Racism, Marxism, labelling, and genocide in Ben Kiernan’s
The Pol Pot regime

Steve Heder

This in-depth review suggests that Kiernan’s argument that Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea regime was more racist and generically totalitarian than Marxist or specifically Communist is unconvincing. It also takes issue with his argument about the predominance in Democratic Kampuchea of a French-educated ‘Pol Pot group’ permanently allied with ‘warlords’ heading two of the regime’s Zones. Kiernan’s suggestion that this coalition was solely accountable for war against Viet Nam is found to be faulty, as is his presentation of another Zone, the East, as the main locus of opposition to Pol Pot. The review considers Kiernan’s theoretical categories to be empty and stresses that Marxism and Communism were at the root of racism and genocide in Democratic Kampuchea.

In this book, historian Ben Kiernan sets himself the task of outlining the ‘social context and course of the Cambodian revolution’ and ‘the role played in it by factors recognizable worldwide’. He argues that the most important of these were ‘racialist ideology and the quest for total power’ (p. vii). He is arguing against what he calls the ‘conventional anti-communist perspective’ of historians like David P. Chandler. He rejects their view of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) that ruled over what it called Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1978 as a ‘thoroughgoing Marxist–Leninist movement’, the behaviour

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2 I would like to thank David Ashley, David Chandler, Penny Edwards, Judy Ledgerwood, Sorpong Peou, John Sidel, Demelza Stubbings, and Laura Summers for commenting on drafts of this review. It has benefited much from their criticisms and suggestions, although perhaps not as much as they or I would have liked.
of which was in line with ‘socialist practice’ and ‘standard operating procedure’ in other communist-ruled countries, even if the sum total of these practices and procedures went beyond such precedents. He also rejects what he describes as historian Michael Vickery’s characterization of Democratic Kampuchea as ‘an anti-Marxist “peasant revolution”’. According to Kiernan, Pol Pot’s ‘Khmer Rouge’ regime was neither Marxist, nor communist, nor peasant, but simply racist and totalitarian. Thus, ‘Khmer Rouge conceptions of race overshadowed those of class’. What they were doing ‘was neither a communist proletarian revolution that privileged the working class nor a peasant revolution that favored all farmers’. Their generic totalitarianism was an ‘unceasing . . . struggle for top-down domination’ by certain CPK leaders ‘from elite backgrounds and without experience of peasant life’. They ‘privileged themselves and each other, to the detriment of alternative leaders from grassroots backgrounds, whether of Khmer or ethnic minority origin’, such that power was increasingly restricted to what Kiernan calls ‘the French-educated Pol Pot group’. He blames them and certain CPK regional leaders whom he describes as ‘warlords’ for having ‘singled out’ non-Khmer in leadership positions and in society as a whole ‘for persecution because of their race’ (p. 26). He also suggests that there was a direct connection between their domestic repressiveness and Democratic Kampuchea’s external aggressiveness, between their racism and militarist expansionism.

However, Kiernan’s failure to problematize his notions of racism and totalitarianism leaves his analysis suspended in theoretical mid-air. He hardly analyses the Pol Pot regime’s concept of race. His own treatment of the subject consists of acknowledging that race and ethnicity are social constructs by declaring that he uses ‘the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, because of the emerging scholarly consensus that racial boundaries have no biological basis’ (p. 26). The label ‘totalitarian’ is nowhere defined. Neither is the concept of ‘warlord’ or the other epithets, like ‘true reactionaries’ (p. 27) that Kiernan applies to the Pol Pot group or those whom he identifies as its allies. Similarly, while he valorizes some of Democratic Kampuchea’s victims as ‘revolutionaries’ and implies they may have represented some sort of ‘Orthodox Marxism’ that would have prevented the human catastrophes of the regime, there is no hint of what these terms might mean.

It is thus perhaps inevitable that Kiernan’s final conclusion that Democratic Kampuchea’s ‘racialist preoccupations and discourse
were of primary importance, but so were totalitarian ambitions and achievements’ (p. 464) begs the issues of the relationship between ‘racialism’ and ‘totalitarianism’ and of what kind of totalitarians Pol Pot et al. were. It is also perhaps not surprising that his argument that Democratic Kampuchea was above all a racist regime is both unconvincing and shot through with contradictions. Equally flawed is his argument about the ever-increasing predominance of a French-educated Pol Pot group working in permanent alliance with warlords at the head of Democratic Kampuchea’s Southwest and Central Zones, two of the seven major subdivisions of the country. His conclusion that this same coalition should be held almost solely accountable for launching an irredentist war against Viet Nam is also faulty, as is his attempt to present another Zone, the East, as bearing little responsibility for these attacks and as being the main locus of ‘opposition to Pol Pot’.

This review will argue that the dichotomy between Marxism and racism posited by Kiernan is false and untenable, and that both Marxism and communism were at the root of racism and genocide in Democratic Kampuchea. It will also argue that Kiernan deconstructs ‘the Khmer Rouge’ into zonal parts, only to reconstruct those parts in a way that recreates the problem of essentialized elements. The trope of evil Khmer Rouge is replaced by those of the evil Paris Group and evil Southwest versus the good East. Kiernan’s view is based on an ahistorical snapshot that freezes the dynamic in mid-1978, without taking into sufficient account what happened before and particularly after that juncture. Depicting Parisian students and ‘the Southwest’ as ‘Pol Pot loyalists’ reflects popular perceptions in some Cambodian quarters of patterns of political power under CPK rule, but is contrary to the real dynamics of politics under Democratic Kampuchea. Categories like Pol Pot Group, East Zone, Pol Pot loyalist, Southwest Zone, obscure more than they elucidate, and their use reflects not a detached analysis of the political process but Kiernan’s own engagement in it. This is an engagement that aligns him with certain surviving East Zone cadres who became founding members of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, which was established in 1979 under Vietnamese tutelage and later renamed the State of Cambodia. It entangles him in their struggles against other Cambodians for

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5 The seven zones were divided into more than thirty sectors that were subordinated to them.
political and historical legitimacy, including battles over the writing of Cambodian history.4

While challenging his theoretical and historical categories, this review also confronts Kiernan’s conclusions by re-examining many of the same sources and same kinds of sources used by him. These include interviews of Cambodians who were CPK members when it was in power, whom this reviewer, like Kiernan, interviewed in considerable numbers in the first few years after the collapse of the Democratic Kampuchea regime. They also include ‘confessions’ extracted from purged CPK cadres by interrogators of the national CPK Security Service Sâ-21 (‘Tuol Sleng’) and maintained after 1979 in the archives of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, in which Kiernan and this reviewer have conducted research on numerous occasions since 1980. Re-examination of these sources suggests that Kiernan’s use of the ‘confessions’ is patchy and selective, and that his use of interview material is sometimes tendentious. This review also raises questions about selectivity in Kiernan’s use of non-‘confession’ documentary evidence, and about the accuracy of his translations. It points the need for readers to be cautious not only with regard to Kiernan’s arguments and conclusions, but also the data presented to buttress them.

Orthodoxy in Democratic Kampuchea Marxism

Even in the absence of an attempt by Kiernan to examine the interconnections between the constructs of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’, it is possible to examine and reject his argument that some combination of these concepts was a more important element in Democratic Kampuchea than the construct of class, and the corollary that the ideology of Democratic Kampuchea was more ‘racist’ than ‘orthodox Marxist’.

Kiernan is right that Democratic Kampuchea was guilty of racism against groups it defined as inferior or dangerous. Its racism was perpetrated through the exercise of political power via institutional practices that systematically produced ethnic inequalities and promoted individual acts of racially-motivated prejudice and discrimination.5 But this

4 These battles remain of contemporary relevance, among other things because of the ongoing role of former East Zone cadres in political contestation in today’s Kingdom of Cambodia.
Ben Kiernan’s ‘The Pol Pot regime’

racism was a part of a particular project of political modernization through rapid communization. In this project, people who were thought most likely to be opposed to communization were racially stigmatized. In the same way that resistance to ‘modernizing’ capitalist transformation requires ‘recalcitrant populations to be racialized’ in order to justify ‘expropriation of their labour, or even the genocide of the stigmatized populations’, so, too did Cambodians stereotyped in class-coloured racial terms suffer this fate under communism. They died as a result of the Communist Party’s ‘universalizing thrust’ to establish socialist relations of production in a way that destroyed populations whose class identities were defined in terms of ‘national’ or ‘racial’ essences.  

Kiernan’s argument fails to take account of the way in which ‘orthodox Marxism’ as an ideology of modernization contains racist impulses. From the Soviet Union to China to Viet Nam, acceleration and intensification of socialist revolution and progress toward achievement of communism went hand-in-hand with attacks on the independence and distinctiveness of ‘national minorities’. Ephraim Nimni has shown the racist tendency inherent in the way Marx’s ‘conceptualization of human development and the rationale for the emancipation of human species as a whole’ assigned nations and races ‘a place on a continuum between “progressive” and “reactionary”’. Democratic Kampuchea was heir to Marx’s theory of progressive ‘historical’ versus reactionary ‘non-historical’ nations and his belief that state centralization and national unification, with the consequent assimilation of small national communities, was the only viable path to social progress. In this view, development of nations meant ‘the destruction of local differences’ and a ‘process whereby each population became uniform’. Indeed, ‘Marx . . . repeatedly argued that national communities incapable of constituting proper national states should vanish by being assimilated into more progressive and vital nations’. For him, such ‘historyless peoples’ were ‘intrinsically reactionary, because of their inability to adapt’. As Nimni points out, the Communist manifesto thus declared that with abolition of capitalist relations of production, nations and nationalities were bound to disappear. Marx believed that the proletariat would become the national class for a short period during the advance to a higher stage,

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after which, with ‘the supremacy of the proletariat’, national differ-
ences would ‘vanish’.7

Scholars of communism have long remarked on the resulting
tendency toward a discriminatory ‘Staatsfolk nationalism’ against
minorities in the praxis of Marxist–Leninist regimes.8 As one wrote in
1965:

in concrete terms, what ‘Marxist–Leninist theory on the national question’ as
applied in Russia and China really means is that claims for national indepen-
dence on the part of minorities in socialist countries is counter-revolutionary
... Once the Communist Party, ... vanguard of the proletariat, seizes power,
then the oppression of one nationality by another is impossible; anyone still
demanding independence, therefore, can only be an agent, wittingly or unwit-
tingly, of world imperialism and therefore an enemy of ‘the people’.

Communist party victory and advance toward socialism therefore typically meant a reduction in the ‘actual status of the minority national
groups’. When the collectivization movements were enforced, commu-
nists often considered that previous united fronts with minorities against
imperialism and promises to them of equality and minority rights had
exhausted their usefulness and were no longer applicable. And where
minority religious and national identities overlapped, communists were
‘determined to efface both characteristics, replacing them with a prole-
tarian outlook’.9 In short, the more the communism, the greater the
attack on minorities that are seen as threatening to the communist
project. This vision of assimilation and disappearance of difference with
the advance of socialism clearly informed Democratic Kampuchea
thought in a way that is essential to understanding its racism.

The extraordinary reign of terror under Democratic Kampuchea was
thus not a matter of simple racism or generic totalitarianism. It was
brought about by a dedicated effort to implement a combination of
Marxist–Leninist policies in order to achieve more far-reaching and
fundamental changes than attempted by previous revolutionaries. It
ensued from decisions to implement these policies through coercion
rather than persuasion or inducement, thus ignoring objective con-

7 Ephraim Nimni, Marxism and nationalism: theoretical origins of a political crisis.
8 Robert R. King, Minorities under communism: nationalities as a source of tension
among Balkan communist states. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973,
pp. 1–2.
straints that contradicted the yearnings of revolutionary ideology.\textsuperscript{10} Pol Potism clearly fits Jürgen Habermas’s description of Marx’s ‘romantic socialism’, in which ‘the dissolution of private property means the total emancipation of all human . . . qualities’ and in which a modernizing project was ‘loaded with nostalgic images of the types of community . . . to be found in the world of peasants’.\textsuperscript{11} The genocide that resulted was the final and most catastrophic of the twentieth century’s attempts to achieve national modernity via a Marxist-inspired total revolution.\textsuperscript{12}

Perhaps 1.7 million or more of Cambodia’s approximately eight million people died from execution, starvation, or disease.\textsuperscript{13} As is all too well known, the victims included not only minorities, but Khmer, both ‘new people’ evacuated from urban areas into the countryside, and ‘base people’ who were already living in old communist ‘liberated zones’.

As Edward Friedman has suggested, Democratic Kampuchea is thus best understood as an extension of ‘the orthodox tradition of Lenin and Stalin’. It was an intensified system of war communist ‘class struggle . . . mobilization . . . containing a strong potential for genocide’ not only against minorities, but also against the majority masses of the peasants as rapid total collectivization of agriculture induced starvation and killings of those – labelled kulaks, rich peasants, or whatever – blamed for socialism’s failures. It was ‘mistakenly conceived of as revolutionary’ and modernizing by leaders who sought to make revolution in the combined senses put forward by de Tocqueville, Braudel, and Marx. This meant implementing formulae aimed at building a modern bureaucratic state, creating a new nation and national identity and replacing the political power of a reactionary social class by a more progressive class. Like its predecessors, the Democratic Kampuchea project had perversely opposite results from its proclaimed and intended ends.


\textsuperscript{13} The overall mortality is still subject to debate. A recent attempt to use macro-demographic data concludes that a figure of around one and a half million ‘excess deaths’ is a not unreasonable estimate. See Patrick Heuveline, ‘“Between one and three million”: toward the demographic reconstruction of a decade of Cambodian history (1970–1979)’, \textit{Population Studies} (forthcoming, 51, 3); and his upcoming paper for the IUSSP General Conference in Beijing, ‘L’insoutenable incertitude de nombre’.
It created an ‘outmoded personalistic state apparatus’ that could not deal with modern challenges. It tried to create an ‘imagined pure nation’ that was supposed to be better off without ‘traitors and counter-revolutionaries’ and required the ‘removal of all autonomous groups’, including those with particular ‘ethnic, regional [or] religious identities’. It did not replace the feudalists and the bourgeoisie with the proletariat, but created a new system of privilege and stratification that rewarded those who tended most toward ‘inhumanity and irrationality’ and ‘to nativistic, autocratic know-nothingism’.14

The Khmer and the Kampuchean worker-peasant people

A telling problem for Kiernan’s argument is the studious avoidance in CPK discourse of the ethnically exclusive term Khmer, in favour of the inclusive Kampuchea. Kiernan unconvincingly tries to parlay what he admits was the regime’s ‘first and only appropriation of the ethnic term “Khmer”’ in the internally-used name of a unit responsible for foreign trade into damning evidence of a ‘secret commitment to racial discourse’ (p. 377). This ignores official sources that clarify the CPK’s doctrinal position. A 1976 text declaring that Democratic Kampuchea’s population as a whole belonged to ‘yellow race’ explained that the Kampuchean nation and people had their genesis in a blend of many nationalities, among whom the Khmer nationality is . . . the majority nationality. . . . The majority and all the minority nationalities are members of the same great family of broad national solidarity in which there is no racism.

