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Nixon's Ghost and the Haunting of Violence at Cambodia's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

Abstract: Between 1975 and 1979, upwards of two million men, women, and children perished in the Cambodian genocide. Decades after the ending of mass violence, Cambodia struggles both with reconciliation and remembrance. These struggles figure prominently in the representation of mass violence at state-sanctioned sites of memorialization, specifically the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. In this paper, I draw inspiration from Derrida's conceptualization of hauntology to provide a critical reading of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. A multivalent concept, haunting directs attention to the traces or remains – whether material or discursive – of violence that remain present in their absence. Consequently, the museum – a popular destination on the dark tourism circuit – reproduces a particular knowledge of Cambodia's genocide, that is, a state-sanctioned interpretation of Khmer Rouge violence. At the same time, the historical and geopolitical context of the genocide, notably the extension of the United States-led war in Vietnam, haunts the museum's display of violence by its conspicuous absence. In doing so, I provide a critique of epistemological practices at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and highlight the tension of absent-presences that haunt the display of genocidal violence in Cambodia.

Keywords: genocide, Cambodia, haunting, museums

Introduction

In January 1979, Vietnamese Colonel Mai Lam travelled throughout Eastern Europe in search of inspiration. Weeks earlier, troops of the Vietnamese Seventh Division and of Khmer Rouge defectors crossed the border into Democratic Kampuchea (as

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Cambodia was renamed), routed the Khmer Rouge forces, sending the remnants of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) into hiding along the Thai border. Now, Mai Lam, who also served as the director of the recently built Museum of American War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City, was to establish a new museum dedicated to bringing to light genocidal crimes perpetrated by the former regime.¹ To that end, a former detainment and torture centre was hastily converted into a visual display of Khmer Rouge killings. As Cathy Schlund-Vials explains, Lam's curatorial focus on war crimes, made plain in graphic depictions of atrocity and the prevalence of perpetrator-driven exhibits, established a distinct narrative wherein the Vietnamese were cast as emancipators and anti-genocide saviours.² For four years, from 1975 to 1979, the CPK ruled Democratic Kampuchea as a totalitarian state; in the process, roughly 1.7 million Cambodians perished.³ Victims succumbed to extreme exhaus-

1 Judy Ledgerwood, *The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative*, in: *Museum Anthropology* 21/1 (1997), 82–98; Rachel Hughes, *The Abject Artefacts of Memory: Photographs from Cambodia's Genocide*, in: *Media, Culture & Society* 25 (2003), 23–44; Paul Williams, *Witnessing Genocide: Vigilance and Remembrance at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek*, in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18/2 (2004), 234–254; David Chandler, *Cambodia Deals with its Past: Collective Memory, Demonisation and Induced Amnesia*, in: *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9/2–3 (2008), 355–369; Bridgette Sion, *Conflicting Sites of Memory in Post-Genocide Cambodia*, in: *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 2 (2011), 1–21; Stephanie Benzaquen, *Looking at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes, Cambodia*, on Flickr and YouTube, in: *Media, Culture & Society* 36/6 (2014), 790–809; James A. Tyner, *Violent Erasures and Erasing Violence: Contesting Cambodia's Landscapes of Violence*, in: Estela Schindel/Pamela Colombo (eds.), *Space and the Memories of Violence: Landscapes of Erasure, Disappearance and Exception*, London/New York 2014, 21–33; Caitlin Brown/Chris Millington, *The Memory of the Cambodian Genocide: the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum*, in: *History Compass* 13/2 (2015): 31–39; James A. Tyner, *Landscape, Memory, and Post-Violence in Cambodia*, London/New York 2017; James A. Tyner, *Official Memorials, Deathscapes, and Hidden Landscapes of Ruin: Material Legacies of the Cambodian Genocide*, in: Hamzah Muzaini/Claudio Minca (eds.), *After Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage from Below*, Cheltenham, UK/Northampton, USA 2018, 22–43; Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *Reframing Cambodia's Killing Fields: The Commemorative Limitations of Atrocity Tourism*, in: Cathy J. Schlund-Vials/Guy Beauregard/Hsiu-Chuan Lee (eds.), *The Subject(s) of Human Rights: Crises, Violations, and Asian/American Critique*, Philadelphia, USA 2019, 163–179; Viviane Frings-Hessami, *Khmer Rouge Archives: Appropriation, Reconstruction, Neo-Colonial Exploitation and their Implications for the Reuse of Records*, in: *Archival Science* 19 (2019), 255–279; and Rachel Hughes, *Left Justified: The Early Campaign for an International Law Response to Khmer Rouge Crimes*, in: *Political Geography* 76 (2020), 1–11, doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102071.

2 Schlund-Vials, *Reframing Cambodia's Killing Fields*, (2019), 174.

3 The number of people killed during the Cambodian genocide remains contested, in large part because scholars disagree on the number of people killed before, during, and after the genocide. That is, in the years prior to the genocide, the Cambodian people endured a brutal civil war, marked by an intensive bombing campaign waged by the United States; and following the genocide, the people of Cambodia suffered through a protracted famine. Compounding the problem, scholars do not know with certainty how many people died from starvation-related conditions, disease, and exhaustion or from torture and execution. See Patrick Heuveline, "Between One and Three Million": Towards the Demographic Reconstruction of a Decade of Cambodian History (1970–79), in: *Population Studies* 51/1 (1998), 49–65; Damien De Walque, *Selective Mortality during the Khmer Rouge Period in*

tion, disease, starvation, torture, murder, and execution as a direct consequence of CPK policies that sought to 'liberate' Cambodia from the vestiges of capitalism and impose a purported communist society.

