
The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: A History of Their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives

Dmitry Mosyakov
Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

To this day, the real history of relations between the Khmer communists and their Vietnamese colleagues is veiled in secrecy. Despite extensive research on this theme, there are still no reliable answers to many key questions. The history of relations between Hanoi and the Khmer Rouge is construed in Vietnam in a way that sometimes bears no resemblance to the story told in the West. Statements of some Khmer Rouge leaders like Khieu Samphan or Ieng Sary, who defected to the governmental camp in Phnom Penh and say what people want to hear, are not to be trusted either. Analysis of relations between Hanoi and the Khmer Rouge is therefore not only a historical problem; there is also a political component, which still challenges its objective study.

I endeavour to tackle this problem and to present an objective and impartial picture of what was happening. The research is based on a study of the former USSR's archival materials (diaries of Soviet ambassadors in Vietnam, records of conversations with ranking members of the Vietnamese government, analytical notes, political letters of the Soviet embassy in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam until 1976), and other documents) deposited in the Russian State Archive of Modern History (RSAMH). Along with other sources, such as the French colonial archives and interviews with Vietnamese and Cambodian participants (see Kiernan 1985), this work allows us to give objective and reasonably complete answers to the question at issue.

Relations between Khmer and Vietnamese communists have passed through some major periods of development. In the first period, 1930 to 1954, a small Khmer section of the Indochina Communist Party (ICP), was under full ideological and organizational control of the Vietnamese communists. During the years of struggle for liberation from the governance of France (1946-1954), the strength of this section grew continuously due to ICP recruitment of the most radical participants in the anti-colonial struggle. The Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) was founded in June 1951 on this basis. The leaders of this party, Son Ngoc Minh, Sieu Heng, and Tou Samut, acted hand in hand

with the Vietnamese in the anti-colonial war and were truly valued allies and strict executors of all the plans drafted by the ICP.

The 1954 Geneva Agreements on Indochina drastically changed relations between Khmer and Vietnamese communists. The Vietnamese withdrew their forces from Cambodia in accordance with the Agreements, but in contrast to Laos (where the so-called free zone in the region of Sam Neua was controlled by the communists), Hanoi could not ensure the same conditions for their Khmer allies. The Vietnamese, under pressure from the Sihanouk regime and its Western allies, did not even let the Khmer communists participate in the Geneva negotiations, and by the end of 1954 had withdrawn their combat forces from the regions of Cambodia which were under their control. Hereupon Khmer Royal Forces entered all zones that had been under KPRP authority, which forced the party underground. The consolation offered by Hanoi - granting two thousand of their allies the possibility of taking cover in the territory of North Vietnam (Chanda 1986, p. 59) - was obviously disproportionate to their contribution to a joint struggle. Therefore among the Khmer communists remaining in Cambodia the story gained currency that Hanoi had simply betrayed them, used them as hostages for the sake of reaching the agreement with the then leader of Cambodia, Norodom Sihanouk. The evaluation of the Vietnamese operations of those days as an "unrighteous betrayal of the Cambodian revolution" (Shawcross 1987, p. 238) was later more than once reproduced in official documents of the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot himself claimed it many times. Interestingly, Hanoi's decision was remembered in Phnom Penh even in the eighties, when such a high-ranking official in the Phnom Penh hierarchy as the executive secretary of the pro-Vietnam United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea, Chan Ven, was of the opinion that in 1953, "the Vietnamese had acted incorrectly by leaving us alone to face with the ruling regime" (conversation with Chan Ven, Phnom Penh, July 15, 1984). The events in Indochina in 1954 marked the beginning of a new period in relations between the Khmer and Vietnamese communists. The close partnership of 1949-1953 promptly came to naught, and the KPRP, which had lost a considerable number of its members, went underground and fell out of the field of vision of Hanoi for many years. The North Vietnamese leaders who were preparing for a renewal of armed struggle in the South, found in Sihanouk, with his anti-imperialist and anti-American rhetoric, a far more important ally than the KPRP. Moreover, Sihanouk had real power. Hanoi

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

placed its bets on the alliance with Sihanouk, who was not only critical of the United States but also granted North Vietnam the possibility to use his territory for creating rear bases on the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail and even to deliver ammunition and arms for the fighting in the South through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. (However, the Khmers retained approximately 10% of all deliveries - see Chanda 1986, pp. 61, 420). The Vietnamese did their best to strengthen this regime, and went out of their way to scrap any plans of the local communists to fight Sihanouk. Hanoi believed that “the armed struggle with the government of Sihanouk slackened it and opened a path to the intrigues of American imperialism against Kampuchea” (*On the History of the Vietnamese-Kampuchean Conflict*, Hanoi, 1979, p. 9). The Vietnamese even tried not to allow Khmer communists to leave Hanoi for Cambodia to carry out illegal work in their home country, and tried to have them keep different official positions in Vietnam (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 50, file 721: Document of the USSR embassy in the DRV, April 1, 1965, p. 142).

As to the communists operating on the territory of Cambodia, their underground organization had broken up into rather isolated factions under heavy pressure from the authorities, and its illegal leaders wandered through the country from one secret address to another at the end of their tether. Authentic documents of this epoch were not saved. However, according to the evidence of such an informed person as Tep Khen, a former ambassador of Heng Samrin’s regime in Hanoi, all documentation of the party fit into a schoolbag, which general secretary Tou Samut and his two bodyguards carried while travelling through the country. (Conversation with Tep Khen, Moscow, March 10, 1985). The treachery of Sieu Heng - the second most important person in the KPRP - dealt a heavy blow against the underground organization. This party leader, who had been in charge of KPRP work among peasants for several years, secretly cooperated with the special services of the ruling regime and during the period from 1955 to 1959 revealed practically all communist activists in the country to the authorities.

The prevailing chaos inside the party and the absence of serious control from the Vietnamese party presented Saloth Sar (who later took the revolutionary pseudonym Pol Pot), who had returned home from France, and his radical friends who had studied with him there, with huge possibilities for elevation to the highest positions in the semi-destroyed, isolated organization. The treachery of Sieu Heng did not affect them seriously, because they belonged to an urban wing of the party, headed by Tou Samut. The career growth of Pol

Pot was rapid: in 1953 he was secretary of a regional party cell, and in 1959 he made it to the post of secretary of Phnom Penh city committee of CPRP (Conversation with Chan Ven, Phnom Penh, July 15, 1984).

In 1962, the Sihanouk secret police laid its hands on and killed Tou Samut at a secret hide-out in Phnom Penh (four years before - in 1958 - another prominent leader of the KPRP, editor of the party newspaper Nop Bophan had been shot and killed). Pol Pot and his friends then got the unique chance to actually head the party or, more precisely, what was left of it. As early as 1960, Pol Pot had managed to ensure that his evaluation of the situation in the country and his views on the tactics and strategy of political struggle were accepted as a basis for drafting a new program of the KPRP. It declared as the main cause of the party the realization of a national-democratic revolution, that is to say the struggle for the overthrow of the regime existing in the country, a policy that went counter to the interests of Hanoi. The congress approved a new Charter and formed a new Central Committee, in which Pol Pot assumed the responsibilities of deputy chairman of the party.

The prevalence of new personnel was consolidated at the next Party congress, which took place in January 1963. It was also held underground at a secret address and according to veteran communists there were not more than 20 persons at it (conversation with Chan Ven, Phnom Penh, July 14, 1984). During this meeting a new Central Committee, wherein young radicals held one third of all 12 posts, was elected. Pol Pot himself took up the post of the general secretary, and Ieng Sary became a member of the permanent bureau (To 1983, p. 68). Unexpectedly for the Vietnamese, Pol Pot then renamed the party: from the People's Revolutionary Party to the Communist Party of Kampuchea or CPK (conversation with Tep Khen, Moscow, March 10, 1985). Much later, explaining the reason for changing the name, Pol Pot claimed that "The Communist Party of Indochina and consequently its successor the KPRP was in due course created by the Vietnamese to occupy Cambodian and Lao lands" (*Provotest songkhep nei pak protiatyun padevoat Kampuchea – 'A Brief history of the KPRP – The vanguard of the working class and all the people of Kampuchea,' Phnom Penh, 1984, p. 7*).

