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# Ethnic Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge: the genocide and race debate

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides insights on the Communist Party of Kampuchea's (CPK) ethnic policy through the dynamics of its relationship with ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia during the 1970s. During Cambodia's civil war between the CPK and the Lon Nol government, the CPK regarded Vietnamese in Cambodia as supporters of its political movement. The paper demonstrates that although class categorization undermined CPK treatment of Vietnamese and other minority groups (notably Chinese and Cham) throughout the four years (1975–1979) of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), internal plots, suspicions of non-Khmer people, and a war with Vietnam led to the expulsion of the vast majority of Vietnamese in 1975. Expulsion gave way to the mass murder from mid-1977 onward of many of the remaining Vietnamese and mixed-parentage children. By demonstrating how CPK notions of class outweighed those of race, the paper argues that CPK purges against Vietnamese should be understood within the framework of CPK efforts to eliminate suspected enemies from Vietnam rather than stemming from genocidal intent.

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## Introduction

Although ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia faced difficult phases of persecution over time, the most significant period of anti-Vietnamese activity was during the 1970s. During this decade, almost all of the country's ethnic Vietnamese were expelled or killed, first during the Khmer Republic (1970–1975) and then under the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979).<sup>1</sup>

Several scholars have discussed the life experiences of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia.<sup>2</sup> But these studies have largely not considered changes in relations between Vietnamese residents and the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Instead, these works highlight key incidents in the CPK's large-scale expulsions and massacres of Vietnamese between 1975 and 1979. These scholars do not clearly distinguish between CPK treatment of Vietnamese before and after the DK period, nor discuss how and why CPK

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<sup>1</sup>On March 18, 1970 a military coup led by General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak deposed Cambodia's royal government and Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the head of state, fled into exile, eventually settling in Beijing. This military regime was defeated by Khmer Rouge forces in April 1975, after which Democratic Kampuchea was proclaimed.

<sup>2</sup>Ehrentraut 2011; Derks 2009; Amer 1994; Tarr 1992.

treatment of the country's Vietnamese minority changed after the party came to power in April 1975.

CPK treatment of ethnic Vietnamese was influenced by multiple factors, including relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). In the early years of Cambodia's civil war the CPK did not mistreat ethnic Vietnamese, and many Vietnamese viewed life in CPK-controlled territory as a safer alternative remaining in government territory or fleeing to either North or South Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> This was because of the violence toward, expulsions of, and restrictions on ethnic Vietnamese by the Lon Nol government. Only after seizing power in 1975 did the CPK initiate a policy of dividing the population into different political classes (*vanṇa:*) and categorizing Vietnamese as an untrustworthy political group.

The CPK's political exigencies in dealing with internal conflicts and a border war with a newly unified Vietnam that began in 1975 led to the expulsion of an estimated 150,000 Vietnamese in 1975 and to the mass murder of some 10,000 more Vietnamese from mid-1977 until the overthrow of the regime in 1979. What the CPK/DK did to ethnic Vietnamese between 1977 and 1979 has been described by scholars such as Ben Kiernan, as well as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) in its 2018 trial judgment of Case 002/02 (discussed below), as an act of genocide.<sup>4</sup> However, based on our examination of the personal experiences of ethnic Vietnamese who lived in Cambodia at that time, as well as CPK political motivations, we argue that racist motives were not the main factor in the CPK's agenda or the eventual massacre of Vietnamese. Instead of describing the CPK's treatment of Vietnamese as genocidal, it is more accurate to call these "crimes against humanity" because the killings reflected the regime's broader campaign to persecute alleged enemies, including hundreds of thousands of its own cadres, soldiers, and ordinary people, regardless of ethnicity.<sup>5</sup>

Our research draws on oral interviews of ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer who lived in Cambodia before and during the DK years. Between 2018 and 2020 we conducted fifty-two interviews, thirty-four of which were with Vietnamese who had lived in different parts of the country during the 1970s. We also interviewed several ethnic Khmer villagers who had lived among ethnic Vietnamese or had relatives who had married Vietnamese. Finally, we have drawn on transcripts of oral testimonies given by witnesses and victims who testified before the ECCC between 2011 and 2016 and interviewed one of these witnesses for clarification.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, we first provide a brief overview of CPK/DK treatment of ethnic minorities during the 1970s and CPK policies on socio-economic classes after it took power in April 1975. We then examine four crucial periods that mark changing CPK attitudes toward ethnic Vietnamese between 1970 and 1975: life in CPK liberated territory during the civil war; the mass expulsion of ethnic Vietnamese in 1975 after the CPK seized

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<sup>3</sup>From 1954 until 1976, North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, DRV) and South Vietnam (the Republic of Vietnam), were separate states. Upon their formal merger on July 2, 1976, reunified Vietnam became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In this paper we use "Vietnam" when referring to either the DRV or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

<sup>4</sup>See Kiernan 2006, 189; 2008, 252. ECCC's Case 02/02 Judgement 2018 is available at <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/document/court/case-00202-judgement>. Accessed May 22, 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Both "ethnicity" and "race" are translated as *janjāti* in Khmer.

<sup>6</sup>The ECCC's transcripts are available at <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/document/court>. Accessed May 22; 2020.

power; life under DK rule in 1976 and early 1977; and life after war broke out with Vietnam in mid-1977.

