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**EAST GERMAN SOCIALISM AND THE KHMER ROUGE
REVOLUTION: INSIGHTS FROM THE GDR'S DIPLOMATIC
ARCHIVES**

Abstract:

This paper analyzes East German perceptions of the Khmer Rouge revolution, particularly its ideological tenants vis-à-vis other communist and socialist currents, as well as developments of the movement's diplomat relations before and during its exercise of power.

The German Democratic Republic's diplomatic archives for the period of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979), the Khmer Rouge's extremist utopia, have recently become publicly accessible. The archival holdings provide a wide-ranging collection of internal assessments, official propaganda materials, diplomatic cables and minutes of ambassadorial meetings, as well as communication between the GDR's diplomatic corps and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. My analysis of these thus far unknown materials suggests that, initially, East Germany – exemplary also for other regimes of the Soviet block – pursued a delusive hope of integrating the Khmer Rouge into a worldwide socialist brotherhood, with some, if skeptical, praise for the daring policies of Democratic Kampuchea's early phase. Two years into the regime, however, a sharp decline in the European socialist euphoria towards Khmer Rouge style communism can be noted, accelerated by growing tensions between Democratic Kampuchea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam which ultimately led to the Third Indochina War. At the same time, the GDR's diplomatic archives provide irritated accounts for the Khmer Rouge's heightened interest in developing diplomatic relations with the Third World and western nations.

The wide range of archival documents analyzed here helps to foster a more differentiated understanding of intra-ideological debates in socialist and communist countries during a critical phase of the Cold War and contributes further to the hitherto fragmentary assessment of the Khmer Rouge's ideology.

Keywords:

Khmer Rouge ; Democratic Kampuchea ; East Germany ; Diplomatic Relations ; Ideology

Introduction

This study is based on an analysis of diplomatic documents from the Foreign Ministry of the German Democratic Republic (*Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten*, MfAA), now kept in the Political Archives at the Federal Foreign Office (PAAA) in Berlin.

The use of evidence from archival sources in historical science is generally seen as paramount. Historians depend on primary materials in order “to rule out rival explanations and to increase confidence in their own account” (Vitalis 2006: 11). Sole reliance on secondary media accounts, as in some semi-historical writing on current affairs, does not only decrease the overall validity of argument and interpretation, but also fails to account for the inherent complexity of political action. This is particularly the case for research on secretive political regimes like the Khmer Rouge’s Democratic Kampuchea.

In consequence, archival research has been a key to understanding the highly opaque Khmer Rouge regime (see Chigas 2000, or Caswell 2010). David Chandler’s seminal study on the Khmer Rouge’s central detention facility S-21 (see Chandler 1999), for example, relies mainly on the prison’s archival records, now safeguarded as part of the Tuol Sleng Museum for Genocidal Crimes, and – in copy – at the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam). The collections of DC-Cam by now extend far beyond the tortured ‘confessions’ of prisoners in S-21. They include Khmer Rouge radio telegrams, minutes of cadre meetings and other official documents, as well as an extensive photographic archive and records of oral testimony. As such, the collections held at DC-Cam have become a major source for historical research on the Khmer Rouge regime as well as an important asset for the currently on-going accountability process in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).¹

Notably, little attention has been paid, so far, to archives outside of Cambodia. An exception to this is Dmitry Mosyakov’s work on relations between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese communists based on materials from the Russian State Archive of Modern History (see Mosyakov 2005). Surprisingly, it seems that no major attempts have been undertaken, either by scholars or the ECCC, to access Vietnamese archives, which are suspected to keep a significant number of Khmer Rouge documents taken out of the country during the period of the Vietnam-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).

After German reunification in 1990, the records of the GDR Ministry of Foreign Affairs and those of diplomatic missions of the GDR (1949-1990) abroad have been integrated into the holdings of the Political Archives at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin (PAAA).² According to German law, access to (non-classified) materials is restricted to files that have been closed for at least thirty years. In consequence, materials on Democratic Kampuchea have only recently become accessible to

¹ DC-Cam has provided about half a million pieces of documentary evidence to the parties at the ECCC and the center’s director Youk Chhang has been questioned as a witness for three days in February 2002.

² *Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts.* – Archival research in the Political Archives of the Federal Foreign Office was conducted in August 2011 and May 2012. I wish to express my gratitude to the assistance in allocating relevant materials, which I received from the archive’s staff on these occasions.

scholars. Diplomatic relations between Cambodia and East Germany had been formally initiated in May 1969 and the PAAA holdings of MfAA documents on Cambodian affairs during the following decade count well over five thousand pages.

