Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge

Inside the Politics of Nation Building

Evan Gottesman

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The map of Cambodia is adapted from map no. 3860 rev. 1, August 1995, produced by the Cartographic Section of the United Nations Department of Public Information. The photographs reproduced in the gallery are all from SPK, the official Cambodian news agency.

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To my parents
Max and Kay Gottesman

Cambodia is like a play with too few actors, all of whom have to play several roles.

—*Om Radsady, former member of parliament, Kingdom of Cambodia*

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Preface

Democratic Kampuchea, the regime established by the Khmer Rouge in 1975, has come as close as any in history to achieving universal condemnation. There are, of course, academic, political, and legal debates over the nature of its rule and the culpability of its leaders. But for Cambodians, the verdict is already clear. The Khmer Rouge experiment—the dismantling of Cambodia's political, economic, social, religious, and cultural institutions—failed miserably. Whatever Pol Pot and his comrades were trying to accomplish, the tens of thousands of executions and more than one million deaths by starvation and disease that resulted from their policies remain inexcusable.

Yet Cambodians continue to disagree on the political meaning of January 7, 1979, the day the Vietnamese army entered Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge. Was Cambodia liberated that day or was it invaded? Were the Vietnamese there to protect Cambodians from the Khmer Rouge or to occupy and exploit their country? More than two decades later, these questions still invite bitter debate and even, as recent news reports have described, occasional violence:

> Students from an anti-Vietnamese student organization and a pro-government group clashed in front of the Cambodian parliament on Monday on the 23rd anniversary of the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge. . . .
>
> Three or four students from the anti-Vietnamese group were beaten, but no one was seriously wounded in the scuffle that erupted over the group's protest of the government's celebrations of "Victory Day over Genocide," students said. "The Vietnamese claimed that on January 7, 1979, they came to liberate Cambodia," said Phang Vanak, one of the students who was beaten during the clash. "Really they came here to kill people and take our property." (Deutsche Presse-Agentur, Jan. 7, 2002)

Demonstrations such as these are part of the Cambodian political scene. Since much of the current leadership was installed by the Vietnamese in 1979, supporters of the government are inclined to celebrate Cambodia's liberation from the Khmer Rouge and to hail the country's achievements in the years that followed. The opposition, on the other hand, tends to emphasize the oppressive nature of the communist regime established by the Vietnamese and their Cambodian "puppets." The stridency with which both sides hold to their interpretations of history is thus political. It is perpetuated, however, by what has been an extremely murky, inconclusive historical record.

In the early months of 1979, Cambodia barely existed as a nation. Millions of ragged, malnourished Cambodians wandered around a bewildering void, a fragmented landscape of violence, grief, anger, and uncertainty. As for Cambodia's new leaders, put to work in an empty capital overgrown with weeds, they kept calling what they were doing a "revolution." But there was nothing to overturn, just an emptiness to fill.

This is a story about the emergence of a country and about personal and political choices. Released from the tyranny imposed on them by the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians looked at an agonizing set of options. Should they flee abroad or return to the towns and villages from which they had been evacuated? Should they remain loyal to the new regime and its Vietnamese patrons or associate themselves with opposition forces? Should they plant rice in the countryside or trade on the black market?

Cambodian and Vietnamese officials, handed a blank slate of a country, were faced with other, extraordinary decisions. There were no institutions of any kind—no bureaucracy, no army or police, no schools or hospitals, no state or private commercial networks, no religious hierarchies, no legal system. More confounding still was that the new regime, installed by a foreign power, had no popular support other than as an alternative to the Khmer Rouge. Fundamental questions arose faster than they could possibly be deliberated. How ideological can a postcommunist communist regime be? Who are its constituents? Who are its enemies? What institutions does an empty country need, and what are its priorities? How much economic, cultural, and political freedom is too much? How does a country establish a national identity when it is being occupied?

I came to the story late, in May 1994, a year after a United Nations–sponsored election. With the promulgation of a new constitution that promised democracy and a free market, international organizations sent dozens of lawyers such as myself to promote the rule of law, economic stability, and human rights. Government ministers and members of parliament made time to meet me and to patiently explain what they saw to be the gaps in Cambodia's legal system. There was plenty of work to do: sample laws from other countries to collect and synthesize, Cambodian precedents to consider, translations to undertake, and meetings to arrange. I was grateful to my colleagues at the American Bar Association and the Asia Foundation for all their assistance and to the Cambodian officials who actually listened. But what I discovered, not unexpectedly, was that the courts, the police, the legislature, and the ministries responded to political and economic pressures put in place long before my arrival. Sometimes it was easy to put a face to intransigence, to identify some minister whose interests did not include law reform; often it was not.

This book began modestly, in late 1996, as a history of law in the Cambodian context, an attempt to more fully understand and then to document the challenges I had faced over the preceding two and a half years. What really interested me, though, was the history of the period between the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and the arrival of the United Nations. These were the years during which most of the country's leaders first came to power. If I was ever to understand their motives for promoting or resisting reform, it was necessary, I felt, to consider their political careers and the positions they staked out along the way. It was also during this period that the country's current political institutions were created and that certain practices of governance—including the corruption and lawlessness that we foreigners were proposing to change—became entrenched. Finally, I was simply fascinated by what I imagined that history to be—the initial chaos and the incremental establishment of order, the competing forces that rushed in to fill the vacuum, the leaders who rose and fell and the choices they made. My problem was that the Marxist-Leninist regime that governed Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge was closed and secretive. The public documents of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)—

which was renamed the State of Cambodia (SOC) in 1989—revealed little, and officials, when they were willing to talk to me and when they remembered names and dates, rarely painted a complete picture. Reluctantly, I was prepared to describe the whole period in one rather superficial introductory chapter of my book.