## The CPK and ethnic minorities

The CPK's priority was total control of the entire Cambodian population. CPK policies, some of which were implemented in zones they controlled even before they took power in April 1975, included collectivization, communal eating, a prohibition on religious belief, the division of communities into mobile units of men, children, and women, and extra-judicial executions of political enemies.

CPK ideology differed from that of any previous Cambodian regime. The Khmer Republic government had promoted a Khmer identity based on an essentialist ethnic and Buddhist lens; the CPK abandoned this in favor of a class-based Kampuchea identity. In the DK Constitution, the word "Khmer," which had been widely promoted by the Sihanouk Royalist and Khmer Republic governments, was replaced by an emphasis on "workers," "peasants," and "revolutionary army," with no regard to ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> Both ethnic Khmers and ethnic minorities were forced to conform to CPK proletarian ideals. Those who did not were deemed national security risks and representatives of a so-called "pathogen" to the party's racialized conception of revolutionary purity.

As Michael Vickery (1984) argued, although the CPK's concept of class had Marxist origins, it was distorted by considerations peculiar to the Cambodian situation. The DK government divided the population into three categories: those who enjoyed full rights, those who were candidates for rights, and "depositees." Full rights people consisted of poor peasants, the lower and middle strata of middle peasants, and workers. Candidates were upper-middle peasants, wealthy peasants, and petty bourgeoisie. Depositees were capitalists and foreign minorities who, were not permitted to join any civic groups or the army.<sup>8</sup> In addition, all people forcibly evacuated from towns and cities after April 17, 1975, were classified as depositees and "new people."<sup>9</sup>

However, in practice, not all minorities were considered depositees, and ethnicity and class status were not the only factors that determined CPK policy. The party's political priorities and the pre-existing social status of each ethnic community in relation to the new revolutionary regime also played a role. Unlike ethnic Chinese, Cham, and Vietnamese, who were treated as foreigners, highland groups like the Jarai<sup>10</sup> and the Brao<sup>11</sup> were referred to by the CPK as "ethnic brothers" (*paṅpa-ūn janjāti*) as they largely conformed to, and were conferred with, the status that the CPK sought to promote. This was because of pre-existing social practices such as communal sharing and eating. In addition, highlanders were among the groups that had supported the CPK movement since the 1960s. Although members of these communities also were forcibly resettled and required to practice collective agriculture, some became party cadres and trusted bodyguards of top CPK leaders like Pol Pot and Ieng Sary.<sup>12</sup> While many of their

<sup>7</sup>Chandler 1976, 506–515.

<sup>8</sup>Vickery 1984, 87.

<sup>9</sup>Vickery 1984, 87.

<sup>10</sup>Uk 2016; Padwe 2020.

<sup>11</sup>Baird 2020.

<sup>12</sup>Kiernan 2008; 302–303.

distinctive cultural and traditional activities were banned after 1975 (which prompted many to flee to Vietnam or Laos), DK authorities allowed highlanders to maintain their own languages. Ben Kiernan has estimated that the highlanders' mortality rate was fifteen percent among a population of around 60,000. This figure is similar to that of the "base people" who had lived in CPK liberated zones during the civil war years and after 1975 received more favorable treatment than "new people" were afforded.<sup>13</sup> In sharp contrast to highlanders, the CPK classified ethnic Chinese as capitalists, regardless of their actual livelihoods. Most of the Chinese diaspora population of 425,000 (7.4 percent of the total population) were traders in urban areas.<sup>14</sup>

Because they were classified as both "capitalists" and "new people" by the CPK, ethnic Chinese faced a more dangerous situation than did highland minority groups. However, the CPK did not consider only ethnic identity as determinant of status. Indeed, they ostensibly should have treated the Chinese better than other ethnic minorities given the fact that the party and later the DK state relied on the People's Republic of China for political, economic, and technical support.<sup>15</sup> However, ethnic Chinese citizens of Cambodia were heavily persecuted as a consequence of their alleged connection to social and economic practices associated with the former corrupt and exploitative capitalist society.<sup>16</sup> Kiernan has estimated that about fifty percent of Cambodian-Chinese died under the DK regime.<sup>17</sup>

CPK treatment of the Cham was closely associated with its broader bans on religious and cultural practices. Some Cham had supported the Lon Nol regime, and there were several high-profile protests by Cham in the first half of the 1970s against the CPK's general prohibition of religious practices. Tensions between the CPK and the Cham arose as early as 1972 in several regions that were under party control. A major incident took place in Kampot in June 1973 when CPK cadres ordered Cham women to cut their hair short.<sup>18</sup> After the CPK took national power and established the DK, two significant uprisings took place in Koh Phal and Svay Khleang villages in Kampong Cham province in September and October 1975, respectively, mainly due to CPK restrictions on religious and cultural practices.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, many Cham were forcibly relocated from their home villages and many others were arrested or killed.<sup>20</sup>

From 1975 onward, the CPK treated the Cham as deposites. It also forced many of them to live among the Khmer majority,<sup>21</sup> speak Khmer, and eat pork, to integrate them into its new social and collective practices.<sup>22</sup> The persecution of the Cham and attacks on their cultural and religious practices may appear to be an exception to the DK's class-based approach. However, the CPK's main goal was to convert all of the population into revolutionary citizens sharing a unified identity.

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<sup>13</sup>Kiernan 2008, 458.

<sup>14</sup>William 1967, 17.

<sup>15</sup>For a discussion of DK relations with China, see Ciorciari 2014; Mertha 2014.

<sup>16</sup>Kiernan 1986.