Although East Germany was not among the scant number of countries able to maintain an embassy in Phnom Penh from 1975-1979, documents from its diplomatic archives are nonetheless of significant interest for research on Democratic Kampuchea's foreign policy and the regime's ideological outlook. Relevant archival holdings of the PAAA in this regard include materials from Democratic Kampuchea's Embassy in East Berlin, which remained active until May 1977,³ and minutes of meetings between the East German and the DK diplomatic corps in Hanoi, Vientiane and Beijing. Additionally, the archive holds a vast collection of intelligence materials, internal country assessments, official DK documents and propaganda materials, as well as media clippings and translations of news wires from a diverse range of sources.⁴

Cambodia's Diplomatic Relations to East Germany

The history of diplomatic relations between Cambodia and East Germany has undergone several phases, broadly corresponding to the changing tides of Cambodian political regimes. After Cambodia gained its independence from France in 1953, a period of relative stability and prosperity marked the "Sihanouk years" of the Kingdom of Cambodia until the late 1960s when the country became increasingly affected by the Vietnam War. General Lon Nol's coup d'état in 1970, supported by the US government established the Khmer Republic and initiated a period of civil war which would last for almost thirty years. The deposed Prime Minister Prince Norodom Sihanouk maintained a government in exile, the Royal Government of National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK), allied with the National United Front of Kampuchea (FUNK) composed of Khmer Rouge resistance fighters. When the military regime of Lon Nol was overthrown in April 1975 by the armed resistance, the secretive, utopian and brutal state of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was established. Infighting amongst different Khmer Rouge factions and growing tensions with neighboring Vietnam ultimately led to the demise of Democratic Kampuchea in January 1979 when the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (FUNSK) entered Phnom Penh and the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was established as a socialist state with support of Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Until the end of the Cold War, Western powers continued to extend diplomatic recognition to the DK government, which still controlled some northwestern portions of the country and was able to retain Cambodia's official seat at the United Nations.

Hopeful Beginnings

First diplomatic contacts between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were established in the late 1950s. A "trade and financial" treaty was signed in July 1960 and ratified on February 1st, 1961,

³ Cf. *MfAA Hausmitteilung* [Internal memo], November 2nd, 1977, in: MfAA – C 6689.

⁴ Beyond the main corpus of materials in German, the archives hold a range of Russian, French, Khmer and English language documents. The linguistic provenance of materials is clearly indicated in this article on a case-to-case basis. Translations are, if not indicated otherwise, my own.

establishing active economic and technical cooperation. In October 1962 East Germany opened a Consulate General in Phnom Penh and “relations between Cambodia and the GDR developed continuously in all areas, whereby a particularly fruitful and close cooperation exists in the area of cultural politics”.⁵

The Consulate General was upgraded to a Political Representation in 1967, but Sihanouk refrained from extending full diplomatic recognition on the ambassadorial level to either of the German states on the principle of non-recognition of the German East-West divide. West German aid, however, convinced Sihanouk eventually to allow the establishment a Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) embassy in Phnom Penh, openly disappointing the East German government. The step was reversed on May 8th, 1969, when full diplomatic relations between GDR and Cambodia were established.⁶ It seems that the elevation of the GDR representation in Phnom Penh to the ambassadorial level was also a signal of growing distrust towards the United States. It coincided with the raising of the representation of the Viet Cong’s National Liberation Front (NLF) to the status of an embassy and Sihanouk’s rejection of President Nixon’s border declaration of April 2nd, 1969, recognizing the present borders of the Kingdom of Cambodia, which had become seen as a mere lip service (Clymer 2004: 5).

The Khmer Republic, GRUNK/FUNK and the Victory of the Khmer Rouge

After General Lon Nol’s coup d’état on March 18th, 1970, relations between East Germany and the newly established Khmer Republic deteriorated. Two months into the military regime, diplomatic relations were downgraded to a caretaker representation and in late 1973 the embassy was temporarily closed. After the GDR officially acknowledged the Royal Government of National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK) and its allied National United Front of Kampuchea (FUNK) as the legitimate government of Cambodia, the pre-Lon Nol accredited Cambodian ambassador to Berlin, Sisowath Methavi, returned to the GDR on January 22nd, 1974, now as a representative of the GRUNK/FUNK.⁷

In October 1974, Prince Sihanouk was received in the GDR embassy in Beijing in his function as GRUNK/FUNK head of state for a two hours long exchange on the current situation in Cambodia. The East German ambassador to China reassured Sihanouk of his country’s continued support at the United Nations for acknowledgement of the GRUNK/FUNK as the legitimate government of Cambodia.⁸

⁵ *Kurzinformationen über die Beziehungen der DDR zu Kambodscha, die westdeutsch-kambodschanischen Beziehungen sowie die Haltung Kambodschas zur deutschen Frage* [Brief information on the relations of the GDR towards Cambodia, West German-Cambodian relations, and Cambodia’s Attitude regarding the German Question], in: MfAA – C 205/76.

