describes the Cambodian experience early on as Cambodia came to become an independent nation in 1953. This official Cambodian nationalism under King Norodom Sihanouk, ruling from 1941-1955, was largely based on the top-down approach where the elites dictated the formation of a national identity. A grassroots nationalist movement in Cambodia slowly began to emerge but was eclipsed largely by the royal official nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Many of the grassroots nationalists in Cambodia, including Pol Pot, felt they initially had to turn their more advanced Vietnamese nationalist counterparts for support, as exemplified by the assistance of the Vietnamese-led ICP during the Indochinese wars.<sup>23</sup>

The royal official nationalism espoused by King Norodom Sihanouk often contrasted with the relatively primitive, grassroots nationalism of Cambodia which saw its heritage in the Khmer culture and language. The Khmer Rouge ideology hybridized the pre-

---

<sup>21</sup> Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xx-xxi.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>23</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

nationalist, grassroots movement of the Cambodia with the rhetoric of international communism while asserting a sense of dynastic tradition and continuation derived from Angkor history. The leaders of the Khmer Rouge were largely French-educated Cambodians who had been raised in relatively well-off Cambodian families. The choice of Kampuchea itself reflected the grassroots nationalism which saw a return to the dynastic traditions of Cambodia, for which Kampuchea had been the official dynastic name.<sup>24</sup> The CPK nationalism was fueled by a siege caused by foreign hostility towards its regime which was seen as a triumph over the grassroots nationalism which tended to be less hostile in terms of international relations. Thus, the characteristics of CPK nationalism were ultra-nationalistic in that they wished to create a glorious dynasty which prized the ethnic identity of the Khmers while demanding a rigid ideological loyalty to the Khmer Rouge doctrine.

After the fall of the Japanese Empire in 1945, the French return to Indochina was met with armed resistance from the Viet Minh and the Cambodian nationalist movement known as Khmer Issarak. In 1951, the Vietnamese sponsored the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KRPR). Like the common front tactics of the Vietnamese during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Unified Issarak Front was composed of the KRPR and other non-communist movements. Though often antagonist to the KRPR, most of the groups were ultra-nationalistic who even carried out ethnic massacres of Chams and Vietnamese. After the Vietnam War and when Cambodian-Vietnamese relations had severely deteriorated, there were Vietnamese pogroms against ethnic Chinese in Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> Though unified in their struggle against the Japanese and other non-Khmers, the Khmer Rouge would come to dominate the nationalist movement in Cambodia through skillful propaganda in the countryside and the opportunistic leadership of Pol Pot.

The Khmer Rouge was born from Saloth Sar, later to be known as Pol Pot. Pot was born to a relatively well-off Cambodian fisherman's family. His sister was concubine to King Monivong so he had access to the royal palace in Phnom Penh. Like many of the future cadre of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot was quite familiar with palace life

---

<sup>24</sup> Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xvii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, i-xxxi.

and used his connections to receive a scholarship to study technology in France.<sup>26</sup>

Like Ho Chi Minh before him, Pol Pot came into contact with French communists in the form of the French Communist Party. From 1949 to 1953, Pol Pot studies electronics at technical college in Paris. He joined the French Communist Party and joined the clique of Cambodians known as the *Cercle Marxiste*. This clique of French-educated Cambodian communists would form the vanguard of the Kampuchea Communist Party and the leadership of this Khmer Rouge elite would greatly determine the character of Cambodian nationalism from 1975-1979.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly to Ho, Pol Pot was inspired by the sympathy of the FCP towards the colonial peoples of French Indochina. Ironically, the ideologies of the West, imperialism and communism, both gave Ho Chi Minh and Pol Pot the catalysts and cohesive ideologies for creating their own anticolonial nationalist movements. Pol Pot, along with many of his French-educated comrades who would form the leadership of the Khmer Rouge, used their experiences in France to become acquainted with the communist movement and form bonds that would distinguish themselves from the pro-Hanoi cadre of the Cambodian communist movement.

Upon returning from France after flunking out of college, Pol Pot joined the communist movement in Cambodia alongside many of his French-educated colleagues. Pot became extremely skeptical of the Vietnamese-trained cadre among the KPRP leadership. He believed that the pro-Hanoi cadre, though assisting his forces during the Vietnam War, were at the core nothing more than tools for Vietnamese expansionism into Cambodia. A ruthless strategist, Pot played the alliance with North Vietnam to his advantage during the Vietnam War in order to come to power in Phnom Pen but would later purge the Vietnamese-trained cadre once he assumed power in 1975.