<sup>17</sup>Kiernan 2006, 190.

<sup>18</sup>Kiernan 2008, 258–260.

<sup>19</sup>Ysa Osman 2006, 53–109.

<sup>20</sup>On Cham population figures and death tolls in the DK years, see Kiernan 2003, 588–590; Vickery 1990; Kiernan 1988.

<sup>21</sup>See Farina So 2011, 54.

<sup>22</sup>A ban on Islamic practices among the Cham had more to do with a broader prohibition of all religious beliefs, including Buddhist practices. See Harris 2012.

The experiences of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia before and after the CPK took power were more complex than those of Cham, highlanders, or Chinese. They were categorized as depositees after April 1975 and, simultaneously, often were accused of working on behalf of the Vietnamese Communist Party to undermine CPK rule. The CPK preoccupied itself with identifying those who followed their own particular and often disastrous revolutionary paths and those who were potentially opposed to the party. The highland minority groups were considered among those whose way of earning a living gave them an acceptable class status under the CPK regime. The Cham were seen as a constant threat to revolt, but nevertheless posed less of a risk than the Vietnamese. This was because the Cham did not have external institutional or national connections. As noted above, ethnic Chinese were at risk because of their association with the Lon Nol regime and their presumed capitalist practices, rather than because of their ethnicity specifically.

In contrast, Vietnamese living in Cambodia shared a complicated background that had deep roots in transnational and domestic political conflicts during the pre-colonial and colonial years.<sup>23</sup> They were also linked to perceived long-term threats to Cambodian sovereignty by Vietnam. Prior to April 1975, however, these threats were much less evident as the CPK preoccupied itself with enlarging the population in its liberated zones and had not fully broken with its Vietnamese allies.

### **Life in CPK liberated zones, 1970–1975**

No particular CPK policy targeting ethnic Vietnamese was evident between 1970 and 1975. Instead, testimony from our respondents highlights relatively favorable treatment by the CPK during this period compared to what ethnic Vietnamese experienced under the Lon Nol government. Even after the CPK's relationship with North Vietnam (DRV) began to break apart in 1972 and Viet Cong<sup>24</sup> troops began to pull out of Cambodia, the treatment of ethnic Vietnamese did not significantly change. To a large extent, the CPK treated them similarly to how they treated Khmers who lived in their liberated territories.<sup>25</sup>

For instance, in Prek Tnot village in Svay Rieng, twelve Vietnamese families sold groceries to anyone in the village and nearby villages. In 1970, after the CPK took control of the area, these Vietnamese families continued their businesses. According to villagers we interviewed, these families had close connections with Viet Cong soldiers who sometimes stayed in their houses. Rumors circulated among Khmer villagers in the area that these Vietnamese residents also had close connections with CPK soldiers.<sup>26</sup>

Things started to change in Prek Tnot in 1973 after CPK propaganda in rural areas took on a more starkly anti-capitalist message. These Vietnamese families were then considered “capitalists” and people became reluctant to buy things from them. Vietnamese who had lived in Koh Krek in Kampong Chhnang recounted similar experiences. One

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<sup>23</sup>Taylor 2014; McHale 2013; Goscha 2009.

<sup>24</sup>National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam.

<sup>25</sup>In May 1970, the CPK joined with the exiled Royal government to form the National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK), led by Prince Sihanouk and based in Beijing. This strategic move allowed the CPK to rapidly expand its territory and drew supporters due to Sihanouk's popularity among villagers across the country.

<sup>26</sup>Authors' interviews with three villagers in Svay Rieng province, September 2019.

villager said his floating village was initially a battlefield between CPK and Khmer Republic soldiers. When the CPK later gained control, he, together with other Vietnamese villagers, continued his fishing activities as normal, although military attacks and aerial bombing by Khmer Republic forces continued throughout the civil war years.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, many Vietnamese who lived in territory controlled by Lon Nol's Khmer Republic government, especially in Svay Rieng and Phnom Penh, were persecuted or expelled to South Vietnam. After reaching an agreement with Nguyen Van Thieu's government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) on May 27, 1970, the Lon Nol government forced some 250,000 Vietnamese to leave Cambodia between April 1970 and March 1971.<sup>28</sup> This was almost seventy percent of the total Vietnamese population of Cambodia at that time.<sup>29</sup> French Catholic priest François Ponchaud, who lived in Cambodia from 1965 to 1975, has described the violence stirred up by the Lon Nol regime against alleged Viet Cong members and sympathizers in Svay Rieng, where about 150 Vietnamese civilians were herded into a barbed wire enclosure and machine-gunned by Cambodian soldiers on April 10, 1970.<sup>30</sup> According to Ponchaud, "from 10 to 15 April, several thousand bodies floated on the Mekong as far up as the ferry of Neak Loeung. Among them were 524 [Vietnamese] Catholics from the village of Chroy Changvar alone."<sup>31</sup>

Khmer Republic violence against and the large-scale expulsion of ethnic Vietnamese in 1970 and early 1971 can partly be understood as a strategy by the regime to gain legitimacy by stimulating hatred and anger among ethnic Khmer against Viet Cong troops based in Cambodia and against Vietnamese in general. This also had to do with Lon Nol and his close associates' antipathy to Vietnamese stimulated by centuries of ethnic conflict, nationalist attitudes towards "Khmerness" and Khmer superiority vis-à-vis non-Khmer, who they repeatedly labeled as *dmil* (a Buddhist term for a non-believer or an immoral person), and concerns about Cambodian sovereignty.