⁶ *Bericht über die Gespräche und Aktivitäten, die zur Einrichtung der Botschaft, führten* [Report on Talks and Activities which led to the establishment of the embassy], Embassy of the GDR in the Kingdom of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 12 May 1969, in: MfAA – C 231/76.

⁷ *Beziehungen DDR – Kambodscha* [Relations GDR – Cambodia], in: MfAA – C 6689.

⁸ *Aktenvermerk über den Besuch des Staatschefs des Königreichs Kambodscha und Vorsitzenden der Nationalen Einheitsfront Kambodschas, Prinz Norodom Sihanouk, in der Botschaft der DDR am 7. 10. 1974* [File-note regarding the visit of the Kingdom of Cambodia’s head-of-state and president of the National United Front of Kampuchea, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, in the GDR embassy on October 7th, 1974], Embassy of the GDR in the PR China, Beijing, 8 October 1974, in: MfAA – C 6672.

GDR officials were baffled when Khmer Rouge forces entered Phnom Penh on April 17th, 1975, representing the GRUNK/FUNK, and forced East German ambassadorial personnel together with about six hundred other foreigners⁹ to take refuge in the French embassy. The GDR administrative attaché, Erich Stange, had just returned from Kuala Lumpur two days earlier and had been looking forward to the liberation of Phnom Penh on the hands of the Khmer Rouge.¹⁰

On January 28th, 2013, during the proceedings at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), an eyewitness, the American photojournalist Al Rockoff recalled that

“the East Germans were forced out of their embassy at gunpoint by the Khmer Rouge, sent to the French Embassy and they were very upset at the conditions. [...] They were very, very bitter. [...] I remember how angry the East Germans were because they flew in specifically for the victory, [but] they were not invited”.¹¹

A GRUNK/FUNK communiqué of April 28th, 1975, stipulated that diplomatic missions with accreditation at the Lon Nol government had lost all privileges, including diplomatic immunity. Two days later, the French embassy was evacuated and all assembled foreigners were brought by truck to Thailand.

By late 1975, diplomatic relations between Democratic Kampuchea and the GDR were “practically frozen”. An internal report notes that the activities of the “Royal Embassy in Berlin are basically constrained to look after the interests of the ca. 40 Cambodian citizens in the GDR (students and graduates), as well as to the dissemination of official bulletins”. In consequence, suggested policies to be adopted by East Germany in this situation included the exchange of formal New Year’s greetings, requests to “Vietnamese and Laotian comrades” to mediate the establishment of direct contacts to the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), continued and repeated offers of “solidarity and aid,” and – first and foremost – trying to persuade the “Cambodian comrades” to consider the re-establishment of a formal diplomatic mission of the GDR in Phnom Penh.¹²

Almost a year into the regime of Democratic Kampuchea, East Germany was still firmly expecting the reopening of its embassy in Phnom Penh. In a decision of February 1976, the GDR Council of Ministers (*Ministerrat*) urged the Far East Department (*Abteilung Ferner Osten*) to prepare concrete plans for an impending reestablishment of a diplomatic mission in Phnom Penh, which “according to Cambodian statements could be realized in 1977.”¹³

⁹ A high-level letter of the GDR foreign minister Oskar Fischer mentions more than a thousand foreign refugees stranded in the French embassy (see MfAA – C 6689).

¹⁰ *Dossier zum Aufenthalt des Gen. Erich Stange, Verwaltungsattaché der DDR in Phnom Penh, in der Botschaft Frankreichs vom 17. Bis 30. 4. 1975* [Dossier on the stay of Com. Erich Stange, administrative attaché of the GDR in Phnom Penh, at the French embassy from April 17th to 30th, 1975], in: MfAA – C 6696.

¹¹ ECCC court proceedings E1/165.1/TR002/20130128, p. 101.

¹² *Einschätzung der gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung in den Ländern Indochinas (...)* [Assessment of social developments in Indochina (...)], Berlin, 5 December 1975, MfAA – C 6525.

¹³ [Internal memo] *Abt. Ferner Osten, 6410*, 26 February 1976, in: MfAA – C 6696.

