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RELATIONSHIP IN THE SHADOW OF VIETNAM: THE GDR AND CAMBODIA/ KAMPUCHEA 1969–1989

INTRODUCTION

Between 1969, when Cambodia recognised and established diplomatic relations with the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and 1990, a total of four very different governments held office in Phnom Penh: The Kingdom of Cambodia under Norodom Sihanouk, who was overthrown in a coup in March 1970; the Republic of Cambodia under the pro-American President Lon Nol, whose rule was ended in April 1975 by the Cambodian communists under Pol Pot; the communists' "Democratic Kampuchea" (DK), which degenerated into a reign of terror and came to an end in January 1979 through Vietnamese military intervention; and the pro-Vietnamese People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), which its ruler Hun Sen renamed the State of Cambodia in 1989. A civil war that had been smouldering since 1979 was ended by an international conference in Paris in 1991 and, after a transitional period of UN administration, led to the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993. Until 1990, the GDR had varying degrees of bilateral ties with Cambodia: friendly-constructive for ten months in 1969/1970; very distant between 1970 and 1974; none at all between 1975 and 1979; and finally relatively close but restricted by the Vietnamese side between 1979 and 1990.

Unlike other socialist countries, the GDR was able to establish contacts with Cambodia only belatedly due to the West German strategy of isolating the GDR diplomatically between 1955 and 1969. Yet the ultimate success of the GDR in establishing such diplomatic relations with Phnom Penh on 1969 was a major blow to Bonn's 'Hallstein Doctrine'. Once those hard-fought ties were achieved, however, the relationship between the GDR and Cambodia over the next 20 years resembled a roller coaster due to the Sino-Soviet

Conflict and, as a result, the divergent interests and policies of Cambodia's changing patrons, namely Vietnam and China. The GDR was rather a subject to these currents than being able to shape them in a significant way.

A HARD-FOUGHT BUT BRIEF DIPLOMATIC TRIUMPH OF THE GDR: THE GOVERNMENTS OF NORODOM SIHANOUK AND LON NOL

The Kingdom of Cambodia, which had become independent from France in 1953, was ruled for the first 17 years by the autocratic royal Prince Norodom Sihanouk and his mass movement Sangkum. He served as King for two years, as Prime Minister for five years, and as Head of State for ten years. During his entire tenure, he propagated Cambodia as a strictly neutral state. Nevertheless, since the 1960s Cambodia positioned itself quite clearly on the side of the People's Republic of China and thus also of revolutionary North Vietnam, which used Cambodia as a hinterland to fight the South Vietnamese regime and the Americans. This way Sihanouk was able to successfully prevent China and Vietnam from supporting the Cambodian communists, who wanted to replace his Kingdom of Cambodia with a revolutionary state through armed struggle.

For the GDR, the volatility and flexibility of mercurial Norodom Sihanouk offered a promising opportunity to undermine the West German efforts of isolating the GDR diplomatically. In the case of the two German states representing a divided country, for a prolonged period the official Cambodian neutrality policy had the effect that both the Federal Republic (from 1956) and the GDR (from 1962) were only granted a "representation" or Consulate General in Phnom Penh – without official diplomatic relations and thus embassies. It was not until November 1967 that relations with the Federal Republic of Germany became official and embassies were established in Phnom Penh and Bonn, following a border guarantee demanded by Cambodia. Before that occurred, the GDR Consulate General in Cambodia had been upgraded and its Consul General had become "Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister", although this was still one step below an embassy. After the charming diplomat Heinz-Dieter Winter took over this function for the GDR in 1968, his skill in personally wooing the Cambodian ruler, as well as Sihanouk's domestic problems and vanity, allowed for a diplomatic coup for the GDR when the Kingdom of Cambodia officially also recognised the East German state on 8 May 1969. A Cambodian government delegation travelled to East Berlin and met Walter Ulbricht, and Heinz-Dieter Winter became the GDR's first ambassador to Cambodia. The Federal Republic responded in the spirit of the 'Hallstein Doctrine' of 1955, according to which Bonn claimed sole German representation: states that recognised the GDR in addition to the Federal Republic were sanctioned with the severance of relations with Bonn. In the case of Cambodia, however, the Bonn government shied away from this ultimate consequence and in June 1969 only withdrew its ambassador, reduced its staff, and suspended some aid. While the Federal Republic thus only wanted

to freeze relations with Phnom Penh, Sihanouk felt offended and broke off relations with the Federal Republic completely on 10 June 1969.¹ The West German government had seriously miscalculated its standing with Sihanouk's Cambodia and delivered a diplomatic triumph to the GDR.

In 1969, almost every foreign regional and hegemonic power in East Asia seemed to support Sihanouk's government. But his political balancing act between China and Vietnam, which was controversial among Cambodian elites, as well as the growing military resistance of the guerrillas of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK, "Khmer Rouge"), increasingly destabilised Sihanouk's rule. Vietnamese bases and the use of the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" on Cambodian territory to support the revolutionary struggle of the National Liberation Front (NLF, known as the Viet Cong) in South Vietnam were unpopular among Cambodians given the general anti-Vietnamese sentiment in the country. The war in Vietnam had led to American bombardment of Cambodian territory in 1969, without Sihanouk taking a critical stance. In the same year, he had also counter-intuitively and abruptly resumed relations with the USA, which he had broken off four years earlier. At the same time, however, he recognised the Provisional Government of the NLF in South Vietnam, so that there were now two Vietnamese embassies in Phnom Penh (as in East Berlin and other socialist countries). The recognition of the GDR in May 1969 should also be seen in this context of concessions and balancing acts on all sides.