Yet not all ethnic Vietnamese left Cambodia during 1970 and 1971. Hundreds of thousands remained in both Khmer Republic territory and CPK liberated zones through the first half of the 1970s. Moreover, according to our respondents, hundreds of Vietnamese families left government territory and went to live in CPK controlled areas after this mass displacement.<sup>32</sup>

Beginning in 1972, the relationship between the CPK and the DRV began to break down for a number of reasons. Khmers had long viewed Vietnam as Cambodia's historical enemy. In addition, the two Vietnams signed the Paris Peace Accords on January 27, 1973, which included a provision that the DRV suspend military assistance to the CPK. Finally, the CPK shared the Lon Nol government's concern that North Vietnam was encroaching on and would swallow up Cambodian territory.<sup>33</sup> Between late 1972 and early 1973, fighting broke out between CPK and North Vietnam military forces in

<sup>27</sup> Authors' interview with a villager in Kampong Chhnang province, October 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Pouvatthy 1976, 342–349.

<sup>29</sup> Cambodia's 1962 census identified 217,774 ethnic Vietnamese within a total population of approximately 5.7 million. See Nguyen and Sperfeldt 2012, 12. Willmott estimated there were about 300,000 ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia in the mid-1960s. See William 1967; 33.

<sup>30</sup> Ponchaud 2012, 171.

<sup>31</sup> Ponchaud 2012, 171.

<sup>32</sup> Authors' interviews with eight villagers in Kampong Chhnang and Siem Reap provinces between October and November 2018.

<sup>33</sup> ECCC's Case 02/02 Judgement 2018, 1714–1715.

southwestern Cambodia and, in some areas, CPK cadres even sought to prevent North Vietnamese soldiers from repatriating their equipment.<sup>34</sup> At that point in time, the CPK pursued a clear goal of getting DRV troops to evacuate its liberated territories.<sup>35</sup>

This confrontation, however, did not cause local CPK cadres to implement any hostile treatment toward ethnic Vietnamese living in the liberated zones. None of our fifty-two respondents recalled any mistreatment by local CPK cadres against ethnic Vietnamese until April 1975. What was of more concern in 1972 and 1973 was the economic status of ethnic Vietnamese, which was at odds with the revolutionary ideology of the CPK. This would have been equally true for ethnic Chinese who were living in CPK-held territory and even for some Khmers as well.

Even so, Vietnamese residents were not allowed to join the CPK military forces and none held any position of authority within these liberated zones.

In summary, until April 1975, the CPK had no specific ethnic policy. Instead, Vietnamese living in CPK-controlled territory had similar experiences to others, regardless of ethnicity. Even among the Vietnamese families in Svay Rieng mentioned above, CPK local cadres did not target them specifically and directly because of their ethnicity. The CPK's boarder intention at that time was to act against those it considered to be "capitalists" and "feudalists."

## Displacement and deportation

After the Lon Nol government collapsed and the CPK seized power on April 17, 1975, the living conditions of ethnic Vietnamese changed rapidly as the party moved to displace them within Cambodia and then to expel them from the country in June. Prior to this large-scale expulsion, Vietnamese who lived in cities such as Phnom Penh, Pursat, Kampong Chhnang, Battambang, and Siem Reap faced mass forced displacement along with the rest of the urban population. Many others who lived in floating villages along the Tonlé Sap and the Mekong Rivers were forcibly relocated to work the land. Afterward, their depositee status, combined with DK policies aimed at responding to its conflicts – real or imagined – with Vietnam, put ethnic Vietnamese in a dangerous position.

According to a respondent who had lived in Kampong Chhnang during this period, the first few months of CPK rule brought a mixture of fear and discrimination. His family had fled to a liberated zone in 1972. He had continued his livelihood as a fisherman until early 1975, when, after the CKP's victory, his entire family, along with many other Vietnamese families in the area, was forced to move to the foothills of a mountain to dig canals, clear forests, and grow corn. They had to work very hard in exchange for a bowl of rice gruel provided by the local authorities at each meal. He recalled that most Vietnamese families were not allowed to live among Khmer villagers. Instead, they were assigned separate huts they shared with other Vietnamese villagers.<sup>36</sup>

Until 1975, there was no national ethnic policy to kill Vietnamese. Ethnic Vietnamese were punished or killed primarily for their inability to complete tasks given them by CPK

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<sup>34</sup>Chandler 1991, 226.

<sup>35</sup>Heder 2004, 166.

<sup>36</sup>Authors' interview, October 2018.



local cadres. Choeung Yaing Chaet, who lived in Kampong Chhnang with his Vietnamese parents and two siblings, described in his testimony to the ECCC how local authorities moved his family, along with many other Vietnamese families, to a foothill surrounded by mountains, where they were ordered to remove tree stumps. After more than a month of enduring this work in exchange for a bowl of rice gruel two times each day, his father and Choeung Yaing Chaet caught fevers. CPK local cadres then arrested his whole family. Although the rest of his relatives were killed, Choeung Yaing Chaet managed to escape after surviving three successive axe blows to his neck, and he later fled to Vietnam with the help of a Vietnamese villager.<sup>37</sup>