Despite such reassurances, since early 1976 the Khmer Rouge leaders seemed to be more anxious to expand their international cooperation with the non-communist developing world assembled in the Non-Aligned Movement, and subsequently some Western countries like Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Greece, Finland or Italy (see Morris 1999: 75 f., Ragos-Espinas 1983: 46, and Pradhan 1985: 186). Intelligence assessments of the GDR claim that Democratic Kampuchea, by March 1977, “entertain[ed] diplomatic relations with around 100 states, mostly non-aligned countries”.¹⁴

Basic Principles of Democratic Kampuchea’s Foreign Policy

It has been claimed that, “[i]n addition to being brutal, the Khmer Rouge regime of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was one of the most isolated in the world” (Clymer 2004: 109). If this claim suggests a lack of concern towards matters of foreign policy among the Khmer Rouge leadership, or the absence of DK diplomatic relations with the outside world, it proves to be unqualified. Even the Khmer Rouge’s staunchest critics admit that “despite its xenophobia, it would be wrong to see DK as a hermit state, shunning foreign entanglement” (Kiernan 2001: 193).

As early as April 25th to 27th, 1975, just a week after Khmer Rouge forces had entered Phnom Penh, a special National Congress outlined the principles of Democratic Kampuchea’s foreign policy in terms of

“independence, peace, neutrality and non-alignment, absolutely prohibiting any country from establishing military bases in Cambodia, against all forms of subversion against Cambodia from outside, whether military, political, economic, cultural, social or diplomatic”.¹⁵

Although, throughout 1975, formal diplomatic relations were limited to China and North Korea, as well as DK’s immediate neighbours Vietnam and Thailand (cf. Poole 1976: 29), the “forging of international contacts” has been called “another significant political activity of the new regime in 1975” (Ragos-Espinas 1983: 44). Consequently, an official delegation, led by DK’s foreign minister Ieng Sary, was sent to attend the Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Lima (Peru) in late August, and the Seventh Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York from 1-15 September 1975, where “the delegates from around the world warmly applauded” the Cambodian delegation (Barron and Paul 1977: 209). Ieng Sary’s departure to Lima and New York was preceded by a state visit to Beijing, together with Khieu Samphan,¹⁶ who “in his speech referred to the tremendous support and assistance rendered by China” (Pradhan 1985: 185) to the Khmer Rouge struggle. Indeed, China, alongside North Korea, would remain Democratic Kampuchea’s foremost international ally for years to come. The special relationship to China is mentioned throughout in diplomatic minutes of the GDR, noting the array of bilateral

¹⁴ *Zur Entwicklung im Demokratischen Kampuchea* [Regarding developments in Democratic Kampuchea], Abteilung FO (Fern-Ost) [Division Far-East], Berlin, 30 March 1977, in: MfAA – C 6682.

¹⁵ Quoted in Pradhan 1985: 184. Cf. also *Information über die Haltung Kambodschas zu internationalen Problemen* [Information regarding Cambodia’s attitude towards international problems], Far East Department, 20 August 1975, in: MfAA – C 6694.

¹⁶ Khieu Samphan did not join Ieng Sary on his trip to the Americas, but continued to Pyongyang (North Korea).

trade and aid agreements, the posting of Chinese specialists in DK industrial estates, or the Phnom Penh's sole functioning air link, which was to Beijing.¹⁷

Reverberating the basic foreign policy principles of the special National Congress, DK's then Head-of-State Samdech Norodom Sihanouk assured the United Nations General Assembly in October 1975 that

“Cambodia wants to establish friendly relations with all countries, states and governments which cherish peace, justice and freedom and which respect the independence, neutrality, sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-aligned policy of the Cambodian nation and people”.¹⁸

Throughout the period of Democratic Kampuchea, and after,¹⁹ the Khmer Rouge leadership utilized the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement as their primary international platforms.

In accordance with the Khmer Rouge's foreign policy thrusts of territorial integrity, non-interference, and the right for national self-determination, Ieng Sary's and Khieu Samphan's speeches at these international forums commonly voice support for the Palestinian and East Timorese struggles for self-determination and urge the final decolonization of southern Africa, repeatedly condemning the racist Apartheid regime. Reversely, and due to DK's close allegiance with China, the reintegration of Taiwan into the 'Chinese motherland' is urged. Similarly, the Khmer Rouge leadership condemns “the splittist schemes of the American imperialists, seeking to maintain their domination over South Korea” and encourages “the independent and peaceful reunification of Korea”.²⁰

The Khmer Rouge's subscription to the revolutionary ideals of the Non-Aligned Movement, rather than to the idea of socialist brotherhood, were also promulgated in Ieng Sary's speeches before the tiny diplomatic corps in Phnom Penh. During the 1977 New Year's reception he promoted

“the revolution of Kampuchea as a modest contribution to the common cause of the revolution in the world and to the struggle of all peace- and justice-loving peoples, especially to the struggle of the peoples of the non-aligned countries and the Third World”.²¹

From Democratic Kampuchea to the People's Republic

¹⁷ Cf. *Informationen über einige Aspekte der Innen- und Außenpolitik des “Demokratischen Kampuchea” seitens der SRV* [Information regarding some aspects of the interior and foreign policies of 'Democratic Kampuchea' voiced by the PRV], Embassy of the GDR in Hanoi, 9 August 1976, in: MfAA – C 6682. Cf. Clymer 2004: 109, Ragos-Espinas 1983: 80-83, or Jackson 1978: 82.