The political context of Vietnam's actions, though, were far from straightforward. Prior to their ascension to power, the CPK was, during a long civil war, assisted – politically and militarily – by the Vietnamese communists. Almost immediately, however, tensions developed between the two communist parties, with ongoing border conflicts flaring up for several years until Vietnam's 'liberation' of Democratic Kampuchea. The military victory over their former ally and challenging neighbour to the east presented a political problem for the Vietnamese government, because the military actions of the Vietnamese were perceived by many members of the international community, including the United States, as an invading force. It was imperative for the Vietnamese, and the subsequent People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government installed by the Vietnamese, to legitimate their ouster of the Khmer Rouge and deflect accusations of installing a puppet government. Ideological glitches also marked Vietnam's global political optics in that, ostensibly, one communist government (Vietnam) overthrew another communist government (Democratic Kampuchea). Possible justifications for the removal of the CPK could potentially backfire and call to question Vietnam's own system of government. It was necessary to distance Vietnamese communism from Khmer communism.

A solution appeared as Vietnamese troops occupied Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city and, until recently, the heart of the CPK's state apparatus. In the days following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, two Vietnamese photojournalists were walking through Phnom Penh when the smell of decomposing bodies drew them toward a former school. There, the photojournalists discovered the corpses of several recently murdered men, some of which remained chained to iron beds in rooms that once had been classrooms. Over the next several days, as the Vietnamese and their Cambodian assistants searched the former school, they recovered thousands of documents: mug-shot photographs and undeveloped negatives; thousands of written confessions, hundreds of cadre notebooks; numerous DK publications, and myriad instruments of torture and detainment. The photojournalists had uncovered S-21, one of approximately 200 security-centres established by the Khmer Rouge throughout Democratic Kampuchea.

Cambodia, in: *Population and Development Review* 31/2 (2005), 351–368; Craig Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide*, Lubbock 2005; Taylor Owen/Ben Kiernan, *Bombs over Cambodia*, in: *Walrus Magazine* (October 2006), 62–69; Patrick Heuveline, *The Boundaries of Genocide: Quantifying the Uncertainty of the Death Toll during the Pol Pot Regime in Cambodia (1975-79)*, in: *Population Studies* 69/2 (2015), 201–218; James A. Tyner, *Famine in Cambodia: Geopolitics, Biopolitics, Necropolitics*, Athens 2023.

Leadership of the PRK saw a political opportunity at S-21. According to Rachel Hughes, the long-term “national and international legitimacy of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea hinged on the exposure of the violent excesses of Pol Pot [...] and the continued production of a coherent memory of the past, that is, of liberation and reconstruction at the hands of a benevolent fraternal state”.⁴ In the Vietnamese effort to build Cambodia’s collective memory of its recent, violent past, S-21 was to shoulder the heavy lifting. Simply put, displaying evidence to the outside world that the invasion by the Vietnamese army was indeed a liberation was the primary concern of those who designed Tuol Sleng as a museum.⁵

Thus, Mai Lam travelled throughout Eastern Europe in search of a model upon which to construct the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. His duty, Lam recalls, was to document what happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and to establish “proof” of their war crimes.⁶ Accordingly, he returned to Phnom Penh “with a display tailored to attract international sympathy in a time of isolation and to legitimize the new authorities, depicted as good Marxist-Leninists who had saved the Khmer people from the ‘fascist’ clique of Democratic Kampuchea.”⁷ To that point, Vietnamese officials designed Tuol Sleng “to provoke outrage through a primarily sensory experience rather than to enlighten.”⁸ Although Lam and his colleagues gave a nod to the Cambodian people, they apparently designed the museum primarily for foreign consumption, modelled after memorial sites, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, that depicted both Nazi crimes and Soviet liberation.⁹

The formal establishment of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum set the memory work of the Cambodian genocide on a path it has hardly strayed.¹⁰ From the outset, the Museum’s purpose was more about politics and less about history. Now, decades after its establishment, the Museum has remained remarkably similar, although subtle but not insignificant differences are apparent, for example the relocation of the entrance and the installation of memorials. As Stephanie Benzaquen explains, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, called to play a more established international role, must adjust to standards of worldwide memorial institutions.¹¹ Indeed, the museum must respond to the expectations of foreign visitors accustomed to a certain form

4 Hughes, *Abject Artefacts*, (2003), 26.

5 Ledgerwood, *The Cambodian Tuol Sleng*, (1997), 87.

6 *Ibid.*, 89.

7 Benzaquen, *Looking at the Tuol Sleng Museum*, (2014), 793.

8 Nic Dunlop, *The Lost Executioner: A Story of the Khmer Rouge*, London/New York 2005, 164; Benzaquen, *Looking at the Tuol Sleng Museum*, (2014), 792.