They comprised ‘the people’, who had become ‘worker-peasants and labourers’ who lived in ‘an equal, just and truly democratic society without rich or poor and without exploiting or exploited classes’.15 An early 1977 text reiterated that ‘the Kampuchean people’ included ‘all the nationalities, including both the Khmer and all the minority nationalities’ who were supposedly ‘living . . . in the great solidarity of the whole nation and joining together to engage in productive labour and to build up and defend a collective, equal and genuinely democratic


Cambodian national society in which there is no racism and there are no rich or poor or exploiting or exploited classes’.\(^\text{16}\) It was the purported success of this assimilation of Khmer and other nationalities into a classless Kampuchean people that resulted in a notorious declaration later in the year that ninety-nine per cent of the country’s population was Khmer.\(^\text{17}\)

Kiernan’s narrative draws attention away from the fact that Pol Pot’s objective was hardly just Khmerization. Instead, it was an effort to transform rapidly the country’s entire population into a mass of proletarianized and Khmerized peasants and the CPK into a politically pure vanguard of this class and nation. The idea of class underpinning this effort was the straightforwardly Marxist one that classes are created by the mode of production in which they exist and made conscious of their interests by ideology. The objective of the Democratic Kampuchea revolution was to create an advanced proletariat by organizational and educational means, so that Cambodia would no longer be ‘behind’. Having learned from the orthodox Marxist tradition elaborated by the Comintern and endorsed by the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists that the state of a nation’s proletariat defined a country’s status in the socialist world, Pol Pot saw it as his and the CPK’s patriotic duty to create an advanced proletariat in a society where hitherto the working class was small and dominated by kamakăr seri (casual labourers not fixed into proletarian discipline by their factory circumstances). His hope was that Democratic Kampuchea would thereby be forged into an agriculturally self-sufficient and industrialized country that would surpass all other countries in the rapid achievement of communist prosperity and strength and thus become totally independent from all foreign countries, whether capitalist or ‘socialist’, and impervious to any military threats they might pose to state territory.

A CPK cadre whom Kiernan quotes as declaring ‘now we are making revolution. Everyone becomes a Khmer’ (p. 271) expressed his perception of what was going on, but if this had really been the limit of what the revolution required, then many more would have made the remark. Thus, while Kiernan argues for the primacy of race in CPK thinking, he observes that ‘Cambodians of all races and classes worked long hours, without wages or leisure, on projects in which they had no say’ (p. 164). He concludes that ‘just as effectively as it had already


\(^{17}\) Democratic Kampuchea is moving forward. Phnom Penh, August 1977, p. 6.
devastated the lives of Cambodians of other races, the course the CPK took eventually alienated nearly all ethnic Khmer peasants as well’ (p. 167). What he fails to mention was that this was a course of enforced proletarianization through compulsory participation in projects based on dreams of socialist revolution and socialist construction. He also fails to see the significance of the way in which methods of class transformation were applied by analogy to class-stigmatized ‘nationalities’. This is why he finds it ‘curious’ that in the immediate post-‘liberation’ phase of CPK rule, ‘ethnic segregation was . . . associated with policy moderation’, while harsher measures that much more vigorously suppressed minority rights through a ‘policy to disperse ethnic groups’ (p. 294) were adopted as the revolution was quickly pushed into a more socialist phase. This policy was the same as that applied to the ‘feudal’ and ‘bourgeois’ classes that were to be destroyed as classes by dispersal and assimilation through evacuation and incorporation in the power framework of poor and lower-middle peasant co-operatives in which they were formally discriminated against.

Communist origins of Democratic Kampuchea’s rural policies

Kiernan’s coyness about Democratic Kampuchea’s Marxist and communist roots also prevents him from understanding other aspects of the regime, and lead him wrongly to suggest that many aspects of Pol Potist praxis were either sui generis or had non-communist sources. For example, he attributes Democratic Kampuchea’s stress on the importance of irrigation works to ideas about the supposed contribution of water control to the celebrated glories of Angkor Voat (p. 8), and implicitly connects this to a ‘Pol Potist’ rejection of agricultural mechanization in favour of use of massed manual labour (p. 319). This ignores the much more proximate inspirations not only from the People’s Republic of China, but from the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam.18 Kiernan also wrongly hypothesizes that Democratic Kampuchea’s tripartite division of members of agricultural producer co-operatives into ‘full-rights’, ‘candidate’, and ‘depositee’ groups was

invented by cadres of the CPK’s Southwest Zone (pp. 180–82). They are portrayed as the propagators of this type of ‘deliberate social classification’ and resulting enforcement of a ‘multi-layered, carefully calibrated, rigidly institutionalized ... new ... caste system’ that ‘had as little to do with peasant class politics as the new centralized labor management system had to do with peasant farming’ (p. 186). He even suggests, on the basis of very thin evidence, that the lowest category – pracheachun phnhaoe (‘depositee people’) – was invented ‘for racial reasons’ to create a discriminatory political status in which to place members of the Islamic Cham minority (p. 259). In fact, this system of division of the population into categories with rights of full political participation, limited rights, and no rights clearly has its immediate roots in communist Viet Nam. Kiernan’s description of it recalls Bernard Fall’s discussion forty years earlier of a Vietnamese decree on the determination of the various categories into which Viet Nam’s rural population had to be classified. Fall remarked upon the arbitrary way in which the decree determined social status and concluded that ‘such a social classification, once given, is considered almost like a racial characteristic’. He believed the intended effect was ‘nothing less than ... creating a caste system along Marxist lines’.

The Cham, the Chinese, and the ‘Khmer Loe’

The centre-piece of Kiernan’s argument about Democratic Kampuchea racism is its treatment of Cambodia’s Islamic Cham minority. He correctly concludes that ‘Cham were persecuted, and that one specific target was their cultural distinctiveness’ (p. 461). He is also right to argue that Cham were ‘not only persecuted, but also discriminated against, that is, persecuted for being Cham.’ Not only was the Cham language prohibited along with Islam, ‘all Cham communities, urban or rural, “new” or “base”, were dispersed’. Most strikingly, ‘Cham “base people” (the vast majority of Cham) were deliberately dispersed from their villages and demoted to “depository” status because they were Cham.’ (p. 462: Kiernan’s emphasis).

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In explaining this, Kiernan quotes a Southwest Zone cadre’s description of the Cham as ‘hopeless’ because they had lost their country to the Vietnamese (p. 283). He presents this as evidence of the ‘racialist’ type of thought entirely contrary to what he elsewhere describes as ‘orthodox Marxism’. In fact, it would be hard to find a more precise echo of Marx’s definition of a historyless people doomed to extinction in the name of progress. While missing this resonance, Kiernan underplays the way in which discrimination and persecution vis-à-vis Cham was based on concepts of class and driven forward toward genocidal results by notions of class struggle. CPK members were told that although Cambodian society was divided into the ‘feudal class, capitalist class, petty bourgeois class, peasant class [and] worker class’, Cham, unlike Cambodia’s other nationalities, included no ‘labourers’.21 As Kiernan points out, this stigmatization of Cham was based on a gross oversimplification of the class stratification within the community, but his focus on the ‘race’ aspect to the exclusion of the ‘class’ misses the key element in CPK thinking. As his own interview with the brother of a CPK cadre confirms, the party analysed the Cham problem in class, not ethnic terms, by asserting that the policy of dispersal was justified as a reaction to violent Cham opposition to the revolution led by ‘big-property owning Cham’ (p. 278).

The treatment meted out to Cham – dispersal, prohibition of distinctive speech, dress, and other customs, and prohibition of religious practice and belief, all backed by executions and massacres in cases of dissidence and violent opposition (pp. 268–69) – add up to a genocidal targeting of Cham for destruction ‘as such’.22 Nevertheless, targeting of the Cham mimicked the measures used to eliminate the French-speaking, Buddhist, Western-style dressing Khmer ‘feudal’ and ‘bourgeoisie’ classes as such (‘as classes’). Signs of ‘Cham-ness’ were interpreted as signs of ‘non-proletarian-ness’. Thus, the upsurge in Democratic Kampuchea killings of Cham in late 1976 and early 1977

21 Comrade Preap, ‘The tactical line of gathering together broad and solid united front forces’, 25 April 1973; ‘Class analysis and class struggle’, n.d. (This reviewer’s translation of CPK documents captured by Khmer Republic forces in 1974.)

22 It was genocide because of the close fit of such practices with the legal definition laid out in the 1948 Convention on preventing this crime against humanity, according to which ‘genocide means . . . acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such’: Convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (9 December 1948), Article II. For further discussion of the applicability of legal and other notions of genocide to Cambodia, see the section ‘Genocide, intent and the case of the blue krama’, below.
and the intensification of such killings thereafter, particularly in the second half of 1978— all graphically chronicled by Kiernan— reflect general changes in the CPK political line. The upsurge correlates with the intensification of the struggle against ‘remnants’ of the non-labouring classes inside and outside the party. This intensification of class struggle produced murderous attacks on all groups stigmatized in class terms and purported to have a history of political opposition or deviance, not just Cham. The 1978 killings correlated with attacks on suspected class and national traitors of all kinds. To attribute those that victimized the Cham solely to ‘racial’ motives is to ignore the general to highlight the specific.

Kiernan’s treatment of Democratic Kampuchea genocide against Cambodia’s Chinese is even more problematic. In contrast to the more convincing work of Elizabeth Becker, Hurst Hannum and David Hawk, and— most recently— Penny Edwards and Chan Sambath, he insists that although ‘ethnic Chinese suffered the most’ of any identifiable group other than Vietnamese, ‘they were not targeted for execution because of their race’ [his emphasis]. He argues that instead they suffered disproportionately because such a large proportion of them were evacuated from urban areas to the countryside, where ‘they were made to work harder and under much worse conditions than rural dwellers’ (p. 288). However, even Kiernan’s own data do not bear out his conclusions that:

What emerges from most accounts is that there was no notable racialist vendetta against people of Chinese origin. . . . The Chinese were seen as the archetypal city dwellers, and therefore ineligible for ‘full rights’, and rarely even ‘candidate’ status. They were nearly all ‘deportees’, generally assumed to be ‘capitalists’. But they were usually seen as ‘foreign’ in the same sense that

23 Before a change in the CPK general line toward accelerated socialist revolution in September 1975, Cham identity was still officially promoted for propaganda purposes. Thus radio broadcasts proclaimed that Cham continued to ‘enjoy the freedom to preserve their tradition and religion’, while taking ‘part in the revolution . . . and in building a new Cambodian society with seething enthusiasm’: Radio Phnom Penh, 4 July and 31 August 1975. I am grateful to Demelza Stubbings and Penny Edwards for drawing these broadcasts to my attention.


city people generally were. This is social or geographic rather than racial
discrimination.

His insistence that they were ‘not . . . singled out for special persecu-
tion’ is contradicted by his recognition that:

the Chinese language, like all foreign and minority languages [sic?],27 was
banned, and so was any tolerance of a culturally and ethnically distinguishable
Chinese community. The Chinese community was to be destroyed ‘as such’.
This CPK policy, like that toward the Cham, could be construed as genocide
(pp. 295–96).

This argument that Chinese, although not ‘racially’ targeted, were
victims of ‘genocide’ appears to be grounded in a notion that Demo-
cratic Kampuchea treatment of Chinese was more objectively justifiable
in class terms than its treatment of Cham, and that therefore the latter
was ‘racist’ whereas the former was not. Kiernan’s contortions leave
the impression that Cham were ‘not really’ upper class, so discrimina-
tion against them was racial, but Chinese were indeed ‘upper class’,
so discrimination against them was ‘not really’ racial. Thus, in contrast
to the Cham, whom he rightly insists were class-divided in such a way
as to include a working class element (p. 260), his only comment on
social structure among Chinese is to remark on the extent to which
they ‘were involved in trade’ and what he describes as ‘usury’ (p. 288).
He thus seems himself to reproduce the kind of stereotyping that
casts ethnic Chinese in Cambodia as bourgeois and ignores their
historically ‘diverse dialect groups, economic interests and provin-
cial identities’.28 He also seems to be indirectly echoing the official
ethno-historiography of the early People’s Republic of Kampuchea,
which denied Cambodia’s Chinese the same status as ‘victims of
Pol Pot’ accorded to other groups.29 This allowed its post-Democratic

27 See the discussion below of Kiernan’s comments on the use of ‘Khmer Loe’ languages.
28 Edwards and Sambath, p. 108.
29 According to this entirely false view, ‘the national minority of Chinese who had
asked to become naturalized Khmer nationals and those Chinese who had remained
resident aliens’ in Cambodia ‘were initially subjected in 1975 to genocide-like mass
killing because the traitorous clique accused them all of being bourgeois. However,
from 1976 on, the fate of fraternal Chinese who were Cambodian citizens and of
resident alien Chinese was easier than that of the fellow victims of evacuation with
whom they were living’. People’s Republic of Kampuchea, Ministry of Propaganda,
Culture, and Information, Sechkdei reaykar ampi moha-okreatakam robâh bân Pol
Pot-leng Sari dael mean leakkhana piseh châmpuoh chun-cheat pheak tech [Report of
the great crimes of the Pol Pot-leng Sary clique with a particular nature vis-à-vis
national minorities], in Somnomreuang robâh tolakar kat-tôh bân prolay puch-sah
Kampuchea authorities to discriminate in 1979 and the early 1980s against Chinese in appointments to political posts, a process in which ‘victims of Pol Pot’ were supposed to be given priority over non-victims.30

Contrary to Kiernan’s argument, the problem for Chinese, as for Cham, was the way in which ethnic stereotyping was fitted into a paradigm of class, such that every intensification of the class struggle meant an intensification of attacks on ethnic groups stereotyped as problematic in terms of class background and tendencies. Class-coloured ethnic stereotypes of the two groups differed in detail, but this does not justify overestimation of the ‘racial’ aspect of the Cham problem and underestimation of the ‘racial’ aspect of the Chinese problem.

Kiernan’s arguments that race was a more important factor than class in CPK thinking, and that Cham but not Chinese were victims of ‘racial’ persecution is contradicted by many of the accounts he quotes, such as this one by a Chinese who ended up in Sector 24 of Democratic Kampuchea’s East Zone in 1975:

They immediately killed any 17 April people ['new people'] whom they suspected of being enemies. . . . They spared only dark-skinned people. . . . In 1976 . . . they began looking for 'capitalists', rich people, meaning people who had cars, brick houses or owned factories - who were mostly Chinese where I was. I know of only one Khmer who was killed (p. 293).