However, the East German state could only enjoy its German sole representation in Cambodia for a short time. The GDR's state security already noted in January 1969 that Sihanouk was only able to stay in office thanks to his still loyal Premier and Defence Minister Lon Nol. In December of the same year, the Stasi verdict was already gloomier: Right-wing forces are systematically trying to remove Sihanouk from power. In fact, the army, police, and intelligence services are no longer under Sihanouk's control.² In January 1970, the GDR embassy in Phnom Penh noted the increasingly anti-monarchist political atmosphere: The tendency of a creeping penetration of all positions of power in the state by representatives of the right wing of the bourgeoisie and the associated reactionary pro-imperialist aristocratic circles is intensifying. Their tactics reveal an effort to avoid an open break with Sihanouk at present [...] and to make him a mere representative of the Kingdom at the necessary moment, or to remove him completely from the levers of state power.³ Unlike the wishful thinking in the embassies of the USSR or Vietnam,

¹ Interview by the author with Dr Heinz-Dieter Winter, GDR Ambassador to Cambodia 1969–1973, Zehdenick, 13 February 2006; H. Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen: Die DDR im Internationalen System 1949–1989* (Munich 2007), pp. 290f.; W. G. Gray, *Germany's Cold War. The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949–1969* (Chapel Hill, NC 2003), pp. 209–214. Thus the GDR – with an 'interruption' between April 1975 and January 1979 – was to act as the "sole German representative" in Cambodia until October 1990 (the Federal Republic of Germany did not return to Phnom Penh in a new form until October 1993 – in the building of the former GDR embassy).

² The Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service (BStU), Central Archive (ZA), HVA 154, 69–76.

³ Annual Report 1969 of the Embassy of the GDR in the Kingdom of Cambodia, 9.1.1970, p. 2. Political Archive of the Foreign Office (PoA AA), Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the GDR (MfAA), C 207/76; interview by the author with Dr Heinz-Dieter Winter, GDR Ambassador to Cambodia 1968–1973, Zehdenick, 13 February 2006; Information on Increased Activity of Reactionary Forces in Cambodia, 10.12.1969. BStU, ZA, HVA, 154.

GDR Ambassador Winter foresaw Sihanouk's fall. When the Cambodian leader travelled to France in early 1970, ostensibly for medical reasons, Winter correctly surmised that he would not return.⁴ On 18 March 1970, Prime Minister and Army Chief Lon Nol declared Sihanouk's removal in his absence, which was confirmed by the Cambodian National Assembly by an overwhelming vote. Once the soon-to-be-new president Lon Nol, together with his deputy Prince Sisowath Siri Matak, felt assured of their power, they announced an ultimatum to Vietnamese units to leave Cambodia's territory completely – to the excitement of the United States.⁵ Already a few days before Sihanouk's deposition, they had had the two Vietnamese embassies in Phnom Penh looted and set on fire.

The severing of relations with Vietnam resulted in China breaking off its relations with Cambodia, followed by the states that tilted towards Beijing in the Sino-Soviet conflict, such as North Korea, Romania, or Yugoslavia. The Soviet Union and its allies, on the other hand, made the decision of maintaining their embassies open and only withdrawing the ambassadors themselves, which would turn out as a mistake when the tides turned in 1975. Heinz-Dieter Winter was called back permanently to Berlin, while the GDR chargés d'affaires Kurt Schumann (1970–1972) and Kurt Stillmann (1972–1974) remained in Phnom Penh without the pro-Vietnamese GDR having any meaningful relationship with the pro-American government under Lon Nol. The hard-won embassy in Cambodia had become redundant, but the GDR did not want to give it up for fear of being immediately replaced by the Federal Republic in Phnom Penh if this happened. By the end of 1973, it was obvious that the Lon Nol government controlled only a few cities, while the CPK militants held most of Cambodia's territory. The Soviet Union and its allies then withdrew the remaining embassy staff from Phnom Penh except for a few people to maintain their buildings. The GDR simultaneously recognised Sihanouk's Cambodian government-in-exile in Beijing and accredited its ambassador in Berlin.⁶

When the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, all remaining foreign embassy properties were confiscated, their staff interned in the French embassy and successively expelled, such as GDR administrative attaché Erich Stange, who had arrived in Phnom Penh just two days before, on 15 April.⁷ The diplomatic couple of the Behlings, who had stayed on in the East German embassy as administrators until the end, were taken to Thailand and crossed the Mekong to Laos to continue working at the GDR embassy in Vientiane. Over the course of the rule of the CPK in its new state of "Democratic Kampuchea" (DK), the former GDR embassy was used as a military training camp for DK units run by North Korean military advisers.

⁴ Interview by the author with Dr Heinz-Dieter Winter, GDR Ambassador to Cambodia 1969–1973, Zehdenick, 13 February 2006.

⁵ Ben Kiernan, "The Impact on Cambodia of the U.S. Intervention in Vietnam," in *The Vietnam War – Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, ed. by J.S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (Armonk, NY/London 1993), pp. 219–221.

⁶ Ch. Oesterheld, *East German Socialism and the Khmer Rouge Revolution: Insights from the GDR's diplomatic archives*. 10th International Academic Conference, Vienna, 3 June 2014, p. 562.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

THE ANTI-VIETNAMESE POLICY OF THE CAMBODIAN COMMUNISTS 1966–1975: THE TRAUMA AND RISE OF POL POT INHERITED BY THE SOCIALIST WORLD

The events of 1975 in Cambodia, and the consequences for the pro-Moscow socialist camp, including the GDR, in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, cannot be understood without examining the dynamics and the evolution within the Cambodian communists in the decade before. These were hardly noticed at all by anyone in that camp, except belatedly by the Vietnamese. However, even they still engaged for way too long in wishful thinking and had to learn lessons the hard way once Saloth Sar/Pol Pot came to power in 'Democratic Kampuchea'.