9 Ledgerwood, *The Cambodian Tuol Sleng*, (1997), 89. See also Serge Thion, *Watching Cambodia*, Bangkok 1993, 182.

10 In 2010 Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, both former high-ranking members of the CPK, were found guilty of crimes against humanity and genocide.

11 Benzaquen, *Looking at the Tuol Sleng Museum*, (2014), 795.

and style of ‘atrocities’ sites. In other words, from its politicized beginnings, the genocide museum speaks more to partisan expediencies than it does a broader understanding of mass violence. That said, it is necessary also to consider the changed political contexts of Tuol Sleng, namely from the charged origins of its beginnings to the present day.¹² Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that in the early years of the museum’s existence, the men and women who devoted their lives to the institution were themselves survivors of the genocide, traumatized and driven by a need to reveal to the world the horrors of genocide. It should not be ignored that their personal sufferings mediated the transformation from a site of atrocity to the place of learning and reflection.¹³

In this paper, I draw on the Derridian concept of hauntology to consider the absent-presence of violence at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. In other words, my focus is directed toward the violence *not* displayed at the museum and, in doing so, critique the singular, historical narrative of the Cambodian genocide that is presently on display. My central thesis is straightforward: the initial framing of the violence depicted within the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide deliberately circumscribed the wider geopolitical context both of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese ‘liberators’. More precisely, the curatorial mission of the museum, from the beginning, offered a very narrow account of the genocide. The fact that this narrative remains largely unchanged limits the possibility for visitors to gain a deeper understanding of genocide. Let me be perfectly clear: my intent is not, primarily, a critique of the museum itself. Indeed, to reproach the museum’s curators – past and present – of circumscribing the displays offered at Tuol Sleng is somewhat unwarranted.¹⁴ The museum was established to perform a specific function at a particular moment in history; it has never claimed to redress all the evils surrounding the genocide. That said, the museum is, to a large degree, tailored toward a ‘Western’ conception of memorialization and caters especially to ‘Western’ visitors. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider the possibilities of future exorcisms, that is, to confront head-on the continual absence (more broadly) of the geopolitical spectres that haunt our knowledge of the genocide. Notably, these are the actions of other foreign governments, including the United States. Simply stated, the original curators of the museum were correct to highlight the crimes against humanity perpetuated by the

12 See for example Schlund-Vials, *Reframing Cambodia’s Killing Fields*, (2019), and Hughes, *Left Justified*, (2020).

13 This is a point raised by an anonymous reviewer and I’m thankful for the opportunity to underscore the dedication of the museum’s staff in these early years. See for example Boreth Ly, *Of performance and the persistent temporality of trauma: memory, art, and visions*, in: *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16/1 (2008), 109–130.

14 I appreciate the constructive criticisms of an anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to address this point.

Khmer Rouge. However, they deferred to depict the war crimes committed by other governments throughout the course of the wider war in Southeast Asia. This omission may no longer be proper. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper – and of my own positionality as author – is to make an ethical intervention, namely to read and reflect on past injustices that mediate our understanding both of the Cambodian genocide and of genocide in general. For as Jacques Derrida writes, no justice “seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead”.¹⁵

Toward a hauntology of violence displayed

Cambodia is home to a plethora of ghosts and spirits, Caroline Bennett details, and many of these are socially active. Bennett explains that to the Khmer people, these ghosts are vital beings that belong to the accepted realms of existence and are part of the day-to-day lives of the living.¹⁶ In this paper, my focus lies with the concept of epistemological hauntings, that is, the ghosts of past injustices.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is haunted by photographic images: of men, women, and children traumatized, tortured, and executed at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. The ghostly apparitions of the architects of genocide – particularly of Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan – are similarly on display.¹⁷ And as an *in situ* site of genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge against their own people, the condemnation of these and other key figures is appropriate. Absent, however, are other spectres who sowed the seeds of violence later to be reaped by the Khmer Rouge. Genocides do not simply happen; there is always a necessary context within which genocidaires operate. On this point, the Cambodian genocide was born of decades of French colonial rule and military intervention associated with the wider, anti-colonial war in neighbouring Vietnam. In short, the epistemology of violence on display at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is haunted by a past that remains both occluded and neglected.

15 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, London/New York 1993, 10.

16 Caroline Bennett, *Living with the Dead in the Killing Fields of Cambodia*, in: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 49/2 (2018), 184–203, 189.

17 These four men were key architects of the Cambodia genocide. Pol Pot served as Secretary of the CPK; Nuon Chea as Deputy Secretary; Ieng Sary as Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Khieu Samphan as President of Democratic Kampuchea.

The term “hauntology” was coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 publication *Spectres de Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. A challenging concept, hauntology supplants its near-homonym ‘ontology’ and calls attention to the instability of what exists and how we can know that existence. That is, hauntology “replaces the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive”.¹⁸ Indeed, as Peim explains, the “domain of the spectral belongs to what haunts and returns, something from the past as yet unfulfilled or unfinished”.¹⁹ In this sense, hauntology underscores the critique that what exists and is made knowable is a hegemonic narrative. Curatorial displays, for example, are often haunted by the traces of unsettling knowledges that refuse to remain buried. This, in turn, raises important questions about agency and authorial power, for the museum ‘experience’ is always and necessarily fluid. Despite the apparent fixity of physical displays, meaning is never static but floats amidst the circulation of curators, tour guides, and visitors.