¹⁸ Quoted in Ragos-Espinas 1983: 44.

¹⁹ The Khmer Rouge retained their officially acknowledged seat at the United Nations, representing the Cambodian government during the Vietnam-supported *Peoples Republic of Kampuchea* (PRK) from January 1979.

²⁰ 'The People of Democratic Kampuchea Hails the Victories of the 5th Summit Conference of Non-Aligned Countries', in: *Democratic Kampuchea, a Workers' and Peasants' State in Southeast Asia*, (Embassy of Democratic Kampuchea in Berlin, GDR. March 1977).

²¹ Extracts from his speech are reprinted in: *Democratic Kampuchea, a Workers' and Peasants' State in Southeast Asia*, (Embassy of Democratic Kampuchea in Berlin, GDR. March 1977).

In April 1977, Cambodia's remaining diplomatic representatives in the GDR were recalled and the Cambodian embassy in Berlin was closed on May 14th, 1977. Throughout the same year, diplomatic missions in a number of other socialist countries were closed as well, and the Khmer Rouge recalled all of their diplomatic personnel from the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Romania, Albania, Egypt, Congo, Senegal and Algeria. By late 1977, Democratic Kampuchea only maintained embassies in China, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam. According to official DK statements the closure of foreign embassies was based on domestic politics and should not be seen as constituting an "unfriendly attitude" to the concerned states: "economic difficulties" and the "need of former diplomats to become acquainted with the new Kampuchea" were given as the main reasons. However, GDR officials suspected that Chinese pressure contributed to the decision to discontinue diplomatic ties with "socialist brother states."²² Until early 1978, diplomatic officials continued to suggest that DK was interested to establish and further develop good relations to countries, which respected and shared its own foreign policy principles of non-interference, territorial integrity and peaceful coexistence.²³ However, with rising tensions between Vietnam and Cambodia throughout the same year, prospects for the reestablishment of friendly diplomatic relations between Democratic Kampuchea and the socialist bloc faded away. In a sketchy internal note of April 1978,²⁴ unnamed GDR officials acknowledge that the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict seemed to be "long-term" and the Khmer Rouge aimed to "weaken the standing of the PRV in the world" and used the conflict to "further nationalistic goals." DK's long suspected complicity with China seemed to be reaffirmed and the Khmer Rouge's actions are seen to concur with "imperialism's counterrevolutionary goals towards the PRV."

East German policy towards Cambodia officially changed at the end of 1978. In a letter of December 18th, GDR foreign minister Oskar Fischer suggests the secretary general of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) Erich Honecker that the GDR should officially and publicly pronounce support for the Vietnam-backed Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (FUNSK). Immediately upon receipt Honecker added in a brief handwritten note "agreed".²⁵

After the FUNSK supported by Vietnamese troops took over Phnom Penh from the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, immediate steps were taken by the GDR's foreign ministry to reestablish diplomatic relations²⁶ and together with other countries of the socialist bloc the GDR was among the first to extend full political recognition to the newly formed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Economic, socio-cultural and educational cooperation resumed swiftly and the GDR provided various avenues of assistance in the early post-Khmer Rouge reconstruction and accountability process of the PRK. East German jurists, health professionals and technicians worked as advisors in the PRK (Gottesman 2003: 113, 146 and 153 f.). Two feature length documentaries by the influential, state funded 'Studio H&S' of Walter Heynowski and

²² *Information über die Schließung der Botschaft des Demokratischen Kampuchea in der DDR und in anderen Staaten* [Information regarding the closure of the DK embassy in the GDR and in other states], in: MfAA – C 6696.

²³ See various documents, e.g. in MfAA – C 6525, C 6672, C 6689, or C 6696.

²⁴ In: MfAA – C 6689.

²⁵ MfAA – C 6711.

²⁶ *Maßnahmen zur weiteren Entwicklung der Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der Volksrepublik Kampuchea* [Measures regarding the further development of cooperation between the GDR and the People's Republic of Kampuchea], Far East Department, Berlin, 9 March 1979, in: MfAA – C 6696.

Gerhard Scheumann – *Kampuchea: Sterben und Auferstehen* (Kampuchea: Death and Rebirth, 1980) and *Die Angkar* (The Angkar, 1981) – helped drawing international attention to the terror of the ‘Pol Pot clique’ and its consequences for Kampuchea (Maguire 2005: 93-98). The GDR authorities also provided assistance in designing the ‘Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes’ on the premises of the Khmer Rouge’s central detention facility S-21 in Phnom Penh (Williams 2004: 35) and dispatched a legal advisor to the People’s Revolutionary Tribunal, which handed a death sentence *in absentia* to Pol Pot and Ieng Sary in August 1979 (De Nike 2008).