Some authors call it a "significant turning point in Vietnamese-Cambodian relations": Saloth Sar, the secret leader of the CPK, who later used the alias Pol Pot, crossed the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" in a ten-week walk from Cambodia and met the Politburo of the Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP) in Hanoi in June 1965 with the aim to negotiate a joint agreement.⁸ The Cambodian visitor expected the support of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) for his armed struggle against the Sihanouk government in Phnom Penh. Instead, he had to listen to a patronising lecture from VWP Secretary General Le Duan. In essence, Saloth Sar was told that the current Sihanouk government in Phnom Penh must remain in place as long as Hanoi was fighting in the south of Vietnam and needed access to bases in Cambodia. This access was guaranteed by Sihanouk, whose regime only much later and in the long term had to be forced to take the "path to socialism". However, this should not be done through armed revolutionary struggle, Le Duan lectured.⁹ This blunt lesson in Vietnam's self-interest was to massively strengthen Saloth Sar's existing hatred towards Cambodia's historical arch-enemy and become one of the causes of the CPK's later anti-Vietnamese excesses of violence.¹⁰

During this period, Beijing's and Hanoi's perspectives on a potential revolution in Cambodia did not differ. In a meeting with North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong on 11 April 1967, China's Premier Zhou Enlai described a Vietnamese victory as the "first priority" and called an armed revolutionary struggle in Cambodia "not necessary." Zhou continued, "Vietnam's struggle is in the common interest of the Indochinese and Southeast Asian peoples, and victory in this struggle is crucial. In this situation, the Cambodian struggle, even if it is an armed one, must have limited objectives." This would only change if "the struggle there comes from the people themselves". However, since

⁸ B. Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930–1975* (New Haven, CT 2004); Ph. Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare* (New York, 2004).

⁹ T. Engelbert and C. Goscha, *Falling out of Touch: A Study on Vietnamese Communist Policy Towards an Emerging Cambodian Communist Movement, 1930–1975* (Monash University Asia Institute, Clayton, Australia 1995), pp. 67–75.

¹⁰ B. Schaefer, "Phnom Penh/Saigon, 1975: Vietnamese-Cambodian and Chinese-Soviet Power Competition in Southeast Asia" in *The Soviet Union and the Third World: USSR, State Socialism and Anti-Colonialism in the Cold War*, ed. A. Hilger (Munich 2009), pp. 201–218.

this would not yet be the case, the “logic” that only success in South Vietnam promises hope for the struggle in Cambodia must be “made clear” to the CPK leadership, the Chinese premier stated. “We have tried to convince them many times,” his Vietnamese counterpart replied.¹¹

For North Vietnam, the so-called “positive neutrality” of Phnom Penh meant that the Sihanouk government granted military bases as command centres and retreat areas to DRV and NLF units in south-eastern Cambodia. In return, the regime in Phnom Penh received financial compensation from Vietnam and China. This fait accompli was linked to two silent agreements: DRV and NLF had to refrain from promoting a revolution in Cambodia through military support to the CPK, this in spite of Sihanouk’s ongoing bloody persecution of Cambodian communists.¹² From the CPK’s perspective, this was nothing less than a conspiracy between Hanoi’s communists and Phnom Penh’s anti-communists to the detriment of the communist revolution in Cambodia. This situation fuelled hatred in the CPK for Vietnam and also had a negative effect on Hanoi’s ability to influence Cambodia after Sihanouk was overthrown in Lon Nol’s coup.

At the end of his March 1970 state visit to Moscow, Sihanouk had deliberately been informed of the coup in Phnom Penh by Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin only on the tarmac before his onward flight, because the USSR did not want to host the deposed Cambodian leader. Sihanouk flew on to Beijing, where Zhou Enlai and DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong set him up in Chinese exile. There he was funded and treated as the legitimate ruler of Cambodia. This joint Vietnamese-Chinese decision for Sihanouk was again made at the expense of the Cambodian communists who, after Lon Nol’s coup d’état, had actually hoped to be recognised by Beijing and Hanoi as the sole legitimate representative of Cambodia and to be fully armed. Instead, China and Vietnam forced the Cambodian communists into a “United National Front of Kampuchea” (FUNK) with Sihanouk as the figurehead leader. Loyal officials from Cambodia and its diplomatic missions around the world travelled to Beijing to join him in forming a government-in-exile under former Prime Minister Penn Nouth in May 1970. It called itself the Royal Government of Kampuchea National Unity, known as GRUNK after the French acronym.

Sihanouk’s close practical ties with anti-Soviet China and his rhetorical bows to his hosts long prevented recognition of GRUNK and FUNK by the USSR and its allied socialist states like the GDR. They also ignored Vietnamese recommendations to demand Sihanouk’s return to his homeland and refused direct military aid to FUNK: massive aid would be given to Vietnam instead and from there it could be diverted if necessary.

As the Cambodian liberation struggle progressed, a front soon formed between Sihanouk’s government-in-exile in Beijing and the local communist guerrilla movement

¹¹ Document No. 27, Conversation between a Vietnamese and Chinese delegation, 11 April 1967. in *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–77*, ed. by O. A. Westad et al. (CWIHP Working Paper # 22, Washington D.C. 1998).