Then, in my wanderings through Cambodian government buildings, I came across thousands of documents from the PRK and SOC: internal reports, secret telegrams, draft laws and regulations, and, most important, hundreds of minutes of meetings of high-level Communist Party and state institutions. Unsorted, uncatalogued, and left to gather dust, they were the product of a bureaucracy that was adept at recording its own activity but extremely disorganized. Most of the documents contained the recitations of official policy, communist jargon inflated with the kind of gung-ho optimism and affirmations of solidarity with which struggling revolutions reassure themselves. Included in the propaganda, however, were candid descriptions of the country's problems, as well as harsh and sometimes contradictory accusations of who was to blame.

Of greatest interest to me were the minutes of meetings, which, I quickly discovered, revealed the views and personalities of individual Cambodian leaders and their Vietnamese advisors. Secretaries assigned to take notes likely paraphrased, summarized, or simply misunderstood the participants. But they had little reason to invent. The purpose of the minutes was to allow leaders to record their own deliberations and to review the positions taken by their subordinates. Secretaries were expected to provide an accurate account of events.

Many of the highest-level Party documents, in particular Politburo documents, are still inaccessible. According to one Party official, Vietnamese authorities took many Cambodian Communist Party documents to Vietnam in 1989, when they withdrew from the country. What remained were documents either produced by the state apparatus or distributed by the Party to state offices. Much of the Party's decision-making process is nevertheless apparent from the documents that are available. In the early years, when the distinction between Party and state was less clear, the minutes of many high-level Party meetings found their way into stacks of state documents. Later, the substance of internal Party debates appears in the minutes of meetings of state institutions, since the top Party leaders were willing to express their views in state as well as Party settings.

Drawn in by the wide range of political, economic, and cultural issues that the Cambodian leadership debated in these meetings, I changed the focus of the book from law in the post-U.N. period to a history of the PRK and the SOC. In doing so, however, I learned an important lesson about law reform in Cambodia. As it turned out, most of the arguments that I and other foreigners had been making, especially about human rights, had been the subject of extensive internal debate for years. I found this revelation reassuring because it confirmed that human rights was not a foreign concept. It was also depressing. Cambodia's top leaders were clearly familiar with the concepts of human rights and the rule of law. Having thought through their political and legal options and having already made what they felt were informed policy choices, they were unlikely to alter the way they governed the country merely in response to Western advisors.

In recounting the history of the PRK–SOC period, I confronted three imposing themes: the legacy of the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese occupation, and the geopolitics of the 1980s. The first defines many popular perceptions of Cambodia. Many Westerners who know little about Cambodia have heard of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot, and the "killing fields." More recently, negotiations between Cambodian leaders and the United Nations over whether to conduct trials for Khmer Rouge leaders have prompted journalists, scholars, politicians, and activists to wonder how ordinary Cambodians feel about historic wrongs, impunity, and justice. In examining the period after Democratic Kampuchea, I have asked a slightly different set of questions. How has the legacy of the Khmer Rouge shaped the country, its people, and the political and economic institutions that govern the lives of Cambodians? In the first year of the PRK, former Khmer Rouge officials and soldiers assumed positions of authority throughout the new regime. How did this happen, and what has come of this arrangement? The Khmer Rouge attempted to destroy Cambodia's intellectual class. How does a country function without educated people, and what role is there for the few who remain? And, finally, the Khmer Rouge prohibited commercial, religious, and cultural practices familiar to Cambodians for hundreds of years. How did Cambodians set about retrieving their history, and how did the PRK-SOC regime seek to control the process?

As the sometimes violent disagreements over the annual January 7 holiday demonstrate, the Vietnamese occupation of the 1980s remains a deeply divisive issue among Cambodians. Critics of the Vietnamese have portrayed them as historical enemies bent on colonizing and ultimately absorbing Cambodia. Hanoi's defenders accuse the critics, accurately in many instances, of racism. They also frequently ignore anecdotal evidence of economic exploitation and political domination. By examining documentary sources, I have sought to confirm, debunk, or provide detail to these allegations and to contribute to a common, less polarizing understanding of this history.

From 1979 to 1991, the period covered in this book, Cambodia was a divided nation caught in the middle of a geopolitical standoff. The regime in Phnom Penh survived by virtue of the Vietnamese occupation and the political and economic support of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Meanwhile, along the Thai-Cambodian border, some three hundred thousand Cambodians lived in refugee camps controlled by resistance factions that included exiled royalists, republicans, and the Khmer Rouge. Bound together only by their opposition to the Vietnamese occupation, these groups received the support of China, the West (including the United States), and the noncommunist countries of Southeast Asia. The PRK, denied a seat at the United Nations and deprived of Western economic aid, was caught up in one of the most complex conflicts of the Cold War. As a result, much of what was said and written about Cambodia during the 1980s described the country in terms of its role in this larger struggle. When scholars and journalists spoke of events inside Cambodia or when Cambodian refugees recounted their experiences, partisans were quick to politicize their accounts. The successes and failures of the regime, its human rights record, and the nature of the Vietnamese occupation carried global implications, legitimizing or delegitimizing the regime, justifying or undermining the resistance.

I have chosen not to pass judgment on whether the PRK and the SOC should have occupied Cambodia's U.N. seat, whether Western and Chinese support for the resistance was appropriate, or whether Vietnam and the PRK-SOC deserved the economic sanctions imposed on them by the West. The international debates over the Cambodia conflict are well documented, and I am grateful to the authors of books and chronologies that describe the diplomatic history and that provide context for the domestic politics and internal developments that are the subject of this book. My one regret, however, is that by focusing on life inside Cambodia, I have neglected to address the plight of the refugees. The forces that controlled how they lived and how they died are as much Cambodian history as are internal events. To the refugees, I can say only that I decided to write one story at a time, to start by shining light on the darkest side of the conflict.