East German aid to the People’s Republic of Kampuchea continued throughout the 1980s and would increasingly include economic and technical support. In January 1982, during a visit of the GDR’s defense minister, a military cooperation agreement was signed, providing training programs for the PRK Armed Forces in East Germany and the development of air defense works in Cambodia (Carney 1983: 81). The main avenue of support for the PRK, however, was the resumption of educational exchange programs at the university level, which had formerly existed prior to the Khmer Rouge regime. Between 1983 and 1989, East Germany was one of the favored destinations for young Cambodian. The 1981 established School of Languages in Phnom Penh provided intensive German language classes for prospective students, supervised by two German teachers dispatched by the GDR government (Clayton 1999: 72). With an average annual aid budget of \$5 million, East Germany was one of the PRK’s main donors after the Soviet Union and Vietnam (Mysliwiec 1988).

East German Assessments of the Khmer Rouge Revolution

When Willi Stoph, one of East Germany’s most senior officials, received the Cambodian ambassador in Berlin, Sisowath Methavi, four days after the Khmer Rouge’s ‘liberation’ of Phnom Penh, he expressed his satisfaction about the Cambodian victory over “US imperialism” and assured the ambassador of the GDR’s solidarity.²⁷ In exactly this sense, the initial enthusiasm of East German officials was of a general nature, defined not so much by particular, novel aspects of the Khmer Rouge revolution as by its victory over a common enemy. In the first couple of years of Khmer Rouge rule, the DK embassy in Berlin was actively involved in the production and dissemination of propaganda materials to bolster international support for the Khmer Rouge revolution. A number of bulletins and booklets were produced, praising the “heroic revolution” in Cambodia. Additionally, six propaganda films have been produced by the East German DEFA-Studio, now stored at the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) in Phnom Penh (Fromholz 2006: 110).

Between enthusiasm and skepticism

Early assessments of the particularities of the Khmer Rouge revolution often oscillate between hopeful enthusiasm for the Khmer Rouge’s “new ways” and critical skepticism towards their radical and nationalistic outlook. Since the GDR could not

²⁷ Vermerk über das Gespräch des Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates der DDR, Willi Stoph, mit dem Botschafter Kambodschas, Sisowath Methavi, am 21. 4. 1975 [Note on the conversation of the president of the GDR state council, Willi Stoph, with the Cambodian ambassador, Sisowath Methavi, on April 21st, 1975], in: MfAA – C 6672.

establish any diplomatic presence in Phnom Penh, information on the situation in Democratic Kampuchea are mostly based on conversations with Vietnamese, Laotian, Cuban and Chinese officials, or on talks with Cambodian diplomats at the GDR embassies in Vientiane, Hanoi and Beijing. However, most of Democratic Kampuchea's diplomatic officials had no or little personal experience of developments within the country. Their role was limited to that of messengers, conveying official accounts of successful developments in agricultural production, infrastructural reconstruction, political fervor and the population's revolutionary spirit.

Generally, the East German position towards the Khmer Rouge revolution concurs with assessments communicated by Vietnamese officials. A note about conversations with the DK ambassador to Vietnam, Sien An, of August 1975, for example, contains a postscript on discussions of the DK ambassador's statements with "Vietnamese comrades".²⁸ Sien An had explained the reasons for the evacuation of all Cambodian cities, the Khmer Rouge's reeducation programs, or the future role of Prince Sihanouk who was to "return to Cambodia and become head of state, which [only] means he has to endorse the government and proclaim state policies – beyond that he will live behind closed doors in his palace." Vietnamese comments on Sien An's explanation of the radical initial policies of the Khmer Rouge stressed that the Cambodian revolution should be seen as a "proletarian [revolution], which chooses to go a totally novel way." It is suggested that – even though "it is still uncertain whether this will be a success" – one should "remain patient" towards Cambodia since if this new type of revolution proves to be successful, "the Cambodian comrades will have enriched the experiences of the workers' movement."

