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HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM

The Communist Rebels in Cambodia

Aims and Objectives. The objective of the Communists in Cambodia

was twofold: a short-range aim to keep lines of communications open; a long-range aim to establish, if possible, a Communist-dominated government in Cambodia that would be a sympathetic supporter of the DRVN and could eventually become a DRVN protectorate, as the government of Cambodia had been a Vietnamese protectorate prior to the arrival of the French.

The short-range objective was entirely assigned to Viet Minh units themselves while responsibility for the long-range objective was placed in the hands either of Khmer or, preferably, of Communist leaders of mixed Khmer-Vietnamese ancestry.

Until 1950, Cambodia was considered a "quiet front" by both the French and the Communists. Much of Cambodian territory was too flat and open to offer good shelter to extensive guerrilla forces, so that, except in a few mountainous or thickly wooded areas, French army columns could circulate through the countryside unhindered. Warfare in Cambodia remained essentially a maneuvering of small and fairly mobile units, with the French retaining the advantage of speed and the Communists retaining the advantage of all-terrain mobility. Neither the French nor the Viet Minh were in any hurry to upset the tactical appellation by attempting far-reaching operations against each other, and only when the French broke this equilibrium by mop-up operations did the Viet Minh retaliate by active operations of their own. This in no small way contributed to the fact that the Cambodians in general looked upon the war against the Viet Minh as something of a "private affair" between the French and the Vietnamese rather than an effort of the governments of the three Associated States against a common invader.

The Viet Minh Organization in Cambodia. The Viet Minh began to organize its political activities in Cambodia in 1949 by the creation of the Canvassing Committee for the Creation of a Revolutionary Cambodian People's Party (Ban Van Dong Than Lap Dang Nhan Cach Mang Cao Mien), composed almost entirely of carefully selected Vietnamese with considerable experience in Khmer affairs. In conformity with the old Comintern directive to unite first of all the "activity of the various national revolutionary organizations", the Committee's action was at first entirely limited to promulgating simple Khmer nationalist slogans.

Cambodia's independence is not real since the French are still here. . . . The lack of security is due to the fact that the French are still here. Let the French go and security will return immediately. . . . The Viet Minh will leave as soon as [Khmer] independence is attained.

The next step was the creation of special Vietnamese armed units under the command of the South Viet-Nam interzone, known as Viet-Nam Troops to Help Cambodia. Such units completely took over what became the Southwestern Zone (Kampot and Kompong Speu), and soon the whole South Viet-Nam Zone Command of the Viet-Nam People's Army (the Viet Minh armed forces) transferred its headquarters to Prey Veng province in Cambodia, finding it quieter than tightly controlled South Viet-Nam; these were followed by the Central Office South and the bulk of the Viet Minh's regional commands. The Central Office South was headed by Sieu Heng, a revolutionary of mixed Khmer-Vietnamese ancestry.

In 1950 began the installation of a complete network of Cadre Committees (Ban Can Su) under the over-all direction of Nguyen Thanh Son (Hanilakiri). Cambodia was split into three zones (mien); several sectors (vung); and numerous local units (srok, khum, phum). At zone level, the Ban Can Su Southwest had no Cambodian members, while the two other zone committees had one Cambodian member each on a seven-man committee. Intercell branches (lien-chi) and other subdivisions were set up just as on Vietnamese soil.

In the meantime, the Canvassing Committees had blossomed into the Khmer equivalent of Viet Minh "administrative committees". With the creation of the Viet-Nam Lao Dong [Communist] Party in 1951, the DRVN possessed an adequate political tool to create a brother-revolutionary party in Cambodia, making due allowance, of course, for the lack of political sophistication among the Cambodian masses. This new party, the Dang Nhan Dan Cach Mang Cao Mien (Revolutionary Cambodian People's Party), was not only entirely created by the Lao Dong but its very name and statutes were drafted in Vietnamese and had to be translated into Cambodian.

The final statute of the Revolutionary Cambodian People's Party as it emerged from the discussions of the three zonal commands resembles a very simplified version of the statutes of the Lao Dong, with one major difference: nowhere in the text can one find a reference to the "great teachers" of the Marxist doctrine, and the only statement with political shading is the guarded sentence: "The doctrine of the Party is the doctrine of Popular Democracy."