Wherever the sources have permitted, I have aspired not just to describe events in Cambodia but to reconstruct a national debate over the direction of the country. Not all Cambodians had an equal voice, of course. Ordinary citizens risked arrest and imprisonment for questioning the regime's ideology or its policies. Yet by refusing to follow a particular course set out by their leaders, they could ensure its failure. The eventual collapse of the PRK's agricultural collectives, for example, resulted more from the choices made by Cambodian peasants than from Party initiatives.

For the individual Cambodians whose lives and careers I have followed—former Khmer Rouge cadres who defected to the new regime, educated communists returning from a quarter-century of exile in Vietnam, and the few intellectuals who survived the Khmer Rouge and remained in Cambodia in the 1980s—the political environment was only slightly less oppressive. Yet within the constraints of a communist system and the Vietnamese occupation, they expressed different visions of how the country should be governed. There were theoretical debates and personal feuds. Often the perspectives of various Cambodian leaders seemed predetermined by their political or educational backgrounds. But just as frequently, the leaders were motivated by an awareness of the country's shifting political terrain, naked opportunism, or simply the mysteries of personality. People change, for better or worse, never more so than in times of turmoil and transition. A former Khmer Rouge cadre promotes human rights. A banker embraces communism. A Vietnamese-trained revolutionary defies his mentors.

Too frequently, opaque regimes are assumed to be monolithic. Absent evidence of internal deliberations, we are unable to attach individual responsibility to state action. We are also deprived of historical theater. Fortunately, in this case, the documentary sources have given us a cast of characters, a relatively small number of Cambodians who have remained in power despite the departure of the Vietnamese, the end of the Cold War, the abandonment of communism, and the arrival of peace. For them, Cambodian politics has required constant adaptation—an ability to accommodate new patrons, accumulate power in the absence of established political institutions, and adjust to a shifting ideological landscape.

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to write without their help. Any remaining errors or omissions are, of course, entirely my own.

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A special thanks goes to Jeannie Brusky, who supported me in many ways. And, finally, it is with great affection that I acknowledge my wonderful family. In addition to my parents, to whom this book is dedicated, I am grateful to my brother Brian, my grandmother Gertrude, aunts Jean and Janice, Betsy, Zachary, Megan, Bob, Nijole, and all my aunts, uncles, cousins, stepbrothers, and in-laws. Their patience, faith, and good humor got me through this. So, too, did the loving memory of my grandmother Helen.

Note on Transliteration

Throughout this book, transliterations of Khmer names and words are based on the standard Franco-Khmer transcription system developed by Franklin E. Huffman in 1983, though absent diacritics. The other exception applies to Khmer names whose spellings have been altered from the direct transliteration by journalists, historians, and the Khmers themselves. Thus, I refer to Hun Saen as Hun Sen, as it is commonly written.

Cast of Characters

Bou Thang: A Vietnam-trained revolutionary from Cambodia's northeast and a member of the Tapuon minority, Bou Thang returned to Cambodia in the early 1970s and joined the Khmer Rouge military before fleeing back to Vietnam in 1974. Under the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), he served as the chair of the Party's Central Propaganda Committee, a member of the Politburo, deputy prime minister (from 1982 to 1992), and minister of defense (from 1982 to 1986). Bou Thang's influence receded in the late 1980s with the rise of the former Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone cadres and the increasing irrelevance of communist ideology. He remains a member of the Politburo and currently serves in the National Assembly.

Chan Si: Trained in Hanoi, Chan Si returned to Cambodia in 1979 as chief of the Political Department of the army and a member of the Politburo. In 1981 he became minister of defense, replacing Pen Sovan. Chan Si served as prime minister from December 1981, after the arrest of Sovan, until his death in late 1984.

Chan Ven: A teacher, Chan Ven lived under the Khmer Rouge until 1978, when he took refuge in Vietnam. As a founding member of the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, minister of education, and mayor of Phnom Penh, he served as a symbol of the PRK's appeal to Cambodian intellectuals. Suspected of ideological nonconformity, Chan Ven was removed from his government positions and appointed secretary-general of the largely powerless Council of State. He is currently deputy secretary-general of the National Assembly.

Chea Sim: A former Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone district chief, Chea Sim fled Pol Pot's purges in 1978 and went to Vietnam. As a member of the Politburo and as minister of the interior, he helped the Vietnamese co-opt former Khmer Rouge cadres while also developing a personal patronage network in the provinces and in the security apparatus. After his influence had begun to concern the Vietnamese, Chea Sim left the Ministry of the Interior in 1981 and took the ceremonial role of president of the National Assembly. Working mostly behind the scenes, Chea Sim continued to promote family members and other loyalists and became one of the two most powerful men in Cambodia, along with Hun Sen. He is currently chair of the Cambodian People's Party, a member of the Politburo, and president of the Senate.

Chea Soth: A Hanoi-trained revolutionary, Chea Soth served as the PRK's first ambassador to Vietnam and as a member of the Politburo. As deputy prime minister and minister of planning, Soth oversaw Cambodia's centrally planned economy and its economic relationship with Vietnam. In 1986, as Hun Sen was promoting a less ideological set of leaders, he lost the planning portfolio but stayed in the Council of Ministers, where he had little independent power. Chea Soth remains a member of the Politburo and is currently serving in the National Assembly.

Heng Samrin: A former military officer in the Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone, Heng Samrin fled Pol Pot's purges in 1978 and went to Vietnam. Selected by Vietnamese authorities as president of the first government (the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Council, or KPRC) and head of state, his name became synonymous with the regime itself. At the end of 1981, the ideologically rigid Samrin replaced the ousted Pen Sovan as secretary-general of the Party. Less adept at patronage politics than Hun Sen or Chea Sim, Heng Samrin never accumulated much personal power. In 1991 he was replaced as secretary-general by Chea Sim. Heng Samrin remains a member of the Politburo and currently serves as vice president of the National Assembly.

