

ELIZABETH BECKER

WHEN THE WAR WAS OVER

**CAMBODIA AND THE
KHMER ROUGE REVOLUTION**

"A WORK OF THE FIRST IMPORTANCE."

— THE NEW YORK TIMES



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Elizabeth Becker



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*For their constant inspiration,
this book is dedicated with love
to my daughter Lily and
my son Lee Clayton.*

Do you find it strange that as we become more sensitive to the sufferings of mankind, we become more and more cruel? The more we think of the human body and the human mind as being able to suffer, and the sorrier we feel for that, and the more we plan to prevent suffering, the more we are drawn to inflict suffering. The more tortures we think up. The more people we believe deserve to be tortured. The more we think that people can be ruled by fear of suffering. We have become one another's keeper—and we will keep him in fear, we will keep him in concentration camps, we will keep him in straitjackets, we will keep him in the grave.

The Middle of the Journey by *Lionel Trilling*

PREFACE

Pol Pot died in 1998, having eluded all attempts to bring him to justice for one of this century's worst mass murders. In the twenty years after I interviewed him, days before he fell from power, he remained unrepentant for his Khmer Rouge revolution that devastated Cambodia, killing nearly one-fourth of the population, including an entire generation of political leaders, professionals, and religious figures.

Cambodia has been crippled by that legacy. It took a dozen years and a \$2 billion United Nations peace plan to end the war over who would lead the country after the Vietnamese withdrawal. The Khmer Rouge actually planned to field candidates in the 1992 election up until the final months when they realized they had no hope of winning. As of this writing, the prime minister is Hun Sen, himself a former Khmer Rouge, who bullied his way to power after losing the election to Prince Norodom Ranariddh and who has since trampled most of the freedoms promised under the peace plan and sacrificed the country's recovery.

The current crisis in Cambodia cannot be understood without a thorough understanding of the Khmer Rouge revolution, which is one reason why I have updated and revised *When the War Was Over*. Another reason is to help answer the extraordinary number of questions that have arisen since the book's original publication. Cambodia's tragedy is now universally recognized as one of the century's worst crimes against humanity. The Khmer Rouge are ranked with the Nazis for the atrocities, yet when international tribunals were established in the last five years to try war criminals—the first since the Nuremberg trials—their mandate covered only those from the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, not from Cambodia. Part of the reason is the confusion over the history of Cambodia and Indochina, and the passions it still stirs here in the United States. Having fought its longest war in Vietnam, losing over 50,000 Americans in those distant battlefields, the U.S. government has played an often questionable role in the Cambodian saga ever since. Finally, Pol Pot's death offered a natural ending to this book, a history of modern Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge.

When I started covering Cambodia in 1973 it was still a footnote to the Vietnam War. The Cambodian people were still blessedly ignorant of the true nature of the Khmer Rouge who would take power two years later. In the twenty-five intervening years I earned the dubious distinction of being the only journalist to have reported from that country under every one of its governments: Lon Nol's Khmer Republic, Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea, Heng Samrin and Hun Sen's People's Republic of Kampuchea, and Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen's Kingdom of Cambodia. Like other journalists and historians who follow a country through extraordinary times, I have to admit that I rarely understood the enormity of the events I was witnessing until after the fact, until I assembled the material necessary to write this book, and now to revise it and add the new chapters to bring it up to date. This updated version is based in large part on my interviews with Cambodians and foreign diplomats throughout the long and convoluted peace negotiations that began after the Vietnamese chased the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979. I lived in Paris from 1986 through 1990 when that city became the focus for the final Paris Peace Accords. After returning to Washington I continued travelling to Cambodia to complete the research.

Since many of the original themes of the book remain the same, I offer the following preface to the first edition with relatively few changes.

It was late one afternoon during the monsoon season and I was waiting for a break in the cloudbursts. The rains had been heavy all week, drenching the Cambodian countryside and forcing soldiers and their commanders to call off battle plans. During these stretches of nervous, idle time when there was little to report or write, I did what was most comforting. I visited friends and talked about the war.

When the rains stopped I walked out of my solid old hotel and hailed the lone trishaw pedaling by the front gate. The driver and I were both shrouded in plastic and shod in rubber thongs and we easily set a price for the short distance to the home of my friend. The driver was talkative and asked me if I spoke French, far better than mine, who I was. When I replied I was an American journalist he switched to broken English and started what I considered the classic conversation of wartime Phnom Penh. He told me about his past, how he had taught at a provincial lycée until the war crowded in and he was forced to take refuge in the capital. He had no sympathy for either side and was fully engaged in keeping his family together, housed, and fed until the war was over and they could return to the provinces. He hoped his house and the lycée would still be standing.

He was charming in the easy Cambodian fashion that neither threatens nor encourages a future friendship. While he navigated through puddles we laughed over a silly pun or spoke seriously about the impending rocket attacks. I overtipped him, one of the few acts of material generosity my budget allowed, and we said goodbye.