Vietnam for a long time calmly watched the changes in the Khmer communist underground, not interfering with its business, unaware of the fact that with their involuntary help an evil, dictatorial bunch led by Pol Pot and Ieng Sary was emerging. In January 1978, the first deputy chief of the external relations department of the Communist Party of Vietnam's Central Committee,

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

Nguyen Thanh Le, told the Soviet ambassador: “There were contradictions between Pol Pot and Ieng Sary before, so in 1963-1964 Ieng Sary left Pol Pot in the underground and went to Phnom Penh. Then Pol Pot persuaded Vietnamese friends to help him to return Ieng Sary” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1061, record of the Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the Vietnamese communist party Central Committee’s first deputy chief of the external relations department, Nguyen Thanh Le, January 14, 1978, p. 6). It is hard to tell if this information provided by Nguyen Thanh Le recalls actual events. Pol Pot always was an “alien” for the Hanoi leaders and it is difficult to imagine that for the sake of repairing his relationship with Ieng Sary, who was no less “alien” to Hanoi, Pol Pot needed Vietnamese assistance. Most likely, high-ranking Vietnamese officials tried to persuade their Soviet allies that Vietnam had the Khmer communist leaders under firm control.

This neglect of the Khmer communists began to change in the mid-sixties, when Hanoi realized that Sihanouk’s support of North-Vietnamese policy was becoming more and more fragile. Critics of the friendship with Hanoi on behalf of the powerful authoritative generals Lon Nol and Sirik Matak became stronger in Phnom Penh. Under such conditions, the Vietnamese again recalled their natural allies – the Khmer communists. However in that regard they had to confront a lot of unexpected problems. The main one was that due to obvious oversight there were people in the highest posts of the Khmer Communist Party little-known to the Vietnamese, and inevitably suspect because they were educated in France, instead of in Hanoi. Besides, the majority of them had not participated in the anti-colonial war and were not checked for allegiance “to the elder brother.” But the most important reason was that they quite openly criticised North Vietnamese policy towards the Cambodian ruling regime. Pol Pot, unlike his predecessors in the highest party post, rigidly defended the line that Khmer communists should act independently, fulfilling their own purposes and interests first of all, and “should carry out independent, special policy on basic matters of revolutionary struggle, theory and tactics.” (*Provatesat songkhep nei pak protiatyun padevoat Kampuchea*, p. 6). And Hanoi should take into consideration that the young radicals had managed to win certain popularity and support in party circles by their activity and independence. The point of view of the new general secretary that “the political struggle won’t bring any results” was regarded with understanding (*Provatesat songkhep nei pak protiatyun padevoat Kampuchea*, p. 7). That’s why the primary task of the Khmer communists should be capturing power in

Cambodia; the interests of “Vietnamese brothers” should not dominate in the determination of CPK policy. Also important was that for the first time since the Geneva agreements, the Khmer communists, despite instructions to support the anti-imperialist policy of Sihanouk received by Pol Pot during his secret stay in Hanoi in the summer of 1965, were prepared to move to real actions. (Chanda 1986, p. 62).

In 1966, the Soviet embassy in Phnom Penh began to receive messages that “the Communist Party is preparing the masses for an armed revolt” (RSAMH Fund 5, inventory 58, file 009540, dossier 324, p. 340). In December 1966, the journal “*Somlenh Polokor*” (“Workers’ Voice”), closely connected to the communist underground, published an article stating: “Brother workers and peasants should be united by all means to destroy feudal and reactionary governors and their flunkies in the territory of Cambodia” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 58, file 009540, dossier 324, p. 341).

Anxious that “the younger brother” was actually getting out of control and putting North Vietnamese interests aside, Hanoi decided to act in two directions: the first one was to redeploy and introduce necessary people into the CPK – Khmer communists who had studied and lived in Vietnam. They were to be introduced into Cambodian party organizations with the purpose of party personnel consolidation. According to the archival documents dated 1965, for the first time after many years “the group of Cambodian communists was transferred to Southern Vietnam for outbreak of hostilities in Cambodia.” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 50, file 721, Document of the Soviet embassy to the DRV, April 1, 1965, p. 142). The other prong of the Vietnamese approach was not to be involved in conflict with the new communist party administration in Phnom Penh, but to demonstrate a certain support to a ruling group in the CPK. Unlike previous years nothing was said about the progressive role of Sihanouk. The statement that “the struggle of the Khmer communists will be victorious” was also a surprise. (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 50, file 721. Documents of the Soviet embassy to the DRV, April 1, 1965, p. 142). Hanoi faced a difficult dilemma: either to create a new communist organization in Cambodia with personnel trained in northern Vietnam, or to introduce “necessary people” in basic posts in the existing Communist Party and to recognize even temporarily a not very reliable Pol Pot as the legitimate communist leader of the fraternal party. The Vietnamese politicians chose the second, as their purpose was to strengthen communist forces in Cambodia,

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

instead of making them weaker by an internal split. Furthermore there were no warranties that the pro-Vietnamese organization led by Son Ngoc Minh – who was very compliant with Hanoi’s interests – would be more powerful and numerous than Pol Pot’s party. One well-known episode shows how unpopular Son Ngoc Minh was among Khmer communists. Keo Meas, one of the veterans, publicly accused Son Ngoc Minh of ‘becoming fat in safety while the party faithful were being liquidated’ (Kiernan and Boua 1982, p. 194).

In addition to this and others events, the policy of a new party leadership evidently was supported by other authoritative veterans of the KPRP. Among them was So Phim, future chief of the Eastern Zone and the fourth-ranking person in the party, and Ta Mok, future chief of the Southwest Zone and one of the most severe and loyal Pol Pot supporters. So it became obvious that Hanoi did not have any other choice. (Nguyen Co Thach, in his conversation with the Soviet ambassador in January 1978, said that So Phim and Ta Mok were former members of the Communist Party of Indochina.) (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. Record of Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the deputy minister of Foreign affairs of the SRV, Nguyen Co Thach, 21.01.1978, p. 20).

It was possible to assume that the Vietnamese decided to strike a bargain by “marriage of convenience” at this time, hoping to remove Pol Pot gradually from leadership. The radicals, in their turn also agreed on compromise, as only Vietnam could have given them the assets for the armed struggle and on party needs.

It is well known that Pol Pot was looking for support from both Soviet and Chinese communists at this time. According to some sources he visited Beijing in 1965 and, as archival data indirectly testify, gained support for his revolutionary plans from the Chinese leadership (On the history of the Vietnam-Kampuchean Conflict, Hanoi, 1979, p. 9.)

At least, according to the information of the Soviet embassy in Hanoi in a document dated February 19, 1968, it was pointed out that “using the critical economic situation of the peasants in the number of provinces, Chinese, based on pro-Maoist and pro-Vietnamese elements of the left-wing forces, rouse actions of the so-called Khmer Rouge in the Northern and Northwest provinces, smuggle weapons, and create small armed groups of rebels (‘Subversive activities of Chinese in Cambodia’ RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 60, file 36. February 19, 1968, p. 4).

Ung Khon San, the Deputy Chairman of Internal affairs at the Council of Ministers of Cambodia, told Soviet representatives at that time about Beijing's active participation in the rousing of rebel activities. He said that "rebels are armed with modern Chinese-made weapons (automatic rifles, grenade launchers, and 81 mm. mortars)...these weapons were found in boxes addressed to the textile factory in Battambang where Chinese experts were working" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 60, file 365. 'Subversive activities of Chinese in Cambodia' (reference), Phnom Penh, February 19, 1968 p. 9-10).

One cannot but admit that besides his trip to Beijing in 1966, Pol Pot expressed a desire to meet representatives of the Soviet embassy in Phnom Penh, expecting to receive support from Moscow. Although the meeting took place, Pol Pot was dissatisfied that a non-senior embassy official was sent to the meeting with him – the third secretary of the Soviet embassy, according to the former ambassador in Cambodia, Yuri Myakotnykh (personal communication 14th of August 1993).

The CPK's hopes for Soviet aid were not justified and could not be justified because the Soviet representatives had practically no serious information about the CPK (conversation with Yuri Myakotnykh, Barvikha, August 14, 1993). The most the Soviet embassy could do at that time "was to send a lecturer to the representatives of the left-wing forces for a course of lectures on the socio-economic problems of Cambodia" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 58, file 324.) (the political letter of the embassy of the USSR in Cambodia, second quarter 1966, p. 84).

It is possible that there were other reasons for the breakdown in contact between Pol Pot and Soviet representatives. It is obvious that on the brink of 1965-1966, the Soviet leadership had not yet decided on the forms and scale of its participation in the new Indochina war. On the one hand, it was necessary to support Vietnam and to participate more actively in the events in Indochina, to show once again that the USSR was a stronghold of antiimperialist struggle and a center of support for national-liberation movements. On the other hand there was obvious reluctance not to be drawn into the Indochina conflict too deeply because of the possible negative implications of this decision. Besides economic losses and the likelihood of aggravating relations with the U.S., the Soviet Union would be entering into direct competition with Beijing in the country where the majority of leaders in the Soviet-China ideological conflict were neutral or sympathized with the pro-Chinese position.