Hun Sen: A former military officer in the Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone, Hun Sen was among the first to flee to Vietnam, in 1977. Two years later, at the age of twenty-six, he became minister of foreign affairs and a member of the

Politburo. On the strength of ambition, shrewd bureaucratic skills, and loyalty to Vietnamese authorities, Hun Sen rose quickly, to deputy prime minister in 1981 and prime minister in 1985. Nonideological, Hun Sen pursued pragmatic economic policies and promoted technocrats with noncommunist backgrounds, developing a patronage network at the Council of Ministers. By virtue of his role in the peace negotiations and his ability, at a later date, to develop a provincial patronage network of his own, Hun Sen eventually became one of the two most powerful men in Cambodia, along with Chea Sim. Hun Sen is currently the prime minister of Cambodia and a member of the Politburo.

KAEV CHENDA: A Vietnam-trained revolutionary, Kaev Chenda served the PRK in many capacities. As minister of propaganda and information, he presided over the trial of Khmer leaders Pol Pot and Ieng Sary in absentia in 1979. He also served as minister of industry, in which position he was reportedly linked to a corruption scandal. After being recalled to Hanoi for "education," Chenda returned as mayor of Phnom Penh, where he exhibited a level of independence and a tolerance of market economics that annoyed the more ideological members of the leadership. Chenda was removed from power in late 1984 or early 1985 and died in 1989.

NHEUM VANDA: A former militia chief in the Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone, Nheum Vanda fled to Vietnam in 1978. Under the PRK, he rose through the ministries of economics and planning. In the mid-1980s, as deputy minister of defense and deputy minister of planning, he took charge of K5, a border defense program that involved the conscription of tens of thousands of Cambodian civilians and that evolved into a vast military-economic network. A practitioner of patronage economics, Vanda found favor with Cambodia's increasingly nonideological leadership, particularly Hun Sen, who granted him control over the Thai-Cambodian border crossing. He is currently a member of the National Assembly.

PEN SOVAN: The most important of the Vietnamese-trained revolutionaries, Pen Sovan served as secretary-general of the Party, vice president of the KPRC, minister of defense, and, in 1981, prime minister. In these capacities, Sovan promoted noncommunists over former Khmer Rouge cadres. His independent attitude as well as specific actions—including his complaints about Vietnamese immigration and pursuit of economic ties with third countries—prompted Vietnamese authorities to arrest and depose him in December 1981. He spent the rest of the decade detained in Hanoi. Pen Sovan returned to Cambodia in 1991 and ran unsuccessfully for office in 1998.

ROS SAMAY: The Vietnam-trained cousin of Pen Sovan, Ros Samay exhibited a similar propensity to act independently. As minister of economics in 1979, he was more permissive of Western humanitarian organizations than were the rest of the leadership. Later, as secretary-general of the Constitutional Drafting Council, he pushed through a draft constitution that had not been authorized by Vietnamese officials. After being forced by Vietnamese advisors to amend the draft, Samay was rumored to be planning to defect and was quietly arrested. After spending the 1980s in detention in Hanoi, Ros Samay returned to Cambodia in the early 1990s and is currently undersecretary of state for post and telecommunications.

Say Phouthang: A Vietnam-trained revolutionary, Say Phouthang returned, in 1970, to his native Koh Kong province in southeast Cambodia. There he joined the Khmer Rouge military and, in 1973, rebelled against Pol Pot. Phouthang, who is ethnic Thai, spent most of the Khmer Rouge period in Thailand or along the border. Brought back to Phnom Penh by Vietnamese agents in the spring of 1979, he served as a member of the Politburo and as chair of the Central Organization Committee of the Party. Following the arrest of Pen Sovan in December 1981, Say Phouthang was perhaps the most powerful Cambodian leader. His influence began to recede in 1985, when he was moved to the Party Inspection Committee. With the ascendance of Hun Sen and Chea Sim, Say Phouthang became less important and, faced with declining health, began spending more time in Thailand. He currently holds no official position, other than his seat on the Politburo.

Sin Song: A former Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone cadre, Sin Song fled to Vietnam in 1977. As deputy minister of the interior, he defended the interests of the police against Uk Bunchheuan's Ministry of Justice. Temporarily exiled to the powerless Ministry of Inspection, he returned as minister of the interior in 1988. Working closely with Chea Sim, Sin Song presided over the expansion of the security apparatus during and immediately after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese army. He died of cancer in March 2001.