It was the rainy season of 1973, when the country's seams were visibly tearing and more than one Cambodian friend had questioned privately what would be left standing once the war was over. The pedicab driver was less sanguine than he appeared. He left me a note at the home of my friend, an Asian diplomat, addressed to "Lady Wednesday Night." He wrote in the script taught at French schools: Could Lady Wednesday Night show him greater kindness and help his family find better quarters until the war was over and they were able to care for themselves. He would be waiting for me outside the hotel gates.

By then, however, the regular trishaw drivers had taken up their positions at the hotel stand and my petitioner had no chance of finding a spot there. Nor did he return to the home of my diplomat friend and I never saw him again.

But I did hear his sentiments voiced over and over again. At odd moments—over a coffee at an open-air cafe, in the sapphire mines of the western mountains, with villagers trading at a provincial market, or with soldiers guarding a makeshift defense position inside pagoda grounds—Cambodian friends and strangers relaxed by talking about their very private plans for a new life when the war was over. It was a national anthem and undoubtedly other people in other wars dispelled their fears with similar conversations about a future without bombs or bullets or refugee camps.

Few people, however, have suffered such a bitter counterpoint to their dreams as Cambodians did once their war ended. From the first day of victory, the Cambodian communists known as the Khmer Rouge enforced a revolution of unprecedented terror and destruction. The outlines are generally known: how the capital city and towns were emptied and everyone sent to the fields; how the cream of the old society was systematically hunted down and often killed; how there was scant food, poor shelter, and no relief from a punishing work schedule; how the population was ruled by terror; and how punishment by torture and death became routine.

In this book I have tried to tell the story of that revolution, to explain who the Khmer Rouge were

how they fit in their own country's history and in the communist movement, how and why they imposed such a destructive revolution in Cambodia, and how that revolution led to war with Vietnam and Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. As such, this book represents an attempt to tell the full story of the Khmer Rouge, and I am painfully aware of areas of inquiry that could not be pursued.

However, I am the beneficiary of pioneering work by others who helped lay the groundwork for such a study, notably Chanthou Boua, Timothy Carney, David Chandler, Stephen Heder, Ben Kiernan, and François Ponchaud. There were few standard histories of modern Cambodia, much less of the Khmer Rouge, when I first wrote this book so a large part is based on original research. It required seven years of writing and investigation to answer crucial questions about the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia.

It would have been impossible to undertake this study if the Vietnamese had not invaded and occupied Cambodia in 1979. In order to indict the Khmer Rouge for the atrocities of their rule, the Vietnamese have allowed access to records left behind. Invaluable were the documents stored at the Tuol Sleng Incarceration Center, the headquarters of the special police of the Khmer Rouge and the center for torture and execution of people accused of betraying the regime.

The invasion also freed large numbers of Cambodians to leave their country and allowed me and other writers to interview them at length. I spoke to refugees during trips I made to refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia and in interviews in North America. I interviewed Cambodian, Vietnamese, and other foreign officials during two trips to Vietnam, one to Laos, and two to Cambodia in addition to my research in the United States.

The story is presented as a narrative and often in the voices of witnesses, people whom I interviewed or whose stories were left behind in the prison files of the Khmer Rouge. The witnesses come from all walks of life and all vantage points. They include a modern Cambodian banker who was representative of thousands of Cambodians who knew nothing about the Khmer Rouge but blindly welcomed their victory in hopes it would lift the country out of its misery; a young peasant orphan who joined the revolution in his teens, rose within its ranks, and was executed for crimes he never committed; two provincial women, one of whom became a model citizen of the revolution and the other a classic victim; and finally the leaders themselves, including Pol Pot and Ieng Sary. They are the voices of the torturers and the victims.

It is as a witness that I came to write this book. For nearly two years I covered the war for the *Washington Post*. Later I was one of two Western journalists allowed to visit Cambodia while the Khmer Rouge were in power. I returned to Cambodia under Vietnamese occupation, to complete the initial research for this book. This revised edition is based on another ten years of research, including five more trips to Cambodia.

The story of the Khmer Rouge proved to be as simple and complex as the story of the Nazis' rise to power in modern Germany or Stalin's triumph in the Russian revolution. It is rooted in Cambodia's history and not in the popular notions of Cambodia as a "paradise lost." Before the 1970s Cambodia had an enviable reputation as a culturally rich society, seemingly immune to the upheavals ravaging its neighbors—war and revolution to the east in Vietnam, disfiguring development and militarism to the west in Thailand. In contrast, Cambodia's largely unspoiled landscape and graceful people were so attractive, the country was routinely described as a welcome oasis if not a paradise.

These notions of a golden epoch were belied by Cambodia's war and subsequent revolution which nearly decimated the society. But theorists looked for a foreign villain to explain the inexplicable—how a paradise could become a nightmare without warning. The three most commonly cited culprits were the importation of Maoist communist ideology, the war policy of the United States, particularly

the 1973 U.S. bombing campaign, and later, a historic Vietnamese drive to conquer Cambodia.