When we conjure ghosts unseen, we confront the reality that official narratives obscure with disturbing historical realities. As such, a reflexive reading of museums requires a greater sensitivity to those apparitions not apparent. Hagglund, for example, explains that “What is important about the figure of the spectre [...] is that it cannot be fully present”.²⁰ As Derrida writes: “To haunt does not mean to be present.”²¹ This is gravely important for thinking about museums of genocide, for the spectre embodies in ghostly fashion a denial of violence not readily on display. Indeed, hauntology is also about the continuity of violence, notably the violent omission – epistemicide – of one narrative for another. As Davis explains, attending to ghosts is more than simply an intellectual exercise; it is instead an ethical imperative.²² The spectral, in this sense, is “about believing in justice, learning to live, discovering that most disturbing of all ghosts—the stranger deep inside oneself”.²³

The affective power of Tuol Sleng, as a memorial site and museum, is found in its sensual authenticity, namely the materiality of its displays. From its inception as a school through its conversion to a detainment and torture facility, as a museum, the site was kept largely intact with only minor modifications made to the compound. This is not to suggest that the materiality and immateriality of the museum

18 Colin Davis, *État Présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms*, in: *French Studies* 59/3 (2005), 373–379, 373.

19 Nick Peim, *Spectral Bodies: Derrida and the Philosophy of the Photograph as Historical Document*, in: *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39/1 (2005), 67–84, 74.

20 Martin Hagglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Stanford 2008, 82.

21 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 1993, 161.

22 Verne Harris, *Hauntology, Archivry and Banditry: An Engagement with Derrida and Zapiro*, *Critical Arts* 29/S1 (2015), 13–27, 21.

23 *Ibid.*, 17.



Figure 1: Inner compound of Tuol Sleng, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, photo by James Tyner.

is static. Over the years, museum staff have introduced audio tours, curated temporary exhibits, conducted primary research surrounding the day-to-day functions of S-21, and have provided physical spaces for contemplative reflection.²⁴

Surrounded by a corrugated tin fence topped with coils of barbed wire, Tuol Sleng consists of four three-story concrete buildings arranged in a U-shape pattern around a grassy courtyard dotted with palm trees.

In the middle is the former administrative building and current site of the museum's archives. To the left of the courtyard are fourteen tombstones and scaffolds used to hang prisoners by their arms.²⁵ Visitors, upon their entrance, are directed first to Building A, located at the southern end of the compound.²⁶ This building includes the former torture rooms – all empty save for the rusty metal beds and shackles and various torture instruments. Grainy photographs of corpses discovered in January 1979 hang desolately on the walls. Adjoining Building A are two buildings that were used to hold prisoners. Building B consists of several classrooms that were converted into

24 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to think more deeply on the fluidity and not just the fixity of Tuol Sleng.

25 The tombstones were initially placed in the courtyard to commemorate the 14 corpses found by the photojournalists.

26 To facilitate the 'standard' tour of the site, in 2010 the main entrance gate to S-21 was relocated from the center wall to the southeastern corner.

communal holding cells. Now, these rooms are filled with thousands of black and white photographs of the unnamed prisoners taken upon their entry to Tuol Sleng. Building C was likewise used to detain prisoners. However, in this building the former classrooms were subdivided with brick walls to create individual ‘private’ cells for more ‘important’ prisoners. Inside the smaller cells are shackles and chains. Directly opposite Building A, on the northern end of the compound, is Building D. Under the Khmer Rouge, this building was also used to detain prisoners. It now houses numerous instruments of torture, rusted shackles, and several disinterred skulls. The museum is, as Cathy Schlund-Vials remarks, “expectedly unwelcoming”.²⁷ Indeed, Schlund-Vials underscores the sensorial discord evoked by the site: “The exhibits contained therein – including rooms marked by bloodstained floors, rusted shackles, oxidized implements of torture, and ghostly black-and-white detainee photographs – are starkly distinguished from the orderliness of Tuol Sleng’s manicured square lawns and swept concrete sidewalks.”²⁸ The overall feeling is vertiginous.

Little textual material accompanies the exhibits.²⁹ Most photographs and exhibits are deliberately unmarked, lacking for example names of people or places. The iron shackles and myriad instruments of torture are present but there is something *intangible* missing that hovers spectre-like throughout the exhibitions. Although in-place, these objects seem out-of-place; violence happened, yes, but *why*? The spectre, as Peim writes, is both the product and the occasion of unease; the spectre returns from the unfinished past as revenant.³⁰ Simply put, the display of genocide appears wraith-like, as something unholy that materialized briefly, exacted a horrific toll, only to dissipate into the mists of mourning. On this point, the curatorial display of violence, on reflection, seems disconnected. Indeed, the barren atmosphere of the museum evokes a haunting experience, surrounded by the ghostly presence of Cambodians long-since tortured and killed. Black and white photographs of victims, crumbling cell walls, rusted shackles, and iron pincers: all remain mute and fail to answer the question that haunts visitors: *why*? As Cheryl Lawther and colleagues write, in the absence of historical, social, and political context the site creates an impression that the violence of the Khmer Rouge was exceptional and unimaginable; and that the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime are something to be gazed upon – but safely left within the confines of Tuol Sleng.³¹

27 Schlund-Vials, *Reframing Cambodia’s Killing Fields*, (2019), 168.

28 *Ibid.*

29 In recent years, more contextual information is provided in an optional ‘audio’ tour made available for a fee.

30 Peim, *Spectral Bodies*, (2005), 76.

31 Cheryl Lawther, Rachel Killean, and Lauren Dempster, *Making (In?)Visible: Selectivity, Visibility and Authenticity in Cambodia’s Sites of Atrocity*, in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 24/1 (2022), 45–70, 60.