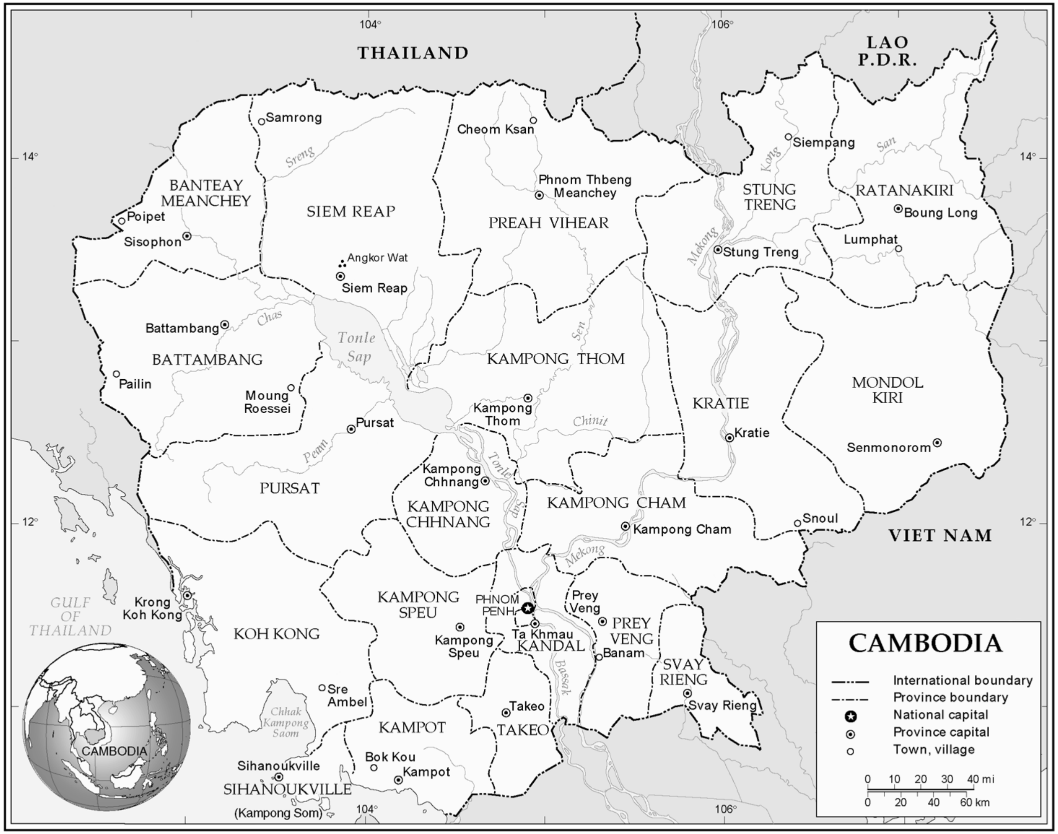
Tang Sareum: One of the few Vietnam-trained revolutionaries to have remained in Cambodia after 1975, Tang Sareum fled to Vietnam in 1978 with the Eastern Zone cadres. As minister of commerce, Sareum jostled for power with Minister of Economics Ros Samay, eventually taking control of an antagonistic relationship with Western donors. Later he fought to protect the interests of the PRK's faltering state commercial sector, bitterly opposing the quasi-private trading tolerated by Phnom Penh Mayor Kaev Chenda. Tang Sareum gradually lost power to more technocratic economic administrators. He currently holds no official position.

THUN SARAY: An economist who survived the Khmer Rouge regime, Thun Saray participated in the 1979 trial of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary but remained doggedly independent of the PRK. A founder, along with Vandy Ka-on, of the Institute of Sociology, Saray took over the institute after Ka-on left Cambodia in 1989. The following year, Saray was arrested for his association with an effort to form an opposition party. He was imprisoned for a year and a half. Thun Saray currently runs ADHOC, a nongovernmental human rights organization in Cambodia.

UK BUNCHHEUAN: A former Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone cadre, Uk Bunchheuan fled to Vietnam in 1978. More suspicious than many of his comrades of Vietnamese authorities, he received a political education in Vietnam up until 1980, when he returned to Cambodia to take over the drafting of the constitution from Ros Samay and to serve as minister of justice. In the former role, he presided over the removal of civil liberties from the draft. As minister of justice, however, he protected noncommunist jurists, defended the interests of a weak court system against the police, and became an advocate, relatively speaking, for the rule of law and human rights. Uk Bunchheuan is currently chair of the Legislation Commission of the Senate.

UNG PHAN: A former military officer of the Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone, Ung Phan fled with Hun Sen to Vietnam in 1977. Appointed minister in charge of the Council of Ministers, Phan promoted pragmatic economic policies while helping Hun Sen develop a patronage system within an expanding and increasingly technocratic bureaucracy. His dissatisfaction with Vietnamese domination contributed to his general unhappiness with the regime. While serving as minister of communications in the late 1980s, he attempted to form an opposition party. Arrested in May 1990, Ung Phan spent a year and a half in prison. He currently holds no official position.

VANDY KA-ON: A French-trained sociologist who survived the Khmer Rouge regime, Vandy Ka-on became a symbol of the PRK's inclusion of noncommunist intellectuals in the government. As a member of the Council of State and as chair of the National Assembly's Legislation Commission, he was sometimes critical of corruption and human rights abuses. Granted permission to establish the Institute of Sociology, he and Thun Saray distributed a publication that cautiously skirted the boundaries of acceptable public discourse. He gradually became more outspoken, fleeing Cambodia for France in 1989 under a cloud of political suspicion and alleged financial entanglements.


CAMBODIA
International boundary
Province boundary
National capital
Province capital
Town, village
0 10 20 30 40 mi
0 20 40 60 km
THAILAND
LAO P.D.R.
VIET NAM
GULF OF THAILAND
104°
106°
14°
12°
BANTEAY MEANCHEY
SIEM REAP
PREAH VIHEAR
STUNG TRENG
RATANAKIRI
BATTAMBANG
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PREY VENG
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KAMPOT
TAKEO
SIHANOUKVILLE
(Kampong Som)
PHNOM PENH
Samrong
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Sre Ambel
Takeo
Svay Rieng
Sihanoukville
Bok Kou
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Pearn
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Chhak Kampong Saom
CAMBODIA

Part One **Beginnings**

Chapter 1 Liberation

In February 1979, around the time of his forty-sixth birthday, a small, unassuming peasant named Heng Chi recalled that he had once been a judge. It was a distant memory, clouded by exhaustion and hunger, constant fear, and the half-dead state of mindless slavery. In a sense, it had already been forgotten. “All that time, I pretended that I had been a construction worker,” Heng Chi explains. “I told my children to forget their own names.” Assigned by the Khmer Rouge to an anonymous and isolated patch of rice fields known as Cooperative 15, he and his family kept their background secret for three years and ten months.[1]

Heng Chi’s life vanished on April 17, 1975, the day Khmer Rouge soldiers marched him out of Phnom Penh, along with his wife, their three children, and hundreds of thousands of other confused and terrified Cambodians. For days he and his family walked amid this stream of people, watching what happened around them until a clear picture emerged. As Cambodians were discovering, the revolution intended to eliminate all remnants of the country’s political, economic, and cultural life. Judges, teachers, bankers, soldiers, and politicians were subject to execution. In the fury of the moment, only a lucky few realized what was happening before it was too late. Heng Chi was lucky—lucky enough to successfully erase his own identity and invent a new name and a new past. He was prepared—for the rest of his life, for all he knew—to work as a peasant in the rice fields.