Moreover, as with Cham, when CPK policy began to put increasing emphasis on ferreting out and eliminating the threat to the revolution from recalcitrant but hidden upper-class elements, Chinese suffered from increasing persecution, including execution. As one source quoted by Kiernan put it, ‘in 1977, they started killing capitalists, students, monks and . . . Chinese, . . . even if they could speak Cambodian. These classes were killed by being beaten to death with poles’. Another source reported that Chinese were forcibly dispersed and treated ‘the same as all new people, the same as . . . Cham’. Chinese were accused by Khmer base people of being ‘traitors to China’ (i.e., class traitors to their socialist motherland), and then ‘killed to the same extent’ as Cham (pp. 291–92). Kiernan’s attempt to make a distinction between Chinese and Cham is also contradicted by his reports that by early 1978, cadres


in Sector 505 were killing both because they were supposed parts of an ‘enemy network’ and were thus ‘not to be spared’. His argument that this upsurge in killings can be explained primarily in terms of ‘racial targeting’ is belied by testimony that the killings ‘soon spread to the Khmer population’, hitting first ‘the people who were lazy at work’ and ‘then all the new people’ (pp. 423–25).

Edwards and Sambath confirm that ‘the worst excesses against Chinese . . . seem to have occurred from 1977–1978’, and cite testimony about a massacre of Chinese in East Zone Sector 21 in 1977 during which cadres characterized the victims as ‘useless’ because they had been speaking Chinese among themselves. Such echoes of the belief that Cham were ‘hopeless’ are indicative of the same type of race-coloured stereotyping. Cham were ‘hopeless’ and Chinese ‘useless’ because neither fitted into Pol Pot’s Marxist vision of socialist modernity. This is why Edwards and Sambath found both that there were ‘numerous instances of persecution of rural Chinese on purely ethnic grounds’ and that ‘generalizations about the Chinese race as a class were commonplace’.

The significance of class is further underlined by the material Kiernan presents with regard to what he calls ‘the tribal minorities’ of northeast Cambodia, who were stereotyped by the CPK as lower class. It reveals the way in which this stereotype and the belief that it explained a record of political loyalty to the revolution made these upland peoples into a category of good ethnic groups. Kiernan reports that although these ‘Khmer Loe’, too, were subjected to cultural assimilation, ‘their languages were not banned’, and a tendency toward affirmative discrimination in their favour meant that in some ways they enjoyed


33 The exact nature of policy vis-à-vis use of Khmer Loe languages remains somewhat unclear. Although they may not have been banned, Pol Pot discouraged their use by his own bodyguards as early as 1967, according to a former bodyguard interviewed by David Ashley in Phnom Penh on 27 September 1996. Personal communication from David Ashley, 11 May 1997.
a preferential status compared not only to Chinese and Cham but even Khmer. At least some groups of them initially enjoyed a privileged place in certain parts of Pol Pot’s leadership apparatus (pp. 392–95). Kiernan’s account of how some upland ‘national minority’ cadres worked with ‘Pol Pot’ in carrying out the purges of recruits of similar background is a further indication of the extent to which ‘race’ was not the decisive one factor in such conflicts (p. 84).

The fact that there was discrimination in favour and against ‘national minorities’, but it was based on stereotypes rooted in class is reflected in Kiernan’s figures on mortality under Democratic Kampuchea, according to which twenty-one per cent of Cambodia’s population perished. Chinese, whose ethnic difference was compounded by the stigma of being ‘upper class’ and of urban residence at the time of the Communist victory, suffered a very high proportional toll: approximately fifty per cent. Among the Islamic Cham, who although predominantly rural were also stigmatized as ‘upper class’, the toll was perhaps thirty-six per cent. A quarter of evacuated Khmer ‘new people’ died. The proportion was smaller for Khmer ‘base people’ (whose identity was associated with the category ‘basic classes’, i.e., ‘poor and lower-middle peasants’): something like fifteen per cent. A similar proportion of upland minority people died (p. 458). These statistics clearly suggest that purported class identity was the most important determinate of death, and that this was true precisely to the extent that it correlated with ethnic identity. Simply put, the more an ethnic identity was stereotyped as ‘upper class’, the more died; and when ethnic groups were stereotyped as even lower class than Khmer, fewer died.

The good East

The above accounts of class-coloured ill-treatment of Chinese in the East Zone point to the way in which the situation there deteriorated over the course of communist rule, most horrifically after its cadres were purged in mid-1978. In this regard, Kiernan collates the wide variety of contemporary and subsequent accounts that demonstrate that

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34 In referring to this, Kiernan reproduces stereotypical denigrations of upland peoples by Khmer, quoting one as saying ‘they understood nothing, and knew nothing about progress. They did whatever angkar [the Communist Party ‘Organization’] told them’. He quotes another as commenting, ‘most of them were ignorant, and wanted power’ and thus ‘liked the revolution’ (pp. 307–308).
up until that purge, conditions in the East Zone were, generally and relatively speaking, less bad and deteriorated less rapidly than in most other parts of Cambodia (pp. 205–206). It seems plausible to attribute this difference at least in part to the leadership style and political proclivities of East Zone Secretary, Sao Pheum. However, in comparing the East with other CPK structures and leaders, particularly the South-west Zone of Ta Mok, Kiernan overdraws his case and essentializes these structures to give them a false coherence, putting himself through numerous convolutions in order to do so. His construct of the East Zone as a moderate, pro-Vietnamese, possibly even ‘orthodox Marxist’ entity is tautologically dependent on its cadre and geographical subdivisions being East Zone only when some evidence can be found to substantiate the characterization. It also relies on testimony from former East Zone cadres about animosity between them and cadres from other zones, particularly the Southwest. However, as a former East Zone combatant suggested in an interview given to this reviewer, these contradictions had no particular social or political basis, but were a by-product of the creation of the zones themselves and the social segmentation that led to re-imagining them as political differences. He explained that because cadres and people were administratively ‘separated’ from each other such that they ‘had no contact, they began thinking in terms of sectors and zones’, and thus became susceptible to false beliefs about differences between them.35

Kiernan retrospectively reproduces such beliefs when he adduces data purporting to show that there was a systematic and fundamental difference between the East and other Zones over the evacuation of Phnom Penh after it was captured on 17 April 1975. While admitting ‘evidence that Easterners could be ruthless’ in getting people to leave the capital and were involved in forcible evacuation of patients from hospitals, he concludes that they ‘either insisted that the evacuation was temporary or opposed it altogether’, or at least delayed carrying it out (pp. 31–47). However, his recounting of contradictory accounts simply does not show that cadres and combatants from different zones had systematically different orders or attitudes vis-à-vis the evacuation. Testimonies collected by this reviewer demonstrate that differences were in fact wide between military units from the same zone and even within component parts of the same unit. None of these sources

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35 Interview with a former combatant of East Zone Division 2 (Division 180 and Division 290), Mai Rut, Thailand, 21 January 1981.
believed that differences existed between zonal command structures over evacuation policy.\textsuperscript{36}

The evidence in fact indicates that the behaviour of East Zone cadres and combatants during the evacuation of Phnom Penh was no more and no less in line with general policy than that of forces from other zones. In this regard, it is striking that the report of Kiernan’s most senior East Zone military informant, Heng Samrin,\textsuperscript{37} to the effect that the orders passed down to him were for a temporary evacuation (p. 33) are in line with what former Democratic Kampuchea Deputy Premier in Charge of Foreign Affairs, Ieng Sary, says he was told when he arrived in Phnom Penh on 24 April. According to Sary, the initial decision ‘was that maybe some evacuees would be evacuated temporarily and some permanently’, and the leadership had agreed ‘to wait and see how the situation eventuated both inside and outside Phnom Penh, as well as outside the country’. It was ‘temporizing about what to do’.\textsuperscript{38}

In discussing the fate of evacuees, Kiernan admits an estimate that ‘thousands (but under ten thousand)’ of people were probably executed in the East in 1975 and 1976 (p. 207). In this connection he reports how repression of the Islamic Cham that began in the zone’s

\textsuperscript{36} For example, one combatant from the regiment of East Zone Sector 22 that entered Phnom Penh on 17 April immediately received orders to ‘evacuate all of the people’, while another did not get his orders until the next day, and the former therefore started evacuating before the latter. A combatant with East Zone Division 2 heard of the evacuation order on 18 April but it was not officially confirmed to him for a week, and he was thus even slower to carry it out. Conversely, while a combatant of North Zone Sector 42 forces had received his orders by 15 April, another who came in with the Zone’s Division 2 did not get his until the 18th and could not begin moving people until then. Moreover, while the former was told to ‘permanently evacuate people’, the latter’s instructions were to ‘evacuate for only three days’. He was told that the evacuees would return after remnants of the defeated Khmer Republic had been ‘captured’. A trooper from Special Zone Division 12 received his instructions on 17 April, but was only told more vaguely that he ‘had to get the people out to facilitate the cleaning up of enemies in Phnom Penh’. Reviewer’s interviews with former Sector 22 combatants, 25 and 26 January 1981; former Division 2 combatant, 21 January 1981; former Division 450 combatant, 29 January 1981; former Division 310 combatant, 29 January 1981; and former Division 703 combatant, 27 January 1981, all in Mai Rut, Thailand.

\textsuperscript{37} An East Zone regimental cadre at the time of the evacuation of Phnom Penh, Heng Samrin, became Secretary of the newly-created East Zone Division 4 in 1975. He later became Chairman of People’s Republic of Kampuchea Council of State and head of its ruling Revolutionary People’s Party of Kampuchea. He is now ‘Honorary Chairman’ of the latter’s renamed successor organization, the Cambodian People’s Party.

\textsuperscript{38} Reviewer’s interview with Ieng Sary, Chanthaburi, Thailand, 17 December 1996.
Sector 21 in 1973 led to a mid-1975 massacre following incidents of violent Cham opposition to forced assimilation. However, he dissociates this from the Zone by turning the Sector 21 Secretary at the time of the killings, Seng Hong alias Chan, into a Pol Potist and thus removing Sector 21 temporarily from the category ‘East Zone’ (pp. 261–65). To maintain the purity of his East Zone concept, Chan is relabelled as a traitor to it because of his ‘collaboration’ with Pol Pot ‘against the East’ (p. 209). Despite the absence of eyewitnesses and any primary source documentation, Kiernan concludes that Pol Pot, the East Zone ‘Pol Potist’ Chan, and other local cadres who ‘followed Pol Pot’s orders’ were responsible for the massacre, not the ‘good man’ Sao Pheum, as one of his sources describes the Zone Secretary (p. 266). In making this case, he glosses over Chan’s record as a veteran East Zone activist and evidence that Sao Pheum considered that Chan’s political position was in ‘total accord’ with his own.39 Instead he puts forward an argument that Chan was Pol Pot’s man in the East because he was promoted to the post of its Deputy Secretary in September 1975 when Pol Pot ‘revamped’ the East Zone Committee (pp. 90, 330). In an attempt to solidify the categorization of Chan as a Pol Potist, Kiernan misleadingly declares that ‘Chan was the only East Zone leader to survive the Democratic Kampuchea period without rebelling’ (p. 265), thus failing to inform readers that he was purged at the end of the Democratic Kampuchea period, allegedly shot dead on Pol Pot’s personal order.40 He further dissociates the East from killings by wrongly asserting that ‘Southwest Zone cadre’ purged the


40 Chan’s impending arrest and execution were signalled in numerous ‘confessions’ in late 1978 in which he was implicated as a ‘traitor’. See for example the ‘confessions’ of Penh Thuok alias Sok Thuok alias Von Vet: Ampi kar teak-tong chea-muoy Yuon [On contacts with the Yuon [Vietnamese]], 5 December 1978, pp. 7–11; Ampi kar riep-châm pak pulakâr chong-kuoy [On the final arrangements for setting up a labourers’ party], 3 December 1978, pp. 5–6; and an untitled 28-page handwritten ‘confession’ dated 24 November 1978, p. 26. (These and other citations to ‘confessions’ are to the reviewer’s translations of documents held in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum archives in the 1980s. In those cases where copies of the Khmer-language originals are not immediately available to me, only the translations will be cited. Wherever possible, a transliteration of the original titles in Khmer will be provided. Unless otherwise indicated, paginations refer to those in the original document.) Chan’s purge was implicitly confirmed to this reviewer by Khieu Samphan in an interview in the Phnom Dang Rek, Siem Reap, on 4 August 1980. His execution was described by Ieng Sary.
Secretary of its Sector 23 in March 1977 (pp. 209, 298, 371), and that therefore after that time, the ‘real’ East Zone comprised only parts of the three northern Sectors of 20, 21 (returned to East Zone-ness after the promotion of Chan), and 22 (p. 209). In this way, he tries to suggest that implementation of a policy to exterminate all remnants of the Vietnamese resident community in the East Zone was carried out only in ‘un-East’ areas, for example, Memut of Sector 21 (supposedly a deviant district in the sector), in Sector 24 (placed under the un-East Chan in 1976), and in Sector 23 (wrongly said to be under the South-west’s control) (p. 298). He also fails to deal with indications that general conditions in Sector 21 progressively deteriorated under Chan’s East Zone replacements as Secretary there: Meah Chhuon alias Chhean and Tauch Chaem alias Sot. As one former CPK district secretary in the Sector put it, in terms of purges, ‘it was worse under Chhean than under Chan and worse under Sot than under Chhean’.

Kiernan cannot be faulted for highlighting the mass killings in the East Zone that followed its purge in mid-1978, and there is no doubt that South-west Zone cadres who were put in charge of many areas during and after the purge were deeply implicated in these killings. However, the evidence he presents reifies more than it clarifies. Contrary evidence that suggests the inadequacy of dichotomous characterizations needs greater attention. For example, a schoolteacher

in the interview cited above. Kiernan’s phrasing suggests that he is aware of Chan’s demise, but is reluctant to refer to it because it muddies his argument. He cites Von Vet’s ‘confessions’ on other points (pp. 80, 197, 339, 348–49, 393).

Kiernan is off by a year about the date of the purge of the sector secretary, Uk Savan alias Sau, who was in fact removed from his post in February 1978 and then arrested in March. See the ‘confessions’ of Meah Mon alias Kev Sømmang: ‘Responses of Meah Mon alias Kev Sømmang, East Zone General Staff: on the history of his own activities of betrayal’, 2 June 1978, pp. 73–75, 84–85; Sám Huoy alias Meah Tal, ‘Responses of Sám Huoy alias Meah Tal, Secretary of Division 290, on the story of his own personal activities of betrayal’, pp. 80–81; Pán Cheuan alias Cheap, ‘Responses of Pán Cheuan, Secretary of Division 3, East Zone: on the activities of Pán Cheuan after 17 April 1975, 29 May 1978’, p. 51; Meah Chhuon alias Chhean, ‘Responses of the contemptible Chhean, Secretary of Sector 22, East Zone, 21 June 1978’, p. 13. For further confirmation of the arrest date, see also People’s Revolutionary Tribunal held in Phnom Penh for the trial of the genocide crime of the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique, People’s Republic of Kampuchea, ‘Important culprits (arrested from 1976 to April 9, 1978)’, (Document No. 2.5.24, August 1979); and Banhchi reayneam kammaphibal choan-kphuoh robāh Pol Pot [Nominal list of high-ranking Pol Pot cadres].