~~While the United States and Vietnam do share responsibility for much of Cambodia's sorrow~~ ultimately Cambodians were the victims of their own leaders and their own traditions and history. The shimmering patina of a tropical paradise masked a country that had been told its people were threatened by extinction and whose rulers routinely encouraged a corollary belief in Cambodia's cultural and ethnic superiority. It is a country long accustomed to quarrelsome, despotic rulers who treated their subjects, or citizens, like children and saw Cambodia as one of history's great victims. And it is a country with a tradition of violence.

The Cambodian communist movement was an expression of these conflicting, desperate impulses just as the Russian revolution was a reflection of that nation's heritage. This is how I present the Khmer Rouge movement in this book, as it grew out of Cambodia's history and shifting fortunes during the violent spasms of twentieth-century Asia. It is a heartbreaking tale for there was nothing inevitable about the rise of the Khmer Rouge. They came to power through a series of self-serving maneuvers and miscalculations by Cambodia's leaders and foreign nations; again, largely Vietnam and the United States.

It is also a cautionary tale. One of the most frightening aspects of the Khmer Rouge is the intent behind their madness. Much of the destruction of their revolution was done in the name of the future or at least how the Khmer Rouge saw the future in countries calling themselves modern. In the name of efficiency and increased productivity, the Khmer Rouge abolished family life, individual life, the rhythms of agricultural life, and instituted a system of labor camp life throughout the entire country. The most frightening of futuristic fables was realized in this rural, third world country and not in the industrial world.

But fanaticism was in the air before the Khmer Rouge came to power, as was the hatred that led to racial pogroms under Khmer Rouge rule. It was no accident that the Khmer Rouge chose the most radical of communist models and tried to revolutionize Cambodia overnight to prove the country's superiority. They were the heirs of the worst in Cambodia's past.

Among the witnesses who bring this tale to life are people who exhibited true dignity and courage. For despite their rulers and despite the travesties they have suffered from foreign nations, the Cambodians remain an unforgettable people, endowed with a culture that at its best is symbolized by the awesome yet sensitive beauty of the famous Angkor temples.

Elsewhere I acknowledge the experts and friends who helped and cheered me on while I undertook this study. They are not responsible for the conclusions in this book, which are solely mine.

ELIZABETH BECKE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

DISTANT FOLLOWERS

The villages are burnt, the cities void;
The morning light has left the river view;
The distant followers have been dismayed;
And I'm afraid, reading this passage now
That everything I knew has been destroyed
By those whom I admired but never knew;
The laughing soldiers fought to their defeat
And I'm afraid most of my friends are dead.

James Fenton, from "In a Notebook," 1976

It is one thing to suffer to live, another thing to suffer only to die. I decided to give it two years. If nothing had changed I would commit suicide.

Mey Komphot, July 1975, in Cambodia

The Second Indochina War (1960–1975) was the Vietnam War. That was how it was known, that was the country being fought over. Laos and later Cambodia were countries brought into the fighting by both sides. There was never any question that the Vietnamese communists were the giants among the Indochinese allies, that the Vietnamese were the most equal among equals.

After 1975 the focus of attention shifted swiftly and dramatically from Vietnam to Cambodia. The Vietnam War gave way in peace to the Cambodian Debacle. Cambodia became synonymous with misery, death, destruction, and despair. And with mystery. It seemed unfathomable and unknowable why the Cambodian communists under the leadership of Pol Pot could undertake a bloody experiment in social restructuring that would lead to the deaths of as many as two million of their people immediately after a war that had devastated the country. The victims of this revolution understood least of all.

•

Mey Komphot was thirty-seven years old when the war in his country ended. The fighting began in 1970 and ended in the spring of 1975—it lasted only five years. It had not been a quagmire or a war of attrition such as the French and Americans considered their long, disastrous battle to deny the Vietnamese communists the independence they believed they had won in 1945. Cambodia's descent into misery had been precipitate and brutal, catching all Cambodians by surprise, especially men like Komphot.

He had watched his country's collapse from an extremely privileged position, as an executive in one of Phnom Penh's largest private banks. Sophisticated and intelligent, a bachelor with entree into the capital's elite circles, Komphot epitomized all that the Khmer Republic and its American sponsors claimed to be fighting to protect. But Komphot had grown so weary of war and so disgusted with the leadership in Phnom Penh that he wanted nothing more than that the war should end and the Khmer Rouge win as he knew they would.

Komphot knew very little about the Khmer Rouge, or Red Khmer. The Cambodian communists had not mounted sophisticated, successful political propaganda campaigns such as those of the Vietnamese communists. By design they had obscured their history and their ultimate aims while they fought the war.

Yet Komphot felt compelled to judge these communists and decide if he wanted the Khmer Rouge to win the war. His answer, finally, was a qualified yes. The Khmer Rouge could not be as awful as the leaders in Phnom Penh. In such a fashion, Komphot became a distant follower.