Genocide and the ghosts of war

To conjure the ghosts of Cambodia's genocide we must stray from the silent walls of Tuol Sleng to unearth the mortal remains of violent events that lie and lay buried on distant battlefields. The mass atrocities carried out by the Khmer Rouge cadre so vividly on display at the museum require condemnation – an ongoing task necessary to document the policies and practices that resulted in the death of one quarter of the country's population.³² But so too do other atrocities that helped bring to life the monstrous Khmer Rouge merit judgement. In Cambodia, decades of colonial corruption and subjugation by France and, later, the Cold War calculations of the United States contributed to the bloodletting by the Khmer Rouge. And yet, the spectres of colonial officials and Cold Warriors make no substantial appearance at Tuol Sleng. Histories of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism remain mostly dormant in the displays of mass atrocities; so too the histories of America's military ventures in Cambodia and the larger Southeast Asian region stay interred. As a partial corrective, in this section I evoke the spectres of US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger.

America's overt military involvement in Vietnam and – by extension, into Cambodia – was gradual and haphazard, reflecting an ignorance and uncertainty over objective, policy, and strategy. When in 1954 the Vietnamese communists led by Ho Chi Minh defeated the French colonial forces, the subsequent Geneva Accords partitioned Vietnam into two military zones, administered by two civilian governments. North of the seventeenth-parallel – an arbitrary demarcation – was the communist controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam and, to the south, the State of Vietnam (later renamed the Republic of Vietnam). Beginning in 1954, the United States assumed the burden of 'state-building' in southern Vietnam, in effect, "inventing"

32 Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930–1975*, London 1985; David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945*, New Haven 1991; Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Policies, Race and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, New Haven 1996; Huy Vannak, *The Khmer Rouge Division 703: From Victory to Self-Destruction*, Phnom Penh 2003; Meng-Try Ea, *The Chain of Terror: The Khmer Rouge Southwest Zone Security System*, Phnom Penh 2005; Alexander Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*, Berkeley 2005; Pivoine Beang/Wynne Cougill, *Vanished: Stories from Cambodia's New People under Democratic Kampuchea*, Phnom Penh 2006; Boraden Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge: Ideology, Militarism, and the Revolution that Consumed a Generation*, Santa Barbara 2013; James A. Tyner, *The Politics of Lists: Bureaucracy and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge*, Morgantown 2018; James A. Tyner, *Red Harvests: Agrarian Capitalism and Genocide in Democratic Kampuchea*, Morgantown 2021.

a sovereign country out of the ruins of French colonialism, to prevent the establishment of a communist-led unified Vietnam.³³

There was nothing special, geopolitically, about Vietnam; indeed, US officials during the early years of the Cold War had little knowledge of the region; nor was there much interest to deepen their understanding at a cultural level. However, caught in the vices of the Cold War, Vietnam emerged as a crucial 'test case' of America's geopolitical credibility and military capability to combat 'wars of liberation'.³⁴ The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV; that is North Vietnam) posed no *military* threat to the United States. However, convinced that the fall of Vietnam to communism would lead to the loss of all of Southeast Asia, a succession of US presidents – from Dwight Eisenhower to Richard Nixon – came to believe that the establishment of a sovereign and non-communist government in southern Vietnam was imperative.

Beyond the immediacy of military operations inside Vietnam, US officials never lost sight of the use of Cambodian (and Laotian) territory by both the North Vietnamese armed forces and the Vietnamese communist insurgents in South Vietnam. Whereas American advisors had been in Cambodia, clandestinely, from the early 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson authorized limited covert operations inside the country in 1967. Soon, these operations expanded to encompass the entire Cambodian-Vietnamese border region and by October 1968 the number of covert missions had increased both in scale and scope. In addition, many restricts, such as the use of anti-personnel mines, were lifted. Cambodian officials, including head of state Norodom Sihanouk, publicly condemned these operations. In just one month – October 1969 – Sihanouk protested 83 separate incidents of American intervention. Aerial and artillery attacks, ostensibly targeting Vietnamese insurgent strongholds, were more often destroying Cambodian villages – houses, schools, bridges – and killing more Cambodian civilians than enemy personnel.