Originally, the KPRP was controlled largely by rural, Buddhist communist veterans who were pro-Vietnamese and moderate. However, the French-educated clique led by Pol Pot eventually came to take the mantle of leadership during the Vietnam War and reorganized

---

<sup>26</sup> Ben Kiernan, "The Original Cambodian." *New Internationalist*, New Internationalist, 5 Apr. 1993, [newint.org/features/1993/04/05/original](http://newint.org/features/1993/04/05/original).

<sup>27</sup> David P. Chandler *Brother Number One A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder: Routledge, 1992).

the KPRP into the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), more infamously known as the Khmer Rouge with their party cadre being known as the Angkar. Though the aftermath of Dien Bien Phu in 1956 was supposed to usher in Cambodian independence and prosperity, the Vietnam War greatly destabilized the already struggling nation. The chaos on the border regions of Cambodia during the war crippled the export duties revenue for King Sihanouk's government, its main source of financial stability.<sup>28</sup> The porous Cambodian borders also allowed the country to become a theater of the war and suffer from South Vietnamese raids and American bombings. The Khmer Rouge began an armed uprising in 1967 while in 1970 General Lon Nol overthrew King Sihanouk. Sihanouk, now in exile in Beijing, decided to side with the Khmer Rouge who eventually took power in 1975. While the Vietnam War and the campaign by Washington and Saigon only served to retard the Communist Party of Vietnam's unification of Vietnam, the chaos resulting in Cambodia allowed for the Khmer Rouge to seize power and begin their short-lived reign of terror.<sup>29</sup>

The characteristics of Cambodian nationalism can be traced in the writings of Pol Pot. Unlike the characteristics of Ho Chi Minh's nationalism, which saw anti-colonialism and the unification of Vietnam as key to its struggle, Pol Pot's ideologies largely believed in ethnic cleansing and a constant struggle with enemy nations as central to Khmer Rouge legitimacy. As part of this struggle to the death with Vietnam, Pot had the Hanoi-leaning members of the CPK cadre purged. One CPK slogan was "Today, the Angkar has decided to attack rats."<sup>30</sup> As part of the anti-foreign struggle, the CPK purged the country of anyone partaking in suspicious behavior. Radios, while not explicitly illegal, could be used for subversive activity. Even if someone was ethnically Khmer, they could possess the mind of a Vietnamese, and it was the duty of the CKP to root out these devils.

Pol Pot would also use his communist training to learn about Mao Zedong Thought and how to successfully wage guerilla warfare in Maoist fashion. To Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, the tactics of guerrilla warfare and using the people were intrinsically tied with their form of nationalism. Like their Chinese and Viet Minh counterparts, guerrilla and psychological warfare played an integral role in the

---

<sup>28</sup> Kiernan, "The Original Cambodian," xxii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>30</sup> Henri Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book, the Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm, 2004), 106.

formation of the Khmer Rouge. During the war against Lon Nol's Republic from 1970-1975, the Khmer Rouge became hardened guerrilla veterans which only increasingly fueled their extremism and bloodlust. Taking inspiration from the Mao Zedong Thought, the supplies were to be economized and the property of civilians was to be respected.<sup>31</sup>

While waging their insurgency against the Republican forces of Lon Nol from 1970-1975, the Khmer Rouge used propaganda warfare to convince the beleaguered Cambodian people that Lon Nol's regime was an American puppet government which was committing atrocities against their families. The Khmer Rouge guerrillas, by strategically economizing on supplies and waging propaganda warfare successfully gained enough of a following to threaten the Republican regime and install Pol Pot as head of Cambodia. However, as soon as the Khmer Rouge took power, their concern for the sympathy of the people was deserted as everyone became required to surrender extra supplies to the Angkar.<sup>32</sup>

The Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot saw themselves in a constant struggle with other nations to maintain their national integrity and obsessively preached national self-reliance. They severed ties with the USSR and Vietnam while adopting a Stalinist-style party organization which inevitably led to the purging of suspected traitors. According to historian Ben Kiernan, "Two transnational ideologies—one traditional and colonial, the other modern and communist—provided the high culture from which the CPK's racist ultranationalism derived."<sup>33</sup> Pol Pot, like Ho Chi Minh, took the powerful message of liberation from communism and merged it with his country's traditions and historical anxieties. It is important to note that the nationalism embodied by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge was not only an anticolonial movement against the West but also an attempt to reverse many historical embarrassments of loss to the Vietnamese and to rebuild the might of the Angkor Empire.