He reached this conclusion because he had faith in the few acknowledged Khmer Rouge leaders and because, he believed, most Cambodians shared a particular set of values. The leaders promoted by the Khmer Rouge during the war were men and women Komphot and his generation had long admired. In the early sixties they had made their mark in Phnom Penh as skilled intellectuals, writers, journalists, and politicians who resisted corruption—the disease that had kept Cambodian politics at medieval court standards.

Komphot had known only one Khmer Rouge figure personally, and that was Khieu Ponnary. She was one of the country's first independent-minded women and a widely respected professor. She had taught Komphot during his first year at lycée, or high school, and he remembered her intelligence and her vivid sense of Khmer nationalism. She had never betrayed her communist sympathies in the classroom, nor those of her husband, who became infamous under the *nom de guerre* Pol Pot.

Khieu Ponnary and the other Khmer Rouge leaders were presumed communists, but in Phnom Penh most of the intelligentsia assumed the Khmer Rouge were more nationalist than communist, hence less dangerous. However, it had been more than a decade since Komphot and the rest of Phnom Penh had seen the Khmer Rouge leaders. They began disappearing from the capital during a witch hunt begun in 1963 by Prince Norodom Sihanouk. By 1967 all the prominent figures had abandoned the city for the jungle and a war of resistance. They left behind romantic reputations that haunted the Phnom Penh of Komphot's generation and colored expectations of what would happen once the war ended.

Komphot had created an unshakable fantasy about the Khmer Rouge and their plans after the war. He ignored wartime propaganda that cast them as ogres and held the view common in his circles that these nationalist Cambodians represented something resembling the Yugoslav variant of communism. If they won and established a communist government, Komphot reasoned, they would welcome the talents and support of professionals like Komphot. He knew little about communism or about the Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Rouge promoted such illusions by exercising their power behind a united front arm

and government based in Beijing since 1970 and theoretically headed by the non-communist Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

What appeared as a weakness—the communists' inability to proclaim straightforwardly who they were because Sihanouk was their movement's figurehead—proved a master strategy. The Khmer Rouge did not appear to be a radical alternative to what had come before, merely a new variation on familiar Cambodian politicians. Thus, the Cambodian people followed the initial instructions of the Khmer Rouge when the war ended, obeyed their drastic orders in 1975, and marched into a life more miserable than any could imagine.

There had been clues, but they were easily overlooked. Komphot had heard stories of Khmer Rouge atrocities, but he had seen atrocities committed by the Phnom Penh government troops as well. Soldiers of the Khmer Republic's army (FANK in acronym) were known to behead the Khmer Rouge soldiers they captured, to slice open their bodies and eat their still-warm livers or disfigure them for revenge. Some commanders tried to prevent this practice, sanctioned by Cambodian custom. But atrocities were common enough for foreign photographers and reporters regularly to record the evidence, though after 1973, American publications refused to print more atrocity photographs. Both sides were harsh to civilians and soldiers alike. Cruelty seemed a tactic of both armies, and Komphot assumed it would be abandoned after victory.

Fundamentally Komphot believed there would have been no war in Cambodia without the war in Vietnam. If the Vietnam War ended, so would Cambodia's and there would be peace. Komphot had to have faith in the Khmer Rouge because he had little else to believe in. All the other leaders of modern Cambodia had proved to be failures. Underlying that disappointment was his conviction, again common, that his relatively bountiful country had been betrayed by poor leadership. Allow the people and the country to develop without such figures and Cambodia would become one of the blessed nations of the world. Ironically, he and the Khmer Rouge shared that opinion but had drastically different concepts of the "people" and good leadership.

As urbane and clear-sighted as he appeared, Komphot was as blinded as the rest of his fellow educated Cambodians. They had been raised to be naive about war, revolution, and the modern realities of Asia. They had grown up under the coddling, dictatorial rule of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk came to the throne in 1941 and ruled as king or chief of state until 1970. He spun a cocoon of soothing myths and updated legends to protect his people and country from the Indochina War and whatever evils might lurk outside the "paradise" of Cambodia. Sihanouk had inherited a country filled with a sense of doom, a people who were taught by colonialists that their race was threatened by ambitious neighbors, and whose culture had reached a zenith centuries earlier. Because of this version of history and resulting inclinations, Cambodians allowed Sihanouk to provide them "shelter," to treat them like children hidden away in a tropical garden.

The claim to paradise was not entirely implausible. The small population of Cambodia lived in a country blessed by beauty and possibilities of bounty. Cambodia sits in the lap of peninsular Southeast Asia, and the wide Mekong River flows down its center. There is precision to the country's geography. The small Cardamom mountain chain rises in the west, sapphires and rubies buried in its hills; the navigable blue waters of the Gulf of Siam form the southern boundary; the Tonle Sap or Great Lake

fills the northwest and feeds the Tonle Sap River flowing into the Mekong; the low, flat heartland covered with irrigated rice fields and all varieties of tropical fruit, vegetables, and trees growing rich delta soil; foothills of the mountains and large rubber plantations form the northeastern corner and almost in the middle of the country, where the rivers cross and form an X, sits the capital, Phnom Penh.