Battambang, the northwestern province where Heng Chi and his family had been sent, was one of the last areas of the country to be reached by the Vietnamese forces that swept into Cambodia at the end of December 1978. Planning their retreat to the Thai border, Khmer Rouge soldiers and cadres throughout the province attempted to take as many Cambodian civilians with them as possible. The civilians, in response, seized whatever opportunities the invasion offered to flee. In the confusion, Heng Chi and his wife were separated from their children.

Grief-stricken, weak, and malnourished, they could barely move. Heng Chi's wife was so sick that she could travel no more than a kilometer a day, but there was fighting nearby, and they had no choice but to flee. Days later, they arrived at the first crossroads, a former middle school in neighboring Siem Riep province. Vietnamese soldiers periodically drove by on their way to and from the front. For twenty days Heng Chi and his wife asked for rides to the provincial capital. At night they slept in a field near the school.

It was already March by the time they reached Siem Riep's provincial capital. The town, evacuated by the Khmer Rouge in 1975, now served as a base for the Vietnamese army and a few Cambodians selected by the Vietnamese as provincial officials. Prevented from entering, former residents squatted on the outskirts of the town, where they searched for rice left behind by the Khmer Rouge and sold recently unearthed gold and family jewels for food. Not for several more weeks did Heng Chi and his wife find another set of Vietnamese soldiers to drive them south in the direction of Phnom Penh.

With Phnom Penh also off-limits, they headed to the town of Takmau in Kandal province, just outside the capital. There Heng Chi finally spotted a family member, a cousin, who offered to bring the couple back to his village, where they could settle. For the next year he worked in the rice fields, oblivious to the new regime and its plans. "All I knew was that I'd lost my children," he says.

In March 1980, Heng Chi returned to Phnom Penh to seek medical care for his wife and to find a state job. One of only eight jurists to survive the revolution, he soon found work at the Ministry of Justice. His initial experiences were not encouraging. Serving under a former Khmer Rouge official whose past had earned him a reputation for cruelty, Heng Chi was assigned to explain to a new and largely uneducated corps of state officials the provisions of a communist constitution drafted, in large part, by Vietnamese advisors. Not surprisingly, he remained suspicious of the new regime. Life, at that moment, was defined by small favors—an allocation of rice, a house, physical security—and by despair, conflicting emotions that only deepened when, one day in June, one of Heng Chi's children arrived in Phnom Penh with news of the others' deaths.

The invitation to return to the civil service was, for Heng Chi, as it was for many other educated Cambodians, a sign of relative normalcy. *Chaul steung tam bat, chaul srok tam brates,* say the Khmer. "Enter a stream; follow its turns. Enter a land; follow the [laws and customs of the] country." As Heng Chi had feared, the ideology to which he was now expected to adhere was not that of the prerevolutionary era. But, in contrast to the Khmer Rouge—whose revolution had been geared to destroying the educated—the new leadership issued a reassuringly familiar promise: support the regime and you shall be rewarded. Cambodia's second revolution, installed by Vietnamese communists, had brought with it a resumption of the traditional arrangement between ruler and technocrats, a relationship of adaptation, co-optation, and perhaps some subtle influence by the technocrats over the direction of the country. The new regime demanded acquiescence to Vietnamese occupation and to communist policies. In return, Heng Chi was offered the chance to teach the minister of justice, the former Khmer Rouge official, the meaning of law.

Many educated Cambodians refused to make these compromises. One young man who would soon choose a different path was Thun Saray. Just a few months short of a degree in economics when the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh, Saray was unable to hide his education and was sent, along with his brother and his wife, to an "education camp" in the eastern province of Kampong Cham. There he spent ten months engaged in menial labor under the intense supervision of the Khmer Rouge. All students were suspect, and those among them deemed to be the "enemy" were killed. Saray, however, offered no indication of disloyalty, and the Khmer Rouge found no evidence against him. Ordered to construct a dirt road, he worked quietly. "The pen of the revolution is the hoe," the Khmer Rouge cadres reminded him. Meanwhile, his wife, who had been released earlier, gave birth. Their daughter was born in a chicken coop without walls and without a roof, "in nature," Saray recalls, "like an animal."[2]

When he was released, Saray was sent to a cooperative three kilometers from his wife and infant daughter. His wife begged the village chief to let her see her husband, giving him her remaining possessions until he relented. Saray's reunion with his wife was a stroke of luck; just a few days later, they were marched north out of Kampong Cham to Kratie province, where they remained for the rest of the Khmer Rouge period. By Saray's reckoning, the trip to Kratie saved their lives. Although his status as a student (as opposed to a member of the civil service) had initially meant the difference between detention and execution, the Khmer Rouge soon launched a furious purge in Kampong Cham in which thousands of Cambodians were killed with little regard to such distinctions.

The fall of Kratie to the Vietnamese army provided Thun Saray and his family the opportunity to leave their cooperative and head for the provincial capital. After a few days' rest, they attempted to return to Phnom Penh but were prevented from entering the city by Vietnamese soldiers. Saray then took the family to Kandal province, where he soon found work at a small district office. For the next three to four months he helped the new regime "educate" local Cambodians on the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in exchange for a salary of rice. It was also at the district office that Saray first met Vandy Ka-on, a thirty-six-year-old French-trained sociologist who had survived the Khmer Rouge by feigning mental incapacity. Ka-on was just as suspicious of the new regime as Saray and had not identified himself. It was difficult, however, to remain anonymous. To gain the support of the population, the Vietnamese had permitted a number of prerevolutionary officials to become village chiefs, one of whom, a former army colonel, recognized Vandy Ka-on and set him to work.[3]