The specifics of Khmer Rouge nationalism came to see Cambodians who did not accept their leadership as Cambodians with Vietnamese minds. This Khmer Rouge's ultranationalistic rhetoric was its reasoning behind the massacring of so-called traitors to Cambodia.

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>33</sup> Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, xx.

In the minds of the Khmer Rouge, a true nationalist not only had to reject foreign influence but also strictly adhere to CPK doctrine.<sup>34</sup> The Khmer Rouge refused to train with Western nations such as the United States for being imperialist.<sup>35</sup>

Upon coming to power, the Khmer Rouge attempted to destroy everything they considered reactionary and not native to Cambodia including Buddhism and Ballet.<sup>36</sup> Pol Pot wanted to rid the country of any culture which he did not believe belonged as part of the new Angkor Empire. CPK officials demanded that all extra goods, save for some spare clothing, be given to the Angkar, another name for the party. In this way, CPK officials confiscated goods such as bicycles and radios in the name of collectivism. The individual and the family were to be demolished in the name of the Angkar and the collective.<sup>37</sup>

In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge was largely aided by the side-effects of the Vietnam War. North Vietnam wanted to train reliable communist cadre in Cambodia to help their war effort in South Vietnam. The merciless bombing campaign which caused hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties in Cambodia served as a catalyst for many Cambodians to join the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. Bombing campaigns by the US military gave the Khmer Rouge reason to recruit young Cambodians into their ranks by asserting that it was Lon Nol's Republican government which had requested such strikes.<sup>38</sup>

Whereas the Viet Minh strategy relied upon mass mobilization through the wooing of the Vietnamese masses, the Khmer Rouge's tactics were based upon making the best out of chaotic situations which saw them come into power largely as a result of external factors such as spill out from the Vietnam War. If not for the Vietnam War, King Sihanouk may not have been ousted by General Lon Nol, and there would never have been the Vietnamese alliance between the CPK and North Vietnam. However, in Vietnam, the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Ming would likely have been able to quickly gain power in all of Vietnam after WWII had it not been for Allied stubbornness. The Viet

---

<sup>34</sup> Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, xi.

<sup>35</sup> Locard, "The Original Cambodia," 4.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>37</sup> Locard, "The Original Cambodian," 277.

<sup>38</sup> Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, i-xxi

Minh seizure of power was the inevitable strategic outcome after decades of conflict while the virulent seizure of power by the Khmer Rouge had little base in the Cambodian population, especially after their mass murder of many Cambodian people.

Serving as a bloody encore to the Vietnam War, the Cambodian-Vietnamese War was the result of the ethnic and political tensions between Vietnam and Cambodia which eventually dethroned the Khmer Rouge. While the ICP under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and his comrades was able to create a successful, mass based movement among the Vietnamese people, the Khmer Rouge failed to maintain popular support and were forced to use violence in order to enforce their rigid ultra-nationalistic vision for Cambodia. The start of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and its outcome are representative of the characteristics of the nationalist movements in Vietnam and Cambodia which were in power at that time. The Khmer Rouge, with their bloody social engineering of the masses, extremist xenophobia and lack of loyalty among the Cambodian population, saw themselves waging an unwinnable war against a relatively stronger opponent in the newly united Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Hanoi regime's success in surviving the onslaught of South Vietnam and its patrons furthered its popularity among the Vietnamese people. Forged by the warfare strategies of Ho Chi Minh, Giap and their successive leadership, the Vietnamese military moved forward to bulldoze the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>39</sup>

In retrospect, there are many historical factors which influenced the growth of nationalism in Vietnam and Cambodia. The mode of imperial conquest in each nation was reflected in the nature of colonial rule in each respective country during its tenure. In both nations, there were a number of nationalist factions and movements which struggled to establish legitimacy and assume leadership for each respective nationalist movement. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh colleagues were able to successfully emerge as the leaders of Vietnamese nationalism by adapting communism and popular front tactics to unite the Vietnamese people in mass mobilization against colonialism and the Saigon regime. In Cambodia, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge successfully utilized the chaos of the Vietnam War and help from their temporary allies in Vietnam to emerge as the triumphant, albeit-short lived reign as the ultranationalist rulers of

---

<sup>39</sup> David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

Cambodia. Whereas the foundation of mass appeal allowed the Hanoi regime to fight off numerous enemies through strategic grassroots support and survive to the present, the Khmer Rouge irrationalism, xenophobia, and use of violence to stay in power ultimately eroded the nation and led to their deposition by the Vietnamese. The bloody scars left by the struggles for nationalism in both nations invite both reflective solemnity and further inquiry to fully understand the zealotry and tragedy of these movements.