Fish from the lake and rivers were plentiful. Cambodia regularly supplied its population more rice per person than any other country in Southeast Asia, even when crops were poor. The landscape remained largely as in medieval times, awash with emerald rice paddies, shaded and dotted by bamboo stands and knots of palm trees. Farmers lived in huts or traditional wooden houses built on stilts for protection from monsoon floods. The pointed spires of pagodas dominated villages and the peasants' lives.

The country even had its own annual miracle. The Tonle Sap River changes its course every August, flowing upstream half the year, downstream the other half—the effect of changes in the water table caused by the heavy monsoon rains and of the respective altitudes of the Mekong and the Tonle Sap.

The Cambodians celebrated this event with a water festival; they had religious holidays to mark most seasonal changes. Their society was old enough to have entwined religion and culture with the country's geography and environment, and their festivals and arts and the details of their daily life are distinctive. Cambodian society was perhaps too rarefied; the French compared the Cambodians to their attachment to their country to delicate wines—they could not travel outside their provenance.

Cambodia, however, did not escape the dark side of the tropics. Disease remained rampant if not carefully monitored; most often it was not. The weather is extreme; long, seemingly endless hot seasons are followed by heavy monsoon rains. The jungle and its beasts always threaten to take back the cultivated terrain. Drought and alternating floods can play havoc with crops.

Portraying himself as the embodiment of Cambodia's supposedly long-held belief that the monarch is a *deva-raj* or god-king, a semidivine ruler with absolute secular power and the benediction of the gods, Sihanouk treated Cambodia as his own paradise. He took it upon himself to design a state to “protect” Cambodia, to keep out unwanted foreign or modern influences that might disrupt the large rural, Buddhist life in his kingdom. Sihanouk saw independence from France largely as a necessary step to prevent the First Indochina War (1946–1954) from spilling into Cambodia and destroying it forever. Independence, in his view, was not the prelude for bringing Cambodia into the twentieth century. It was insurance that Cambodia could remain an Asian beauty, unspoiled by too much modernity, which could also upset his own power.

Sihanouk resembled an Asian replica of an old European monarch rather than the leader of a third-world country aspiring to a place in the modern world. He cherished the pastoral life and the arts while disdaining commerce, industry, and financial enterprise. While Thailand, Malaysia, later Singapore, and even war-torn Vietnam north and south struggled to build modern financial and industrial bases, Cambodia under Sihanouk gradually built industrial projects. The prince preferred to concentrate primarily on education and building an infrastructure of roads, railways, and a seaport, an approach inherited, perhaps unconsciously, from the French colonizers of Cambodia.

The prince believed that “agricultural pursuits ran highest in productivity, while commercial and other service activities are looked upon as more or less parasitic.” Sihanouk disdained neighboring Thailand, where peasants were abandoning their fields to work in new factories and live in city slums, and he discouraged large industrial schemes and foreign commercial ventures that might have attracted Cambodia's villagers to Phnom Penh. To this extent his plan worked—there was little large-scale urban migration during his rule. Phnom Penh remained the only sizable city, with about 1

percent of the population. But as early as the sixties the elite panicked. The parents of Komphot and his friends feared that Cambodia was falling behind both economically and politically.

Over three-fourths of the country's population lived in villages. For them the benefits of independence were realized in educational and social improvements that Sihanouk believed would not significantly alter the traditional Buddhist character of village life. To that end the prince put aside one-third of the national budget, an extraordinary proportion. Most developing nations spend from 5 to 10 percent on education. In 1970, the year he was ousted, Sihanouk devoted fully 25 percent.

Cambodia's farm children did become educated. When the country won independence in 1955, only one-third of the children were enrolled in primary schools. By 1970, more than three-fourths were students. The enrollment in high schools rose as dramatically over the same period—from 5,000 to 118,000. The number of teachers increased from 7,000 to 28,000. But what these youths learned was another story. Often their courses had little to do with their future roles as farmers employed in wet rice cultivation. In the most remote rural schoolhouses, teachers used a curriculum patterned on French education in which world history was more European than Asian, and art and culture more French than Khmer. Vocational schools were few. In 1968, there were 7,000 university students enrolled in the country. Only 130 of them were majoring in agriculture. A Frenchman who taught history in a Cambodian lycée in 1969 explained: "I soon discovered the bewilderment produced by the history courses on these youngsters' minds. . . . World history for them was an obscure struggle, with all great historical contenders fighting each other, from Caesar to Napoleon and Bismarck, in a vast rice field. . . ."