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

The Central Committee of the CPSU regularly received information from the Navy that the attitude of Vietnamese workers and administrators to the Soviet sailors and ships in Vietnamese ports was very bad. They “hold up the unloading of Soviet ships, concentrate them near the most dangerous places in the ports (near batteries of anti-aircraft guns), during American bombardments military vessels open fire from the places situated very close to Soviet ships trying to direct fire from airplanes straight on the ships. (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 58, file 263. Letter of the Minister of Sea fleet of the USSR V.Bakaev to the Central Committee of CPSU 18 July 1966, p. 40).

In the same secret letter Minister V. Bakaev mentioned other facts that show the differences in Vietnamese priorities towards USSR and China at that time. He wrote that on the 10th of July 1966 the Vietnamese pilots directed a Chinese ship around a dangerous zone (there were mine fields on the sea route to Haiphon). In contrast, on the 11th of July they directed the Soviet ship “Chelyabinsk” straight through the dangerous region, using it to check whether there were mines or not (p. 41). Moscow understood well that without permission from the highest circles of the party hierarchy, all these accidents would be impossible.

At that time Moscow showed real restraint to different Vietnamese suggestions. That attitude was demonstrated not only in the economic sphere but also for example in the problem of sending Soviet volunteers to help Vietnam in its war. In the special paper that was prepared on this question by the department of South East Asia countries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs it was noted that “during negotiations between party and state delegations of the USSR and DRV the question to send Soviet volunteers to Vietnam was discussed in closed order mainly by the initiative of the Vietnamese side.” (Fund 5, inventory 58, file 262. Information (spravka) “About the problem of sending Soviet volunteers to Vietnam” from department of South East Asia countries of the Ministry of foreign affairs of the USSR, 9th July 1966, p.85).

In the same document we can see that the answer from the Soviet leadership to these demands was not very favorable for Hanoi. “In 1965, in the Soviet Union there were several declarations of support for this proposition but from that time, during more than one year in public presentations of the leaders of CPSU and Soviet state, the problem of volunteers was never mentioned” (p. 82-83). It was not mentioned because during all this time Soviet leaders were discussing what to do in Vietnam.

So we can say now that the contact of Pol Pot with the Soviet representatives in Phnom Penh happened in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is probable that if that contact happened a little later in 1969-1970 when Moscow at last determined what to do in Indochina, the result of this contact would have been more favorable for the Khmer communist leader.

The failure to establish contacts with Moscow did not weaken the position of Pol Pot, as he had Beijing and Hanoi behind him. To strengthen his support from Hanoi he even showed readiness for close union and “special solidarity” with the DRV: Pol Pot introduced Nuon Chea – a person trusted in Hanoi, whom Le Duan, leader of the Vietnamese communists, in a conversation with the Soviet ambassador, called a politician of “pro-Vietnam orientation” – as the occupant of the second most important post in the party. Speaking of Nuon Chea, Le Duan said “he is our man indeed and my personal friend” (Record of conversation of the Soviet ambassador with Le Duan, first secretary of the Vietnamese communist party Central Committee, RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314, November 16, 1976, p. 113).

The compromise with Hanoi allowed Pol Pot to maintain his authority in the party leadership, and provided material and military aid for fighting groups, which he called the Revolutionary Army. In the period 1968-1970 this army conducted unsuccessful operations against the forces of the ruling regime, sustained heavy losses, and did not have the slightest hope of coming to power. A great chance for Pol Pot and Khmer communists came in March, 1970. Their long-term enemy - Cambodian leader Prince Sihanouk - was overthrown in a military coup d'état on March 18, 1970. He had to enter into a military-political union with the communists to get back to power. It became a turning point for the communists; in the eyes of thousands of peasants, the Khmer Rouge turned from enemies of Sihanouk into his protectors. The revolutionary army started growing, and communists' bases among the masses increased considerably. The goals of purely communist reorganization were set aside for the moment, and the slogans about protecting the legitimate chief of state and of national independence came to the fore.

In April-May 1970, many North-Vietnamese forces entered Cambodia in response to the call for help addressed to Vietnam not by Pol Pot, but by his deputy Nuon Chea. Nguyen Co Thach recalls: “Nuon Chea has asked for help and we have liberated five provinces of Cambodia in ten days.” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. Information on the conversation of the German comrades with the deputy minister of foreign affairs of the SRV Nguyen Co

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

Thach, who stayed on a rest in the GDR from the 1st to the 6th of August, 1978. August 17, 1978, p. 70). In 1970, in fact, Vietnamese forces occupied almost a quarter of the territory of Cambodia, and the zone of communist control grew several times, as power in the so-called liberated regions was given to the CPK. At that time relations between Pol Pot and the North Vietnamese leaders were especially warm, so much so that the Vietnamese leaders were still trying at that time to keep the necessary balance between the USSR and China.

Information by the Soviet Ambassador dated the 4th of September 1970 offers important evidence of that Vietnamese course. In this document the ambassador stated that during his conversation with Pham Van Dong (on the 28th of August) the Vietnamese leader told him that “the Political bureau of the Central Committee of the VWP decided to send him as a head of party and State delegation to the Soviet Union and China. The delegation was charged to discuss with the Soviet Party and State leaders several important questions connected with the situation in Vietnam and in Indochina. We have a lot to tell our Soviet comrades on this problem,” underlined Pham Van Dong (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 69, file 489. Record of Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the prime minister of DRV Pham Van Dong on the 28th of August 1970, p.150).

It is obvious that Pham Van Dong made a point of mentioning his future visit to China. By this he wanted to show his Soviet friends that he had a lot to tell not only them but also his Chinese comrades and that in Vietnamese policy, the Soviet Union and China were considered two equal allies. In the same conversation Pham Van Dong neatly used time of his future visit to Moscow. So we can see that at this time the Vietnamese did their best to maintain the Soviet-China balance in their politics and preferred to discuss the most important problems about the situation in Cambodia and Laos simultaneously with Moscow and with Beijing.

It is interesting that in the same conversation, the Soviet ambassador “in accordance with the assignment of the Center, informed Pham Van Dong about situation in Cambodia. Pham Van Dong expressed his gratitude and pointed out that the information that he received is important for Vietnamese comrades because it is possible to check the truthfulness of facts and conclusions coming to the DRV.” In most cases, he underlined facts received from Soviet comrades coincide with the Vietnamese sources. Beside this they received some new facts that they didn’t know before (Ibid., p.152).

I am highlighting this conversation between Soviet ambassador and Vietnamese Prime Minister because it was very unusual that Soviets would offer the Vietnamese important information about the situation in Cambodia at the time when Vietnamese divisions occupied more than one third of Cambodian territory. What sort of information was it? It was unlikely about the military or economic situation in Cambodia because the Vietnamese knew this without Soviet help. More likely, it concerned the attitudes of groups of Khmer communists to their “older brothers” in Hanoi. In our conversation in Barvikha, Mr. Myakotnyh told me that at the beginning of the Vietnamese invasion in 1970, some Khmer communists staying in Hanoi complained in conversations with Soviet diplomats about “Vietnamese superiority on Cambodian soil that they treated them with some contempt” (conversation with Yuri Myakotnyh, Barvikha 14 August 1993).

The Vietnamese leadership did not even hide the fact that the Cambodian Communist Party, in association with the Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP), was given the role of the “younger brother,” obliged to follow the directions of the “elder brother.” The secretary of the VWP Central Committee, Hoang Anh, for instance, in his speech at the twentieth VWP Central Committee plenary meeting held in January 1971, declared: “We should strengthen the revolutionary base in Cambodia and guide this country along the path of socialism. Here is the policy of our party” (RSAMH, Fund 89, list 54, document 3, p. 21). Moreover, Soviet diplomats working in Hanoi noted: “Vietnamese comrades last year carefully raised one of the clauses of the former Indochina Communist Party program concerning creation of the socialist Federation of Indochina” (RSAMH, Fund 89, list 54, document 10. About VWP policy in determination of Indochinese problems and our goals implying from the decisions of the Congress of the C.P.S.U. (political letter) May 21, 1971, p. 14.).