In 1969 the ascension of Richard M. Nixon to the presidency of the United States changed the course of events in Cambodia dramatically. As part of his overall approach to 'end the war and win the peace,' Nixon was prepared to expand American military operations into Cambodia while simultaneously, paradoxically, withdrawing American troops. The subsequent overthrow of Sihanouk by his former general, Lon Nol, in 1970 contributed to Nixon's planned aggression into Cambodia. For the Nixon administration, the newly installed Lon Nol government constituted little more than a handle with which to wield a blunt instrument. Convinced that military

33 Michael E. Latham, *Redirecting the Revolution? The USA and the Failure of Nation-Building in South Vietnam*, in: *Third World Quarterly* 27/1 (2006), 27–41; James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968*, Cambridge 2008.

34 Latham, *Redirecting the Revolution*, (2006), 29–30.

victory was still possible in South Vietnam – and that winning the war was necessary to maintain US credibility, deter further wars of national liberation, and provide leverage over the Soviet Union and China – Nixon determined that the expansion of war into Cambodia would buy the time needed and compel North Vietnamese officials to accept a negotiated settlement that provided the semblance of victory for the United States. As a necessary show of force, however, the invasion could not be conducted covertly. As Nixon explained to Kissinger: “I think we need a bold move in Cambodia.” Of the Vietnamese Communists in Cambodia, Nixon grumbled: “They are romping in there and the only government in Cambodia in the last 25 years that had the guts to take a pro-Western and pro-American stand is ready to fall.”³⁵

Consequently, the United States quickly but haphazardly provided military aid to the Cambodian military, including captured small arms, ammunition, and miscellaneous personal equipment throughout the ensuing Civil War (1970–1975). Significantly, military and economic assistance was developed to help Cambodia maintain political stability. In translation, this primarily meant buttressing Lon Nol’s military in support of attacks against enemy forces operating within Cambodia’s territorial limits.³⁶ However, Nixon was not willing to risk his overall objectives by assuming a secondary role in the developing conflict. On 30 April, he informed the American public of a massive offensive into Cambodia against “the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam”.³⁷ Code-named Operation Shoemaker, the invasion involved more than 44,000 South Vietnamese and US troops and was concentrated along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. Nixon lied that the United States undertook the operation not for expanding the war into Cambodia, but for ending the war in Vietnam and winning the peace.³⁸ When asked about the invasion in the immediate aftermath, Kissinger explained, “We’re not interested in Cambodia. We’re only interested in it not being used as a base.”³⁹ To this point, Kissinger further revealed his hand, adding, “We’re trying to shock the Soviets into calling a conference and we can’t do this by appearing weak.”⁴⁰

35 Memorandum from President Nixon to his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Special Files, President’s Personal File, Box 2, Memorandum for the President, January–December 1970 (April 1970), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v06/d245> (23 January 2021).

36 U.S. General Accounting Office, U.S. Assistance to the Khmer Republic (Cambodia) (10 October 1973), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/210/200096.pdf> (27 January 2021).

37 Quoted in Wilfred P. Deac, *Road to the Killing Fields: The Cambodian War of 1970–1975*, College Station 1997, 77.

38 Richard M. Nixon, *Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia* (30 April 1970), www.nixonlibrary.org (9 January 2021).

39 Quoted in William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, revised edition, New York/London 2002, 145.

40 Quoted in *ibid.*

As the civil war in Cambodia stalled, US advisors grew frustrated with the inability of the Lon Nol government to stem the flow of material to South Vietnam. Despite minor victories, by late 1971 and early 1972, the overall course of the war in Cambodia was clear. For Kissinger and most of his advisors, the Khmer Republic was steadily unravelling and all they could do was to “lurch” onward to the inevitable and bitter end.⁴¹ Indeed, by February 1972 CIA analysts premised: “Prospects for driving the communists out of Cambodia by military means must now appear dim in Phnom Penh, and Cambodian leaders probably accept that a negotiated settlement will be necessary at some point in the future.”⁴² Sihanouk – because of his connections both with the Chinese and the Khmer insurgents – seemingly offered the best hope. As Kissinger explained in January 1973: “We are not in favor of seeing Peking dominate Phnom Penh, because we don’t want any great power to dominate Phnom Penh. Therefore, if some accommodations could be reached between Lon Nol and the Khmer communists [...] we could get a neutral Cambodia in which no great power exercises a dominate influence.”⁴³ To that end, Kissinger warmed to the possibility of a coalition government with Sihanouk as figurehead.

Prospects for a negotiated settlement in Cambodia took a turn in January 1973 with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords by Kissinger and North Vietnam’s representative, Le Duc Tho. On 23 January Nixon announced that “we today have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia”. Nixon affirmed that “the people of South Vietnam have been guaranteed the right to determine their own future, without inference” but that “the United States will continue to recognize the Government of the Republic of Vietnam as the sole legitimate government of South Vietnam”. To that end, Nixon pledged “we shall continue to aid South Vietnam within the terms of the agreement, and we shall support efforts by the people of South Vietnam to settle their problems peacefully among themselves”.⁴⁴ At no point in his speech did Nixon mention Cambodia. This is not altogether remarkable. The Cambodian government had no role in the negotiations and, in fact, the resultant Paris Peace Accords, formally signed 27 January, were particularly vague on the political future of Cambodia. In fact, the Accords

41 Central Intelligence Agency, A Review of CIA Judgments on the Probable Situation in Cambodia after the US Bombing Halt on 15 August 1973 (14 September 1973), <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01495R000600160028-2.pdf> (9 January 2021).