¹² Information on Cambodia’s Policy towards the USA, the West German Federal Republic, the People’s Republic of China and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, 10 December 1969. BStU, ZA, HVA, pp. 155, 264f.

under Pol Pot, which was growing strongly on its own and thanks to the heavy American bombing that lasted until 1973 and which alienated the Cambodians. The growth of the Khmer Rouge guerrillas was accompanied by increasing hatred of internal enemies, any cadres trained abroad, and Vietnamese advisors.¹³ The first acts of violence by the CPK against Vietnamese in Cambodia began to occur: “Since 1971, they [the CPK] had secretly begun to work against Vietnam.”¹⁴ In the face of the unsuspecting outside world, the explosive potential of nationalist communist rivalry and ethnic enmity was always shielded by the three sides who were familiar with the situation, i.e. Beijing, Hanoi and the leadership of the CPK.¹⁵

The Vietnamese “comrades in Cambodia cannot do anything that is not expressly accepted by the Cambodian comrades” and would have to “proceed very carefully and skilfully”; a high-ranking DRV official privately admitted.¹⁶ Despite its sometimes excellent Vietnamese background information, the GDR could have known better than the conclusions that its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MfAA) came to at the end of 1973 in an analysis that manifested an ignorance of the balance of power. It still believed in Vietnamese influence on the Cambodian communists and naively expected future brotherly relations between the CPK and the Soviet camp.¹⁷

FROM REVOLUTION TO WAR: KAMPUCHEA AND VIETNAM 1975–1979

On 17 April 1975, Phnom Penh fell to CPK units and Pol Pot’s “Democratic Kampuchea” (DK) began to take shape. Since the spring of 1974, China had coolly and calculatingly abandoned the line it had hitherto taken together with Hanoi, according to which a revolution in Cambodia had to take second place to Vietnam. A broad military aid package from China had enabled the revolutionaries in Cambodia, among other things, to mine the Mekong and thus cut off Phnom Penh’s supply routes.¹⁸ Those measures represented Chinese foresight to prevent Vietnamese hegemony in Indochina. Beijing now wanted to build up the CPK and its DK as a counterweight to the “Socialist Republic of Vietnam” (SRV), which had been triumphantly united after the 1975 victory over the Saigon regime and had in Chinese eyes become too pro-Soviet during the last years of war in Vietnam.

¹³ B. Kiernan, *The Impact on Cambodia of the U.S. Intervention in Vietnam*, pp. 222–226; *idem*, *How Pol Pot came to Power*, pp. 321–331.

¹⁴ Luu Van Loi, *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy 1945–1995*, vol. I: 1945–1975 (Hanoi 2000), pp. 206f.

¹⁵ T. Engelbert and C. Goscha, *Falling out of Touch*, pp. 102–112.

¹⁶ ADN [GDR News Agency] Hanoi, Hellmut Kapfenberger, Transcript of a Conversation with Comrade Hoang Tung (candidate of the Central Committee of the PWV, editor-in-chief of the party newspaper *Nhan Dan*), 4 May 1973.

¹⁷ „Assessment of the National Congress of the National United Front of Cambodia” and „Status of the realisation of the political programme of the NEFK [FUNK] of 4 May 1970”, 15 December 1973. PoLA AA, MfAA, C 222/76.

¹⁸ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC 2000), pp. 212 f.

After the military triumph of the CPK in April 1975, Pol Pot immediately created facts to cement his rule and ordered the evacuation of Cambodian cities as a first step towards an egalitarian communist society. On 21 June 1975, he was received as a hero in Beijing. In a spectacular meeting, Pol Pot accepted Mao Zedong's admiration for having "eliminated the classes in one fell swoop" by evacuating the cities. Such a measure had never been achieved by China with its masses, Mao noted. Pol Pot's hatred of urban culture as the root cause of class society that needed to be overcome was shared by Mao. Self-critically, the Chinese leader noted that he had failed "on the cities" to eliminate a "system of inequality" in China. Mao admonished Pol Pot not to copy the Chinese mistakes and presented him with 30 books containing the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.¹⁹

China's intense turn towards the CPK had also come at Sihanouk's expense. Due to Chinese mediation, he returned to Kampuchea as formal head of state in August 1975. Reduced to an invisible figurehead after two public appearances, he was deposed there in April 1976 and placed under house arrest in part of his old palace for the duration of their rule.

After the revolutionary victories in Phnom Penh and Saigon in April 1975, DK and SRV reopened embassies with each other after a five-year forced pause. Pol Pot visited Hanoi for the second (and last) time with a CPK delegation, and in July the SRV leadership came to Phnom Penh with Le Duan for a return visit and had themselves photographed together with the DK leadership in the empty former royal palace. These last bilateral encounters could not prevent Vietnam and Kampuchea from now gradually becoming bitter enemies. The leadership of the CPK stylised its "Democratic Kampuchea" as the historically superior model of a global revolution.²⁰

Increasing hostility with a Kampuchea massively supported from China drove the Vietnamese closer to Moscow's side. At the end of 1977, this led to an escalation and the DK became a pro-Chinese vehicle: a visit by the Vietnamese leadership to Beijing in October ended inconclusively because the SRV was not prepared to meet the Chinese demand to end its close relations with Moscow. A few weeks later, a DK delegation under Pol Pot was received in the Chinese capital with great honours and warmest sympathy. After the return of the CPK delegation, the now openly irredentist DK launched a military attack on Vietnam to retake ancient Cambodian territory south of the Mekong Delta.