The idea of this federation was to unify Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia into one state after the victory of the Indochinese revolution under the direction of Vietnamese communists as “the elder brothers.” It is natural that all these plans of Hanoi leaders were well known in Cambodia and could not help causing the Khmer communists to wonder if the Vietnamese were taking into consideration their views on Cambodia’s future. Soviet representatives in Vietnam were well aware of the wary and even hostile attitude of Khmer and Lao communists towards Hanoi’s plans on restricting the independence of Laos and Cambodia and a new reorganization of the former territory of French Indochina. In the

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

1971 political letter, they noted that a “too narrow national approach of Vietnamese comrades towards the resolution of Indochinese problems, [and] noticeable attempts of submission of Laos and Cambodia problems to the interests of Vietnam, caused latent complaint of Lao and Cambodian friends” (RSAMH, Fund 89, list 54, document 10 (political letter, p. 5).

This “latent” complaint is apparent in the correspondence between Pol Pot and Le Duan. In the letter of 1974, on the one hand he swore that “all our victories are inseparable from the help of our brothers and comrades-in-arms – the Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese workers party” and on the other hand he quite definitely declared that “relations between our parties are based on mutual respect and non-interference in one another’s internal affairs” (On the History of the Vietnamese-Kampuchean Conflict, Hanoi, 1979, p. 20).

The Khmer Rouge party and military apparatus “became more and more forceful, the ambitions of their leaders, their genetic hostility and mistrust to the Vietnamese” became more and more obvious (historically Khmers always disliked Vietnamese, considering them aggressors in relation to their home country): “The Khmer Rouge only searched [for] an occasion to designate their own position, independent from the Vietnamese. In the liberated regions they prohibited the local population to come into contact with Vietnamese, attacked as if mistakenly separate Vietnamese groups, seized wagon-trains with food supplies, ammunition and military equipment” (Ibid., p. 7).

The possibility for “insult” and “divorce” from Hanoi was granted to them by destiny; in 1973, after the conclusion of the Peace agreement in Paris, Pol Pot turned from formal into real leader of the liberated territory of his country. The reason for this change was that the Vietnamese in Paris, as in 1954 at Geneva, again agreed on full withdrawal of their forces from Cambodia. Their withdrawal loosened the Khmer Rouge leadership’s dependence on Hanoi’s instructions, saved their party structures from political and ideological custody by Vietnamese advisers, and in fact disrupted the positions of plainly pro-Vietnamese elements inside the CCP. Hem Samin, very friendly to Vietnam, a founding member of the United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea, recalled that since 1973 people who had only joined the party at military party meetings “freely came in for rude and groundless criticism of pro-Vietnamese veterans” (Skvortsov 1980, p. 68). The year 1973 was marked by the first wave of cadre emigration, when along with Vietnamese forces, the country was abandoned by future well known figures of post-Pol Pot Cambodia like Miech

Somnang and Keo Chenda. Pen Sovan, who became the head of the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party reconstructed after 1979 by the Vietnamese, left the editorial committee of the Khmer Rouge radio station in 1973 and escaped into Vietnam (Ibid., p. 93.). The Vietnamese withdrawal of forces and the weakening of Vietnamese control allowed Khmer radicals to begin realizing their plans to toughen domestic policy in the spirit of "the Great Leap Forward" and "the Cultural Revolution." A sharp transition towards mass socialization and a reorganization of Khmer village life in the spirit of China's large communes started just after the Vietnamese withdrawal. Beforehand, it was a risky business, as it would inevitably have caused suspicions that the Cambodian communist leadership would not follow the Soviet-Vietnamese course, but would have more sympathy for the Chinese experience.

The Khmer Rouge position was strengthened again after success on all fronts in their mass attack at the end of January and the beginning of February 1973. Thus Pol Pot more or less demonstrated to all that the new Vietnamese "betrayal" ("Hanoi has left us" – said Khieu Samphan in a conversation with Sihanouk evaluating the Paris Agreement) and the sharp aggravation of relations with the Vietnam Workers Party due to the Khmer Rouge refusal, despite insistent Vietnamese "recommendations," to enter into negotiations with the Lon Nol government (Shawcross 1987, p. 281), had not affected the operations of the Khmer communists. Under Pol Pot's leadership the CPK, unlike in 1954, was ready for such a turn of events, and independently capable of a military victory in the country.

In the spring of 1973, in a conversation with the Soviet ambassador, Le Duan stated, "the initiative in Cambodian affairs is not in our hands" (Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. Record of conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the VWP Central Committee Secretary Le Duan, April 19, 1973, p. 78.). This was a fair but late recognition by the Vietnamese leader. Pham Hung - the member of the VWP Politbureau responsible for Cambodia - made unsuccessful attempts to act according to the Vietnamese script. It was clear to all that Pol Pot was waging his own war, independent of Hanoi. Pham Hung held a few meetings with Pol Pot in January 24-26, 1973 (Chanda 1986, p. 68).

In April 1973, Hanoi openly advised its Soviet allies that it had no real control of the situation in the Cambodian Communist Party. In the same conversation with the Soviet ambassador, Le Duan declared, "the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party has contentions both with Sihanouk and with its own members. Their organization is situated in Beijing. Even the Chinese

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

embassy in Hanoi has more contacts with them than we have. However Khmer comrades are very careful. Our help to them is substantial. There is a possibility to get closer to them gradually” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. Record of the Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the VWP Central Committee secretary Le Duan, April 19, 1973, p. 78).

Pham Van Dong told the Soviet ambassador about the bitter relations between Khmer and Vietnamese communists. In their conversation of April 14, 1973, the Vietnamese prime minister indicated that “our support and help to Cambodian friends is decreasing and its scale is now insignificant.” Pham Van Dong took a much more optimistic position, in comparison with Le Duan’s, when he was asked by the Soviet representative about the “presence of conspiracy in the Cambodian problem behind the Vietnamese back.” He said, “we know that there are plans directed to the creation of difficulties in relations between the peoples of Indochina. We, however, have enough forces to resist these plans. The leadership of the DRV is constantly working on the Cambodian problem” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. Record of the Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the VWP Politbureau member and prime minister of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong, April 14, 1973, p. 80).

To all appearances, under the influence of Vietnamese leaders’ information on the significant independence of the Khmer leadership, Moscow officials came to a conclusion about the necessity of making their own contacts with the Khmer Rouge. In the same conversation with Pham Van Dong, the Soviet ambassador said that “comrades from the KPRP do not evaluate fairly enough their connections with the C.P.S.U., depending [the issue of] of recognition of Sihanouk by the USSR. We need their help to know the situation in Cambodia better.” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 66, business 782. Record of the Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the VWP’s Politbureau member and prime minister of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong, April 14, 1973, p. 85).

A little later, in June 1973, the envoy-counselor of the embassy of the USSR in the DRV informed Moscow: “in accordance with the assignment of the Centre, I have passed the letter of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. to the KPRP Central Committee. In the conversation with the VWP Central Committee deputy chief of department Tran Khi Khien, he said that it was difficult to foresee a response of the Cambodian friends as to how they will consider the initiative of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U.” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. Record of the Soviet embassy to the DRV’s envoy-

counsellor's conversation with the VWP Central Committee deputy chief of department Tran Khi Khien, June 16, 1973, p. 132).

Analysis of these documents proves, surprisingly, that Moscow's attempts to create connections with the Khmer Rouge were undertaken indirectly, via its Vietnamese allies, in whom the Cambodian leadership had minimal confidence. The passing on of the official invitation for cooperation with the Khmers by means of the Vietnamese Workers Party ensured the blazing collapse of the whole project. As it now appears, Moscow, though wishing to establish direct ties with the Khmer Rouge leadership, at the same time did not want to complicate its relations with Hanoi by trying to approach the Cambodian leadership by going over Hanoi's head.

The information provided to the Soviet side by Hanoi contained its own puzzles. In November 1973, the deputy chief of the socialist countries department of the VWP Central Committee, Nguyen Trong Thuat, in a conversation with a Soviet diplomat, asserted that "the latest information makes it clear that the process of the NUFC's (National United Front of Cambodia), and Khieu Samphan's leadership, are now strengthening" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. Record of the Soviet embassy first secretary's conversation with the deputy chief of the socialist countries department of the VWP Central Committee, Nguyen Trong Thuat, November 13 1973, p. 185).

In January 1978, the information about Khieu Samphan was completely different. The first deputy chief of the external relations department of the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee, Nguyen Thanh Le, told the Soviet ambassador that "in 1971-1972 Khieu Samphan was an ordinary member of the party and only in 1975 became a candidate member of the Central Committee" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory, 75, file 1061. Record of the Soviet ambassador's conversation with the first deputy chief of the external relations department of the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee, Nguyen Thanh Le, January 14, 1978, p. 6).