In May 1979, Vietnamese and Cambodian officials contacted Ka-on and asked him to participate in a trial for Khmer Rouge leaders Pol Pot and Ieng Sary. Ka-on invited Saray to join him, and despite the misgivings they shared about Cambodia's new leadership, they joined in the one project in which their interests and those of the regime coincided. As surviving intellectuals, Ka-on and Saray understood that they were helping to legitimize a political show trial, and yet they applied themselves to their assignment: drafting what was called the "Investigative Report on the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary Clique's Crimes Against the Phnom Penh Population." Saray interviewed other survivors, collected Khmer Rouge documents, and, three months later, when the tribunal convened, testified. It wasn't much of a trial, he says now, "not in terms of fair procedure." In his own testimony, moreover, Saray was required to parrot the new regime's political line, referring to the prerevolutionary "imperialist, feudal, and bourgeois regimes," to the Khmer Rouge's "long struggle against the American imperialist aggressors," and to the "traitors who sold out our country to the Chinese imperialists."[4] Despite these pressures, Saray, who lost his father, a brother, and all his sister's children to the Khmer Rouge, does not regret his role. "The important thing was to prosecute them," he explains. "They killed so many people."

The trial was Thun Saray's last concession to the new regime. Like tens of thousands of other Cambodians, Saray's two younger brothers responded to the Vietnamese occupation, the imposition of communism, and the threat of conscription by fleeing to the Thai-Cambodian border. Tempted to follow, Saray was ultimately dissuaded by a friend who had made part of the journey and had returned with stories of soldiers and border guards and of bandits willing to cut open a traveler in search of swallowed diamonds. "I'd survived the Khmer Rouge. The most important thing was my life," he recalls. "I had a wife and a child." Living for years outside the umbrella of state employment, the family survived on his wife's meager earnings in the illicit private market.

Meanwhile, Saray worked at a quasi-independent research institution, the Institute of Sociology, which he helped establish with Vandy Ka-on and which was tolerated by the leadership only because Ka-on had accepted a series of high-profile, powerless positions. While under scrutiny by Cambodian and Vietnamese officials, Thun Saray and Vandy Ka-on professed their loyalty to the new regime at the same time as they wrote articles and distributed publications that gingerly tested the boundaries of acceptable discourse.[5]

THE NEW LEADERSHIP

On the morning of December 2, 1978, in a small clearing inside a rubber plantation just east of the township of Snoul in Kratie province and just over the border from Vietnam, the future leaders of Cambodia emerged. Calling themselves the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS, or the Front), they assembled before several hundred Cambodian refugees who had fled to Vietnam and who had now been trucked into Cambodian territory for the occasion. With what official accounts later described as "boundless enthusiasm," the Cambodians watched as a short, balding, inconspicuous-looking man stepped forward and began to speak. "Dear and respected compatriots, dear cadres and combatants, dear compatriots abroad. Throughout the long period when Kampuchea was under the yoke of colonialism, imperialism, and feudalism . . . "[6]

The speaker, Heng Samrin, had only recently defected from the Khmer Rouge. Described in the Front's official pronouncements as a "former member of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea for the

Eastern Zone, former political commissar, and commander of the 4th Division," the newly selected president of the KUFNS had nothing but praise for the Khmer Rouge revolution. "Our people won the glorious victory of April 17, 1975, totally liberating our country, opening for the Kampuchean people a new era, the era of independence, freedom, and socialism."

Cambodia's troubles, he continued, began "a few days after liberation," when "the reactionary Pol Pot–Ieng Sary gang and their families" launched their destruction of Cambodia. Samrin ticked off the gang's crimes: the "razing of towns," the severing of the "sacred sentiments of people" toward family and neighbors, the "abolition of money and markets," "forcible cooperativization," and "camouflaged concentration camps." "Everywhere," he concluded, "our people have witnessed massacres, more atrocious, more barbarous, than those committed in the Middle Ages or perpetrated by the Hitlerite fascists." "Worst of all," he said, were the purges in the Khmer Rouge Eastern Zone, from which he himself had fled and which had claimed the lives not only of civilians but also of Samrin's revolutionary compatriots. "How many cadres, Party members, authentic revolutionaries and patriots, and cadres and combatants in the armed forces who had contributed to the liberation of the country and proved absolute loyalty to the motherland have been killed en masse at all levels and in all places for the sole reason that they did not approve of the reactionary and barbarous policy of the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary gang."

Heng Samrin had two messages to deliver, one to Cambodian civilians and one to Khmer Rouge cadres. To ordinary Cambodians, those forced "to live in misery as slaves," he promised inclusion and tolerance. The Front, he said, "unites all nationalities in the country and rallies all patriotic forces regardless of political and religious tendencies—workers, peasants, petty bourgeois, intellectuals, Buddhist monks and nuns." After the overthrow of Democratic Kampuchea, Cambodia would be a very different place. "All Kampucheans have the right to return to their old native land, and to build their family life in happiness. All Kampucheans have freedom of residence, the right to stand for election and to vote, freedom of thought, association, and religion, and the right to work, recreation, and education." The Front, continued Samrin, planned: "To abolish the compulsory 'work-and-eat-together' system. . . . To put an end to the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary policy of seizing the people's rice and other property. . . . To establish banks, issue currency, restore and develop the circulation of goods. To broaden home trade and increase economic relations with all foreign countries on an equal footing and with mutual benefits."

Samrin's speech was also intended to reassure those Khmer Rouge cadres "still in the ranks of the ruling clique." "Die-hard reactionary chieftains who have committed bloody crimes against the people" would be punished. No one else needed to be afraid. The Front intended "to warmly welcome, and create favorable conditions for, officers and soldiers, as well as public servants, in the administration of the reactionary regime to rally with the people and fight back against the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary gang to save the motherland and their own families. . . . To practice leniency toward those who sincerely repent. To give appropriate rewards to those who had performed feats of arms in service of the revolution."