Both states terminated their diplomatic relations on 31 December 1977 and fought bloody battles for weeks. The SRV army retained the upper hand and advanced deep into Cambodian territory, which it occupied until spring 1978. Files of the Military Intelligence of the GDR Ministry of Defence allow one to reconstruct what GDR

¹⁹ P. Short, *Pol Pot*, pp. 298–300; Document No. 73, Mao Zedong and Pol Pot, Beijing, 21 June 1975, in Westad et. al.; Qiang Zhai, "China and the Cambodian Conflict, 1970–1975", in *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia*, ed. Priscilla Roberts (Stanford, CA, 2006), pp. 392f.

²⁰ B. Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to Power*, 232; Bernd Schaefer „Communist Vanguard Contest in East Asia during the 1960s and 1970s“, in *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture*, ed. by Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat (New York 2009), pp. 113–126.

interlocutors in Hanoi exclusively learned in the course of 1978:²¹ the SRV leadership was now determined to replace the pro-Chinese and anti-Vietnamese regime in Phnom Penh, which was seen as an existential threat, with a pro-Vietnamese one. The ideal scenario for Hanoi would have been an overthrow by renegade Cambodian military officers and officials. Appropriate preparations had been made in Vietnam to organise Cambodian defectors that had fled. However, a sufficient and powerful number could not be assembled, so Vietnam ultimately decided to use its own military.

Internal political conflicts in China after the III Central Committee Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party from 18 to 22 December 1978, where reformer Deng Xiaoping prevailed against the Maoists, as well as Deng's announced visit to the USA for the beginning of January 1979 to establish diplomatic relations, offered the SRV a window of opportunity for a swift military intervention. The Vietnamese held the hope, which proved to be correct, that China would not become directly militarily active in Kampuchea. On 18 December 1978, the GDR declared its support for the "United Movement to Save Cambodia" formed by the Vietnamese from Cambodian defectors and exiles.²² On 22 December 1978, the Vietnamese army invaded the DK together with this movement, and already by 7 January 1979 Phnom Penh fell. Pol Pot and his followers fled to the border with Thailand along with the entire Chinese Embassy staff. Shortly before the Vietnamese arrived in Phnom Penh, China had also evacuated Sihanouk back to Beijing.

With the Vietnamese army, a new Cambodian leadership returned to a country that would now call itself the "People's Republic of Kampuchea" (PRK). One of the very first international well-wishers, expressed by means of full diplomatic recognition, was the GDR, which capitalized on its close ties with Hanoi and was eager to follow Vietnamese encouragement to establish a base in a now different Cambodia as soon as possible. The GDR Embassy in Phnom Penh, which had been deserted since April 1975 and damaged by the North Korean-run military camp, was quickly cleaned up and occupied by the new Ambassador Rolf Dach and his staff already in January 1979.

IN THE SHADOW OF VIETNAM AND CHINA: THE GDR AND THE PRK 1979–1989

Thus the GDR embassy in Phnom Penh was reopened in 1979 even before the Soviet embassy. This move was to lead to a decade of various East German contacts and connections with Cambodia, although these could not be described as intensive in the overall context of GDR's "internationalism". There were various reasons for this, the most important of which were: "Vietnam" and "China".

²¹ BStU, ZA, ZAIG, 6671.

²² Oesterheld, *East German Socialism and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*, 566 (in the original French „Front uni national pour le salut du Kampuchéa”); A. Port, "Courting China, Condemning China: East and West German Cold War Diplomacy in the Shadow of the Cambodian Genocide", *German History* 33 (2015), no. 4, p. 596.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was to struggle in vain for international recognition of the new pro-Vietnamese government in Phnom Penh in order to take over Cambodia's seat in the United Nations from the now defunct Pol Pot government hiding in the Cambodian borderlands near Thailand. The latter, despite its military defeat in 1979, was not only able to maintain this U.N. seat with Chinese and anti-Vietnamese Western support until 1990 – it was also able to permanently militarily pinprick the government in Phnom Penh for over a decade. This situation then resulted in turn in Vietnamese efforts to militarily occupy the PRK and in far-reaching attempts to control it politically, using the argument of fighting the remnants of the Pol Pot movement as a pretext to dominate its Indochinese neighbour.

This impaired any direct and unimpeded cooperation between the GDR and the PRK, as everything had to run through Vietnamese approval. A first impression in this respect was gained by the General Prosecutor's Office of the GDR and by Carlos Foth from the International Liaison Department in the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), who were in Vietnam and Cambodia for consultations and discussions before, during and after the Hanoi-staged "People's Tribunal" against the "Pol Pot/Ieng Sary Clique", which Vietnamese prosecutors held in Phnom Penh from 15 to 19 August 1979.²³ The GDR delegation wanted to incorporate experiences from the prosecution of German Nazi war crimes, but its consultative role was to remain strictly secret because Vietnam wanted to avoid the impression that it was being directed "from the outside". While the contributions of the Office of the Prosecutor General were more substantial²⁴ and could provide more assistance to the Vietnamese side than Carlos Foth,²⁵ overall the advice of the GDR was at best partially followed. The East German attempt to dissuade the Vietnamese from describing the crimes in Cambodia as the worst in human history and far surpassing the quantitatively more massive crimes of the Nazi regime, was particularly hotly debated. Not surprisingly, the GDR proposals to set up an international, interdisciplinary "research and publication centre" after the trial to make the crimes accessible, as well as several memorials, were only rudimentarily accepted.²⁶ What the GDR and Vietnam initially agreed upon in 1979, however, was the explicitly anti-Chinese thrust of the reappraisal of the crimes in Cambodia. Pol Pot was to appear as Beijing's contractor and the executor of Chinese will. However, this Vietnamese-East German common ground regarding the "China" factor was to come to an end two years later when the GDR changed its political course towards Beijing.