This type of educational system, geared to a foreign culture, had the effect of creating class divisions based on the idea that there was an elite cadre of *neak ches-doeng*, "those with know-how and knowledge," who had all the answers for society's ills and were trained to lead if not to work. Such an idea grew naturally from another of Sihanouk's deeply rooted if not stated presumptions that the peasants could "just pick the fruit off the trees" and live comfortably, an idea that ignores the excruciating hard work of wet rice cultivation in the tropics. They were happy peasants, in Sihanouk's vision, and the prince insisted that Cambodians and foreigners alike accept this truth.

Komphot was to be one of those with know-how and knowledge. Such children went to the best lycées and later to universities overseas so that they might become the professors and teachers Sihanouk wanted for his "children," the subjects of Cambodia. Other developing countries pushed their most talented and ambitious students to master the practical sciences, to become technocrats and businessmen, to become skilled enough to replace foreign (in Cambodia, French) experts. In Sihanouk's Cambodia, they became teachers of higher education. And they received the large salaries of all government employees—\$200 a month—while the top civil servants received only \$12 a month. They staffed the new schools and universities, government and newspaper offices. And they created a boulevard society of professors, writers, and intellectuals; an artistic community of dancers, musicians, and painters.

They lived in a city whose beauty was zealously protected, one that reflected Sihanouk's plans for his elite. Phnom Penh would not grow with concrete high-rise buildings standing chock-a-block along the city's boulevards or factories belching smoke and polluting the Mekong and Bassac Rivers. Sihanouk commissioned government buildings designed to resemble French provincial architecture. (The French colonial rulers had done the opposite; they had built the city's grand palace, museum, and royal grounds in the style of Khmer architecture.) It would remain a romantic riverport city.

In the midst of Sihanouk's Cambodian Phnom Penh were other societies performing other duties for the capital. Commerce was handled by the city's ethnic Chinese, relatively new émigrés who arrived

poor toward the end of the nineteenth century but eager to become prosperous by performing exact those activities Sihanouk considered beneath his elite. The Chinese held a near monopoly on business trade, and informal banking. Those Khmer intellectuals interested in the country's economy were encouraged to become civil servants advising the government, and later to staff the government bank. This royal outlook was buttressed by traditional French attitudes, and the end result was a cemented along racial divisions: The Chinese were the moneylenders and businessmen; the Vietnamese who had arrived with the French colonialists were middlemen or followed the service trades; the Cambodians were the farmers, civil servants, and intellectuals; the French who stayed on were the foreign experts, chief import-exporters, and plantation owners. In Sihanouk's day one did not need to know Khmer to travel about the city; French, Vietnamese, or Chinese would suffice.

The middle-class Khmers of Phnom Penh grew up pampered in this environment, isolated from much of the life of the city—and, consequently, the world. Komphot and his contemporaries grew up as privileged children of Sihanouk, not independent citizens capable of succeeding or failing on their own. Routine corruption ensured that the favored lived well; and Sihanouk's inclinations were imperial. He preferred to grant privilege and position out of noblesse oblige and not any moderate notion of shared power or a rational reward system. Courtiers were favored, troublemakers punished. It was a small society, and Sihanouk, through his police and his instincts, knew one from the other.

Sihanouk created a contradictory, if not irrational, political society for people like Komphot. The prince claimed Cambodia was a democracy, but he ruled it as a medieval monarch, not as a politician. Peasants voted for his party because he was a god-king and a charismatic medieval ruler. Sihanouk's socialism was an updated version of a royal welfare system. The prince used a pseudo-Marxist vocabulary to condemn "capitalism" when he was really condemning modernity, to promote "socialism" when he meant noblesse oblige, and in foreign affairs he spoke as an anti-American ruler promoting stronger ties with his communist neighbor states rather than "capitalist" Thailand when at the same time he boasted that he was the most effective anticommunist in the world.

The figure of Sihanouk dominated the country and loomed large over Komphot and his fellow lycée students as they came of age and began plotting their futures. But in 1960 the communists of South Vietnam inaugurated open warfare against the government in Saigon, fighting back against the regime's anticommunist campaign. The Second Indochina War began. In neighboring Cambodia the war quickly overshadowed even Sihanouk in importance. Komphot understood that the war in Vietnam would determine the course of Cambodia's history.

Cambodia was not stuck off in a forgotten corner of Asia but was dead center in the white-hot fire of the Second Indochina War. South Vietnam and Laos on the eastern and northern boundaries were battlegrounds, Thailand to the west became the American rear guard, home to the jet fighter planes and idling spot for American soldiers on rest and recreation leaves. Sihanouk's pastoral Cambodia was the unlikely neutral spot in the middle.

At first the war seemed to unite Cambodians. Komphot saw little difference between Sihanouk and his most radical teachers on the subject of the Vietnam War. They all opposed American intervention in Vietnam. They all supported a neutralist policy for Cambodia. During the first years of the war a whom Komphot admired supported Sihanouk's foreign policy, even if they continued to object to his stifling control over their lives back home.