The man most responsible for the Front's lenient policies toward the former Khmer Rouge cadres was standing nearby. Chea Sim, forty-six, was two years older than Samrin. Thickset, with dense, closely cropped hair, Sim appeared to be one of the few Cambodians not suffering from malnutrition. Identified as the "former secretary of the Party Committee for Region 20 [and] former member of the Kampuchean People's Representative Assembly," Chea Sim had defected from the Khmer Rouge's Eastern Zone around the same time as Heng Samrin. He was now vice president of the Front.

A third Eastern Zone cadre, a scrawny, angular soldier whose flight to Vietnam had preceded those of Heng Samrin and Chea Sim by more than a year, was also in attendance. With an ill-fitting glass eye and thick black glasses correcting what remained of his vision, he stared out at the proceedings. Hun Sen was twenty-six years old.

Although few people in Cambodia or overseas had ever heard of these three men, an elderly Vietnamese man in attendance would have been instantly recognizable if the Front had bothered to announce his presence. Le Duc Tho, a founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party, was most famous for negotiating the 1973 cease-fire with the United States and for having been awarded, along with Henry Kissinger, the Nobel Peace Prize, an honor he turned down. Tho was also a powerful Politburo member whose political machinations had earned him a reputation as a kingmaker within Hanoi's political circles. His most important contribution to the Indochinese communist movement, however, began in 1950, when Ho Chi Minh sent him south into the Mekong Delta. In addition to designing Hanoi's southern strategy throughout the two Indochina wars, against France and against the United States, Tho assumed responsibility for Vietnamese assistance to the Cambodian revolution, establishing a special Politburo office for Cambodian affairs.[7]

Heng Samrin was still speaking. "The Pol Pot–Ieng Sary gang," he was saying, "had provoked a border conflict with Vietnam, thus turning friend into foe."

To Le Duc Tho, the collapse of the once fraternal Cambodian-Vietnamese relationship had meant the resumption of a familiar task: identifying, guiding, and promoting pro-Vietnamese Cambodian revolutionaries. Having spent the previous year and a half with this particular set of defectors, he must have been proud of their apparent loyalty. For Tho, the revolutionary midwife, the man who had been in Bac Bo in 1941 for the formation of the Viet Minh and in Hanoi in 1945 for the creation of the provisional government and who had participated in the 1960 formation of the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front, not to mention the historic 1950 congress at which the first Cambodian communists had announced their United Issarak Front, the morning's ceremonies were only the latest in a series of political births.[8]

Heng Samrin was finishing his speech. "The time of the revolution has come!

"Cadres and combatants, unite and march forward heroically!

"Struggle resolutely to overthrow the reactionary Pol Pot–Ieng Sary gang!

"Our people will surely achieve a peaceful, independent, democratic, neutral, and nonaligned Kampuchea, which will advance to socialism. The Kampuchea revolution will win!" According to various accounts, Heng Samrin then walked over to Le Duc Tho, shook his hand, and thanked him. Official reports, broadcast the following day from a radio station in Ho Chi Minh City, presented a more theatrical finale. "The meeting," boomed the Voice of the Kampuchean People, "wound up with folk songs and dances full of combative and revolutionary spirit."[9]

INVASION

On Christmas Day, 1978, the People's Army of Vietnam sent 150,000 heavily armed troops into Kratie. A week later, the Vietnamese invaded from Laos, taking the northern province of Steung Treng and pinching off the northeast from the Khmer Rouge's central authority. The heaviest fighting, however, took place in the southeast, where the Vietnamese prepared for the invasion with relentless bombing runs over areas with large numbers of Khmer Rouge soldiers. Despite Vietnamese tanks, heavy artillery, and thousands more troops, the fighting on the ground was fierce. Not until January 4 did Vietnam control the seven Cambodian provinces east of the Mekong. Two days later, Vietnamese soldiers finally crossed the river, forcing the Khmer Rouge leadership to flee Phnom Penh and head west toward Thailand.[10]

Vietnamese soldiers entered the Cambodian capital on the morning of January 7, their jeeps roaring down the city's deserted avenues. At noon, radio broadcasts announced that the Front had liberated Phnom Penh. By evening hundreds of Cambodian soldiers—Khmers who had fled the Khmer Rouge and taken refuge in southern Vietnam—arrived. Housed in Phnom Penh's airport, they joined Vietnamese troops in scouting the empty streets and buildings for lingering Khmer Rouge soldiers, engaging the few they found in rounds of gunfire.

Over the next few days, pronouncements poured forth on behalf of the Cambodian leadership. On January 8 an ostensibly Cambodian news agency announced the composition of a Cambodian government, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Council (KPRC), to be headed by Heng Samrin. On January 10 the KPRC officially declared the establishment of a new regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, or PRK.[11]

When it was considered safe, Samrin, Chea Sim, Hun Sen, and the rest of leadership boarded Vietnamese jeeps and entered Phnom Penh, a city none of them had seen for more than a decade. The scene was bleak. As the Cambodians inspected their capital, block after block passed by without a sign of life. In some places, there were indications of sudden flight: laundry left hanging out to dry, food left behind. But in most places, the years of neglect were obvious. In houses, apartment blocks, and markets, people had seemingly been replaced by encroaching vegetation. Banana, coconut, and papaya trees grew from the sidewalks. Pigs and chickens roamed the city. Snakes slid through the high grass. And rats found their way from house to house, hiding among the toppled furniture and family photo albums of Phnom Penh's missing residents. Meanwhile, the remnants of the city's former life lay upended in stacks of televisions and phones, kitchen utensils, clothes, and books. Cars were assembled to rust. In the schools, equipment had been systematically ruined; the test tubes and microscopes of the medical school lay shattered on the floor. Anywhere that culture, education, or wealth had thrived, these bizarre refuse heaps were all that remained, testaments to both political and literal upheaval.[12]