Reviewer’s interview, 5 August 1990. This source wishes to remain anonymous. Tauch Chaem alias Sot, described by this source as the sector secretary responsible for the most purges before May 1978, was the brother-in-law of future People’s Republic of Kampuchea chief of state Heng Samrin.
evacuated from Phnom Penh to an old liberated zone in Sector 24 recalled that many ‘soldiers, customs officials, civil servants, administrators and students’ were executed or ‘worked to death’ in 1975, and that local cadres continued to take away ‘those they could find’ in 1976. After the arrest of Sector 24 Secretary Chhouk in 1976 and his replacement by the purported ‘Pol Potist’ Chan, there were ‘fewer’ executions, and reasonably good harvests and reliable rations meant there was no starvation. Things did not change significantly after ‘fighting between Sao Pheum and Central Committee troops’ and purges followed by installation of cadres from the South-west. According to this source, this changeover was associated with the execution of only one ordinary person.  

The story told by a middle peasant from Sector 22 also goes against Kiernan’s manichean grain. This source’s home had been under communist control since 1971, and cadres there executed ‘lots of soldiers and civil servants’ among ‘evacuees from Phnom Penh’ in 1975. Other new people died from ‘malaria and exhaustion’ in small numbers that year and greater numbers the next. However, there were no executions in 1976 or 1977, and after a poor harvest in late 1975, those in the following years were much better. Rations remained high and work demands low. Thus, there was no starvation in any year, and deaths from disease were ‘few’ in 1977 and ‘even less’ in 1978. Four local cadres were executed in 1978 and replaced by South-west Zone cadres, but the latter did not kill any ordinary people or do anything that worsened conditions.

Such accounts should not be dismissed as exceptions that prove the rule, but evidence that something is wrong with the rule. So, too, should the following account about Ponhea Krâk district of Sector 20, where Sao Pheum maintained his forward headquarters. A family of six Khmer poor peasants who had heard that life in the East Zone was ‘easy’ made their way to the district in early 1977. They found themselves in an area of short and falling rations. Moreover, as strangers in the area, they were categorized as ‘new people’. As such, the father was subjected to ‘tempering’ (lut-dâm) by being assigned to cut bamboo in forested areas where malaria was rife, and he soon contracted the fever and died. Shortly thereafter, his thirteen-year-old daughter was arrested and executed for singing a song with lyrics complaining that

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43 Reviewer’s interview No. 4, Khao I Dang, Thailand, 18 November 1980.
44 Reviewer’s interview No. 42, Nong Chan, Thailand, 22 November 1980.
'in the old society, when we depended on the rains, we ate rice; now that we dig canals, we eat gruel'. Her twin sister and two other siblings were executed at the same time, apparently because they were suspected of sharing such subversive sentiments. Only the mother was spared. However, she lived in fear as the pace of executions and the demands of the work regime in her area increased through 1977 and into 1978, even before the purge of the East Zone.45

The Paris group: a locus of opposition to Pol Pot

Kiernan's valorizing essentialization of the East is matched by the ahistorical picture he constructs of increasing control of the CPK revolution by a Pol Pot group comprised of 'most of Pol Pot's Paris friends' and 'dominated at the national level' by 'Pol Pot and his in-laws'. He suggests this group remained stable for 'over 40 years' and exercised its domination through a 'Party Centre' (pp. 11, 93, 186). In consigning the leadership to the grip of the Paris-educated Pol Pot group, he declares that it presided over 'the disappearance of every last veteran communist leader with a traditional religious education', a group which he credits with having originally taken on 'the tasks of modern nationalism' in Cambodia (p. 6). He argues that this was part of a process by which Pol Pot's 'urban, French-educated, radical and anti-Vietnamese' faction seized control of the Cambodian movement from a 'largely rural, Buddhist, moderate and pro-Vietnamese' faction, a process which he suggests was basically completed by 1970 but continued with a vengeance from 1975 to 1978 (p. 14). He implies it eliminated 'orthodox Marxist' elements within CPK ranks (p. 64) and describes some of the victims or intended victims as 'revolutionaries'. If, following Hannah Arendt, a revolutionary is someone whose political project focuses 'on the creation and institutionalization of political spaces for democratic political exploration and participation',46 it is undoubtedly right to deny Pol Pot this title. However, it seems hardly

45 Reviewer's interview No. 46, Nong Chan, Thailand, 22 November 1980. The CPK Secretary for Ponhea Kraek district throughout this period was Chea Sim alias Ta Salat. This interview provided no evidence one way or the other about the degree of his personal involvement in CPK killings. Chea Sim later became Minister of the Interior of the People's Republic of Kampuchea and Chairman of its National Assembly and national united front organization. He is currently Chairman of the Cambodian People's Party and of the National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

likely that it is deserved by those upon whom Kiernan bestows it, such as East Zone figures like Hun Sen (p. 375).47

Typically, Kiernan’s use of the concept of a Party Centre leaves the impression that it was somehow Pol Pot sui generis and ignores the fact that it was inherited by the CPK from the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists.48 His arbitrary definition of it as ‘members of the Standing Committee of the Central Committee with national responsibility, not responsible for a regional area such as one of the Zones of the country’ is part of a tautological effort to elide it with some sort of coherent Pol Pot group (p. 93). However, his notion of a French-educated faction is a misleading political label with little explanatory power. Pol Pot’s purported political ‘friends’ from Paris days were not by definition permanent allies. Old French school ties did not provide them with guarantees against purge, and many of the Cambodians who became Marxists in France during the same period as Pol Pot, had been arrested and killed by the time Democratic Kampuchea collapsed in early 1979. The idea also ignores overwhelming evidence of the near-fatal political split between Pol Pot and Son Sen, Deputy Premier in Charge of National Defence, in the second half of 1978 (described below). Moreover, Kiernan’s picture is contradicted by his own evidence that the CPK leadership troika at the time of the Vietnamese invasion in late 1978 comprised only one sojourner in France, Party Secretary Pol Pot himself. The first of his two deputies was Nuon Chea, who had spent two years undergoing training in a Vietnamese cadre school after an educational interlude in Bangkok.49 The second, Ta Mok, also active in the communist movement since the period of

47 Hun Sen was for many years Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea and is currently the second of the Kingdom of Cambodia’s two co-prime ministers.


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Vietnamese guidance, had never been outside Cambodia and was a graduate of a Buddhist Pali school.\textsuperscript{50} Ta Mok was precisely the kind of ‘veteran communist leader with a traditional religious education’ that the Pol Pot group had supposedly eliminated. Both Nuon Chea and Ta Mok had backgrounds similar to that of other cadres whom Kiernan describes as leaders of ‘the old, pro-Vietnamese generation of Khmer communists’ (p. 197). It remains unclear why Ta Mok and Kæ Pok, the Secretary of the Central Zone, should be categorized as a ‘warlords’, while Sao Pheum escapes this epithet, given the fact that all three were noted for their military prowess and its importance in their political power.

Kiernan’s characterization of the Centre skirts over the striking fact that all members of the Party Standing Committee of 1976, including Pol Pot, his brother-in-law Ieng Sary, and the former Paris student Son Sen, were of rural origin. It is not clear why the earlier Cambodian communist leaders from whom they took over, such as Son Ngoc Minh and Tou Samut, who came to Phnom Penh from the countryside to pursue Buddhist studies before going into the maquis, should be honoured with the description ‘rural’, whereas members of the Pol Pot group should be denigrated as irredeemably ‘urban’ because of their time in the capital, regardless of their origins and subsequent underground activities in the countryside. Similarly, Kiernan’s assertion of domination by ‘Pol Pot and his in-laws’ exaggerates the political importance of Pol Pot’s brother-in-law Ieng Sary and sister-in-law Ieng Thirith,\textsuperscript{51} compared to the roles played by non-relatives on the Standing Committee, including those who survived without being accused of treason (Nuon Chea, Ta Mok), those who

\textsuperscript{50} Mok reportedly ‘entered the monkhood and studied Buddhism. He got an elementary level Pali School degree, achieving the rank of lok kru achar [lay teacher] for monks’. Non Suon alias Chey Suon alias Seng ‘confessions’, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{51} For example, in an attempt to link killings in Pailin in the North-west Zone to the Pol Pot group, Kiernan quotes a contemporary US Embassy report that very implausibly identifies Ieng Sary as responsible for troops there (p. 236). In fact, the cadre in charge was Phok Sary alias Tom whose background was much more typical of those whom Kiernan likes to dub ‘veteran revolutionary’ and as rural, Buddhist, and pro-Vietnamese. He had been recruited from a Buddhist monastery in 1950 by the future Zone Secretary Ruoh Nheum and inducted into the then Indochina Communist Party by Nheum and Vietnamese cadres in rural Batdambang: ‘Confessions’ of Phok Sari alias Tom, ‘Kâmnâ-bhat choun Angkar ampi pravoat sakamnapheap khât robâh Phôk Sari hav Tom neati chea Lekha Tâmbân 3 Phumiopheak Peayoap: Pheak Ti I’ [Record presented to the organization about the history of the traitorous activities of Phok Sari alias Tom, Secretary of Sector 3, North-west Zone: part I], 4 September 1978, pp. 1-2.
were purged in 1978 (Sao Pheum, North-west Zone Secretary Ruoh Nheum, and Deputy Premier in Charge of Economic Affairs Von Vet), and those who were about to be purged when the regime collapsed (Son Sen).

As Kiernan’s own data show, early opposition to Pol Pot came as much from within the French-educated milieux and from people closely associated with the Pol Pot group as from rural, Buddhist, and supposedly ‘pro-Vietnamese’ veterans. Thus Hou Youn, a member of the same Parisian ‘Marxist circle’ as Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Son Sen, was secretly executed in late 1975 for his repeated, insistent, and vocal opposition (pp. 33, 59–60). Early 1976 saw the removal from power of Central Committee member and Chairman of the government Commerce Committee, Koy Thuon, a schoolteacher who had been recruited into the Communist Party in 1960 by Son Sen.52 Thuon’s detention and execution by the CPK’s national Sa-21 security service (‘Tuol Sleng’) in early 1977 was part of a larger blood purge that hit hardest at former students in Paris like Central Committee member Tauch Pheuan and Minister of Propaganda Hu Nim, and at ex-petty bourgeois associated with Son Sen, either directly or via Koy Thuon.53

Kiernan’s data seem to confirm that the social focus of the dissonance that was eliminated in this purge wave was such CPK ‘intellectuals’, including sojourners in France and former lycée and other teachers who had been recruited into the Party in schools in Phnom Penh in the 1960s and then risen to important middle-level military and administrative posts during the war (p. 96). Reflecting Sihanouk-era propaganda that labelled some of the victims as ‘Maoists’ because of their 1960s activism on behalf of the officially-sponsored Cambodia–China Friendship Association, Kiernan characterizes them as a part of a ‘leftist tendency’ identified with the Chinese Cultural Revolution (pp. 352–53). It seems more accurate to see the key figures among these victims as one-time ‘democracy activists’ with relatively moderate political goals who were forced into the communist fold by Sihanouk’s repression. Their post-1975 position tended toward less radical socialist

53 See, for example, the 1977 victims mentioned in the ‘confessions’ of Chhay Keum Hor alias Hok, Chămlaeey Chhay Keum Hor hav Hok (nov Krasuang Karbârateh) kännät ti pram: ampi pravoat sakammapheap kbât pak robâh khnhom [Responses of Chhay Keum Hor alias Hok (at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) about the history of my party-betraying activities], n.d., (incomplete), passim.
policies than those favoured by Pol Pot, and in this sense some of them could be better characterized as ‘centrist’ than ‘leftist’.54

The dissidence of those not tarred with Kiernan’s Beijing brush is sometimes instead attributed by him to East Zone influence. This is put forward as an explanation for relative moderation of policy in Sector 41 of the old North Zone (pp. 337–38), the secretary of which was a former schoolteacher and protégé of Son Sen’s recruit Koy Thuon who had worked with the French-educated Marxist intellectuals Hu Nim and Hou Youn. By crediting the characteristics of Sector 41 to the East, Kiernan saves the category of radical French-speaking intellectuals from the confusion of such messy facts. Similarly, he characterizes Son Sen’s deputy at the General Staff, Seat Chhæ alias Tum, as the ‘most senior Easterner’ in Phnom Penh to be arrested in the purge wave of early 1977. This ignores the fact that Tum had been personally inducted into the party by Pol Pot in 1959, that he been deeply involved in underground party activities in Phnom Penh directed by Pol Pot, Von Vet, and Ieng Sary; that he had lived with Pol Pot and other senior Party leaders when they took refuge in Viet Nam in the mid-1960s; that Pol Pot had assigned him to work in the East Zone; and that Pol Pot had then brought him to work at the General Staff in Phnom Penh.55

**Pol Pot versus Von Vet and Son Sen: continuing purge**

The categories put forward by Kiernan cannot explain the fact that as a member of the Central Committee’s Military/Security Commission headed by Pol Pot, Son Sen helped to oversee the arrest and execution of their fellow Paris Group members and intellectual protégés carried out by the Sâ-21 security service. Overwhelming evidence that Son Sen was about to be purged in late 1978 further demolishes these categories. Kiernan is thus fundamentally wrong to portray the purge process in 1978 as a confrontation pitting Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, and Son Sen in Phnom Penh and Ta Mok’s South-west against Pheum’s East. The process was much more dynamic and points to much more

54 As suggested in Laura Summers’s presentation, “‘The state’ . . . conceptualized by Cambodia’s first democracy activists”, at the conference ‘Cambodia: power, myth, and memory’, Monash University, 11 December 1996; and by her in a personal communication to this reviewer, 24 March 1997.

55 ‘Confessions’ of Seat Chhæ alias Tum, Châmolaey Seat Chhæ hav Tum adit Lekha Tambah 22 Phumipheak Bualphea [Responses of Seat Chhæ alias Tum, former Secretary of Sector 22, East Zone], 3 November 1977, pp. 1–32.
widespread opposition to Pol Pot than Kiernan is prepared to admit. It appears that Pol Pot and Nuon Chea were determined to purge almost all the rest of the party leadership from top to bottom. Just as East Zone cadre structures had been eliminated along with their leaders earlier in the year, the same was happening to those associated with Son Sen and even Ta Mok at year’s end. This followed the purge of another Standing Committee member, Von Vet, the one-time student activist whom Pol Pot had personally recruited into the communist movement, who had headed the CPK’s wartime Special Zone around Phnom Penh, and had been given responsibilities for economic affairs in 1975. Most of Von Vet’s protégés were killed before Democratic Kampuchea collapsed.