On May, 20, 1975, CPK leaders convened a special meeting with hundreds of regional and local officials in Phnom Penh to discuss a policy to expel all ethnic Vietnamese.<sup>38</sup> This decision displayed the CPK's own quest for domestic power and legitimacy by engaging in open hostilities with North Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> This expulsion order also coincided with the DRV's victory in its war with South Vietnam on April 30, 1975. The CPK leaders may have assumed that the DRV government was too busy consolidating its control in South Vietnam and would, therefore, be less likely to respond to this kind of provocation.<sup>40</sup>

Another key reason behind this decision was that CPK senior leaders like Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, and Ieng Sary regarded Vietnam as Cambodia's most dangerous enemy. To them, ethnic Vietnamese in the country still maintained political loyalties to Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Pol Pot himself later claimed that there were one million Vietnamese living in Cambodia during the previous regimes but there was not a single Vietnamese living in the country by April 1978.<sup>42</sup>

In April 1976, at the commemoration of the one-year anniversary of the CPK's military victory, its official publication *Dañ'paṭivatt (Revolutionary Flag)* recounted the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of "foreign nationals." Although the author does not specifically mention their ethnicity, the article clearly is referring to ethnic Vietnamese who by this time the CPK considered politically "poisonous" to the Cambodian people and the country.<sup>43</sup> The party labeled all Vietnamese as "foreign nationals" even though most of them were Cambodia-born, had lived in the country for decades, and often had supported the CPK. Between June and September 1975, the CPK expelled an estimated 150,000 ethnic Vietnamese to a now-reunified Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> This number represents the great majority of Vietnamese who had remained after the forced exodus under Lon Nol during the early 1970s.

<sup>37</sup>ECCC December 7, 2015b, 42–44.

<sup>38</sup>Kiernan 2008, 55–56.

<sup>39</sup>Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley note that, similar to the Pathet Lao, the CPK was branded by its enemies as a Vietnamese puppet group. However, after a series of conflicts beginning in April 1975, these accusations passed out of fashion, and some commentators even praised the CPK for its patriotism and valiant struggle against Vietnamese attempts to dominate Cambodia. See Evans and Rowley 1984, 84.

<sup>40</sup>Personal communication, Bruce Lockhart, July 13, 2020.

<sup>41</sup>This perception was shared by key supporters of the Khmer Republic regime such as Nuon Khioen. See Nuon Khioen 1971.

<sup>42</sup>See *Dañ'paṭivatt (Revolutionary Flag)* April 1978, 20. Pol Pot's statement is not necessarily correct because the number he suggested is not supported by data from Cambodia's last pre-war census data, and our evidence shows the presence of a small number of ethnic Vietnamese who survived his regime.

<sup>43</sup>*Revolutionary Flag* April 1976; 6–8.

<sup>44</sup>Heuveline 1998, 63.

## Life under DK rule, 1976–1977

Party policy towards Vietnamese with Khmer spouses, and children of mixed Vietnamese and Khmer heritage, was more ambiguous. During the 1975 expulsions, some local cadres might not have been fully informed of or certain about this policy, and consequently allowed people in these groups to make their own decisions.

Thousands of ethnic Vietnamese married to Khmers, along with their relatives and their children, remained. As depositees, their situation was largely similar to that of urban evacuees who had been classified as “new people.” CPK leaders considered everyone in these categories untrustworthy and subjected them to hard labor (although not yet persecution). A daughter of a Vietnamese mother and Khmer father named Sao Sak testified before the ECCC in 2015 that she had lived a normal life with her family in the CPK liberated zone in Prey Veng in the early 1970s. After the CPK took power, she was assigned to turning a water wheel and making fermented and smoked fish.<sup>45</sup> Her aging mother was assigned to look after small children and babies. Sao Sak’s mother did this work until 1978, after which she was invited to a meeting and disappeared.<sup>46</sup>

A woman named Khuoy Muoy, who was sixty-two when she testified in 2015, was the daughter of a Chinese father and Vietnamese mother, and had lived in Koh Seh in Kampot province (now Sihanoukville province) before 1975. After the CPK took over the area, she was briefly sent to school by CPK cadres. Her family could have easily escaped to South Vietnam at the time because their village was close to the border, but they did not do so because they had lived in Cambodia for a long time and did not anticipate that the CPK would treat them badly.<sup>47</sup> Khuoy Muoy lived with her parents and siblings until 1976, when she was assigned to a mobile work unit far away from home. She visited her parents once or twice per year until they and her siblings were taken away by CPK cadres in 1978.<sup>48</sup>

Sao Sak’s account shows that although she was of mixed parentage, no major changes happened to her family before or immediately after the CPK took power. Khuoy Muoy’s story discloses a more complex situation, as she was not Khmer. Both cases illustrate that although Vietnamese lived under surveillance by local CPK militiamen, prior to the war with Vietnam that began in mid-1977, the CPK had no clear policy towards either hybridized or non-Khmer.

Even among those who were forced to leave urban areas or who had worked for the Lon Nol government, ethnic minorities were classified as “new people” throughout 1976 and early 1977. Sieng Chanthei, daughter of a Vietnamese man and Khmer woman, had two brothers, one of whom had been a policeman and the other a soldier for the previous government. Her family was forcibly moved from Svay Rieng town in April 1975 and assigned to live in a village in the same province. Her two brothers and other family members were forced to leave Phnom Penh and resettle in the same village. Both brothers were later sent to a re-education camp for six months and then assigned to hard labor,

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<sup>45</sup>ECCC December 3, 2015a, 91.

<sup>46</sup>ECCC December 3, 2015a, 76.

<sup>47</sup>ECCC December 3, 2015a, 57–59.