It is possible to explain this obvious inconsistency in two ways: either Hanoi really did not know Khieu Samphan's actual place in the ruling hierarchy of the Cambodian Communist Party (he was always far from real leadership), or they knew but did not want to tell the Soviet side, wishing to put Moscow in contact not with the actual leaders, but with Khieu Samphan who was unable to make decisions. At least in 1973-1974, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary were considered in Moscow as the most influential persons in the CPK, and Moscow

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

officials tried several times to organize a meeting with Khieu Samphan alone. Thus in April 1974, the Soviet ambassador, in conversation with the deputy minister of foreign affairs of the DRV, Hoang Van Tien, “asked about the time of Khieu Samphan’s return to the DRV on his way to Cambodia. He said that he would like to meet with him” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 67, file 659. Record of the Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the Vietnamese deputy minister of foreign affairs, Hoang Van Tien. April 12, 1974, p. 59).

In reply to this request, the chief of the USSR and East European countries department of the Vietnamese ministry of foreign affairs, Nguyen Huu Ngo, said, “in the morning of May 28, the protocol department of the ministry of foreign affairs, according to the request of the Soviet ambassador, has raised with Khieu Samphan the question of this meeting. In the afternoon, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, in negotiations with the Cambodian delegation, has passed on fraternal greetings to Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary from comrades Brezhnev, Podgorniy, and Kosygin, wishing them success in their struggle. The Soviet leaders asked Pham Van Dong about it during his recent visit to Moscow.” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 67, file 659. Record of conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the Chief of the Department of the USSR and East European countries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DRV, Nguyen Huu Ngo. May 30, 1974. p. 85).

It is clear now that Khieu Samphan, even if he was very keen on going to such a meeting, would not have been able to do so without the approval of Pol Pot himself or the Politbureau of the Central Committee. A breakthrough in relations between Moscow and the Khmer Rouge could take place only if key figures of the Khmer leadership were involved in this process. But the Vietnamese tried to do their best to prevent direct contact between Moscow and the CPK authorities, wishing to avoid a situation in which someone else would take over their monopoly of relations with the Khmer Rouge. Aware that Moscow could inevitably become suspicious of Hanoi’s intentions to assist in establishing contacts between the CPSU and the CPK, Vietnamese officials constantly declared that “the VWP exerts every effort to assist in the promotion of relations between Cambodian and Soviet comrades” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 67, file 659. Record of conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the Chief of the Department of the USSR and East European countries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DRV, Nguyen Huu Ngo. May 30, 1974. p. 85).

It is widely believed that after 1973 relations between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese communists were gradually worsening until the beginning of the border war in April 1977. The archival documents, however, suggest that this assumption is not correct and that relations, after seriously cooling off in 1973, saw a marked improvement in 1974 up to the level of close cooperation.

In that year the CPK authorities seemed to have forgotten their accusations that the Vietnamese “have betrayed the interests of the Khmer people,” and they started to glorify again the combat friendship and solidarity of the liberation forces of Vietnam and Cambodia. In fact, Pol Pot was compelled to recognize that he had been somewhat hasty in accusing the Vietnamese, perhaps because in the beginning of 1974 it became obvious that due to considerable casualties in the 1973 military campaign, the Khmer Rouge were not able to take Phnom Penh without serious military and technical aid.

In his search for material assistance and arms, Pol Pot originally addressed China; however, the latter was deaf to all entreaties (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. Record of the conversation of Deputy minister of Foreign affairs of the SRV, Nguyen Co Thach, with German comrades while staying for rest in the GDR on 1-6 August, 1978. August 17, 1978, p. 72). Beijing played its own game and expected certain changes in the combination of forces in the Vietnamese leadership and in its political course, which would deepen Vietnamese cooperation with China and slow the growing influence of the USSR. After receiving a refusal in Beijing, Pol Pot, who was frequently called “brother number one” in CPK documents, was compelled to soften his rhetoric and summon Hanoi for support once again. The archival documents testify to a warming of Khmer-Vietnamese relations. The political report of the Soviet embassy in the DRV for 1974 mentioned that while in the beginning of the year the Vietnamese referred to vast difficulties in cooperation with the Cambodian communists in conversations with the Soviet diplomats, at the end of the year they indicated an improvement of relations (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 67, file 655. The 1974 political report of the Soviet embassy in the DRV, p. 49). In March Pol Pot, in a letter sent to Le Duc Tho, a member of the Politbureau of the Central Committee of the VWP, went so far as to say that “sincerely and from the bottom of my heart I assure you that under any circumstances I shall remain loyal to the policy of great friendship and great fraternal revolutionary solidarity between Kampuchea and Vietnam, in spite of any difficulties and obstacles” (On the history of the Vietnamese-Kampuchean Conflict, Hanoi 1979, p. 20).

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

No doubt in 1974, Pol Pot was playing an ingenious game with Hanoi with far-reaching purposes. He exuded gratitude and swore his allegiance, because he had no better chance of receiving military and other aid from Vietnam. In 1978, the then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, Ngyuen Co Thach, told German communists that in 1974, Cambodians had asked for assistance for the purpose of taking Phnom Penh. "But the Chinese did not provide such aid, then Pol Pot had approached Vietnam." The new call for assistance, as in 1970, did not come from Pol Pot himself, but from his deputy within the party, Nuon Chea (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062, Record of conversation of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the SRV, Ngyuen Co Thach, with German comrades while staying for rest in the GDR in August 1-6, 1978. August 17, 1978, p. 72). There is nothing strange about Pol Pot's appeal to Vietnam for assistance. The strange thing was why the Vietnamese leadership, which was fully informed of the special position of the Khmer Rouge leader concerning relations with Hanoi, did not undertake any action to change the power pattern within the top ranks of the Communist Party to their own benefit. Apparently, the position of Nuon Chea, as the main person in whom Hanoi leaders put their hopes, proved to be decisive at that moment. Nuon Chea was already closely cooperating with Pol Pot. It was obvious that he consistently and consciously deceived the Vietnamese principals concerning the real plans of the Khmer leadership, pointing out the inexpediency of any replacement of the Khmer leader. As a result, in 1974 Vietnam granted military aid with no strings attached. Pol Pot was not toppled. There were no attempts to undermine his position or strengthen the influence of opposition forces. It is possible that Hanoi simply did not want problems in its relations with Phnom Penh at the moment of preparation for its own decisive assault in the South.

There is no doubt that the apparent desire of the Khmer leadership's majority to govern Cambodia independently and without external trusteeship was obviously underestimated in Hanoi. Vietnamese leaders confessed to this blunder later. A member of the VWP Politbureau and a long-term Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ngyuen Co Thach, for instance, in his 1978 conversation with German communists, told them that "in 1975 Vietnam evaluated the situation in Cambodia incorrectly" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. Record of the conversation of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the SRV, Ngyuen Co Thach, with German communists, while staying on rest in the GDR in August 1-6, 1978. August 17, 1978, p. 72).

Such an admission by an experienced Vietnamese minister was no wonder: 1975 became an important watershed in relations between Phnom Penh and Hanoi. After the seizure of Phnom Penh by the Khmer communists, and Saigon's takeover by the Communist Vietnamese, the situation in Indochina changed dramatically. North Vietnamese leaders successfully accomplished one of the main behests of Ho Chi Minh: they unified all Vietnam under the authority of Hanoi and came close to the realization of another item of his alleged will - formation of a federation of socialist states of Indochina under Vietnamese domination. But it came as a surprise that unlike the "Pathet Lao" and Kaysone Phomvihan, Pol Pot and the Khmer leadership categorically refused any form of "special relations" with Hanoi. Pol Pot's visit to Hanoi in June 1975 was mainly a protocol event.

Pol Pot offered ritual phrases like "without the help and support of the VWP we could not achieve victory;" expressed gratitude to "brothers in North and South Vietnam;" took special note of the Vietnamese support in "the final major attack during the dry season of 1975, when we faced considerable difficulties" (Skvortsov 1980, p. 52). The Khmer leader did not mention the establishment of special relations with Vietnam as expected by the Vietnamese. Moreover, upon returning to Phnom Penh, Pol Pot declared: "we have won total, definitive, and clean victory, meaning that we have won it without any foreign connection or involvement... we have waged our revolutionary struggle based on the principles of independence, sovereignty and self-reliance" (Kiernan 1982 p. 233). Thereby the Khmer leader actually disavowed even the ritual words of gratitude for the Vietnamese people, which he had pronounced during his trip to Hanoi. In fact the only result of his trip was the agreement on holding a new summit in June 1976. However, as Vietnamese sources testify, the meeting was never held (On the History of the Vietnamese-Kampuchean Conflict, Hanoi, 1979, p. 16).