By the time war broke out, Sihanouk was known worldwide for his strong belief in neutralism. In 1955 he attended the Bandung Conference, which argued that developing nations should resist ties with either superpower and chart their own courses. The communist world generally applauded Bandung, but the United States did not. The next year, in 1956, the United States tested Sihanouk's neutralism and asked Cambodia to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, a defense pact of American client states. Sihanouk refused. As punishment, the Saigon regime proclaimed an economic blockage against Cambodia and curtailed shipping up the Mekong River to Phnom Penh, then Cambodia's only port. The episode served to illustrate why Sihanouk was so opposed to military pacts.

The open conflict in Vietnam, however, brought new pressure on Sihanouk to at least modify his neutralism. Both sides wanted Cambodia's valuable logistics lines and use of the country for their base areas. It was the United States that earliest and most firmly pushed Sihanouk, telling him that neutrality was tantamount to supporting the communists. At first Sihanouk listened to the Americans and said he needed American muscle to produce solid security guarantees between Cambodia and its noncommunist neighbors, Thailand and South Vietnam. But the United States refused. And Sihanouk was convinced that the United States had been behind a plot to overthrow him the year before in 1955. (He was correct.) Sihanouk's neutralism was tempered thereafter by a strong and well-earned personal distrust of the Americans.

The turning point came in 1963 for Vietnam, for Cambodia, for Sihanouk, for Komphot, and for the right and left in Cambodia.

It was Komphot's last year in lycée. He and his friends should have been engrossed in deciding where they would attend university, what their courses of study would be. But the war would not allow them to remain innocents. Nor would Sihanouk, who began to fear for himself as well as for Cambodia. First the neutralist foreign minister of Laos, Quinim Pholsena, was gunned down at home by rightists who destroyed the united front coalition formed that year to stem the tide of war in Laos. Pholsena was a like-minded friend of Sihanouk. If he could be killed and the war expanded to Laos, what would happen in Cambodia?

A month later, in May 1963, a nonviolent Buddhist demonstration in Hue, South Vietnam, was broken up by local military, who opened fire with machine guns and killed nine people, seven of them children. South Vietnam exploded. A seventy-three-year-old Buddhist monk burned himself to death in Saigon in protest. Three more Buddhist monks and a nun committed suicide in August protesting the repressive policies of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. Nothing touched Buddhist Cambodia like these horrors. Sihanouk publicly said that Diem, a Roman Catholic with little sympathy for Buddhism, could last no more than a few months.

Phnom Penh was riveted to the war. Sihanouk was incensed and announced that the United States and Diem were ruined. He also broke political relations with South Vietnam. "The fate of Vietnam appears to me to be sealed," he wrote, predicting a communist victory. "That of my country will certainly be so in a little while. But at least we have the meager consolation of having often warned the Western world."

On November 1, 1963, Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were assassinated in a coup d'état approved and facilitated by the United States. Sihanouk was among the first world figures to see the American hand in the coup and condemn it as a criminal, cold-blooded betrayal of an ally. He immediately rejected all American aid to Cambodia. Sihanouk wanted to keep the United States out of Cambodian affairs altogether and reduce the possibility that Americans would plot his overthrow or death.

At home, Sihanouk's response to the Vietnam War was not so straightforward. In 1963 he instituted

drastic changes that fed deep anger and dissent in both the left and the right, and that ultimately brought about his own downfall.

Despite his sympathy for the communists abroad, Sihanouk was wary of leftists in Cambodia. In 1963, with the war exploding in neighboring Vietnam, he moved openly and dramatically against the left. The troubles at home began with student strikes in a northwestern province that spread to Phnom Penh. The initial protests involved accusations of local police brutality. They developed into an attack on all authority and particularly Prince Sihanouk.

Sihanouk blamed the left for the problems and forced the leading leftists to flee Phnom Penh. Among them were the top central committee members of the Khmer Rouge, who had reconstituted the country's communist movement in 1960, shortly after communists in neighboring South Vietnam had officially launched their armed insurgency against Diem in 1959. Most of these Khmer Rouge fled to a Vietnamese communist base along the border, to the jungle maquis, hoping to lead their own insurgency against Sihanouk one day. A few others fled to France. Their exodus sent a chill through the student and intellectual community of the city. Komphot remembers confusion about the war and the treatment of leftists in Phnom Penh. Sihanouk called himself a socialist, yet he punished the people who called themselves socialists and said they were dedicated to modernizing and rationalizing Cambodia's society and economy.

Sihanouk's attack on the left was direct. His move against the right was not meant as such. It was an attempt to straighten out the Cambodian economy after Sihanouk dropped American aid. Cambodia's army was supported by that aid, and so was Cambodia's balance of payments. Without that money, Cambodia's army deteriorated as the armies of neighboring countries were growing. Sihanouk's military commanders despaired of defending Cambodia should either Vietnam or Thailand attack. The military became the center of what grew to be a right-wing rebellion against Sihanouk and produced the 1970 coup d'état.