The ‘confessions’ extracted from purge victims by interrogators of Sā-21 describe in detail how Son Sen directed purges in the East Zone in mid-1978, while at the same time implicating him as a traitor who worked with Von Vet to sabotage resistance against Viet Nam, with which Democratic Kampuchea had been fully at war since late 1977 (see below). They portray Son Sen and Von Vet as rivalrous leaders of a network of treason whose members wanted to resolve differences with Viet Nam through negotiations rather than fighting, who wrecked efforts to drive Vietnamese troops out of Cambodian territory, and who sometimes ‘exaggerated’ the Party line by killing more people than was necessary. They describe Von Vet and Son Sen as conspiring in the latter half of 1978 to assassinate Pol Pot and Nuon Chea. They suggest that while Son Sen was determined to proceed with purges of East Zone elements, he was concerned that Democratic Kampuchea’s


57 See, for example, the ‘confessions’ of Chan Kim, ‘Responses of Chan Kim (920), Part V: I would like to report to big brother about my post-liberation traitorous activities and liaisons with traitorous forces aimed at attacking the party’ (27-page typescript dated 24 December 1978), p.28. The Vietnamese communists believed that Son Sen had ‘a positive attitude towards Viet Nam’. This was stated by the Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary to a senior Soviet official. Quoted in Stephen Morris, Why Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming. After the Vietnamese invasion, Vietnamese cadres in charge of the Sā-21 archives asserted that Son Sen had ‘attempted a coup’ against Pol Pot ‘in accordance with Chinese instructions’, but that the effort failed. Reviewer’s interview with a Cambodian who worked as an archivist at the Tuol Sleng museum in 1979, Thai-Cambodian border, 29 February 1980.
ability to fight the Vietnamese would be adversely affected. They indicate that Von Vet advocated rearming surviving ‘bad elements’ from the ranks of purged military units and ex-combatants among factory workers to build up a combat reserve.58 They suggest that Son Sen was reluctant to act against Pol Pot and Nuon Chea because of the foreign threats faced by Cambodia, and that after the arrest of Von Vet in November 1978, he was obliged to bide his time while trying to build up a new network that would allow him to act at the appropriate moment.59 They seem to reveal, however, that Son Sen had by this time been marginalized by Pol Pot. Although as Deputy Premier in Charge of National Defence, Son Sen had ‘an overall grasp on’ the armed forces ‘in form, . . . in reality it was . . . Brother Number One [Pol Pot] . . . who grasped them’,60 and Son Sen was undoubtedly removed from the Sâ-21 loop as it closed on him. After the arrest of Von Vet in November 1978, Pol Pot personally encouraged at least one cadre held in Sâ-21 to implicate Son Sen. As a result, not only Son Sen, but also the Defence Minister’s ‘confidants’ were listed as ‘traitors’.61 They included cadres of the CPK’s North-east Zone with whom Son Sen had worked in the early 1970s and cadres of the late

58 See the ‘confessions’ of Im Nat alias Lon, ‘I would like to report to the Communist Party of Kampuchea about the dry season plan’ (eight-page typescript dated 25 December 1978), see especially pp. 2, 4–5; and Im Nat alias Lon, ‘Report presented to the Communist Party of Kampuchea on my activities of contact with foreigners’ (five-page typescript dated 31 December 1978), p. 5.

59 ‘Confessions’ of Sun Ti alias Prak Teanh, ‘I would like to report on my biography’ (26-page typescript dated 24 December 1978), pp. 12–24; ‘Respected party’ (one-page typescript dated 24 December 1978); and ‘I would like to report about the plans to assassinate the big brothers and do this to guests of the party and the state visiting Cambodia (about which I know from having been told by Kâń)’ (three-page typescript dated 25 December 1978), pp. 1, 3.


61 ‘Confessions’ of Kheang Seum Hân alias But, ‘The third response of Kheang Seum Hân alias But’, 14 December 1978, pp. 1–2, 4–5. But had taken care of Pol Pot when the Party Secretary had been ill in the late 1960s, and among other things had been taught by Pol Pot to sing the Internationale. When first detained in November, But had been reluctant to implicate Son Sen because ‘maybe the Organization would not believe’ the defence minister was a traitor. However, Pol Pot hinted heavily that this was precisely what he wanted to hear, and after a month’s ‘reflection’, Kheang Seum Hân decided:

as long as I was asked I was going to reply, because to conceal this was terribly dangerous. This was what I was prepared for, and that’s why [when] the Organization took me in for questioning the second time, I spoke immediately.
Koy Thuon’s former North Zone and the late Von Vet’s former Special Zone with whom he had worked closely thereafter. The ‘confessions’ record that after the arrest of Von Vet, military and political cadres in the North-east were living in fear and confusion because they were terrified that Son Sen and themselves were about to be arrested. One is quoted as saying that if Son Sen ‘disappears, too, we should all get together and flee to Viet Nam. If we stay, we’ll die just the same, so let’s take our troops to Viet Nam and counter-attack the Party from there’. Those named also included members of Son Sen’s family, such as his wife Yun Yat, who held a post as Minister of Propaganda, and Ni Kân, his younger brother, who in late 1978 was Chief of Protocol at Ieng Sary’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ‘confessions’ of Chhay Keum Hor alias Hok, who until late 1978 had been working with Son Sen at the General Staff, portray all of Son Sen’s activities after his return to Cambodia from France in the mid-1950s as using his position in the communist movement as a cover to recruit a network on behalf on the Central Intelligence Agency. They implicate almost all of the students and teachers with whom Son Sen had had contact in the 1960s. Many of these had already been eliminated during 1977, but the minority who had survived were now being arrested and killed.

The South-west Zone: Pol Pot begins ripping out the ‘heartland of Pol Potism’

The evidence thus flies in the face of Kiernan’s construction of a Paris Group, his characterizations of Von Vet as an ally of Pol Pot, and

62 See the ‘confessions’ of Chan Kim, ‘Responses of Chan Kim (920), Part V: I would like to report to big brother about my post-liberation traitorous activities and liaisons with traitorous forces aimed at attacking the party’ (27-page typescript dated 24 December 1978), pp. 13–19, 28. This ‘confession’ was evidently addressed personally to Pol Pot.

63 See the ‘confessions’ of Im Nat alias Lon, ‘Report presented to the Communist Party of Kampuchea on my activities of contact with foreigners’ (five-page typescript dated 31 December 1978), pp. 1, 4; of Sun Ti alias Prak Teanh, ‘I would like to report on my biography’ (26-page typescript dated 24 December 1978), pp. 12–24; ‘Respected party’ (one-page typescript dated 24 December 1978); and ‘I would like to report about the plans to assassinate the big brothers and do this to guests of the party and the state visiting Cambodia (about which I know from having been told by Kân)’ (three-page typescript dated 25 December 1978), pp. 1, 3.

64 Chhay Keum Hor alias Hok, Châmłaoey Chhay Keum Hor hav Hok (nov Krasuon Karbâraateh) kâmnât ti pram: ampi pravoat sakammapheap kbât pak robâh khnhom [Responses of Chhay Keum Hor alias Hok (at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) about the history of my party-betraying activities], n.d., (incomplete), passim.
description of the former Special Zone as ‘a Centre bastion’ (pp. 22, 315). It also contradicts his endorsement of the idea that Ta Mok’s South-west Zone was the ‘heartland’ of Pol Potism, the ‘Zone of “Pol Potism” par excellence, the power base of the Pol Pot central government’ (p. 169). While this view reflects the extraordinary and increasingly crucial role played by Zone Secretary Ta Mok and many of his subordinates in purging the Communist Party right through to the beginning of 1979, it cannot make sense of the purge of that Zone that had begun and was gathering pace in late 1978. As Kiernan reports, in March 1978, former South-west Zone Deputy Secretary Chou Chet alias Thang Si was purged from the post to which he had been promoted in May 1975, Secretary of the newly-created West Zone. In August 1978, the same fate befell the former South-west Zone number three cadre, Kâng Chap alias Sae, when he was purged as Secretary of the North Zone, where he had been sent in 1977 to replace an associate of Koy Thuon. The ‘confessions’ establish that by the end of 1978 many of the South-west Zone cadre who had previously carried out purges in various zones had already been arrested, and that those who remained active were accused of wholesale treason. For example, one former South-west Zone cadre who had been sent to the East ‘confessed’ that other South-west Zone elements assigned there in the latter part of 1978 had ‘served the treasonous plans’ for which he was arrested. Back home, the same downward slide of failures in agricultural production and productivity and defeats in military confrontations with Viet Nam that had thrown other parts of Democratic Kampuchea into crisis was manifest in declining food rations, harsher work regimens, and widening executions that alienated more and more people (p. 434). As a result, South-west Zone Deputy

Kiernan labels Chap a ‘Maoist’ who was particularly ‘suspicious’ of Viet Nam, a ‘soldier’ who ‘was rising fast in Democratic Kampuchea’ (pp. 113–14). In fact, like Ta Mok, Kâng Chap fits almost perfectly Kiernan’s notion of a ‘veteran revolutionary’. Chap was a peasant with only a pagoda-school education who had been inducted into the Indochinese Communist Party by a cell including a Vietnamese cadre. See Chan Sâm alias Kâng Chap alias Sae, Châmloey robâh Chan Sâm ho Chap ho Sè Lekha Phumipheak Utar: ampi pravoat sakammapheap khát pak phtoat pi daoem dål chong chhnham 1973 pheak ti muoy [Responses of Chan Sâm alias Chap alias Sae, Secretary of the North Zone: on the history of my personal betrayal of the party from the beginnings up to late 1973], 7 September 1978, passim.

Secretary Sam Bit was accused of being the fount of traitorous plans to sabotage paddy production and instigate popular panic while fashioning opposition networks within the Zone. He was condemned as a ‘CIA agent’ for his alleged failure to stay close to his troops. He is reported to have at one time advocated the ‘mature’ and ‘political’ stance of non-violent solution to border conflicts between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam. Zone number three Răn is described as another one of the ‘traitorous forces ... who have not yet been arrested’. Moreover, three of Ta Mok’s own sons-in-law are identified as traitors. These purges and planned purges reflected the underlying reality that many South-west Zone cadres, like those in other parts of the country, were opposed to the party’s domestic policies, even if most of them agreed with its insistence on Cambodian independence from Viet Nam.

These late 1978 developments cannot be encompassed by Kiernan’s argument that ‘the Centre started to self-destruct’ after the arrest of Kãng Chap ‘sparked a series of convulsions at the heart of the regime’. His suggestion that the purge process suddenly (but only now) became ‘internecine’ as the Centre fell ‘prey to its own fears’, began ‘chasing Noch Phan ‘confessions’. As David Ashley has commented in a personal communication (11 May 1997), this had previously been the official policy, and Săm Bit was now being condemned for supposedly having been too slow in seeing the wisdom of a more offensive posture.

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See the undated fragment of a 16-page chronology and summary of ‘confessions’ of Im Nat alias Lon, evidently prepared by his interrogators, p. 14. This document identifies Răn as concurrently Secretary of both Sector 37 of the West Zone and Sector 33 of the South-west Zone.

The three were Mut, Vin, and Răn. See the ‘confessions’ of Sun Ti alias Prak Teanh, ‘I would like to report on my biography’ (26-page typescipt dated 24 December 1978), pp. 12–24; ‘Respected party’ (one-page typescipt dated 24 December 1978); and, ‘I would like to report about the plans to assassinate the big brothers and do this to guests of the party and the state visiting Cambodia (about which I know from having been told by Kăn)’ (three-page typescipt dated 25 December 1978), pp. 1, 3; of Khun Sarom, ‘Responses of Khun Sarom, Secretary, Division 117, Section 2: I would like to report to the Communist Party of Kampuchea on plans for a coup d’état to seize state power from the party’, 12 December 1978, p. 2; and the undated fragment of a 16-page chronology and summary of ‘confessions’ of Im Nat alias Lon, evidently prepared by his interrogators, p. 14.
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its tail in ever-shrinking circles’, and then ‘devouring itself’ does not fit the facts (pp. 436–38). It draws a falsely clear line between the East Zone ‘dissidents’ purged at mid-year and those who became victims of purges or whose purge was imminent in late 1978. It reproduces the kind of partial understanding summed up in the testimony of one of Kiernan’s sources: ‘The Eastern Zone forces ... were not much of a problem. ... Sao Pheum was not responsible for much persecution or killing. Pol Pot and the Southwest Zone were the killers’ (p. 274). This valorizes the East and de-humanizes the South-west cadres on the basis of ahistorical stereotypes.71 It reifies geographical expressions to create positive and negative political labels and anthropomorphized political entities.72

‘Conquering Kampuchea Kraom’

This tendency is clearly reflected in Kiernan’s treatment of Democratic Kampuchea’s territorial disputes with Viet Nam and of the involvement of the Pol Pot Group, the East, and the Southwest in them. Kiernan argues that Democratic Kampuchea was solely responsible for border incidents with Viet Nam. He asserts that the Pol Pot group and the ‘warlord’ South-west Zone advocated ‘conquering Kampuchea Kraom’, which he defines as ‘the Mekong Delta’ area of Viet Nam. He claims that this was a policy from which the East Zone dissented. He makes purported members of the Pol Pot group, the South-west and cadres of the supposedly ‘warlord’ Central Zone directly responsible for attacks into Viet Nam in the latter half of 1977 during which many Vietnamese civilians were reportedly massacred, and absolves East Zone cadres of major accountability for such acts. All this appears to be wrong.

Kiernan credits Vietnamese allegations indicating incursions by South-west Zone troops into adjacent Vietnamese land territory immediately after 17 April 1975, while ignoring same-source accounts indicating that East Zone forces also crossed into Viet Nam at the same time (p. 104).73 In fact, it appears that minor border clashes were

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71 Kiernan also passes on generalized characterizations of West Zone cadres as ‘veritable savages ignorant of any rule of humanity’ (p. 419).
72 Kiernan’s descriptions of Zones extends to endowing them with ‘instincts’ (p. 232). The South-west is even granted telepathic powers, so that ‘the influence of the Southwesterners preceded’ them when they were reassigned elsewhere (p. 241).
73 For the Vietnamese accounts, see Kampuchea dossier I. Hanoi: Vietnam Courier, 1978, pp. 67, 125.
initiated by both Vietnamese and Cambodian forces in 1975, and that
attacks into Viet Nam were conducted from the East as well as the
South-west. For example, according to a source from East Zone Sector
21, ‘the Vietnamese crossed the border’ into Kamchay Mear district
there in January 1975, and district and zone forces ‘pushed them back’
in a series of engagements that lasted through May 1975. According
to a former combatant of the forces of East Zone Sector 23, ‘three
to four days after liberation, Vietnamese attacked near Krang Leav’
in Svay Rieng district, but were driven out by East Zone forces that
then ‘attacked into Vietnamese territory’ to prevent the Vietnamese
from coming back in to Cambodia.