In 1951, Sieu Heng, already head of the Central Office South, also became president of the Cambodian National Liberation Committee, the pseudo government of the Khmer revolutionaries. A year later the Liberation Committee went one step further. A "Cambodian Resistance Government" was set up under Son Ngoc Minh; it was promptly recognized by the DRVN and the "Free Laotian Government", but by no one else. In June 1950, Prince Sisowath Monipong, then Prime Minister of Cambodia, had

already proclaimed that "insecurity now prevails in more than two-thirds of the national territory". He appealed for unity of all Cambodians against the "permanent reign of terror imposed by trouble-making foreigners". The Communists in Cambodia, as well as Communist propaganda in the Soviet Union, seized on such admissions of the extent of disorder in Cambodia as proof of their own contention that the "liberated areas comprise over one third of the total territory, with a population of one million". However exaggerated this claim, the fact was that until the Geneva cease-fire, Communist control and influence grew as they deployed their armed propaganda units throughout Cambodia. The serious limiting factor was the preponderance of Viet Minh troops, which indicated Vietnamese domination of the Communist movement in Cambodia.

To make up for the lack of experienced Cambodian leaders, the Communists established schools in Cambodia for both political and military personnel. On June 11, 1950, the Achar Hem Chieu political school formally was opened "at a certain base in the Southwest War Zone of Cambodia". "More than 140 pupils comprising cadres of the khum and srok grades in southwest Cambodia and a number of other cadres from northeast, southeast, and northwest Cambodia" were reported in attendance. The Khmer People's Liberation Army school had its opening ceremonies "in a liberated area" on August 14, 1950, enrolling "nearly 100 Cambodian partisans". Other facilities to provide personnel for government services, including police, information, economics, and education, were established in Takeo province.

The emphasis throughout was on training youth. To placate the Buddhist clergy, monks who had also been given special schooling by the Communists figured prominently in all the public meetings and ceremonies. To allay fears of Vietnamese domination, propaganda was conducted in the Khmer language and edited by Khmer. Vietnamese units were transformed into mixed Khmer-Vietnamese formations and attached as volunteer troops to the Khmer People's Liberation Army.

The principal ethnic minorities in Cambodia were given distinct attention by the Communists. Emigré Vietnamese sections of the adult, youth, and peasant Associations for National Salvation of Viet-Nam were established in Cambodia. In Phnom Penh, the Vietnamese, who comprise the city's principal labor force, were organized into unions, subject to heavy Communist pressure. In the provinces particular consideration was given to gaining control of the Vietnamese rubber workers and their union, for the Communists were bent on disrupting rubber production to weaken the French economically. Further agitation was conducted among the Vietnamese fishing population living in the Tonle Sap lake region and along the

river basins; such action provided funds as well as food supplies for the guerrilla forces.

The large Chinese minority numbering some three hundred thousand witnessed similar activity. An Overseas Chinese Liberation Association was formed, whose functions were to recruit new cadres and above all to levy taxes on rich Chinese merchants and the Chinese operators of the pepper plantations, rice mills, and salt installations. The greatest success in this respect was achieved in Kampot province.

Communist efforts with respect to the Malay population were directed to mobilizing Cambodia's third-largest minority against the Royal Government and the French, to provoking Malay desertions from the French and Royal armies, and to recruiting Malay fighters for their own ranks. The Communists were claimed to have been least successful among this Muslim element, which is a stable, homogeneous, and strongly hierarchical community. They did capture the well-known Malay "Viceroy" Toun-Sles, and for some five months in 1951 issued numerous tracts and propaganda leaflets in his name. But Toun-Sles escaped in June 1951, and the effect of the propaganda apparently lasted only as long as his imprisonment.

The foregoing activities were paralleled by intensive attempts to mobilize the large Cambodian minority in Viet-Nam in the provinces bordering Cambodia. Numerous meetings were held in the fifth interzone (southern-central Viet-Nam), bordering the Cambodian provinces of Stung Treng, Kratie, and Kompong Thom, as well as in the ninth zone (southern Viet-Nam), bordering Kampot and Takeo provinces. The Issarak Mutual Aid Committee was set up to raise funds and enlist recruits for the Khmer People's Liberation Army. Communist propaganda which emphasized the unified character of the struggle throughout the Indochinese peninsula was transmitted through such organizations.

The Khmer Provisional Government. To further integrate Communist policies in Cambodia with those of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam and to begin the process of achieving recognition in the Communist world and elsewhere for Son Ngoc Minh's Khmer Provisional Government, Sieu Heng was officially dispatched to North Viet-Nam. There in November 1950 he participated in a meeting of the Viet-Nam Committee of World Peace Defenders, indicating Cambodian support of its activities and resolutions. Subsequently, he attended a three-day conference, November 21-23, 1950, as the representative of the Cambodian National United Front in concert with the representatives of the National United Fronts of Laos and Viet-Nam. This meeting avowedly was designed to discuss the setting up of a joint bloc of the three National United Fronts.