<sup>48</sup>ECCC December 3, 2015a, 64.

such as plowing rice fields.<sup>49</sup> Sieng Chanthei stayed with the rest of her family members through 1976 and most of 1977, until her father committed suicide shortly after her elder brother was arrested and killed.

Before these terrible events, she recounted that there had been harsh discrimination against her family between 1976 and early 1977. They received smaller portions of food than other villagers and endured harsher labor. She testified that their situation was better during the dry and harvest seasons (October through April), but they suffered from starvation during the rainy season (May to October). It was also at that time that the CPK's persecution of ethnic Vietnamese intensified after clashes with Vietnamese troops along the border began in mid-1977.<sup>50</sup>

Taken together, these accounts by Sieng Chanthei, Khuoy Muoy, and Sao Sak describe the situation for deposites and former urban residents during the first two years of the DK regime. More specifically, Sieng Chanthei's story recounts how local CPK cadres treated mixed-Vietnamese and Khmer people prior to mid-1977. Her case also shows how urban evacuees and families of mixed parentage were given unequal food rations and harsher labor tasks, but were not rounded up and purged. On the other hand, her story also illustrates how treatment towards them changed after internal party conflicts intensified and military clashes with Vietnam became more frequent and severe.

### **CPK anti-Vietnamese purges during Cambodia's war with Vietnam**

The CPK initiated its campaign to persecute the remaining Vietnamese, including those of mixed parentage, as economic and political conditions deteriorated sharply beginning in early 1977. When war broke out with Vietnam in mid-1977, the regime's impossible agricultural production goals, concerns about alleged plots, and mutual suspicions between national and regional leaders intensified DK leaders' fears of a Vietnamese threat.<sup>51</sup> Besides purging a number of allegedly pro-Vietnamese traitors within the party, including two deputy prime ministers and several members of the Central Committee, CPK leaders launched a campaign to eliminate all Vietnamese in the country, accusing them of conspiring to undermine the party's control.

Sieng Chanthei recounted how local party cadres' treatment of her and two other Vietnamese families living in Svay Rieng changed after Vietnamese forces retaliated against a DK military offensive along the border in December 1977. Chanthei recalled that her co-workers did not want to talk to her because they were afraid of being associated with a "yuan daughter" even though she could not speak a word of Vietnamese.<sup>52</sup>

CPK cadres targeted her father, Ta Thoueng, because they believed he was a Vietnamese puppet purely because of his ancestry. According to Sieng Chanthei, Ta Thoueng had a fair complexion.<sup>53</sup> She testified that he became overwhelmingly frightened after witnessing the torture, rape, and killing of two entire Vietnamese families (nine people), in the village a few weeks earlier. About a week after her first brother was taken away and killed by CPK cadres, Ta Thoueng committed suicide, after having

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<sup>49</sup>ECCC March 1, 2016b, 25–26.

<sup>50</sup>ECCC March 1, 2016b, 17–18.

<sup>51</sup>Chandler 1991, 270–271.

<sup>52</sup>ECCC February 29, 2016c, 99–100. *Yuan* is a derogatory Khmer term for Vietnamese.

<sup>53</sup>ECCC March 1, 2016b, 15.

tried twice unsuccessfully before. He ended his life because he believed that it was the only way to save his other children.<sup>54</sup> Sieng Chanthei and her remaining family members survived the DK years partly because she tried to please her unit leader through hard work. She also told us that her survival was due partly to more sympathetic treatment by local cadres after her father's suicide and her brother's murder.<sup>55</sup>

As for CPK purges of children of Khmer and Vietnamese parents, the beginning of this policy is uncertain. In a May 17, 1978 telegram, Northwest Zone Secretary Rous Nhim sought guidance from Angkar 870 (Pol Pot's Office) on what to do with the children of a Khmer father and a Vietnamese mother.<sup>56</sup> There are no traces of a response, but, in most cases, these children were killed. A survivor named Lach Kry testified to the ECCC how his brother's Vietnamese wife was arrested in front of him while they were at work in a rice field. CPK cadres took her away, and the following day her children followed, never to return.<sup>57</sup> Testimonies to the ECCC by other survivors suggest that the CPK mainly killed mixed parentage children whose mothers were Vietnamese, under the logic that such children were also Vietnamese. But if the father was Vietnamese and the mother was Khmer, the CPK did not kill the children.<sup>58</sup>

As the war between the DK and Vietnam intensified and anti-Vietnamese propaganda increased, the killing of ethnic Vietnamese was tasked to regional authorities.<sup>59</sup> In reports submitted to senior CPK leaders by telegram, these officials reported their successes. In a December 31, 1977 telegram to Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Vorn Vet, Son Sen, and Office 870, Division 164 Commander Meas Muth reported "sweeping cleanly away" the *yuon* and other enemies.<sup>60</sup> Another telegram from the West Zone Committee, dated August 4, 1978, described their successful screening operations of Vietnamese (among others) in the preceding month and the killing of "100 Vietnamese people – small and big, young and old."<sup>61</sup> Up to January 1, 1979, just six days before the collapse of the DK government, senior leaders were still issuing orders for all people, soldiers, and party cadres to "raise the spirit of revolutionary vigilance [and] track down and search out *yuon* enemy agents," not allowing them to "hide anywhere at all, to eliminate them, and gain timely mastery."<sup>62</sup>

## The genocide and race debate

Ethnic Vietnamese who had remained in Cambodia after the 1975 mass expulsion had almost no chance to escape the killings. Although a small number of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Cambodian children managed to survive until 1979,<sup>63</sup> the extent of the DK's persecution of the remaining Vietnamese between 1975 and 1979 was corroborated

<sup>54</sup>ECCC February 29, 2016, 94–95.