However, Kiernan describes only an unprovoked attack on Viet
Nam’s Phu Quoc island (known in Khmer as Kah Tral) by troops from
the South-west Zone who began functioning as naval forces immedi-
ately after April 1975. A former combatant of the Cambodian unit,
redesignated Central Committee Division 164 in 1975, confirms that it
assaulted Phu Quoc ‘before the Vietnamese attacked’ anywhere in its
area of responsibility, and that he was told in study sessions at the
time not only that the ‘Khmer wanted to demand the return of Kah
Tral’ but also that ‘Kampuchea wanted to get Kampuchea Kraom
back’. By the beginning of 1976, however, the division had been told
that the Cambodian position was that even though ‘Kah Tral was
formerly Khmer territory’, there was no ‘plan to take it back’ because
doing so would be contrary to the proclamations made by Sihanouk
and the Vietnamese regarding Cambodia’s frontiers. Thereafter,
Division 164 initiated no fighting against the Vietnamese until they

74 Reviewer’s interview No. 102, Mai Rut, Thailand, 19 January 1981.
75 Reviewer’s interview No. 149, Mai Rut, Thailand, 27 January 1981. The ‘confessions’
of East Zone military cadre Chan Chakrei alias Nôv Mean indicate that this inci-
dent was followed by the spread of ‘rumours’ that East Zone troops ‘along the border
. . . were in the process of devising a plan to attack and take back Kampuchea
Kraom’. In Sector 24, local cadres concluded that ‘these rumours were spread by the
enemy’, and by June ‘a lot of these rumour mongers had . . . been arrested’ there.
76 Reviewer’s interview with a former Division 164 combatant, Sa Keo, Thailand, 27
November 1980. Another former combatant attributed such statements to division
cadre Ta Ngêt and the attack itself to the division’s Regiment 62. Reviewer’s inter-
view with a former Division 164 combatant, Mai Rut, Thailand, 25 January 1981.
77 Reviewer’s interview with a former Sector 22 and Division 164 combatant, Mai Rut,
Thailand, 19 January 1981. It may be significant that Ta Meanh, whose troops had
attacked Phu Quoc, was arrested in late 1976, and that Ta Ngêt, who had proclaimed
a plan to ‘retake’ Kah Tral, was purged in mid-1977. Reviewer’s interviews with
former Division 164 combatants, Mai Rut, Thailand, January 1981.
invaded Cambodia in late 1978, except for an incident in late 1976 during when it repulsed Vietnamese naval units that crossed south of the so-called Brevié line, which Democratic Kampuchea was claiming as its maritime border with Viet Nam.

Kiernan asserts that the May 1975 Division 164 attack on Phu Quoc ‘benefited from CPK Centre acquiescence and probable direction’, but the only evidence he adduces to support this is that Pol Pot ‘discussed the conflict’ at a party gathering later that month, during which the Party Secretary said Kampuchea Kraom was, as Kiernan paraphrases it, ‘once Cambodian’ or ‘had been Cambodian territory in the past’ (pp. 58, 105). He similarly parlays evidence that South-west Zone cadres shared with almost all other Cambodians a belief that ‘Kampuchea Kraom’ had once been part of a ‘Khmer Empire’ into proof of its ‘irredentism’. However, as Kiernan himself admits, this notion of pre-colonial Cambodian sovereignty over Kampuchea Kraom was generally accepted as a ‘fact’ in Cambodian and Western historical literature. His suggestion that Pol Pot was compelled by consolidation of the Vietnamese revolutionary victory into a tactical retreat from irredentism is unpersuasive (p. 63). Rather, the burden of the evidence is that Pol Pot’s position from the beginning was that Kampuchea Kraom was only Cambodian historically. As Kiernan reports, in meetings with the Vietnamese in June 1975, he condemned the attack on Phu Quoc and other such incidents, as did his political alter ego and deputy, Nuon Chea, in August. Similarly, in September, Khieu Samphan told Sihanouk that the CPK had rejected suggestions from within its ranks that it ‘take back Kampuchea Kraom’ (pp. 58, 104–108).

Internal Cambodian documents from which Kiernan quotes extensively provide evidence of profound suspicion and hostility vis-à-vis Viet Nam, and of an unwillingness seriously to negotiate over small patches of contested land territory or over the ill-defined, much more contentious, and economically important maritime border. As he rightly argues, negotiations over the border ‘foundered on the Brevié line’, an administrative boundary that the Vietnamese had previously accepted but about which they now wanted to talk. The Vietnamese were prepared to concede minor adjustments of the land border in

78 Reviewer’s interview with a former Division 164 combatant, Mai Rut, Thailand, 20 January 1981.
79 Reviewer’s interview with a former Sector 22 and Division 164 combatant, Mai Rut, Thailand, 19 January 1981. The troops involved in this incident were from a former East Zone regiment that had been integrated into Division 164.
Cambodia’s favour, but the Cambodians insisted on both this and the Brevié line. Kiernan presents excepts from the record of a May 1976 meeting presided over by Pol Pot at which the Vietnamese refusal to cave in was discussed. It provides no evidence of the kind of irredentism Kiernan attributes to the CPK. Indeed, in the meeting, Pol Pot insisted ‘We don’t go back to old times. We use old documents just to maintain the existing situation. We don’t claim anything new’. Pol Pot also suggested that earlier border clashes had been started by ‘enemies’ within the ranks of the CPK who wanted to wreck negotiations between the two countries. The meeting decided to break off high-level talks with the Vietnamese while trying to avoiding confrontation with Viet Nam, maintaining local liaison structures to deal with what were seen as inevitable clashes, and seeking general diplomatic support for Cambodia’s position in the ‘Third World’ (pp. 111–20). As Kiernan himself recognizes, despite declarations by district cadres in the South-west that Viet Nam was a ‘big enem[y]’, the border there and elsewhere remained largely quiet for the remainder of 1976 even though the delineation negotiations were suspended (pp. 122–23).

However the border was not entirely trouble-free. According to Uk Bunchheuan, former Deputy Secretary of East Zone Sector 21, both Cambodian and Vietnamese local forces were responsible for petty violations of the border during 1976, and frontier areas were also plagued by cattle- and oxen-rustling carried out by Cambodian and Vietnamese ‘thieves’. In Bunchheuan’s opinion, ‘these contradictions didn’t amount to much’, and he tried to resolve them through negotiations in his capacity as chairman of the Sector 21 committee for border liaison with the Vietnamese. However, he said, the negotiations came to naught: ‘Although I ... discussed things over and over again with the Vietnamese, we couldn’t get along on anything about how to prevent ... mutual clashes’. Thus, as 1977 began, ‘the contradictions ... along the length of the border ... were ... becoming more intense’.80 The border between the South-west Zone and Viet Nam was reportedly afflicted by similarly minor but growing irritations. According to a former resident of an area of Viet Nam’s An Giang province bordering on South-west Zone, Vietnamese ‘had been going to steal draught animals from the Khmer ... in Takæv [province]. They were rustling hundreds of head at a time’.81

80 Reviewer’s interview with Uk Bunchheuan, Phnom Penh, 14 August 1990.
81 Reviewer’s interview, Site Two, Thailand, 27 July 1990.
As Kiernan argues, Pol Pot’s transmutation of such problems into a claim in late 1976 that Democratic Kampuchea was being attacked ‘slyly along the border’ by elements who were deploying ‘spies along the frontier’ does not prove any significant threat to Cambodia’s territorial integrity (p. 358). However, Kiernan’s evidence is insufficient to support his insistence that Democratic Kampuchea posed such a threat to Viet Nam. His mistranslation of a mid-1977 internal CPK document gives false support to his case. He claims it stated ‘that the Democratic Kampuchea army “resolves to defend its entire ancient territory”’ (p. 361, emphasis in Kiernan’s text). In fact, the document simply declared the Democratic Kampuchea armed forces were ‘determined to defend its territorial integrity to ensure its future survival [pdechnha karpear bauranapheap toek-dei robâh khlouo aoy ban kung-vung tov anakut] and not to allow any country whatsoever to commit aggression against or swallow Cambodian territory’. Indeed, this document is further evidence that there was no Democratic Kampuchea policy to ‘conquer Kampuchea Kraom’. It concluded that ‘Cambodia had lost the territories of Kampuchea Kraom as a result of the acts of treason against the nation and people of the powerholding kings and feudalists’ of pre-colonial times and had suffered further losses as a result of the boundaries established under French colonialism, but that Democratic Kampuchea considered them as ‘the state border between Cambodia and Viet Nam bequeathed by history’. It insisted that these ‘current frontiers’ must be defended. It reconﬁrmed, however, Democratic Kampuchea’s insistence on minor adjustments in Cambodia’s favour, declaring that because ‘the Cambodia–Viet Nam border had been established in a most unjust manner vis-à-vis Cambodia, the Government of Democratic Kampuchea demands adjustments of some points of the current delineation to put them in harmony with existing texts and the customs and needs of the people in those areas, such as by using hollows, canals, streams or rivers as the border line’. Although this formulation allowed for some elasticity in
Cambodian claims, it seems to reject any broad objective of ‘conquering Kampuchea Kraom’.83 Nevertheless, it is indisputable that starting in early 1977, Democratic Kampuchea forces launched a series of attacks into Vietnamese territory during which they killed large numbers of Vietnamese civilians, including Vietnamese of Khmer Kraom origin living in border areas. Vietnamese sources allege that ground attacks began in January, and that the first raids came both from the East and South-west Zones. However, while bloody cross-border assaults from the South-west allegedly continued through March, April, and May, serious assaults from the East did not take place until September.84 Kiernan does not mention Vietnamese allegations of an East Zone attack in January 1977, which are corroborated by other sources,85 but does examine the South-west Zone attacks over the next several months. Although he argues that the South-west Zone attacks were motivated by irredentism, a former resident of Viet Nam’s An Giang province bordering on South-west Zone Sector 13 believed that the ‘underlying reason’ for the attacks launched by the Cambodian side was continuing Vietnamese thefts of draught animals. He said that because ‘this happened too many times, the Khmer Rouge got angry and attacked all along the border. . . . They attacked many times. They attacked without regard to whether the targets were military or civilian. It was a general offensive. . . . There were a lot of civilians killed’.86 He added that

83 Kiernan also cites as evidence of Democratic Kampuchean expansionism the inclusion of the Brevié line as the sea boundary in the August 1977 official publication Democratic Kampuchea is moving forward. However, he overlooks that fact that the land border depicted on this same map gives no indication of any intention to ‘conquer Kampuchea Kraom’ (p. 361).


85 A former East Zone combatant clearly referred to this attack when he recalled that the East Zone had performed its task of national defence ‘well’, not only by ‘fighting bravely and effectively’ in ‘guard[ing] the border from Vietnamese attack’, but also in an early 1977 operation in which it ‘pushed the Vietnamese into their own territory and smashed them there’. Quoted in Steve Heder, ‘Kampuchea: October 1979–August 1980, the Democratic Kampuchea resistance, the Kampuchean countryside, and the Sereikar’ (unpublished paper based on research among active and former Democratic Kampuchea cadres along the Thailand-Cambodia border, dated November 1980), p. 45. An official People’s Republic of Kampuchea map depicting Democratic Kampuchea attacks into Viet Nam depicts a 17 January 1977 thrust out of the northern part of East Zone Sector 23 into the southern part of Viet Nam’s Tay Ninh province. (The reviewer is in possession of a photograph of this map, which was for many years displayed in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.)

86 Reviewer’s interview with a Khmer Kraom from the border area, 27 July 1990, Site Two, Thailand. Another Khmer Kraom from the same area explained that local
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where I was the Khmer Rouge didn’t do any propaganda saying they were trying to liberate Kampuchea Kraom territory. . . . I never heard anything to the effect that they were trying to liberate Kampuchea Kraom.

Nevertheless, it seems very possible that at least some of the attacks aimed to establish by force of arms adjustments in the land frontier of the type outlined in the internal CPK document of mid-year and were justified by irredentist propaganda. For example, an April 1977 attack that Kiernan reports was launched from Sector 13 of the South-west Zone to seize a swath of territory up to a canal inside Vietnamese territory probably aimed to lay a claim to this feature as the border (p. 360).

However, Kiernan’s account of the attacks that came out of the East Zone into Viet Nam beginning in September 1977 wrongly shifts almost all responsibility for them away from East Zone cadres to the Pol Pot group and the ‘warlord’ South-west and Central Zones. According to the Vietnamese, the attacks began with a series of assaults on all the border communes in Dong Thap province, opposite East Zone Sector 24, from 18 to 20 September. Then, from 24 September to 30 November:

three Kampuchean divisions operate[d] permanently in the border area of Tay Ninh province along a 240-km. front. They occup[ied] several portions of Vietnamese territory, especially an area 10 km. deep into Vietnamese territory on the bank of the Eastern Vam Co canal. Initial statistics show[ed] that over 1,000 Vietnamese civilians [were] killed or wounded and a large number taken prisoner, over 1,000 head of cattle and other property taken away.

The Vietnamese clearly considered these the worst Cambodian attacks of 1977.87 They identified the units involved as East Zone Divisions 3 and 4, supported by elements of the armed forces of the zone’s Sectors 20, 21, and 23. They highlighted in particular a series of operations by zonal and Sector 20 forces launched down Route 22 into Tay Ninh that began with an attack on the Vietnamese borderpost of Xa Mat on 24 September,88 and was followed with a raid on Tan Lap commune, seven kilometres inside Viet Nam, during which the attackers allegedly

Vietnamese authorities had already ‘denounced’ these ‘thieves’ for ‘stealing along the border [when] the Khmer Rouge attack came’. Reviewer’s interview, Site Two, Thailand, 28 July 1990. These sources and several other Khmer Kraom from An Giang said that after smaller raids, the Cambodians launched large-scale attacks in April 1977.

‘killed 500 persons with their submachine guns, bayonets and daggers, sparing neither old people, small children nor pregnant women’.

In describing these events, Kiernan asserts that by the time they occurred, East Zone Secretary and Party Centre Standing Committee member Sao Pheum was politically isolated. This conclusion is based on false evidence. For example, Kiernan misinterprets the testimony of a former CPK cadre about the composition of the Standing Committee in such a way as to suggest that Pheum was excluded from it by 1977 (p. 355). He also misreads descriptions of Sao Pheum by Phnom Penh radio and the Chinese news agency Xinhua as evidence of Pheum’s political demotion (pp. 354–55). This is part of a larger mistaken argument that by early 1977, ‘the East . . . was . . . substantially occupied by outside forces’ (p. 369). Kiernan backdates by almost a year the establishment of new command structures in the East Zone in which Son Sen took direct charge of Central Committee and East Zone troops on Route 1 in the southern half of the zone, while Central Zone Secretary Kæ Pok came to assist Sao Pheum in taking responsibility for Central Committee and Central and East Zone troops on Route 7 in the northern half. Citing an interview with former East Zone Sector 21 Deputy Uk Bunchheuan, Kiernan places these events months before the September–November cross-border attacks into Tay Ninh (pp. 369, 372). In fact, Uk Bunchheuan dates the arrival of Son Sen and Kæ Pok to late 1977, after the beginning of a series

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90 Kiernan is relying here on the text of this reviewer’s interview with the former cadre, who attended a CPK Congress convened several months after Pheum’s suicide in June 1978. The cadre explained that the Congress did not change the composition of the Standing Committee, i.e., that no new members were added to its surviving membership. Kiernan is wrong in thinking that this is corroboration of Sao Pheum’s exclusion from the Standing Committee in 1977.

91 The transmissions described Sao Pheum as First Vice-Chairman of the Democratic State Presidium and Chairman and Secretary of the East Zone CPK Committee, but failed to specify that he was a member of the Standing Committee of the CPK Central Committee. Phnom Penh radio and Xinhua, 6 December 1977. Kiernan argues this indicates he had therefore been removed from these leading bodies. In fact, the transmissions reflected a policy of keeping such matters secret, and other zonal Secretaries who were concurrently Central Committee or Standing Committee members also were not identified as such. See, for example, the transmissions about South-west Zone Secretary Ta Mok by Phnom Penh radio and Xinhua, 14 December 1977, and about Central Zone Secretary Kæ Pok by Phnom Penh radio and Xinhua on 6 and 9 December 1977, respectively.