Sieu Heng remained in northern Viet-Nam where he was received

formally by the Standing Committee of the Viet-Nam Democratic Republic's National Assembly on February 20, 1951. That month he also participated in the deliberations resulting in the open re-establishment of the Communist Party in Viet-Nam, now called the Viet-Nam Workers Party (Viet-Nam Dang Lao Dong), and was listed among those who "enthusiastically hail the establishment of our Party and approve the united resistance program". Explicit recognition of the Viet-Nam Communists as the political leaders of the war against France thus was confirmed by all the participating elements in the three resistance movements. The subsequent merger of the three National United Fronts on March 11, 1951, and the adoption of a common program was merely ceremonial. Effectively, the Vietnamese Communist leadership was empowered to act for all in any subsequent negotiations.

The dependence of the Cambodian Communists on the Viet Minh was a fact that both the Issarak and the Royal Government never failed to exploit. Son Ngoc Minh, the Communist leader, was forced to attempt to counter this charge publicly. In a reported interview, he drew a distinction between the "character of the armed struggle of the Cambodian people" and that of "the resistance of the Vietnamese people", which amounted to asserting that in Viet-Nam the resistance was based on the efforts of an established government to defend itself and then counterattack the enemy, "whereas the armed struggle of the Cambodian people tries to seize power throughout the country".

Son Ngoc Minh indicated also that in "cooperating with the Cambodian regional troops, a small unit of Viet-Nam troops has obtained satisfactory results". This cooperation was based on the fact that the "Vietnamese people and government... are far more experienced than ourselves from the point of view of struggle and organization". He argued that the Vietnamese did not interfere with the internal affairs of Cambodia and that a basic principle was the recognition that "to obtain successes the Cambodian revolution must be achieved by the Cambodian people themselves". Thus, "the Vietnamese troops and units coming to give support to Cambodia have merged with our elements to fight under our command exactly like Chinese soldiers in Korea". It is significant that Son Ngoc Minh felt compelled to excuse himself for having to use Viet Minh help. However, the stigma of being a "Vietnamese puppet" stuck, and greatly contributed to the failure of the Cambodian Communist movement.

Government Counteraction. Meanwhile the Cambodian Communists were receiving a build-up in the world Communist press. The Soviet press carried accounts of the Khmer People's Liberation Army emphasizing that "two thirds of Cambodia has been liberated". The Congress of Peoples for

Peace meeting in Vienna, December 12-19, 1952, received a report by Keo Meas, leader of the Khmer delegation and a member of the executive committee of the Khmer National United Front, on the "liberation struggle" of his government and its contribution to peace.

By early fall of 1953, the security situation in Cambodia had deteriorated to the point where Prime Minister Penn Nouth made his appeal to the Viet Minh to evacuate the country. The embarrassed Cambodian government quickly sought to reverse its stand on the matter, but the Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune, September 12, 1953, asserted that the Cambodians had offered neutrality to the Viet Minh in exchange for the withdrawal of all Viet Minh forces from Cambodia, then estimated at about ten thousand.

The return to Phnom Penh of King Sihanouk from his voluntary exile in the border provinces and the subsequent "Mobilization of the Live Forces of Cambodia" (see below) plus the return to legality of several nationalist rebels, somewhat improved the security situation with regard to the Communist rebels. By December 1953, Communist forces had evacuated most of the area north of the Battambang-Phnom Penh railroad line and had retreated into the southwestern hill and mountain area.

The Communist Counteroffensive. As the French began to implement the "Navarre Plan" early in 1954, the Viet Minh high command sought to alleviate the pressure on its northern key positions by launching several diversionary offensives in secondary theaters such as Laos and Cambodia. In Laos this resulted in a Communist stab to the Mekong River, cutting Indochina in two. In Cambodia, all Cambodian and Vietnamese Communist rebel forces were merged into one single force known as the "Khmer Peoples' Liberation Army".

This offensive in Cambodia brought about a sharp increase of guerrilla operations against communications throughout the country and a sudden Communist offensive out of the Laotian and Vietnamese plateau area into the northeastern sector of Cambodia, resulting in April 1954 in a temporary occupation of the important northeastern road hub of Voeune Sai, and in an attack on the Phnom Penh-Battambang train. Some one hundred civilians, including thirty bonzes, were killed. Public opinion was aroused, and on April 23, 1954, the Cambodian government reported these acts of aggression to the United Nations.