The three 'Kampuchea films' by the both hyper-productive and agitational GDR documentary film duo Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, who had their own

²³ The following paragraph is based on documents provided to the author in 2017 by Craig Etcheson, Counsel at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Phnom Penh. Their archival call numbers are: Foundation Archive of Parties and Mass Organizations in the Federal (German) Archive (SAPMO-BA), DP 3, 2228 and DP 3, p. 228.

²⁴ F. Selbmann, "Die Rolle der Generalstaatsanwaltschaft der DDR in Prozess gegen Pol Pot und Ieng Sary im Jahr 1979", *Neue Justiz* 11 (2011), pp. 454–460.

²⁵ On Foth's role, see Howard J. De Nike, *East Germany's Legal Advisor to the 1979 Tribunal in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh, Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2008). The article is based on a conversation De Nike had with Foth in November 2007.

²⁶ See footnote 23.

“H&S” Studio in Berlin since 1969, are also emblematic of the “Vietnam” and “China” factors.²⁷ After making several films on Vietnam, the duo travelled to the PRK between 1979 and 1981, where they shot exclusive spectacular footage and were granted on-camera interviews with the support of the Stasi and its Vietnamese partner Cong An. The first film *Kampuchea: Death and Resurrection* was premiered in Phnom Penh in 1980, pre-screened by Pen Sovan, General Secretary of the newly formed “Revolutionary People’s Party of Kampuchea” (RPPK), who himself appeared prominently in the film.²⁸ In December 1981, however, Pen Sovan was deposed by the Vietnamese and imprisoned in Vietnam until 1992, so that the film became banned in the PRK and also ultimately inconvenient in the GDR. It was a powerful indictment of the genocide committed by the Cambodian communists and Pol Pot’s Chinese backers; Vietnam was celebrated as a liberating power. It was shown prominently in cinemas and on television in the GDR in late 1980. The second film, *The Angkar*, which mainly documented the murders in Phnom Penh’s Tuol Sleng prison but also drastically denounced China, received much less attention and no TV slot in the GDR during its debut a year later in December 1981. It was also subjected to intensive East German censorship. The last film, *The Jungle War*, about the struggle of the remnants of the CPK around Pol Pot in alliance with Sihanouk against the PRK and the Vietnamese, finally fell entirely victim to censorship in 1983 and appeared only as a script.

The reasons behind all these shifts: since 1981 the GDR had increasingly pursued a rapprochement with China, which made the anti-Chinese message of the “H&S” films increasingly politically inappropriate. The motives for this rapprochement were manifold: GDR leader Erich Honecker had the personal ambition to bring the People’s Republic of China back into the socialist camp, even against the resistance of the Soviet Union. From the GDR’s point of view, economic relations with a reformed but still socialist China seemed highly promising in the medium and long term for the East German economy. Finally, the GDR did not want to leave German relations with China to the West German state alone, which had a significant and growing presence in China and was the economically much more attractive German partner for Beijing.²⁹

At a congress of film and television makers in Berlin in September 1982, Gerhard Scheumann felt compelled to present a thesis paper against GDR censorship policy. It led to his party trial and the closure of the “H&S” Studio for several years. In their enthusiasm for Vietnam, Heynowski and Scheumann had adopted Hanoi’s thesis in their films that it was the “Chinese counter-revolution” and “Maoism” that were behind

²⁷ Port, “Courting China, Condemning China”, pp. 600–607.

²⁸ PolA AA, MfAA C 4291 (18 August 1980): “Comrade Sopheak Men Neary, 1st Secretary of the PRC Embassy in Berlin, conveyed Comrade Pen Sovan’s request to cut from the film (“Kampuchea – Dying and Resurrection”) by Studio H&S, which had been shown to him on 14 August, all footage showing Mrs. Ben Kanita. Otherwise, he said, the film could not be shown in Phnom Penh. „

²⁹ *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990: Politik-Wirtschaft-Kultur. A Collection of Sources*, ed. Werner Meisner (Berlin 1995); Joachim Krüger, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Beziehungen der DDR und der VR China: Erinnerungen und Untersuchungen* (Munster 2002); Zhong Zhong Chen, *Beyond Moscow: East German-Chinese Relations during the Cold War*, 1 December 2014. URL: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/beyond-moscow-east-german-chinese-relations-during-the-cold-war> (access: 2 November 2022).

Pol Pot's crimes, thus countering Erich Honecker's new ambitious China policy.³⁰ Scheumann was deeply embittered that the GDR refused to denounce Pol Pot's genocide in Kampuchea and for reasons of realpolitik, noting in his diary in May 1983: "A Pol Pot is predisposed in every [Marxist-Leninist] party built according to the principles of Democratic Centralism."³¹

As mentioned above, in December 1981 General Secretary Pen Sovan had been deposed by the Vietnamese in Phnom Penh and interned in Vietnam until 1992 – he was accused of "nationalist" tendencies. Those had consisted of his protesting against brutal Vietnamese practices in the fight against the remnants of the CPK in the PRK and in voicing such in Moscow to the Soviet leadership (Vietnam was using Cambodian youths as "cannon fodder" and "guinea pigs" in jungle warfare and for landmine defusing).³² His successor as the next "number one" in the PRK soon became the person who had informed the Soviet bloc ambassadors in Phnom Penh in December 1981 about the so-called Vietnamese "purge" of Pen Sovan and other alleged Cambodian "nationalists": Foreign Minister Hun Sen, the upcoming and then perennial leader of Cambodia.