92 During the interview cited above, Bunchheuan evinced incredulity about Kiernan’s chronology, which had first been outlined in ‘Wild chickens, farm chickens and cormorants: Kampuchea’s Eastern Zone under Pol Pot’, pp. 169–75.
of Vietnamese counter-attacks. This chronology is corroborated by data from the ‘confessions’, which indicate Son Sen and Kæ Pok arrived on the scene in early and late December, respectively.\(^93\) It is confirmed by the testimony of former Centre troops who were sent to East Zone border in late 1977.\(^94\)

Kiernan also mistakenly writes that at the time of the East Zone attacks of September–November, the Secretary of its Division 3, Pan Cheuan alias Cheap, had been purged and the unit’s combatants dispersed and replaced by troops from outside the East (p. 371). In fact, these events did not take place until April 1978.\(^95\) Kiernan is

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\(^93\) On Son Sen, see Sâm Huoy alias Meah Tal, ‘Responses of Sâm Huoy alias Meah Tal, Secretary of Division 290, on the story of his own personal activities of betrayal’, n.d., pp. 62–68; Meah Mon alias Kæ Sàmmang, ‘Responses of Meah Mon alias Kæ Sàmmang, East Zone General Staff: on the history of his own activities of betrayal’, 2 June 1978, pp. 61–73; ‘Responses of Meah Mon alias Kæ Sàmmang, Chairman of the East Zone General Staff’, n.d., p. 5; Kæ San alias Sok, ‘Responses of Kæ San alias Sok, Secretary of Division 170 [alias 280]: on the history of Sok’s own treasonous activities’, 4 May 1978, pp. 78–79. These ‘confessions’ indicate that Son Sen was dispatched to take charge of the Route 1 battlefield shortly after a Democratic Kampuchea military disaster on 29 November, when infiltration of its forces onto Vietnamese territory left a gap on the Cambodian side of the border into which the Vietnamese counter-infiltrated and launched a devastating counter-attack. On Kæ Pok, see Kæ San alias Sok, ‘Responses of Kæ San alias Sok, Secretary of Division 170 [alias 280]: on the history of Sok’s own treasonous activities’, 4 May 1978, pp. 78–79. Sok dates the establishment of a new Route 7 Battlefield Committee with Sao Pheum as Chairman, Kæ Pok as Vice-Chairman, and East Zone Division 4 Secretary Heng Samrin as third-ranked member to 27 December. See also the ‘confessions’ of Veung Chaem alias Phuong, ‘On the responses of Phuong, Chairman of the East Zone rubber plantations: on activities from January 1977 through February 1978’, 22 July 1978, p. 42. According to this document, in the latter half of 1977, ‘large-scale troop forces were set up to go to attack and smash the troop emplacements and population concentrations along the border line all the way from Peam Chor [district in south-west Sector 24] to Me Mut [district in north-east Sector 21]’ of the East Zone, and the resulting attacks ‘caused the Vietnamese heavy damage of a large-scale character’. It was only thereafter, in the face of threats of Vietnamese counter-attacks, that ‘the CPK Centre successively assigned leading and combat forces to join in the combat of the army of the East and constantly attack the Yuon [Vietnamese] army heavily right on the border’.

\(^94\) Reviewer’s interviews No. 67 with a former combatant of Centre Division 207 (ex-Division 310), Sa Keo, Thailand, 23 November 1980; No. 149 with a former Sector 23 combatant, Mai Rut, Thailand, 27 January 1981; No. 150 with a former combatant of Centre Division 703, Mai Rut, Thailand, 27 January 1981; No. 151 with a former combatant of Centre Division 520/603 (ex-Division 450), Mai Rut, Thailand, 27 January 1981; No. 157 with a former combatant of Centre Division 304 (ex-Division 450), Mai Rut, Thailand, 29 January 1981.

\(^95\) See his ‘confession’, ‘Responses of Pan Cheuan, Secretary of Division 3, East Zone: on the activities of Pan Cheuan after 17 April 1975, 29 May 1978’, p. 51; and those of Meah Mon alias Kæ Sàmmang, ‘Responses of Meah Mon alias Kæ Sàmmang, East Zone General Staff: on the history of his own activities of betrayal’, 2 June
furthermore wrong to write that East Zone Division 4 Secretary Heng Samrin had been kicked upstairs before the cross-border raids by being removed from this post – which he had held since 1975 – and made Vice-Chairman of the East Zone General Staff (pp. 369, 371). This did not happen until May 1978. Instead, in November 1977, Heng Samrin was given more power by being appointed ‘Chairman of the entire Route 7 Battlefield’, in charge of his own Division 4, a newly constituted East Zone Division 5, plus Sector 20 and 21 troops.

Kiernan brings all the wrong dates together in his account of the late September attack on Tan Lap. According to his version, ‘on the night of 24 September, elements of the reconstituted 3rd Eastern Zone Division, under the command of Son Sen, crossed into Tay Ninh province and massacred nearly three hundred civilians in five villages’ (p. 373). In reality, Son Sen was not yet on the scene and Division 3 remained under the secretarship of Pên Cheuan alias Cheap. Moreover, although Kiernan cites ‘locals’ at the raid site as telling him in 1980 that ‘the attack was “mainly” by the 3rd Eastern Division’, other evidence points to Division 4 under its Secretary Heng Samrin as the unit chiefly involved. The ‘confessions’ make it clear that this was its area of operations. A resident of the Vietnamese Route 22 border post of Xa Mat at the time of September–November attacks

1978, p. 84. Kiernan’s date for the arrest of Cheuan is based on a typographical error in People’s Republic of Kampuchea, ‘Important culprits (arrested from 1976 to April 9, 1978)’, (Document No. 2.5.24, August 1979, of the People’s Revolutionary Tribunal held in Phnom Penh for the trial of the genocide crime of the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique). A Khmer-language document prepared in connection with this trial correctly indicates the arrest was not until 1978. Although giving no arrest date, it reports that Cheuan was executed in June 1978: Banhchi reayneam kammaphibal choan-khpuoh robah Pol Pot [Nominal list of high-ranking Pol Pot cadre].

96 See the ‘confessions’ of Koy Chheuan, who replaced Heng Samrin as Division 4 Secretary in early May 1978; of Kæv Sâmnnang alias Meah Mon, Chairman of the East Zone General Staff; of Heng Keum, Secretary of East Zone Division 5; of Pên Cheuan, Secretary of Division 3; and of Kæ San alias Sok, Secretary of Centre Division 280.

97 On Heng Samrin’s appointment as Route 7 Battlefield commander, see the ‘confessions’ of Heng Keum, ‘Responses of Heng Keum, Secretary of Division 5, East Zone: on the history of his own activities of betrayal, 22 June 1978’, p. 31. On his continued secretarship of Division 4 see also the ‘confessions’ of Kæv Sâmnnang alias Meah Mon, Koy Chheuan, Pên Cheuan, Kæ San alias Sok.

98 See in particular the ‘confessions’ of Kæv Sâmnnang alias Meah Mon, Heng Keum, Koy Chheuan, Pên Cheuan, and Kæ San alias Sok. Division 4 had headquarters in the district town of Ponhea Krâk in Sector 20, at the junction of Routes 7 and 22. The People’s Republic of Kampuchea map depicting Democratic Kampuchea attacks into Viet Nam (referred to above) depicts the attack on Tan Lap as originating from Ponhea Krâk.
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identified their commander as ‘Rin’, the name by which Heng Samrin was then known. This source, an ethnic Khmer, added that the attacking forces told villagers they did not kill that their villages were on Cambodian territory, ‘and they were going to liberate it’.

This testimony suggesting East Zone combatants were as prepared as those from the South-west to utter irredentist sentiments is, however, not corroborated by any solid proof of a Democratic Kampuchea policy to pursue such aims. Rather, the evidence suggests that the attacks were part of a gross overreaction to minor border problems. This is certainly the retrospective view of former Sector 21 Deputy Secretary Uk Bunchheuan. He asserts that the basically minor incidents that had characterized the border since 1975 could have been contained by diplomatic means, but that they turned them into a crisis by resorting to large-scale military action during 1977. This perspective is supported by the description of the events of late 1977 given by a former combatant of Sector 23 forces. According to him, the Vietnamese had come into Svay Rieng to steal draught animals; we fought them first on Khmer territory and then chased them deep into Vietnamese territory; the Vietnamese troops then counter-attacked and pushed us back into Cambodian territory.

He commented, ‘it was said the Vietnamese committed aggression against us, but in fact we committed aggression against them, and that’s why we got hurt; we attacked them to prevent them from attacking us, but this didn’t work’.

This conclusion that the CPK was responsible for the disaster it brought down on Cambodia and itself is also put forward retrospectively by Ieng Sary. Sary claims that the decision to launch the September attacks was a collective one made by Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Sao Pheum, and Ta Mok, who jointly agreed on proposals from Sao Pheum and Ta Mok that it was necessary to attack Viet Nam preemptively in order to maintain the military initiative and thus prevent a Vietnamese first strike against Democratic Kampuchea during the

99 Reviewer's interview, 27 July 1990, Site Two, Thailand. In this regard, it is worth recalling Heng Samrin's candid admission to a journalist that when the CPK was 'slaughtering people who had [accomplished] brilliant feats during the fight against American imperialism', he, too, had 'carried out activities with the treacherous clique': Asiaweek, 10 April 1981.

100 Uk Bunchheuan interview.

1977–78 dry season. Sary asserts that Pheum was ‘most emphatic’ about the need for pre-emptive attacks to prevent further Vietnamese encroachments, which in fact involved little more than Vietnamese building houses on territory claimed by Cambodia. Sary insists that the decision to attack was not based on irredentist aims, because the consensus among the leadership, including Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, and himself, was to maintain the border as they argued it should be delineated, based on French maps dating from the early 1950s.

Other evidence supports this version of events. A document from an East Zone conference in July 1977, which is cited by Kiernan (p. 372), reports it resolved in principle to respond to any Vietnamese encroachments on Democratic Kampuchea with multi-pronged attacks into Vietnamese territory in order to defend and ‘maintain stability at the border’. The ‘confessions’ left by Standing Committee member Von Vet after his arrest in November 1978 implicate Sao Pheum as having ‘proposed attacking the Yuon [Vietnamese]... in order to gain mastery in advance of the work of protecting the paddy harvest’ in late 1977, and indicate that Pol Pot ‘authorized him to attack’.

In any case, the attacks into Tay Ninh provoked particular Vietnamese ire and large-scale Vietnamese counter-attacks that threw East Zone forces onto the defensive, which in turn brought Son Sen, Kæ Pok, and forces under their command to the border amidst allegations that East Zone forces had ‘opened the way’ to Vietnamese thrusts into Cambodia. The former Sector 23 combatant quoted above said that the poor military performance of East Zone military units in the face of Vietnamese counter-attacks was the reason why ‘East Zone people

102 Ieng Sary interview.
103 Sechkdei sâmreichchet loe sechkkdei reaykar nei ang sânebat Phumipheak Bauppheak peak-kandal chhnam 1977, pi Thngay 17–7–77 [Decisions regarding the report of the mid-1977 conference of the East Zone, on 17 July 1977], p. 84. Excerpts from this document were made public by the Vietnamese in early 1978, apparently after they obtained it in the counter-attacks described below. The title-page is marked ‘Transmitted to Comrade Rin, Division 4 Committee, with respect’, indicating that they captured Heng Samrin’s copy.
105 It seems that Vietnamese counter-attacks in December 1977 may have particularly targeted Heng Samrin’s thinly-spread Division 4 to punish it for its killings in Tay Ninh. According to the ‘confessions’ of Meah Mon alias Kæ Sâmnang, the Vietnamese ‘defeated’ it ‘from beginning to end’, such that three months later, ‘its troops had not been reassembled’. See ‘Responses of Meah Mon alias Kæ Sâmnang, East Zone General Staff: on the history of his own activities of betrayal’, 2 June 1978, p. 83.
were accused of treason, but in fact there was no treason'. According to the ‘confessions’ of Sector 22 Secretary Meah Chhuon alias Chhean, because of what happened when the Vietnamese attacked Cambodia ‘in a very big way’ in November–December 1977, East Zone ‘forces were censured by the masses and exposed to the Organization, which began keeping track of and investigating them’. Or, as East Zone Office Chairman Sok Khnol alias Peam alias Lin ‘confessed’, during the Vietnamese attacks, East Zone cadres became ‘irresolute’, as a result of which ‘the Organization investigated and kept track of them undeviatingly’. ‘This precipitated purges of East Zone cadres in mid-1978.

Kiernan argues that meanwhile, his Pol Pot group continued in 1978 to advocate ‘conquering Kampuchea Kraom’. However, the data he presents are at best inconclusive. For example, he cites Pol Pot’s 3 January 1978 instructions on how to drive counter-attacking Vietnamese forces out of Cambodian territory by attacking ‘from behind the enemy’s back’ using guerrilla forays to penetrate Vietnamese territory. This contradicts rather than confirms his argument and – along with other evidence – indicates that CPK attacks that penetrated deeply into Viet Nam during 1978 were still a military tactic to put Viet Nam on the defensive, not part of a concerted effort to conquer large areas of the Mekong Delta (pp. 386–87). On the other hand, Kiernan presents a large body of testimony to the effect that Democratic Kampuchea was pursuing a policy of achieving adjustments in the land frontier by force of arms. At the same time, as he describes, the CPK was attempting to foment rebellion among Khmer Kraom as part of an effort to destabilize Viet Nam politically (p. 365). What remains unclear is whether and to what extent Democratic Kampuchea had gone beyond claims on the seventy or so square kilometres of land territory that the Vietnamese said in mid-1978 were in dispute. The various quotations attributed to Democratic Kampuchea cadres are indicative, but often ambiguous and vague. Some appear either to be merely restatements of the belief that

106 Reviewer’s interview No. 149 with a former Sector 23 combatant, Mai Rut, Thailand, 27 January 1981.
109 ‘A high Vietnamese government official discussing situation vis-a-vis Cambodia’, typescript translation of an interview conducted by a member of a foreign delegation visiting Viet Nam, dated 5 May 1978.
'Kampuchea Kraom' had ‘historically’ belonged to ‘Cambodia’ or of a determination to conduct attacks into Vietnamese territory, while others suggest an irredentism going beyond minor adjustments (pp. 360–65, 370, 390). However, unless and until more internal documentation from the Communist Party’s leading bodies becomes available, the matter must be considered unresolved.