42 Central Intelligence Agency, Taking Stock in Cambodia (18 February 1972), <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00875R002000110043-7.pdf> (9 January 2021).

43 Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 29 January 1973, 1:15–2:30 p.m., National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1030, Presidential/HAK Memoranda of Conversations, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve08/d104> (3 January 2021).

44 Address to the Nation Announcing an Agreement on Ending the War in Vietnam (23 January 1973), <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-23-1973-address-nation-announcing-agreement-ending-war> (7 January 2022).

actually left in doubt both the political future of South Vietnam and the future of Cambodia.

Despite the many flaws and limitations of the Accords, Nixon hoped that Saigon and Hanoi would respect the accords, at least in the short run.⁴⁵ As late as May 1973, Nixon pondered, “We can hope that this decline [in fighting] will continue until each side accepts the balance of forces as the best of a bad bargain. If events do take this course, there will also be hope that the two sides will commence to negotiate a political settlement in earnest.”⁴⁶ Nixon’s hopes, however, were misplaced, as fighting between the Vietnamese Communists and the South Vietnamese resumed in earnest. With fading prospects for peace, Pierre Asseline explains, it was imperative for Nixon that a semblance of peace last long enough to demonstrate the viability of the Accords; in other words, a “decent interval” was necessary for the claim of “peace with honor.”⁴⁷ And to that end, Cambodia’s immediate political future was vital.

In reality, US officials increasingly saw little hope of a peaceful settlement in Cambodia and became resigned to the possibility of a coalition government.⁴⁸ For a brief period after the Accords, however, the Nixon administration held one final brutal chip to play in the effort to reach an acceptable settlement in Cambodia: the intensification of the air war. Similar to their strategic approach in dealing with the North Vietnamese, Nixon and Kissinger premised that a massive aerial bombardment would force the Khmer insurgents to the negotiating table. Accordingly, eleven days after the Paris agreement, Nixon authorized the bombing of Cambodia and “for the next six months the air war was waged with unprecedented fury.”⁴⁹ In March 1973 American B-52s dropped more than 24,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia; by April the tonnage increased to 35,000 tons; and in May the figure surpassed 36,000 tons. By the time the bombing campaign ended, American B-52s had dropped more than 260,000 tons of explosives on Cambodia.⁵⁰

45 Pierre Asseline, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement*, Chapel Hill 2003, 183.

46 Quoted in *ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, 183–184. See also Jeffrey Kimball, *The Case of the “Decent Interval”: Do We Now Have a Smoking Gun?* in: *SHAFR Newsletter* 32/3 (2001), 35–39; Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider’s Account of Saigon’s Indecent End Told by the CIA’s Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam*, Lawrence 2002; Jussi Hanhimäki, “Selling the Decent Interval”: Kissinger, Triangular Diplomacy, and the End of the Vietnam War, 1971–73, in: *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 14/1 (2003), 159–194; and Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics: Nixon’s Political Time Table for Withdrawing from Vietnam*, in: *Diplomatic History* 34/3 (2010), 497–506.

48 Central Intelligence Agency, *Military Assistance Alternatives for Cambodia* (22 April 1970), <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000200030003-0.pdf> (9 January 2021).

49 Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Cambodia*, Baltimore 1983, 217.

50 Shawcross, *Sideshow*, 2002, 294–295.

For Nixon and his advisors, Cambodia served a surrogate, political-military purpose, as it was necessary to sustain the Khmer Republic only insofar the Cambodians could prevent the rapid collapse of South Vietnam's inevitable downfall. Unlike their approach to neighbouring South Vietnam, the Nixon administration harboured no illusions of economic development or state-building in Cambodia. In the end, it had no real plans for Cambodia; nor was it excessively worried about Cambodia's political future. Effectively, the Nixon administration was never committed to defending Cambodia; nor was it ever a question of retaining a non-communist Khmer Republic. As Kissinger bluntly declared in late 1974: "The United States has nothing to gain in Cambodia."⁵¹

It was widely known among US officials that the United States' bombing of Cambodia contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge. Indeed, US military and civilian advisors warned *at the time* that America's war machine rallied Cambodia's men and women to the side of the Khmer Rouge. On 2 May 1973, for example, the CIA's Directorate of Operations provided details on a new recruitment drive launched by the Khmer Rouge:

"Khmer Insurgent (KI) cadre have begun an intensified proselyting [sic] campaign among ethnic Cambodian residents in the area of Chrouy Snao, Kaoh Thom district, Kandal province, Cambodia, in an effort to recruit young men and women for KI military organizations. They are using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda. The cadres tell the people that the Government of Lon Nol has requested the airstrikes and is responsible for the damage and the 'suffering of innocent villagers' in order to keep himself in power. The only way to stop 'the massive destruction of the country' is to remove Lon Nol and return Prince Sihanouk to power. The proselyting [sic] cadres tell the people that the quickest way to accomplish this is to strengthen KI forces so they will be able to defeat Lon Nol and stop the bombing.... This approach has resulted in the successful recruitment of a number of young men for KI forces. Residents around Chrouy Snao say that the propaganda campaign has been effective with refugees and in areas of Kaoh Thom and Leuk Dek districts which have been subject to B-52 strikes."⁵²

Chhit Do, a former Khmer Rouge subdistrict chief, remembers the bombing campaign and the 'lessons' taught by the Khmer Rouge:

51 Memorandum of Conversation, Ford Library, National Security Advisor, Kissinger Reports on USSR, China, and Middle East Discussions, Box 2, China Memcons and Reports, 25–29 November 1974, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v18/d97> (3 January 2021).