One of the key documents for the early East German perception of Khmer Rouge style communism is the *Assessment of Social Development in the Countries of Indochina*, dated December 5th, 1975.²⁹ The thirty pages long, internal report praises the "world-political significance of the victory of the Vietnamese people and the patriots of Laos and Cambodia," which is regarded as the "expression of a deep and wide-reaching change of international power relations in favor of peace and socialism." Despite all praise and optimism towards the communist revolution in Cambodia, East German cadres concur with their "Soviet and Vietnamese comrades" in the assessment that the newly (re)formed Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) was still "unstable", both in "political-ideological" and in "organizational" regard.³⁰ The leadership of the party is seen as "not unitary" [*nicht einheitlich*], with one group oriented towards "the Chinese leaders" and another towards Vietnamese-style socialism. GDR officials estimated – and desired – that the "positions of the latter group can possibly be strengthened." The document frequently expresses skepticism and bafflement regarding the strong nationalistic outlook of the CPK and notes that the party seems to have "little experience with the guidance of social processes." The use of "radicalized methods" – such as the evacuation of all cities, or the total abolition of private ownership – in restructuring Cambodian society is explicitly

²⁸ *Vermerk über ein Gespräch mit dem Botschafter Kambodschas, Sien An, am 22. 08. 1975* [Note on a conversation with the Cambodian ambassador Sien An on August 22nd, 1975], [GDR] Embassy Hanoi, 26 August 1975, in: MfAA – C 6682.

²⁹ *Einschätzung der gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung in den Ländern Indochinas und Schlußfolgerungen für die weitere Gestaltung der Beziehungen der DDR zu Vietnam, Laos und Kambodscha*, Berlin, 5 December 1975, MfAA – C 6525.

³⁰ The GDR's awareness of the existence of the CPK in December 1975 is somewhat surprising since it was not publicly announced until a party congress in April 1976 and the Khmer Rouge tried their best to conceal the nature of *angkar* ("the organization") both domestically and internationally.

criticized, as is the denial of active, friendly relations to the “global communist movement” [*kommunistische Weltbewegung*]. The CPK’s goal to implement a radical and utopian form of socialism, together with a fully autarkical economy – “regardless of the actual situation” in Cambodia – is seen as “unrealistic.” In this situation, the document concludes, that

“the political immaturity of the Cambodian comrades [...] demands much engagement and patience from the [socialist] brother-parties in order to develop a meaningful cooperation with the CPK and to strengthen its Marxist-Leninist forces. This is paramount in order to prevent Cambodia’s descent into a military-bureaucratic dictatorship and to safeguard its national-democratic revolution.”

The Khmer Rouge as Maoists

Despite some initial enthusiasm for the Khmer Rouge revolution, the GDR’s reservation regarding the role of China in Democratic Kampuchea’s policies can be noted as early as June 1975. Kurt Schumann of the GDR Far East Department remarked in a meeting with Czech comrades: “Socialist positions need to be strengthened in Cambodia in order to avoid that Maoist forces on Cambodian soil are given an opportunity to disturb developments in southern Vietnam and Laos.”³¹ Consequently GDR officials note with satisfaction some internal information by the Vietnamese deputy foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach in October:

“Since their victory, our Cambodian comrades do not mention Chinese aid in the first place anymore, but stress the solidarity of the 3 countries of Indochina. During the [Ministerial] Conference [of Non-Aligned Nations] in Lima our Cambodian comrades did not say anything about China.”³²

Two years later, in October 1977, it had become fully evident that the Khmer Rouge’s internal power struggle between Vietnamese-leaning socialists and Chinese-influenced Maoists had been decided in favor of the latter. A document based on information of the GDR embassy in Vientiane acknowledges that Pol Pot was a staunch Maoist, “and even more, [in his ideological fervor] he even exceeds the current Beijing leadership.” Pol Pot and his foreign minister, Ieng Sary, are described as “wannabe intellectuals [*Intelligenzler*] with *petite-bourgeoise*, opportunistic, and anti-Vietnamese attitudes.” Notably, the same document describes Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan as more “reasonable” and potentially pro-Vietnamese, and conceives the two as opposed to the “Pol Pot-Ieng Sary group.” The document also mentions widespread executions of opponents, “internal resistance” and the flight of “even mid-ranking cadre” to Vietnam. The reasons for the increasingly tense situation both

³¹ Vermerk über ein Gespräch des Genossen Schumann mit dem Gen. Kramar, 3. Sekretär der Botschaft der CSSR in der DDR am 5. 6. 1975 [Note on a conversation of Comrade Schumann with Com. Kramar, 3rd Secretary of the Czech embassy in the GDR, on June 5th, 1975], Berlin, 12 June 1975, in: MfAA – C 6672.

³² Vermerk über die interne Information des stellvertretenden Außenministers der DRV, Gen. Nguyen Co Thach, am 18. 10. 75 über einige Aspekte der Lage in Kambodscha [Note on internal information of the deputy foreign minister of the PRV, Com. Nguyen Co Thach, on October 18th, 1975, about some aspects regarding the situation in Cambodia], Berlin, 28 October 1975, in: MfAA – C 6672

inside DK and between DK and its neighbors is attributed to the “nationalistic and Maoist positions” of the Khmer Rouge leadership.³³

From 1977 onwards, internal GDR documents also include an increasing awareness of the shallow nature of official DK statements conveyed by its diplomatic officials. If up to 1976 occasionally there was praise and acclaim for the Khmer Rouge’s achievements, the reports on DK become increasingly skeptical regarding the “alleged” success of Khmer Rouge policies. Many documents explicitly note that DK officials were unable, or unwilling, to detail particular claims and further explicate the communist institutions of Democratic Kampuchea.