<sup>55</sup>Authors' interview in January 2020.

<sup>56</sup>ECCC October 17, 2014, 44.

<sup>57</sup>ECCC January 20, 2016a, 11.

<sup>58</sup>ECCC March 1, 2016b, 1742, 1751–52; ECCC January 20, 2016a, 21–22.

<sup>59</sup>State-run *Yuva:jan Yuva:nāri* (*Male Female Youth*, henceforth *MFY*), published in early 1978, depicted Vietnam as Cambodia's most dangerous enemy by comparing it to the "American Imperialists." *MFY* also recounted CPK successful efforts to eliminate all Vietnamese agents in the country. See *MFY* January-February 1978, 9–13.

<sup>60</sup>ECCC's Case 02/02 Judgement 2018, 1733.

<sup>61</sup>ECCC's Case 02/02 Judgement 2018, 1734.

<sup>62</sup>ECCC's Case 02/02 Judgement 2018, 1734.

<sup>63</sup>They include the six survivors, along with their relatives and siblings, who testified at the ECCC between 2015 and 2016.

by the ECCC's trial judgment on November 16, 2018, against senior DK leaders Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan:

Genocide by killing (nationwide from April 1977 to 6 January 1979, inclusive); murder as a crime against humanity (Vietnamese who resisted deportation in 1975-1976 and nationwide from April 1977 to 6 January 1979, inclusive); extermination as a crime against humanity. (nationwide from April 1977 to 6 January 1979, inclusive)<sup>64</sup>

The ECCC accused DK leaders of intending to exterminate the entire Vietnamese population in Cambodia. This charge is largely in line with Ben Kiernan's argument about racial prejudice and the genocide that he contends the CPK committed against Cambodia's ethnic minorities, especially Cham and Vietnamese.<sup>65</sup> Kiernan has emphasized that "the Khmer Rouge concepts of race overshadowed those of class"<sup>66</sup> and argues that "in 1977-78, DK officials hunted down and exterminated every last one of 10,000 or so surviving Vietnamese residents in the country. The CPK also perpetrated genocide against several other ethnic groups ..."<sup>67</sup>

CPK prejudice against ethnic Vietnamese certainly existed before 1975. Such prejudice became harsher by 1977 for three principal reasons: the CPK classified all Vietnamese as deposites regardless of pre-war occupations and prior experience in liberated zones; the CPK expelled most Vietnamese after seizing power in 1975; and the party launched a purge against remaining Vietnamese and mixed-parentage children in April 1977. These actions indeed support charges of racial discrimination and genocide.

But if one examines larger CPK/DK political motivations, Kiernan's analysis of the race question and his classification of CPK actions against Vietnamese as a form of genocide are not entirely correct. Because there were many political and military confrontations between Cambodia and Vietnam, it is impossible to explain the CPK's treatment of ethnic Vietnamese without exploring the party's relationship with Vietnam. CPK expulsions that followed the forced mass displacement of urban dwellers to the countryside was part of a broader defense strategy against perceived threats from Hanoi, as top leaders such as Pol Pot believed that ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia maintained political loyalty to Vietnam.

CPK persecutions of Vietnamese and mixed-race Vietnamese between April 1977 and January 1979 must be understood in the context of the war with Vietnam and the party leadership's suspicion of its own members and zone leaders. While most Vietnamese had left the country by 1975, our interviews indicate that Vietnamese who remained in Cambodia experienced living conditions similar to those of "new people" until war broke out in mid-1977. Like ethnic Cham and Chinese, Vietnamese and mixed-race children mainly encountered discrimination in terms of unequal food rations and more strenuous labor tasks. The CPK did not persecute them when tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam calmed down in 1976 and early 1977.<sup>68</sup> Party purges against ethnic Vietnamese, along with tens of thousands of DK cadres and troops, mainly began when confrontations between Cambodia and Vietnam intensified and suspicions of alleged plots by

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<sup>64</sup>ECCC's Case 02/02 Judgement 2018, 1704.

<sup>65</sup>Vickery rejected Kiernan's argument about genocide against the Cham as he believed that it would be better to drop the loaded and legalistic term "genocide," and concentrate on mass murder and war crimes. See Vickery 1990, 33.

<sup>66</sup>2008, 26.

<sup>67</sup>2006, 189.

<sup>68</sup>For additional information about Cambodia-Vietnam relations during this period, see Morris 1999, 93-95.

Eastern Zone cadres in collaboration with Vietnam against the central government began to circulate in the middle of 1977.

The CPK's efforts to eliminate its alleged enemies led to massacres against Vietnamese, hundreds of DK cadres, and innocent people, mostly after the war with Vietnam broke out. In some cases, ethnic Vietnamese were arrested together with ethnic Khmer. A May 1, 1978 report by party cadres in the Eastern Zone described six alleged political enemies who had been accused of collaborating with the "yuon enemy." Two of them were mixed-race Vietnamese, and the rest were Khmer.<sup>69</sup>

The state-sanctioned killing of ethnic Vietnamese was primarily aimed at eliminating anyone suspected of supporting Vietnam, whether at that time or in the future. The practice of killing mixed parentage children matrilineally was due to the CPK leadership's view that these children were closer to, and therefore influenced by, their Vietnamese mothers.