**Genocide, intent, and the case of the blue krama**

Questions about the way in which Kiernan reads the motivation behind Democratic Kampuchea attacks into Viet Nam point to a broader problem of his treatment of intentionality in other Democratic Kampuchea policies, including those that led to genocide. He recognizes that the CPK leadership aimed at a ‘transformation of Cambodia’ that would ‘guarantee ... its independence’, but that the unintended result of this attempted transformation was to ‘destroy it’ (p. 4). However, genocide is not assimilated into this overall schema of unintended consequences. On the contrary, Kiernan tries to maximize his argument that genocide was a centrally-planned affair that fits the definition that leaps out from a literal reading of the provisions of the Genocide Convention, with their reference to ‘acts committed with intent to destroy’ particular groups ‘as such’.

This reading of the nature of Democratic Kampuchea’s genocidal intent is overdrawn. Since for Kiernan, Democratic Kampuchea’s genocide cannot be related to a dangerous tendency intrinsic to Marxist and communist orthodoxy, it must have been the result of an intentional racist plan. However, as Hannum and Hawk have rightly argued, even if Democratic Kampuchea’s actions were only an element of a non-racial socio-political project, and even if the deaths were only a by-product of that project, they still constitute genocide. They explain that although there were also ‘economic’, ‘historical’, and ‘political aspects to Democratic Kampuchea policy toward Cambodia’s ethnic minorities’, this ‘policy ... intentionally sought their elimination “as such” and the destructive acts perpetrated by the Democratic Kampuchea Government against the ethnical and racial minorities of Kampuchea are clearly within the scope of the prohibitions of the Genocide Convention.’ Thus, any contention that [victimized] groups ... were primarily political groups and that their destruction therefore is not covered by the Genocide Convention cannot
be sustained. Even if political motives were emotioned by the hatred of . . . ideological deviance, the targeted destruction of . . . ethnical groups by the Government of Democratic Kampuchea is precisely the kind of ‘odious scourge’ the Genocide Convention is intended to prohibit.

Discussing the concept of legal intent, they clarify that regardless of ‘the motivation, excuse or rationale which may have led to’ decisions by ‘Democratic Kampuchea authorities to destroy all or part of a group’, the destruction of that group is genocidal as long as the killings and other acts carried out to achieve it were themselves deliberately inflicted. Indeed, even if ‘the leadership of Democratic Kampuchea may have had lawful’ or otherwise lofty and laudable motives, this could not exonerate them from responsibility for genocide.110

The Marxist-inspired policies of Democratic Kampuchea also fit the expanded sociological definition of genocide elaborated by Helen Fein, according to which it is a form of ‘sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members, sustained regardless of the surrender or lack of threat offered by the victim’. Democratic Kampuchea’s genocide was perpetrated by a collective and organized actor that carried out ‘a continuity of attacks . . . to physically destroy group members’, with numerous victims who ‘were selected because they were members of a collectivity’ and were ‘defenceless’ when they were killed. There is no doubt in the Democratic Kampuchea case, ‘the destruction of the group members was undertaken with intent to kill and murder was sanctioned by the perpetrator’, and that the killings were legitimated by officially-propagated ‘ideologies and beliefs’, the ‘articulated social goal’ of which ‘enjoin[ed] or justifie[d] the destruction of the victim[s]’.111

Like Hannum and Hawk, Kiernan considers the killings of large numbers of ordinary Khmer ‘base people’ evacuated from the East Zone to other parts of Cambodia after the purge of that Zone in mid-1978 as an act of (auto-)genocide. However, his discussion of these killings goes off the rails because he insists that he has discovered conclusive evidence that ‘the Centre planned, prepared, ordered and executed a campaign of genocide’ targeting these people. He cites the testimony of people evacuated during the second half of 1978 from the East to North-west Cambodia. They reported they were issued blue

clothing and blue-and-white *krama* (a combination scarf/loincloth/sarong that is a common item of Cambodian clothing) while passing through the outskirts of Phnom Penh. These sources recalled how on arrival in the North-west Zone, to which South-west Zone cadres had been sent following a purge similar to that in the East Zone, they found themselves among a population wearing black clothes and red-and-white, yellow-and-white, or black-and-white *krama*. They said their blue outfits ‘were a sign of being from the Eastern Zone’, and thus a ‘killing sign’. The conclusiveness of this evidence is undermined by other testimony Kiernan reports, such as stories that some evacuees were issued green-and-white *krama* and black clothing in Phnom Penh, that evacuees from the East sent to the new North Zone were issued with second-hand black-and-white or purple-and-white as well as blue-and-white *krama*; and that cadres who executed evacuees from the East took their victims’ blue *krama* for their own use. Contrary to the testimony of evacuees who believed that what they were issued marked them for death, he also cites the belief of a resident of an area into which the evacuees were sent that no such marking was involved. Despite all these contradictions, Kiernan sticks to his conclusion that the distribution of the blue clothing and *krama* was part of a pre-planned genocide. To tie it to Pol Pot, he suggests that the Party Secretary used blue to mark the victims because he had ‘surely’ been ‘apprised’ during a summer he spent in Yugoslavia in 1950 that the second World War Nazi collaborator regime in Croatia had forced Serbs to wear blue armbands as a sign of their alien status. He also insists that ‘blue was a new colour in Democratic Kampuchea’ in mid-1978 and makes much of the fact that some 242 tons of blue and grey cloth were imported from China between June and August 1978. He declares ‘the first shipment of blue cloth, which arrived on 13 June, must have been ordered in May, as the Centre was planning its suppression of the Eastern Zone for the end of that month’ (pp. 405–411).

In fact, *krama* in blue and other colours had long been produced throughout Democratic Kampuchea both in factories and on looms in co-operatives. Some colours and types of *krama* were indeed associated with particular zones or social strata. For example, hand-loomed large turquoise *krama* produced in the South-west Zone and considered typical of it were much sought-after. However, even at the

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South-west Zone’s model co-operative of Leay Bau, peasants wore *krama* of whatever colour was available, including red, green, and blue.\(^{113}\) *Krama* of various colours, including blue, were to be seen throughout the country before and throughout 1978.\(^{114}\) The blue *krama* handed out in significant numbers to evacuees from the East Zone were evidently a low-quality item factory-produced in Phnom Penh starting in late 1977. *Krama* from this production run were distributed from that time on to workers in the capital, who considered them inferior to what they had received in earlier years.\(^{115}\) Moreover, blue caps, blue shirts, and blue trousers were increasingly a part of the official clothing issue for Phnom Penh factory workers, for students in the Centre’s technical schools in the capital and for cadres throughout the country in 1978. Indeed, blue was becoming a kind of elite colour favoured by those with privileged access to the clothing ration system.\(^{116}\) Although in March 1978, Pol Pot himself was still wearing black, by December he had switched to blue-grey.\(^{117}\)

The real explanation of the connection between the evacuees’ clothing and their deaths seems to be that for the cadres of South-west Zone origin in the areas into which the victims were sent, evacuees represented a potential threat, and as pressure mounted on these cadres to prove their loyalty and capabilities or be purged themselves, they began more or less systematically executing evacuees. Thus although it is no doubt true that the cadres sometimes identified evacuees from such readily available, if imprecise, markers as the clothes and *krama* they had been issued, Kiernan’s confidence that this was all part of

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113 See the film *Kampucija 1978* (Belgrade Television), shot by the delegation of Yugoslav journalists who visited Democratic Kampuchea in March 1978.

114 For evidence from before 1978, see the official publication Democratic Kampuchea is moving forward. Phnom Penh, August 1977, which features a display of *krama* of every conceivable colour and includes photographs of peasants, medical personnel, and others in the North-west Zone, Phnom Penh, and elsewhere wearing red and blue *krama* (pp. 10–11, 18, 31, 48). Photographs in the official publication Kampuchea democratique. Phnom Penh, March 1978, indicate that most *krama* in rural areas were either red or blue or mixed red and blue (pp. 6, 18, 20, 26–27, back cover). The film *Kampucija 1978* includes scenes from the irrigation construction sites in North-west Cambodia with this typical pattern.


116 See *Kampucija 1978*, which includes scenes from a Phnom Penh factory, a technical school, an artistic performance depicting model workers, and cadres in various parts of the country, including the South-west Zone. Blue remained a colour of choice for clothing in late 1978. See the December 1978 photographs of another art troupe performance depicting blue-clad model workers. *Nazo no kuni: Kanbojia*, p. 23.

117 *Nazo no kuni: Kanbojia*, p. 30.
some carefully orchestrated Pol Pot plan is untenable. What his account points to is not a genocidal plan, but a more complex phenomenon in which a regime, inspired by a modernizing ideology with genocidal potentialities, realizes those potentialities through a set of genocidal practices. The evacuees from the East fell victim to these practices, which in late 1978 had spread to cover every available population category, Khmer, Cham, and Chinese; cadres, base people, and new people; petty bourgeois intellectuals and peasant deviationists; East Zoners, South-west Zoners, and Central Zoners, etc. All were falling victim to the logic of a class struggle that was eliminating everyone who was not living up to Pol Pot’s expectations of what a proletarianized people could achieve, how they should behave and what they should believe.

In his attempt to argue otherwise, Kiernan highlights the fact that many of the East Zone victims were stigmatized with the epithet, kbal yuon khluon khmær, which he translates as ‘Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds’ and which he suggests racialized those killed. This phrase, which might also be translated ‘Khmer bodies with Vietnamese heads’, had also been used historically to conjure up images of Khmer political structures under Vietnamese leadership. Kiernan’s argument that the phrase was used to suppress ‘the Khmer majority . . . on the racial grounds that they were not really Khmer’ (pp. 3–4) is at best incomplete. Instead, the phrase suggests political leadership and political orientation were considered more important than any biologically-determined physical characteristics. Being physically or ‘racially’ Khmer was no protection: treason to the class and national cause was political, and could not be committed by anyone, regardless of skin colour, eye shape, or hair texture, who was suspected of refusal to accept and be loyal to the correct political line of the ‘proletarian vanguard’ leadership.

Thus the underlying dynamic driving the perpetration of genocide in Democratic Kampuchea was the notion that what determines the socio-political nature of a human being is neither the false conscious-

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118 In the early 1950s, according to one former scholarship student in Paris, Pol Pot and others who had returned from France to join the Vietnamese-backed anti-colonial groups were denigrated as simultaneously kbal barang khluon khmær (‘Khmer bodies with French heads’) and kbal yuon khluon khmær. The application of these epithets indicated that they were tainted with or had sold out to foreign ideas, interests, and political structures. The former label was also used by Pol Pot, but against those who had failed to become communists in France and instead supposedly imbibed colonial culture there. Reviewer’s interviews with Nhek Suong, Phnom Penh, 14 July and 10 November 1974.
ness constructs of biology (race) nor ethnicity (culture), but how they are organized for production, how they are led politically and what they are taught ideologically – hence the persistent CPK leitmotif stressing ‘politics, ideology and organization’. This is how the non-biological, non-ethnic construct of the East Zone damned its people. The failure of their leading cadres successfully to fight the Vietnamese ‘proved’ that both leaders and followers had failed to achieve the advanced state of proletarian-ness that would ensure victory. In Pol Pot’s mind, this was apparently attributed to the cadres’ supposed adherence to Vietnamese-inspired beliefs that the Cambodian revolution would by objective necessity have to lag behind Viet Nam in the advance toward communism. For the Party Secretary, this not only explained indications that East Zone cadres were sceptical about the wisdom and humanity of building socialism at a breakneck pace, but also made them kbal yuon khluon khmcer. The people of the East had been laxly organized, traitorously led, and wrongly indoctrinated by these ‘biological’ Khmer ‘nationals’ whose objective service to the Vietnamese had been undeniably revealed by their defeats at Vietnamese hands. The people of the East Zone were thus organizationally, politically, and ideologically contaminated. They needed to be purged and transformed, just like the old bourgeois and feudal classes, the ‘upper class’ new people from Phnom Penh, the ‘upper class’ Cham, and the ‘upper class’ Chinese. Only by this time, the routinization of killing had reached a much higher level, and the looming threat of a Vietnamese invasion left little time for re-education. The ever-accelerating waves of killings of previously victimized categories were now telescoped into a much shorter period of time. Thus, these demonized peasant strangers from the East, crudely identified by whatever stigmata available, including their blue krama, were dispatched in droves by South-west Zone cadres who themselves were in the process of being eliminated for their own failures and doubts.\(^\text{119}\) As one South-west Zone cadre involved in the purges concluded, the logic of the

\(^{119}\) For an example of one such cadre, see the ‘confessions’ of Heng Rin alias Mei, a peasant from Kampot province and former monk-student at a Buddhist lycée who had become Deputy Secretary of South-west Zone Sector 33. He was appointed Secretary of North-west Zone Sector 5 after the arrest of its previous leadership in mid-1977, and oversaw subsequent purges in the Sector, only to be arrested himself in November 1978: Heng Rin alias Mei, Khnhom saum thwoe sechkdei reaykar choun Pak Kommuynih chea ti korup ampi pravoat neung sakammapheap kbût robâh khnhom [I would like to report to the respected Communist Party about my traitorous record and activities], 24 November 1978, passim.
system was such that the worst was yet to come, because this logic meant that in the end everybody in Cambodia would be ‘beaten to death and disposed of [vay-chaol], except Pol Pot’.  

Conclusion: the nature of Democratic Kampuchea racism

Despite Kiernan’s many mistakes, his stress on the racism of Democratic Kampuchea policy and practice raises important questions about its form and origins. A quick review of some recent literature suggests the following tentative conclusions. Democratic Kampuchea racism had particular historical roots that gave its dominant form characteristics typical of what Benjamin Bowser describes as ‘subordinate group racism’. It reflected the fatal effects of the reactionary impulse generated by the ethnic stereotyping to which all Cambodians were subjected by French colonialism and to which Cambodian communists were subjected when they informed in the name of ‘proletarian internationalism’ that the Vietnamese proletariat was the socially natural leader of the Indochinese revolution. The rejection of such denigration was inverted into an ethno-nationalism profoundly infused with the belief that there could ‘be no justice or true community’ in Cambodia until a completely independent Khmerized nation was forged. This was in part expression of a refusal to accept the possibility of Cambodia being less advanced than French and Vietnamese Others, and thus a kind of ‘perversion of the demand to participate in modernity and an opposition to the effective modalities of its functioning’. It was deeply tinged with anti-modern inflections in the form of hatred of those who were ‘assumed to be vectors of a detested modernity’. In Democratic Kampuchea, these vectors were those of classes and class-defined ethnic minorities perceived as being particularly implicated in capitalism, or at least market relations. Democratic Kampuchea racism was thus a by-product of efforts to advance an historic worldview based on unexamined and unsubstantiated assumptions about the potentialities of the Cambodian nationality and ‘race’ to make a contribution to the modern world via rapid construction of a highly advanced socialism. In seeking to translate this worldview into reality, the Communist Party radically reorganized the nation’s insti-

tutional life to produce the proper hierarchies and privileges for ‘the
people’ as it defined them. In its system, the only way negatively stereo-
typed classes and nationalities could have any value was to conform
to the customs defined as correct by the party. These lesser people
could never be equal to ‘the people’ short of complete assimilation to
an unattainable ideal, and the penalty for refusal or failure to assim-
ilate was death. Ultimately, hardly anyone attained the ideal, and thus
almost everyone was subject to execution.