The Cambodian Communists and the Geneva Conference. The Khmer Resistance Government established at the outset, as an operational principle, its complete support of the policies and aims of Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam. Without Viet-Nam Communist support, Cambodian Communism was, despite its pretensions to governmental status,

an isolated minority movement. The Cambodian Royal Government had undercut any of the movement's demands for support by Cambodians with its own successful struggle against the French. At best, Cambodian Communist claims might be used as a bargaining pawn in diplomatic negotiations.

Toward this end, the Khmer Resistance Government was advanced by the Communists as a legitimate voice entitled to a hearing in peace negotiations. The Communist Viet-Nam News Agency repeatedly stressed the history of the Khmer Resistance Government, to lend weight to its claims to be recognized, and inflated the military accomplishments and strength of the Khmer Peoples' Liberation Army: "Tens of thousands of youths have enrolled in guerrilla and militia units in the people's bases and even in regions near the enemy-occupied towns."

On May 3, 1954, Son Ngoc Minh, President of the Khmer Resistance Government, demanded that the Geneva Conference formally seat a delegation representing his government, but he was not supported by the Communist bloc.

The political aims of the Cambodian Communists were completely defeated as a result of the agreements reached at Geneva. Little remained for them but to make their peace with the Royal Cambodian Government or to be evacuated north to the Vietnamese Communist zone, thereby clearly showing their allegiance to a foreign cause, that of the Vietnamese Communists. For a time, Cambodian Communist forces sought to obtain, through the channel of the International Supervisory and Control Commission (ISCC), recognition as an independent force and possession of an autonomous area such as that obtained by the Laotian Communist forces. The Royal Government authorities refused, however, to grant them any recognition whatever and insisted that they surrender, indicating that they might be pardoned if they took an oath of loyalty to the Royal Government.

Here again, as at the bargaining table in Geneva, when the Cambodians made up their minds on the stand they would take, they remained completely adamant. On September 24, 1954, the Cambodian Communists submitted six proposals to the Joint Armistice Commission, attempting again to get recognition. Again they failed; the Royal Government refused to negotiate with them.

The Cambodian Communists then threw in with the Vietnamese Communist forces operating in Cambodia. Although most of the low-ranking guerrilla fighters simply slipped away and merged into the countryside, the hard core of the movement withdrew from Cambodia toward North Viet-Nam along with the Vietnamese Communist forces that had operated in Cambodia and that now, under the terms of the cease-fire, accepted evacuation. On October 25, 1954, Nguyen Thanh Son, now a full colonel in Ho

Chi Minh's Viet-Nam People's Army, left Phnom Penh, where he had acted as the head of the Communist delegation to the Joint Armistice Commission, and evacuated to North Viet-Nam with about twenty-five hundred troops. (Other figures indicate that up to four thousand troops were evacuated.) The number of evacuees was considered unsatisfactory by the Cambodian government, which estimated that at least another four to five thousand Communist rebels had remained behind, hidden their weapons, and merged with the surrounding Vietnamese population, ready to rise again should the opportunity occur.

The Present Communist Threat

The cease-fire and the subsequent evacuation of Communist rebel forces from Cambodia did not eliminate the threat of Communist political or even military subversion in the area. In view of the conspicuous success of the nationalist independence policy of Prince Sihanouk, Cambodians now tend to underestimate the potential threat of communism in their country, the more so as the Communist Vietnamese Government in North Viet-Nam has repeatedly expressed its peaceful intentions toward Cambodia and even promised to give favorable consideration to the status of the Cambodian minority in South Viet-Nam in the event of a total occupation of all Viet-Nam by the Communist regime. Communist-line Cambodian newspapers such as Pracheachon, along with Chinese Communist newspapers (see Chapter IX, Control and Diffusion of Information), now circulate freely in Cambodia.

There is, however, no immediate threat of an extension of Communist popularity in Cambodia. The generally favorable economic position enjoyed by Cambodians and their strong religiosity are barriers to Communist success there. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that the Cambodian government may establish political and economic ties with the Soviet bloc.

The Chinese in Cambodia, as in other countries where there is a substantial Chinese population, are highly sensitive to political changes in the host country, particularly when they affect relations between the host country and the Chinese Communist and Chinese Nationalist governments. The recent rapprochement between Peking and Phnom Penh has resulted in a large-scale turnabout among the Chinese community, away from the Chinese Nationalist government and toward the Red Chinese government.