Furthermore, Sihanouk launched a program to further nationalize the economy and solve the problems created by the loss of U.S. aid. The prince nationalized some businesses, the banks, and the import-export trade. He set fixed prices to chase away foreign competition and restrict foreign investment. As Thailand boomed with business and U.S. war-related aid, Cambodia was growing less than 5 percent each year. To the country's small-business community, the elite and the middle class of Phnom Penh, this was considered a travesty. They, too, were key players in the 1970 coup.

Nothing seemed to make sense. Komphot and his friends were at a loss to understand the turmoil. Their parents, their student leaders, the politicians, and Sihanouk himself were saying contradictory things about the war and Cambodia's future. The country was dividing, at least in Phnom Penh. Komphot saw his own future threatened, not only by the Vietnam War but by the limited choices presented to him in Sihanouk's Cambodia.

At this juncture, in 1963, Komphot left for studies abroad. He felt he was escaping the narrow, increasingly tense life of Phnom Penh. And he decided to go far away, not to France, like most of his fellows, but to Canada, where he studied first at Laval University, then McGill University. He kept up correspondence with his family and friends in Cambodia. He was in Canada when the United States sent its forces into battle in Vietnam in 1965, and he was frightened. From his vantage point he understood the power of the United States better than he might have in France, and he understood the fervor of the Americans' anticommunist crusade. But instead of plunging into debates about the war, Komphot discovered he was losing his appetite for politics. He thought this the result of the "Anglo-Saxon" temperament he believed he acquired in Canada.

In Canada, Komphot discovered he most wanted to study economics. He studied the theory

socialism and capitalism, and appreciated the primitive level of debate in his own country. He turned to the practical side and studied finance and business. He finished his schooling and returned to Cambodia in 1968. He left Canada as the American anti-war protest movement surged and the number of American deaths in Vietnam mounted. He left North America convinced he could best help his country by concentrating on building up the economy, not by joining the endless political debates.

But on his arrival home, Komphot learned his new ideas were of little use in Sihanouk's Cambodia. By 1968, Sihanouk's nationalization program had been in effect for five years and had disappointed everyone. Sihanouk was taking businesses from businessmen and turning them over to underpaid and unqualified bureaucrats. Sihanouk tried to create a government-controlled welfare state without the money or the political support required. By 1967 the prince had purged all the leading leftists. He had turned to the rightists to administer his socialist agenda. No one wanted to listen to Komphot and his ideas for creating new joint private and state ventures. The Vietnam War and the exploding political situation in Cambodia were the only topics under consideration.

Komphot entered the world of banking, in Phnom Penh the world of nationalized banks. Inexorably Komphot was drawn back to political discussions, and for the next two years his life was that of the majority of the elite in Phnom Penh. He heard and passed on rumors that spoke of war. Sihanouk not only openly screamed against the Khmer Rouge. Before he had dismissed the leftists. By 1968 he was warning that the Khmer Rouge wanted to drag Cambodia into the Vietnam War. He said the leftists were taking orders from the Vietnamese communists.

Komphot and his friends did not believe Sihanouk's charges against the leftists. Some of his friends actually fled the capital to join the Khmer Rouge. Others stayed behind and waited, fearing any fighting would draw the United States or Vietnam, or both, into Cambodia. Komphot was among the group, a majority. Despite his pent-up anger against Sihanouk, Komphot still approved of the prince's promise to remain aloof from the Vietnam War.

New rumors circulated around the city. By 1970 the elite were being told that Sihanouk had sided with the Vietnamese communists and had allowed the communists sanctuary rights inside Cambodia. In the countryside, the Khmer Rouge grew more bold in their attempts to mount a peasant rebellion against Phnom Penh. The city was braced for a showdown.

On March 18, 1970, the rightists mounted a coup against Sihanouk. To Komphot and his friends it seemed a blessing. They likened the coup to the founding of the French Republic. The coup leaders promised to instate a Khmer Republic that would be modern, democratic, and truly neutral. The city was buoyant with enthusiasm. There were promises to end the corrupt, freewheeling politics of Sihanouk with efficient, clean, modern government. It seemed too good to be true—a republic without a revolution, without being drawn into the Vietnam War.

The illusions of a republic did not last the year. The coup seemed headed by two figures—Prince Sirik Matak and General Lon Nol. Matak was the scion of the Sisowath branch of the Cambodian royal family, which had been passed over in 1941 by the French who then awarded the crown to Sihanouk. Matak was Sihanouk's rival and his opposite. He was a friend of business and a friend of the United States. He was so tied to the United States that many Cambodians assumed he must have received their approval for the coup and its promises of support. Matak represented modernity, elegance, and ties to American aid that Sihanouk had rejected. He was also the man who most appealed to men like Komphot. Phnom Penh's professional classes saw Matak as their country's savior.

Lon Nol was a more distant figure. He had been Sihanouk's police chief and military leader for years; he was considered a perfect number two for Matak. He brought the military against Sihanouk. He seemed a flexible man, capable previously of leading delegations to Beijing for Sihanouk.

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