In fact this is not the whole truth. Such a meeting did take place in the first half of 1976. In 1978, the Chairman of the State Committee on Science and Technology of the SRV, Tran Quy Inh, told the Soviet ambassador about some details of the meeting. He said that during a personal meeting between Le Duan and Pol Pot in 1976, "Pol Pot spoke about friendship, while Le Duan called the regime existing in Democratic Kampuchea "slavery communism." In the conversation with Pol Pot, the Vietnamese leader described the Cambodian revolution as "unique, having no analog" (RSAMH, Fund 5 inventory 75, file 1061, Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with member of the

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

Central Committee of the CPV, Chairman of Committee on Science and Technology of the SRV, Tran Quy Inh, March 24, 1978. pp. 39-40).

It appears from the archival documents that in the first half of 1976, Hanoi seriously expected positive changes in its relations with the Khmer Rouge. In February 1976, apparently on the eve of the summit, Xuan Thuy - one of the most prominent party leaders of Vietnam - told the Soviet ambassador that “the relations of Vietnam and Cambodia are slowly improving” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. Conversations of the Soviet ambassador with Xuan Thuy, February 16, 1976 p. 16). A little later, in July 1976, in conversation with the Soviet ambassador, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DRV, Hoanh Van Loi, declared that the Vietnamese leadership “deems it necessary to have patience and work towards gradually strengthening its influence in Cambodia” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2312. Conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DRV, Hoanh Van Loi, July 1976, p. 90).

Apparently the Vietnamese leaders considered the well-known Pol Pot interview, which he had given in 1976 to the deputy director-general of the Vietnamese Information Agency, Tran Thanh Xuan, as a proof of growing Vietnamese influence in Phnom Penh. Tran Thanh Xuan visited Cambodia at the head of a large delegation of Vietnamese journalists. In the interview Pol Pot said all the words that the Vietnamese had waited in vain to hear in June 1975. He said in particular, “we consider friendship and solidarity between the Kampuchean and Vietnamese revolutions, between Kampuchea and Vietnam, a strategic question and a sacred feeling. Only when such friendship and solidarity are strong, can the revolution in our countries develop adequately. There is no other alternative. That is why, honoring these principles, we consider that both parties and we personally should aspire to maintain this combat solidarity and brotherhood in arms and make sure that they grow and strengthen day by day” (Nhan Dan. 29 VII, 1976).

It is quite obvious that only extremely serious circumstances could have made Pol Pot demonstrate anew this adherence to Vietnam. “Brother No 1” indeed experienced tough pressure inside the CPK from a group of party leaders, rather numerous and influential, especially on the regional level, who were opposed to breaking off relations with Vietnam. In September 1976, due to their pressure, Pol Pot would even be temporarily removed from his post. To relieve this pressure and to gain time, he was simply compelled to make statements expected by his enemies. Surprisingly enough he managed to fool them again, to create the illusion of his surrender and readiness to go hand in

hand with Vietnam. Even in March 1977, when the anti-Vietnamese campaign in Cambodia was rapidly escalating, Truong Chinh, member of the VWP Politbureau and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of the SRV, in a conversation with the Soviet ambassador, made the point that “Democratic Kampuchea is also generally building socialism, but the leaders of Kampuchea are not clear enough as to forms of socialist construction. There is no unity in the Kampuchean leadership and much depends on which line will win” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 73, file 1409. Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with Truong Chinh, March 15, 1977 p. 34).

There is no doubt that in 1976 in spite of some improvement in relations with Phnom Penh, Hanoi actually lost not only control (that had happened long before), but also sources of accurate information on the situation in the Khmer leadership. At least the Vietnamese leaders recognized this. In July 1976, according to the Soviet ambassador’s information, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the SRV, Pham Vam Dong, “informed confidentially that the present situation in Cambodia is not clear enough to Hanoi, which has difficulties in following developments there.” Pham Van Dong also said that it was “necessary to show patience and that reality itself should teach the Khmers some lessons” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. Conversation of the Soviet ambassador with prime minister Pham Van Dong, July 13, 1976, p. 72). The Vietnamese leadership’s poor understanding of current political struggle in Cambodia could also be seen from the fact that back on November 16, 1976, Le Duan had told the Soviet ambassador that Pol Pot and Ieng Sary had been removed from power, that they were “bad people.” Le Duan added that “everything will be all right with Kampuchea which will be together with Vietnam sooner or later, there is no other way for the Khmers. We know how to work with them, when to be resolute or soft” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the VWP, Le Duan, November 16, 1976, p. 113).

In fact the report that Pol Pot and Ieng Sary had been removed from power, which was now in the hands of the “reliable” Nuon Chea, totally misinterpreted the situation in Phnom Penh by the middle of November 1976. Pol Pot’s opponents—such well-known Khmer communists with strong links to Vietnam as Keo Muni, Keo Meas and Nei Sarann – had already been

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

imprisoned and exposed to severe torture. Agriculture Minister Non Suon and more than two hundred of his associates from various ministries, the army and the party apparatus had already been arrested by November 1 (Kiernan 1996, p. 335). While Le Duan was informing the Soviet ambassador that Pol Pot and Ieng Sary had been ousted, in reality they were firmly in power, wielding full authority in Phnom Penh.

Generally speaking, the circumstances of the coup attempt have until now been insufficiently investigated. It is known that in September 1976, under pressure from the anti-Pol Pot opposition (Non Suon was one of the leaders and an old Vietnamese protégé), Pol Pot was compelled to declare his temporary resignation from the post of prime minister of Democratic Kampuchea due to 'health reasons.' The second-ranking person in the party hierarchy, Nuon Chea, was appointed acting prime minister (Kiernan 1996, p. 331). At the same time "Tung Krohom" (Red Flag) magazine, an official organ of the Communist Youth League of Kampuchea, ran an article affirming "that the CPK was founded in 1951" when it was assisted by the VWP (On the History of the Vietnamese-Kampuchean Conflict, Hanoi, 1979, p. 8). Such a statement contradicted Pol Pot's directives claiming that the CPK emerged in 1960 and had not received any help from the VWP. In September 1976, a regular air route between Hanoi and Vientiane was also established. A natural rubber consignment was sold to Singapore and attempts were made to accept humanitarian and medical aid from the U.N. and some American firms. All these events testified to a weakening of the radical group's positions, to an obvious change of the political line and to a certain modification of the Cambodian authorities' attitude towards Vietnam and the VWP.

A turnaround in Phnom Penh like this encouraged the Vietnamese leadership, which advised its Soviet friends that "the situation in Cambodia is not clear, but it is easier to work with Nuon Chea than with Pol Pot and Ieng Sary" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314, p. 88. October 15, 1976. Conversation of the Soviet ambassador with Ngyuen Duy Trinh). Soviet friends in their turn had sent the new Khmer leadership an important sign: at the October 1976 Plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSU, L.I. Brezhnev suddenly declared that "the path of independent development was opened among other countries before Democratic Kampuchea ("Pravda," October 26, 1976). However, the hopes for stability or positive changes in Cambodia soon dimmed, as Hanoi did not make any appreciable attempts to support Pol Pot's opponents. It is difficult to determine the reason for such passivity. Was it because the Vietnamese considered the changes irreversible, or

were they afraid to compromise “their people” in Phnom Penh, or did they not quite clearly realize how to help them, or did they not have actual possibilities to provide such help? In any case the attempt at Pol Pot’s removal from power ended extremely pitiably for Hanoi: thousands of “Brother Number One’s” opponents were imprisoned and executed, and the winner having regained his power, he could now openly conduct his anti-Vietnamese policy.

The “cat and mouse” game between Pol Pot and Hanoi ended after the Vietnamese Deputy minister of Foreign Affairs Hoang Van Loi’s confidential visit to Phnom Penh in February 1977. Pol Pot declined his proposal of a summit of Vietnamese and Cambodian leaders (Chanda 1986, p. 186). After the obvious failure of this visit, Hanoi, apparently, was finally convinced that it was impossible to come to terms with the Cambodian leadership. Gone were the hopes that Nuon Chea could change the situation for the benefit of Vietnam. At least during the Soviet ambassador’s meeting with the deputy minister of Foreign affairs of the SRV, Hoang Bich Son, on December 31, 1977, the Vietnamese representative said that “during the war with the United States, Nuon Chea’s attitude towards Vietnam was positive and now in his personal contacts with Vietnamese leaders he is to a certain extent sympathetic to Vietnam, but the current situation in Kampuchea makes such people unable to do anything” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1061. Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs of the SRV, Hoang Bich Son. December 31, 1977. p. 10).