The removal of Pen Sovan is emblematic of what the files of the GDR embassy in Phnom Penh and the Stasi were documenting in detail about the period of 1979 to 1989: the People's Republic of Kampuchea was ruled almost like a Vietnamese colony. Especially in the first half of the 1980s it was regarded, like the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), as a junior member of a de facto "Indochinese Federation" centred in and managed from Hanoi. East German observers therefore noted a strong "nationalist", i.e. anti-Vietnamese, sentiment in the PRK. Vietnamese advisors sat in all Cambodian government and party institutions, made final decisions and took part in meetings between Cambodians and foreigners. It was not possible for the GDR to agree on projects or cooperation with the PRK without the knowledge and consent of the Vietnamese side.³³ For example, in 1980 as well as in 1988, the PRK made official attempts to reach agreements with the GDR Ministry of the Interior and with the Stasi regarding training and equipment for Cambodian security organs. In both cases, the GDR, which maintained its most extensive intelligence cooperation outside Europe with Vietnam³⁴, let the request go unanswered because it was known that the SRV wanted to control the Cambodian intelligence organs exclusively without any foreign involvement.³⁵

³⁰ See footnote 27.

³¹ F. Hörnigk, "...Es ist die Zeit, wo die Erinnerung an der Stelle der Hoffnung tritt": *Das geteilte Leben des Gerhard Scheumann* (Berlin 2017), pp. 163–165.

³² Talks by the author with several Cambodian witnesses, 2012 ff. When Pen Sovan became involved in the opposition party against Prime Minister Hun Sen in the last years before his death (2016) and was elected to the National Assembly, the film "Kampuchea: Death and Resurrection" could no longer be shown at the German Cultural Centre in Phnom Penh. In 2016 the author sent written questions to Pen Sovan through an intermediary but he died before he was able to answer them.

³³ PoLA AA, MfAA C 4291 (GDR embassy reports 1979–1980, pars pro toto also for the following years).

³⁴ B. Schaefer, "Socialist Modernization in Vietnam: The East German Approach, 1976–89", in *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War*, ed. Quinn Slobodian (New York/Oxford 2015), pp. 95–116.

³⁵ BStU, ZA, HA X, 384 and 743. See also Markus Karbaum, *Cambodia's Desired Cooperation East Germany's*

Most of the GDR's internal reports on the situation in Cambodia between 1979 and 1989 are based on Vietnamese sources and their assessments of the Cambodians. Many are concerning in detail the military course and the balance of power in the civil war raging in the PRK between 1980 and 1989. The remnants of Pol Pot supporters on the border with Thailand, together with refugees and exiles supporting Sihanouk, were systematically armed by China, Thailand, and the USA to counter Hanoi's influence over Cambodia with the objective of having Vietnam withdraw. Those armed guerrillas were capable of causing major problems for the new government in Phnom Penh and for the Vietnamese army. Despite several offensives, the latter did not succeed in completely eliminating their opponents and maintaining and guaranteeing security in the country. At the end of 1987, when only the road between Phnom Penh and the border in the south of Vietnam was considered safe, it was assessed that a decisive military victory was not possible.³⁶ Vietnam, however, still justified the need for a quasi-permanent military presence in the PRK on the basis of this military stalemate, which is why the Hun Sen government entered into years of negotiations with Sihanouk and other opposition figures from 1987 onwards. It wanted to isolate Pol Pot's group in order to bring about a national Cambodian compromise that could allow the Vietnamese a face-saving withdrawal.

The ultimately futile attempt to build a Marxist-Leninist cadre party in Cambodia on the Vietnamese model, with the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) as the sole power taking a "leading role" and organised according to the principle of "democratic centralism", can also be clearly seen in the reports and analyses of the GDR. After two party congresses in 1981 and 1985, this attempt was aborted for good by Hun Sen at the end of the 1980s. For their part, the Vietnamese were desperate over what they perceived as Cambodian deficits in personal qualifications and politically unsuspecting backgrounds, as well as problems of patronage and corruption.

The GDR's economic aid and cooperation projects in the PRK were small in comparison to the many years of extensive East German involvement in Vietnam or the Lao PDR. And thus: between 1987 and 1990 a specialist collective from the GDR established a rubber plantation in PRK's Kompong Cham province, and in 1989 the "Otto Grotewohl" Free German Youth [FDJ] Friendship Brigade helped to build a vocational training centre in Battambang. A comparatively small number of Cambodian students and apprentices came to the GDR for training (173 were there in 1984). Their passports were taken away from them in 1981 by the PRK Embassy in Berlin so that they could not leave for the West, which had happened in 1979/80.³⁷ Between 1987 and 1989, some military cadres of the PRK army were also trained in the GDR, although there occurred conflicts with Vietnamese military personnel also present in the same facilities. The Stasi's description in September 1983, when a total of 323 Cambodian citizens were in the GDR, is

Stasi in the 1980s – the History of Failing Requests, https://cambodianewsdotnet.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/2010_karbaum_cambodia_s-desired-cooperation-with-east-germany_s-stasi.pdf.

³⁶ BStU, ZA, HA II, 14076.