If there is a final break between the Cambodian government and the Chinese Nationalist government in Formosa, it is very likely that the majority of the Chinese community of Cambodia will serve the aims of the

Peking government. Since the cease-fire of 1954 there has been evidence of a great amount of Chinese Communist propaganda circulating throughout the Chinese community (see Chapter IX, Control and Diffusion of Information).

The Vietnamese in Cambodia are now in an even more ambiguous position than the Chinese in view of the fact that their own homeland is just across the border. Many of them still consider Cambodia a semibarbarian colony whose eventual annexation by the Vietnamese mother country is both justified and desirable. Therefore, they tend to be loyal to whatever Vietnamese authority makes a strong claim for their allegiance. In the past, such a claim has come from the Communist Vietnamese guerrilla forces. Now, similar strong appeals are made by the Vietnamese Nationalist government in Saigon, although it is certain that Communist appeals have far from completely disappeared.

When its over-all strategic position is considered, Cambodia must be seen as the "soft underbelly" of the southern Indochinese area. Since its northeastern and eastern mountain border with Laos is indefensible (it is thinly populated and largely a jungle area) the route through Laos and Cambodia is the shortest approach from northern Viet-Nam into South Viet-Nam for infiltrating Communist forces. Recent reports indicate that such infiltration (including that of a Vietnamese Communist army general) has been taking place. In other words, Cambodia, on the flank of the wide-open plains of South Viet-Nam, must be considered a dangerously weak spot in the defense of Indochina.

In addition, the neutral attitude professed by succeeding Cambodian administrations since late in 1954 creates a climate in the country that somewhat encourages a lowering of resistance to Communist infiltrations. On the other hand, the Cambodians have always taken a firm stand, including successful military operations, whenever they recognize Communist subversive activities as a danger to their system of government. Such a quick resistive reaction is to be expected particularly when Communist infiltration is openly backed by elements alien to the Cambodians, such as the Chinese or the Vietnamese, but is less likely to be effective if the subversive force succeeds in attracting a hard core of Khmer, so as to be able to pass itself off as a "Cambodian" movement.

Government Measures to Insure Internal Order

Internal subversive activities of various guerrilla groups and of bandits constitute Cambodia's most serious public order problem. Until 1952

the task of "pacification" was almost entirely in the hands of the French Expeditionary Forces, which had only uncertain success. In the summer of 1952 the Cambodian government created the Under-Secretariat of State of the Interior for Self-Defense (Auto-Défense) and the pacification effort became a joint French-Cambodian operation, with the Cambodians taking a steadily increasing part.

The plan of operations was simple: the regular army forces would first break the back of guerrilla resistance and do a mopping up; then the Provincial Guard would be sent in to organize self-defense units in the larger villages by arming reliable civilians. To fill the gaps between villages, mobile and semimobile Provincial Guard units would be stationed at centrally located points, ready to come to the help of an attacked village. Independent Infantry Companies (Compagnies Autonomes d'Infanterie, or CAI) would step into the picture for "external defense" when an enemy attack proved to be more than a temporary probing stab.

At the national level, the anti-guerrilla effort is coordinated in the High Committee for Pacification, presided over by the king. Provincial Pacification Committees, each presided over by a provincial governor, implement pacification policy at field level. In these committees all military operations are coordinated with the civilian authorities, to obtain a maximum concentration of effort with the least possible harm to the civilian population affected by the operation.

Subordinated to the Ministry of Interior, hence considered as a police force, the Provincial Guard is now stabilized at a man power level of about fifty-five hundred men equipped with some forty-two hundred rifles, twelve hundred submachine guns, seven hundred grenade-launchers, and more than twelve hundred pistols. There are a few heavier weapons, such as light machine guns and BAR's, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Most units are truck- or jeep-borne and have mobile radio equipment.

Toward the end of 1953 the Provincial Guards and their auxiliaries in the villages (five thousand in 1953 and about eight thousand in 1954) had assumed almost full control of local defense, but the problem posed by the sudden Communist Viet Minh invasion of northeastern Cambodia in 1954 created a dangerous situation by siphoning off almost all the available Cambodian regular army forces and CAI, leaving the defense of the rest of the country in the hands of the police units. (The French Expeditionary Corps by October 1953 had evacuated all of Cambodia west of the Mekong.)

It was obvious that the Provincial Guard would not be able to master the situation alone. King Sihanouk initiated a new program: the "Mobilization of the Live Forces of Cambodia" (known in Cambodia as Chhivapol, or by its French initials MFVC), that is, the mobilization of every man