Vietnam’s decision to take a tougher stand on relations with Democratic Kampuchea was also motivated by the endless border war, started by the Khmer Rouge in the spring of 1977, and the appearance of Chinese military personnel backing the Khmer Rouge, training and arming their troops, building roads and military bases. Among such bases was an Air Force base at Kampong Chhnang, which made it possible for military planes to reach the South Vietnamese capital Hochiminh City (Saigon) in half an hour’s time. The situation developed in such a manner that Hanoi had to think of the real threat to its national security rather than about an Indochinese federation. New circumstances required new approaches. In this connection the following information received by the Soviet ambassador from his Hungarian colleague in Vietnam deserves attention. “As a Hungarian journalist was informed, on September 30, 1977, the Politbureau of the CPV met in Saigon for an extraordinary session, under Le Duan’s chairmanship, to discuss when to

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

publish information on the Kampuchean reactionary forces' aggression" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 73, file 1407. Hungarian ambassador's information on Vietnamese-Cambodian relations. November 1, 1977. p. 99). The very term "Kampuchean reactionary forces" meant a radical turnaround of the Vietnamese policy. Hanoi had a new plan of operations to deal with the situation in Cambodia.

The first element of this plan was the change in Vietnam's border war strategy. While the year 1977 had seen the Vietnamese troops mainly defending, now they dealt a powerful direct blow against Cambodian territory, which came as a surprise to the Khmer Rouge. In December-January 1977-1978, Vietnamese troops destroyed Cambodian units and pursued Khmer Rouge combatants. For different reasons the Vietnamese did not occupy the country, but quickly withdrew their forces. (Bulgarian news agency correspondent I. Gaitanjiev was told that "the Vietnamese troops were deployed some 35 kilometers away from Phnom Penh but occupation of all Kampuchea was politically impossible" (RSAMH, Fund 5 inventory 75, file 1062. Record of the conversation of the Soviet embassy minister in Beijing with the BNA correspondent I. Gaitanjiev, Beijing, April 4, 1978 p. 23). This successful invasion made it possible for Hanoi to make a detailed appraisal of the situation in Cambodia and the mood of the majority of its population. When the Vietnamese forces entered Khmer territory, the local population, as a high-ranking Vietnamese diplomat informed the Soviet ambassador, "met the Vietnamese well" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1061, Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the chief of the consular department of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vu Hoang, February, 1978, p.15-16). Moreover, when the Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodian territory, thousands fled following them to Vietnam (Chanda 1986, p. 213).

At that time, Hanoi considered only two ways of solving the Cambodian problem. According to the chief of the consular department of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vu Hoang, "one option is a victory for "healthy" forces inside Democratic Kampuchea; another – is compelling Pol Pot to negotiate in a worsening situation" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1061. Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the chief of the consular department of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vu Hoang, February, 1978, p. 15-16).

As we see, Hanoi put its hopes either on a coup d'état and a victory of "healthy forces," or on the capitulation of Pol Pot and his acceptance of all Vietnamese conditions. But its leaders miscalculated. Attempts to organize Pol Pot's overthrow by a mutiny of the Eastern Zone military forces ended in a complete disaster for the anti-Pol Pot rebels in June 1978. Thereby the first option was discarded. The second one appeared equally unrealistic, as the Chinese aid to the Khmer Rouge sharply increased in 1978 and eased the difficulties experienced by the regime.

It appeared that the Vietnamese leadership did not limit itself to the two scenarios for Cambodia introduced by Vu Hoang to the Soviet ambassador. They had the third choice: overthrow the Pol Pot regime by a massive military invasion and introduce a new administration in Phnom Penh controlled by Hanoi. So in the middle of February 1978, Vietnamese party leaders Le Duan and Le Duc Tho met with, firstly, a small group of Khmer communists remaining in Vietnam, who had regrouped there in 1954 (most of the other regroupes had returned to Cambodia in the beginning of the 1970s, and were soon killed in repressions), and, secondly, with former Khmer Rouge who had sought refuge in Vietnam from Pol Pot's repressions. The purpose of these meetings was to form an anti-Pol Pot movement and political leadership. It would include Vietnamese army major Pen Sovan, a Khmer who had lived in Vietnam for 24 years, and the former Khmer Rouge Hun Sen, who had escaped to Vietnam only in June 1977. At that time "a chain of secret camps" for guerrilla army induction and training appeared in South Vietnam" (Chanda 1986, pp. 217-218). Former American military bases in Xuan Loc and Long Chau were the main camps. In April 1978, the first brigade of the anti-Pol Pot army was secretly administered an oath; later some other brigades manned at battalion level or below, were formed on the territory of Vietnam.

The provision of a proper diplomatic background for the operation to overthrow Pol Pot was considered of utmost importance. In June 1978, the Politbureau of the VWP Central Committee took a decision on the expediency of a trip by Le Duan to Moscow. A Soviet diplomat reported in June 1978, that "according to the Vietnamese the trip should have a confidential status. Le Trong Tan, deputy chief of the Joint Staff, will accompany Le Duan" (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062, Record of a Soviet diplomat's conversation with the member of the Politbureau of the VWP Central Committee, minister of foreign affairs of the SRV, Ngyuen Duy Trinh, June 15, 1978, p. 35).

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

By securing initially informal, and only after the conclusion of the friendship and cooperation treaty between the USSR and the SRV, official support from Moscow, the Vietnamese began to assert quite clearly that “the forthcoming dry season can be effectively used for powerful attacks on the Phnom Penh regime” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. Record of conversation of a Soviet diplomat with Nguyen Ngoc Tinh – deputy chief of South East Asian communist parties sector of the CPV Central Committee’s foreign relations department. October 20, 1978. p.1). An interesting thing was that the Vietnamese firmly assured Soviet representatives, who were concerned about the Chinese response to the prospective invasion, that “China will not have time to dispatch large military units to Phnom Penh to rescue the Kampuchean regime.” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. Record of the conversation of the Soviet diplomat with Nguyen Ngoc Tinh, deputy chief of the communist parties sector of the CPV Central Committee’s foreign relations department. October 20, 1978, p. 109).

Generally speaking, on the eve of the invasion, the Vietnamese rather explicitly and frankly told their Soviet allies what they knew about the situation in the Khmer leadership. In October 1978, according to a high-ranking Vietnamese party official “responsible for Cambodia,” Hanoi still believed that “there were two prominent party figures in Phnom Penh, who sympathized with Vietnam - Nuon Chea and the former first secretary of the Eastern Zone, So Phim.” Friends were aware, a Soviet diplomat reported, that “Nuon Chea opposes Pol Pot’s regime; he deeply sympathizes with the CPV, but fearing reprisals, he can not speak his mind.” Trying to save Nuon Chea from reprisals, the Vietnamese had severed all their contacts with him. They knew nothing about So Phim’s fate but believed that he had escaped and hidden in the jungles. According to the CPV Central Committee’s opinion, CPK Politbureau members Nuon Chea and So Phim were widely known political figures in Kampuchea who “under favorable circumstances could become leaders of bona fide revolutionary forces in this country” (RSAMH, Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062, p. 108, October 20, 1978. Record of conversation of a Soviet diplomat with Nguyen Ngoc Tinh – deputy chief of the Southeast Asia Communist parties sector of the CPV Central Committee’s Foreign relations department).

True enough, if So Phim and Nuon Chea had joined forces to head the resistance, the expulsion of Pol Pot from Phnom Penh and a transition of power to more moderate and pro-Vietnamese forces would not have been accompanied by such fierce fighting and destruction as that of 1979. Both leaders controlled a significant part of the military and party apparatus and

could have promptly taken main regions of the country under their control. Nevertheless, Vietnamese hopes that these figures would head an uprising against Pol Pot turned out to be groundless: So Phim perished during the revolt in June 1978, while Nuon Chea, as is now known, turned out to be one of the most devoted followers of Pol Pot - he did not defect to the Vietnamese side. Moreover, the situation around Nuon Chea remains extremely vague. It is difficult to understand why until the end of 1978 it was believed in Hanoi that Nuon Chea was “their man” in spite of the fact that all previous experience should have proved quite the contrary. Was Hanoi unaware of his permanent siding with Pol Pot, his demands that “the Vietnamese minority should not be allowed to reside in Kampuchea,” his extreme cruelty, as well as the fact that, “in comparison with Nuon Chea, people considered Pol Pot a paragon of kindness?” (Ben Kiernan 1996, p. 58). Either he skillfully deceived the Vietnamese, explaining his cruelty and anti-Vietnamese activity by the constraints under which he acted, or the Vietnamese were fooling themselves, failing to believe that a veteran communist who had once worked side by side with them in a united Indochina Communist Party and who was totally obliged to Hanoi, could become a traitor. It turns out that the Vietnamese were not only deceived by Nuon Chea. Other veterans of the ICP, such as Ta Mok and So Phim, were also bitterly anti-Vietnamese.