³⁷ BStU, ZA, HA II, 29666 and 29667.

symptomatic of the various prejudices and reasons for the GDR government's reluctance to accept Cambodians: "Efforts to remain permanently in the GDR, or attempts to resettle in non-Soviet countries; effects of political-ideological diversion, especially with regard to the role of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; partial predominance of an emotional, strongly nationally influenced attitude towards Vietnamese aid and the current situation in Kampuchea; operationally significant postal and personal connections to non-socialist states, strong travel activity/reception of visitors; occurrence of smuggling and speculation"³⁸

The situation in and around Cambodia began to change after 1986: the gruelling guerrilla war there had contributed to Vietnam's massive economic problems, which had led to food shortages and widespread rationing at home by the mid-1980s. Domestic dissatisfaction in the country increased steadily, and then the incipient reforms in the Soviet Union and the new popular economic course in neighbouring China offered the Vietnamese the opportunity to initiate a broad reform debate in the Party and its media through a policy of "Doi Moi" ("Renewal"). Foreign involvement and the expenditure of scarce domestic resources on the Indochinese neighbours of Laos and Cambodia came under intense scrutiny, and also the sense of a seemingly endless military occupation in the PRK was now openly questioned. The millstone of foreign adventures ultimately forced a change of course in the SRV from 1986 onwards, from which Hun Sen and his party in the PRK benefited: Cambodia began to gradually move out of Vietnamese control in tandem with Vietnam's loosening of control.

In March 1989, Hun Sen summoned the ambassadors of the Soviet Union and the other East European states to a briefing session and told them that the PRK's path to laying the foundations of socialism had proven to be incorrect. He stated that the RPPK would not relinquish its leadership role, but it would convene a commission to work with former supporters of the Sihanouk and Lon Nol governments and to change the name of the country, the national flag, the anthem and all constitutional articles on nationalisation. The commission would look at how private property could be allowed and encouraged. According to Hun Sen, Cambodia would establish a status of neutrality for itself and by the end of September 1989, Vietnamese troops would be withdrawn. When a solution to the conflict with the Cambodian opposition had been reached, excluding Pol Pot's group, the country would be opened up. Relations with the socialist countries would still be a priority, the Cambodian leader asserted, and they requested that the promised aid be delivered by September 1989.³⁹

Although the GDR embassy in Phnom Penh stated that these measures "can strengthen the positions of the RPPK and the PRK"⁴⁰, they meant in fact nothing other than the end of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, which was now to call itself the "State of Cambodia" from May 1989. After the international Paris Agreement of 1991 and the

³⁸ BStU, ZA, HA II, 29666, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 152f.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

transitional phase of a UN administration (UNCTAD), the “Kingdom of Cambodia” arose again in September 1993 with Sihanouk’s return to the royal throne. Cambodia was and remained the only nominally socialist country in Asia that officially and voluntarily departed from socialism in 1989/90, while its leader Hun Sen stayed in power ever since – at the same time when in Europe the socialist rulers in the GDR and its eastern neighbour states were forced to relinquish their power involuntarily.

CONCLUSION

Relations between the GDR and Cambodia from 1969 to 1989 were primarily marked by the bloody turbulence and upheavals in this Southeast Asian country caused mostly by Vietnam and China in the wake of the Sino-Soviet conflict. The bilateral relationship resembled a roller coaster ride, ranging from engagement to total disconnect. Only in the decade from 1979 to 1989 were the two states able to develop an actual relationship, but to a limited extent only due to Vietnam’s watchful monitoring. The small number of Cambodians who came to the GDR for education have mostly nostalgic memories of their stay in the socialist German state. Overall, however, the political clout of the two international powers with a high and often deadly influence on Cambodia, namely Vietnam and China, always worked against more intensive bilateral ties between Cambodia/Kampuchea and the GDR.

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Relationship in the Shadow of Vietnam: the GDR and Cambodia/Kampuchea 1969–1989

Until 1990, the GDR had varying degrees of bilateral ties with Cambodia: friendly-constructive during the rule of Sihanouk for ten months in 1969/1970; very distant between 1970 and 1974; none at all and outright hostility under Pol Pot between 1975 and 1979; and finally relatively close but restricted by the Vietnamese side between 1979 and 1990. Unlike other socialist countries, the GDR was able to establish contacts with Cambodia only belatedly due to the West German strategy of isolating the GDR

diplomatically between 1955 and 1969. Once those hard-fought ties were achieved, however, the relationship between the GDR and Cambodia over the next 20 years resembled a roller coaster ride due to the Sino-Soviet Conflict and, as a result, the divergent interests and policies of Cambodia's changing patrons, namely Vietnam and China. The GDR was rather subject to these currents than being able to shape them in any significant way.

KEYWORDS

Sihanouk, Pol Pot, Sino-Soviet Conflict, Vietnam, China

Relacje w cieniu Wietnamu: NRD i Kambodża/Kampucza 1969–1989

Do 1990 r. NRD utrzymywała dwustronne stosunki z Kambodżą w różnym stopniu: przyjazne i konstruktywne podczas rządów Sihanouka przez dziesięć miesięcy w latach 1969–1970; bardzo odległe w latach 1970–1974; żadne i jawnie wrogie pod rządami Pol Pota w latach 1975–1979; i wreszcie stosunkowo bliskie, ale ograniczone przez stronę wietnamską w latach 1979–1990. W przeciwieństwie do innych krajów socjalistycznych, NRD zdołała nawiązać kontakty z Kambodżą dopiero z opóźnieniem ze względu na zachodnioniemiecką strategię dyplomatycznej izolacji NRD w latach 1955–1969. Po nawiązaniu tych ciężko wywalczonych stosunków relacje między NRD a Kambodżą przez następne 20 lat przypominały przejażdżkę rollercoasterem ze względu na konflikt chińsko-sowiecki, a w rezultacie rozbieżne interesy i politykę zmieniających się patronów Kambodży, czyli Wietnamu i Chin. NRD raczej poddawała się tym prądom, niż była zdolna do kształtowania ich w znaczący sposób.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

Sihanouk, Pol Pot, konflikt chińsko-radziecki, Wietnam, Chiny

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