In fact, the persecution of ethnic Vietnamese and mixed-parentage children was in line with CPK campaigns to purge all cadres, soldiers, and ordinary people in the Eastern Zone who were suspected of possessing "Vietnamese minds."<sup>70</sup> CPK purges of ethnic Vietnamese must be understood within this context, instead of being framing as an act of genocidal intent as defined by the 1948 United Nations Convention. The term "crimes against humanity" is a more accurate description of DK massacres because it reflects a widespread campaign imposed by the regime to kill *anyone* whom the regime suspected to be a threat to the DK.

In regard to the race question, our study suggests that ethnic issues often remained secondary under CPK rule. None of the top DK leaders was a "real" or "pure" Khmer (*Khmer doem* or *Khmer suddh*). Instead, Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Khiue Samphan, and Ta Mok all had Chinese and Khmer heritage. During his trial in 2011, DK Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ieng Sary stated that he was not a Khmer-Cambodian (a Cambodian whose parents are pure Khmer and live in Cambodia) as his mother was of mixed Vietnamese and Chinese descent and his father was an ethnic Khmer Krom from southern Vietnam.<sup>71</sup> During the reign of the CPK, an estimated 1.3 million ethnic Khmer were killed, compared to an estimated 400,000 ethnic minorities.<sup>72</sup> If the Khmer Rouge's concepts of race overshadowed those of class as Kiernan has claimed, which race did the Khmer Rouge favor?<sup>73</sup>

In the early days of the regime, the CPK abandoned an ethnic-based concept of "Khmerness" in favor of a notion of revolutionary citizens based on class. Yet this does not necessarily mean that race and class were always separate categories. There were circumstances when race overlapped with class, especially when race was used as a factor to categorize most minority groups in the depositee class. But most ethnic Vietnamese and people with mixed heritage were killed from mid-1977 onward not because of their class status but because they had become suspect as a result of the war with

<sup>69</sup>This is based on a telegram report on the situation in an overlapping region in the eastern zone in May 1978. See DK 1978, 2–3.

<sup>70</sup>This phrase is derived from a widespread slogan, "Cambodian bodies and Vietnamese minds" (*kbāl Yuon khluon Khmer*). See Locard 2004, 179–181.

<sup>71</sup>ECCC December 5, 2011, 23.

<sup>72</sup>Kiernan 2008, 458.

<sup>73</sup>According to Chandler, the "DK favored no ethnic groups and targeted none for destruction. Instead, it favored its friends and destroyed those it considered to be its enemies." See Chandler 1996, 1064.

Vietnam. Other instances included times when local cadres searched for DK enemies by using racial elements such as physical traits, Khmer accents, and names to identify Vietnamese and Khmer Krom in order to arrest and kill them.<sup>74</sup> However, these cases had less to do with class factors because the intention was to search for the CPK's perceived enemies and to destroy them.

In most cases, an emphasis on class outshined race. In a 1978 speech marking the third anniversary of the establishment of DK, CPK General Secretary Pol Pot emphasized the role of the army, workers, and farmers in the successes of the regime. He stated that “we are wholeheartedly respectful and proud of our comrades who had sacrificed their lives for the revolution, classes, citizens, and the party.”<sup>75</sup> Pol Pot and other top leaders never said that those they addressed as “comrades” and “citizens” had to belong to any specific ethnic group or race. Moreover, when Pol Pot talked about Cambodian society, he did not classify people by race. Instead, he divided them into different classes, such as in a September 1977 speech in which he stated that only ten percent of the population was made up of capitalists and landlords, while “the workers, peasants, and other laboring people constitute ninety percent of the population, with the peasant class alone representing eighty-five percent.”<sup>76</sup> From the leadership's standpoint, class concepts were the medium the CPK used to structure its revolution. It murdered those who were not workers or peasants and persecuted many of its own cadres who were suspected of betraying the revolution and the party.

## Conclusion

Our discussion has chronologically incorporated four historical phases. Each characterizes different political contexts and forms of CPK treatment of Vietnamese in Cambodia. We have demonstrated the absence of CPK mistreatment of ethnic Vietnamese between 1970 and April 1975, when the party categorized them in the depositee class. We also have discussed how ethnic Vietnamese experiences as depositees reflected the CPK's defense strategy against perceived threats from Vietnam. This led to the expulsion of the vast majority of the country's ethnic Vietnamese in 1975.

Examining the dynamics of CPK-ethnic Vietnamese relations during those years illustrates key motivations behind the violence against and massacres of both Khmer and non-Khmer. This focus has shed light on CPK/DK ethnic policy which was overshadowed after 1975 when the regime began to classify the population into different political and social classes. However, class factors became less important in some parts of the country, particularly in the Eastern Zone, when the CPK launched a purge to tackle a perceived military threat from Vietnam in mid-1977. The party killed everyone who the leadership suspected of possessing links to Vietnam, regardless of class, ethnicity, or political background. This mass killing of ethnic Vietnamese and high-profile party members, regional and local cadres, soldiers, and ordinary people should be characterized as a crime against humanity.

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<sup>74</sup>For more about the persecution of ethnic Khmer Krom under DK rule, see ECCC Case 02/02 Judgement 2018, 586–592.

<sup>75</sup>*Revolutionary Flag* April 1978, 2.

<sup>76</sup>This statement is derived from the transcript of Pol Pot's speech entitled “Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea” on September 29, 1977, 56.

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