In this connection Hanoi, preparing the invasion and establishing a new Cambodian power, was compelled to rely on little-known figures from the mid-level Khmer Rouge echelon such as Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen, complemented by characters absolutely trustworthy after living for many years in Vietnam, like Pen Sovan and Keo Chenda. These two groups formed the core of the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea (UFNSK), founded in December 1978, and the Peoples’s Revolutionary Party, reconstructed a little later, at the beginning of January 1979. In this case former Khmer Rouge assumed control over the UFNSK, whose Central Committee was headed by Heng Samrin, while longtime Khmer residents of Vietnam took the key posts in the PRPK, where Pen Sovan was put at the head of the party construction commission, later transformed into the PRPK Central Committee.

Evidently, Hanoi had learned a lesson from the mistakes it committed in respect of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, and decided not to put “all its eggs in one basket” anymore.

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

Phnom Penh's seizure by the Vietnamese forces on January 7, 1979, and the declaration of the People's Republic of Kampuchea meant that it was all over for the Khmer Rouge as a ruling political organization in the country. Remnants of the Khmer Rouge entrenched themselves in the border areas adjacent to Thailand, conducting a protracted guerrilla war. But they never managed to restore their former might and influence. Political power in Cambodia was transferred to the PRPK, reconstructed by the Vietnamese. As to the history of relations between that organization with the VCP, and the attitudes of Vietnamese leaders to Hun Sen, who became prime minister in 1985 and was nicknamed "the man with plenty of guts" – that is a subject for another study.

References

- Chanda, Nayan. 1986. *Brother Enemy: the War after the War*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- Kiernan, Ben. 1985. *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975*, London, Verso
- Kiernan, Ben. 1996. *The Pol Pot regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979*, New Haven: Yale University Press
- Kiernan, Ben and Chantou Boua, ed. 1982. *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-1981*. London: Zed Press
- Nhan Dan. 29 VII, 1976
- Shawcross, William. 1979. *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*, N.Y.: Washington Square.
- Skvortsov, V . 1980. *Kampuchea: The Saving of Freedom, Moscow*.
- To Kuyen. 1984. 'The CPRP as avant-garde of the Kampuchean people', Cong Shang, 1983, N11-12. Cited from the Russian translation in "Questions of the history of the CPSU," N10.
- "Pravda", October 26, 1976.

1984. *Provotesat songkhep nei pak protiatyun padevoat Kampuchea* – ‘A Brief history of the KPRP – The vanguard of the working class and all the people of Kampuchea,’ Phnom Penh.

On the History of the Vietnamese-Kampuchean Conflict, Hanoi, 1979.

Russian State Archive of Modern History (RSAMH)

1965. Fund 5, inventory 50, file 721 (Document of the USSR embassy in the DRV, April 1, 1965.)

1966. Fund 5, inventory 58, file 324. (Economic problems and escalation of the domestic situation in Cambodia. The political letter of the embassy of the USSR in Cambodia, second quarter 1966.)

1966. Fund 5, inventory 58, file 262. (Information (spravka) “about the problem of sending Soviet volunteers to Vietnam” from the department of South East Asia countries of the Ministry of foreign affairs of the USSR, July 9, 1966.)

[1966?] Fund 5, inventory 58, file 009540, dossier 324.

1968. Fund 5, inventory 60, file 36. (‘Subversive activities of Chinese in Cambodia’ February 19, 1968.)

1970. Fund 5, inventory 69, file 489. (Record of Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the Prime Minister of DRV, Pham Van Dong on August 28, 1970.)

1971. Fund 89, list 54, document 10. (About VWP policy in determination of Indochinese problems and goals implied in the decisions of the IV Congress of the C.P.S.U. (political letter) May 21, 1971.)

[1971?] Fund 89, list 54, document 3.

1973. Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. (Record of the Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the VWP Central Committee secretary Le Duan, April 19, 1973.)

1973. Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. (Record of the Soviet ambassador’s conversation with the VWP Politbureau member and prime minister of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong, April 14, 1973.)

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

1973. Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. (Record of the Soviet embassy to the DRV's envoy-counsellor's conversation with the VWP Central Committee deputy chief of department Tran Khi Khien, June 16, 1973.)

1973. Fund 5, inventory 66, file 782. (Record of the Soviet embassy first secretary's conversation with the deputy chief of the socialist countries department of the VWP Central Committee, Nguyen Trong Thuat, November 13 1973.)

1974. Fund 5, inventory 67, file 659. (Record of the Soviet ambassador's conversation with the Vietnamese deputy minister of foreign affairs, Hoang Van Tien. April 12, 1974.)

1974. Fund 5, inventory 67, file 659. (Record of conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the Chief of the Department of the USSR and East European countries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DRV, Ngyuen Huu Ngo. May 30, 1974.)

[1974], Fund 5, inventory 67, file 655. (The 1974 political report of the Soviet embassy in the DRV.)

1976 Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. (Record of conversation of the Soviet ambassador with Le Duan, first secretary of the Vietnamese communist party Central Committee, November 16, 1976.)

1976. Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. (Conversations of the Soviet ambassador with Xuan Thuy, February 16, 1976.)

1976. Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2312. (Conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DRV, Hoanh Van Loi, July 1976.)

1976. Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. (Conversation of the Soviet ambassador with prime minister Pham Van Dong, July 13, 1976.)

1976. Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. (Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the VWP, Le Duan, November 16, 1976.)

1976. Fund 5, inventory 69, file 2314. (Conversation of the Soviet ambassador with Ngyuen Duy Trinh , October 15, 1976.)

1977. Fund 5, inventory 73, file 1407. (Hungarian ambassador's information on Vietnamese-Cambodian relations. November 1, 1977.)

1977. Fund 5, inventory 73, file 1409. (Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with Truong Chinh, March 15, 1977.)

1977. Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1061. (Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs of the SRV, Hoang Bich Son. December 31, 1977.)

1978. Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1061 (Record of the Soviet ambassador's conversation with the Vietnamese communist party Central Committee's first deputy chief of the external relations department, Nguyen Thanh Le, January 14, 1978.)

1978. Fund 5, inventory, 75, file 1061. (Record of the Soviet ambassador's conversation with the first deputy chief of the external relations department of the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee, Nguyen Thanh Le, January 14, 1978.)

1978. Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1061. (Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with the chief of the consular department of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vu Hoang. February, 1978.)

1978. Fund 5 inventory 75, file 1061. (Record of the conversation of the Soviet ambassador with member of the Central Committee of the CPV, Chairman of Committee on Science and Technology of the SRV, Tran Quy Inh, March 24, 1978.)

1978. Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. (Information on the conversation of the German comrades with the deputy minister of foreign affairs of the SRV Nguyen Co Thach, who went on holiday to the GDR from the 1st to the 6th of August, 1978. August 17, 1978.)

1978. Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. (Record of Soviet ambassador's conversation with the deputy minister of Foreign affairs of the SRV, Nguyen Co Thach, January 21, 1978.)

1978. Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. (Record of the conversation of the Soviet diplomat with Nguyen Ngoc Tinh, deputy chief of the communist parties sector

The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists

of the CPV Central Committee's foreign relations department.
(October 20, 1978.)

1978. Fund 5, inventory 75, file 1062. (Record of a Soviet diplomat's conversation with the member of the Politbureau of the VWP Central Committee, minister of foreign affairs of the SRV, Ngyuen Duy Trinh, June 15, 1978.)

1978. RSAMH, Fund 5 inventories 75, file 1062. (Record of the conversation of the Soviet embassy minister in Beijing with the BNA correspondent I. Gaitanjiev, Beijing, April 4.)

An earlier version of this paper appeared in the Russian journal *Vostok* ('Orient'), no. 3, August 2000. This English translation has been made possible through the support of Ben Kiernan and Yale University.