The Khmer Rouge as nationalists and imperialists

Suspicion among East German officials also arose due to the DK’s policies of increasingly friendly contacts to governments beyond the socialist bloc. The active role DK sought to play in the Non-Aligned Movement early on seemed tolerable, although the increasing distance to socialist nations was frequently bemoaned by the GDR. By mid-May 1976, however, Democratic Kampuchea had established diplomatic relations with all member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) except for Indonesia (which would follow in 1978), and in early 1977 DK foreign minister Ieng Sary embarked on a tour of South (Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines). Asked by GDR officials during a meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Berlin on April 13th, 1977, DK embassy staff seemed to be “uninformed” about Ieng Sary’s mission.³⁴

During 1976 and 1977 the rate of state visits by Khmer Rouge leaders increased dramatically too, including a vast array of Asian and African countries.³⁵ Some ‘Kampuchea Friendship Organizations’, notably from Scandinavian countries, were invited for guided tours of Democratic Kampuchea, and the number of foreign embassies in Phnom Penh increased gradually.

At the same time, the Khmer Rouge showed little interest in developing closer diplomatic ties with the states of the Warsaw Pact, except for maverick Romania, which had an embassy in Phnom Penh since 1976. Until 1977, Soviet Russia and the “socialist brother states” had aimed towards a normalization of diplomatic relations with the DK regime. East Germany’s continuous attempts to reopen its diplomatic mission in Phnom Penh failed, and even Berlin’s offers of solidarity aid to Democratic Kampuchea remained unanswered. Undoubtedly, this distance to the states of the socialist block was warranted in order to entertain close economic and military relations with China.

³³ *Zur Situation in der Partei- und Staatsführung des Demokratischen Kampuchea* [About the party and state leadership of Democratic Kampuchea], in: MfAA – C 6682.

³⁴ *Vermerk über ein Gespräch des Genossen Schwarz, politischer Mitarbeiter, mit dem 2. Sekretär der Botschaft des Demokratischen Kampuchea, Herrn Huor Someth, am 13. 4. 77 im MfAA* [Note on a conversation of Comrade Schwarz, political officer, with the 2nd Secretary of the Embassy of Democratic Kampuchea, Mr. Huor Someth, on April 13th, 1977 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], Berlin, 14 April 1977, in: MfAA – C 6672.

³⁵ Cf. *Informationen über einige Aspekte der Innen- und Außenpolitik des “Demokratischen Kampuchea” seitens der SRV* [Information regarding some aspects of the interior and foreign policies of ‘Democratic Kampuchea’ voiced by the PRV], Embassy of the GDR in Hanoi, 9 August 1976, in: MfAA – C 6682.

Until border clashes with Vietnam worsened throughout 1977, Democratic Kampuchea had officially pursued a policy of limited cooperation with its neighbor state, encouraging Vietnam to reopen its embassy in Phnom Penh in December 1975, voicing support for the international recognition of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam at the United Nations, and fostering diplomatic exchange by mutual state visits throughout 1976. Behind the scenes, however, the Vietnamese were accused of expansionism and neo-imperialism, and a major Vietnamese attack upon Democratic Kampuchea in late 1977 ultimately led to the closure of the Vietnamese embassy in Phnom Penh and the termination of all remaining diplomatic relations with the states of the Warsaw pact.

Based on the increasingly hostile relations between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam (as well as the country's socialist allies), and the intensification of armed conflict throughout 1978, the Khmer Rouge leadership started to seek broader international support in order to avoid a fully-fledged Vietnamese invasion. From the beginning of 1978, foreign dignitaries were invited to visit Democratic Kampuchea. At a conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, in July 1978, Democratic Kampuchea sought, unsuccessfully, Vietnam's expulsion from the movement (Pradhan 1985: 190). Also, high-level meetings had been arranged between Ieng Sary and Japan's foreign minister Sunao Sonoda, and even a normalization of relations with the United States was initiated, leading to the visit of Washington Post special envoys to Democratic Kampuchea in December 1978. Out of protest against the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea – the final campaign lasting from December 25th, 1978 to January 7th, 1979 – the Khmer Rouge regime would ultimately be able to mobilize lasting support from an unlikely alliance of communist China and capitalist Western powers for years to come (cf. Ragos-Espinas 1983: 90 ff.).

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