52 Quoted in Ben Kiernan, *The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969–1973*, in: *Vietnam Generation 1* (1989), 4–41, 13–14; see Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 1996, 22.

“They did use it [the bombing] to stigmatize the US. They said that all this bombing was an attempt to make us an American satellite, a manifestation of simply American barbarism, because, after all, as they pointed out, we had never done anything to these Americans, the people had never done anything at all to America.”

He continues:

“The ordinary people were terrified by the bombing and the shelling, never having experienced war, and sometimes they literally shit in their pants when the big bombs and shells came. Artillery bombardments usually involved 200-400 shells per attack, and some people became shell-shocked, just like their brains were completely disoriented. Even though the shelling had stopped, they couldn’t hold down a meal. Their minds just froze up and [they] would wander around mute and not talk for three or four days. Terrified and half-crazy, the people were ready to believe what they were told. What [the Khmer Rouge] said was credible because there were just so many huge bombs dropped. That was what made it so easy for the Khmer Rouge to win the people over [...]. It was because of their dissatisfaction with the bombing that they kept on cooperating with the Khmer Rouge, joining up with the Khmer Rouge, sending their children off to go with them, to join the Khmer Rouge [...].”⁵³

As Philip Short concludes, the combination of America’s carpet bombing campaign and the coup against Sihanouk “gave the Khmer Rouges a propaganda wind-fall which they exploited to the hilt—taking peasants for political education lessons among the bomb craters and shrapnel, explaining to them that Lon Nol had sold Cambodia to the Americans in order to stay in power and that the US, like Vietnam and Thailand, was bent on the country’s annihilation so that, when the war was over, Cambodia would cease to exist.”⁵⁴ Motivated by an expanded war, thousands of men, women, and even children joined the Khmer Rouge. In 1970, Khmer Rouge forces were marginal, numbering around 4,000 soldiers. Within two years, US analysts concluded Khmer Rouge forces had grown to between 35,000 and 50,000, with some estimates placing Khmer Rouge forces at over 150,000.⁵⁵

In a moment of frankness, Kissinger ruminated: “For a great nation to have gotten itself into these straits is unbelievable. People just won’t believe that we could do

⁵³ Kiernan, *American Bombardment*, (1989), 22.

⁵⁴ Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, New York 2005, 218.

⁵⁵ Kenton Clymer, *Troubled Relations. The United States and Cambodia since 1870*, DeKalb, Illinois 2007, 119.

this to ourselves [...].⁵⁶ Kissinger's comments, made on 2 November 1973, capture effectively his dawning realization that Nixon's reckless strategy to expand the Vietnam War into Cambodia had backfired. The United States let loose a maelstrom of violence on a sovereign state with no clear purpose beyond the furtive use of Cambodia as a sacrificial pawn to delay the inevitable collapse of South Vietnam. Neither Kissinger nor his advisors evinced any great concern for the people of Cambodia; nor did they take responsibility for the death and devastation they wrought on the country.

Ghosts haunt Cambodia's past and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum calls forth many of these spectres. A more full accounting of violence, however, requires that the ghostly apparitions of Nixon, Kissinger, and myriad other enablers similarly make their appearance. So why, then, are these spectral figures missing? In part, their omission is born of historical inertia. As David Chandler argues, the memorialization of the Cambodian genocide has been afflicted with a case of domestic amnesia. Simply put, many members of the government are former members of the CPK, including the long-serving Prime Minister, Hun Sen, who would like nothing more than to "dig a hole and bury the past."⁵⁷ Accordingly, the Phnom Penh government has been exceptionally reticent to reconsider the broader context of the genocide, beyond the severely circumscribed parameters established in the early years of the PRK regime. This amnesia has proved contagious, however, in that attendant geopolitical factors are likewise "buried in the past". No doubt there is an economic component to this memory loss, as the bulk of visitors to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum arrive from foreign destinations.⁵⁸ On this point, it is probably better to limit the display of violence to that conducted by the Khmer Rouge. However, there is an additional component. The purpose of the museum is to document violence *in situ*; namely to confront the horrors perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. And while I have argued that the fuller context of the genocide remains incomplete, haunted, by the absence of US military interventions (but also of French colonialism), perhaps the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is not the most appropriate forum to call forth the ghost of Nixon. Perhaps the absence of Nixon is indicative of a more capacious haunting that casts a dark shadow over the West.

56 Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-117, WSAG Meeting Minutes, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v10/d113> (3 January, 2021).

57 Chandler, *Cambodia Deals with its Past*, (2008), 356.

58 An estimated 80 per cent of annual visitors hail from outside Cambodia; that said, a not-insignificant Cambodians visit the site, including many thousands of school children. See for example Schlund-Vials, *Reframing Cambodia's Killing Fields*, (2019), 173, and J. John Lennon, *Tragedy and Heritage: The Case of Cambodia Tourism*, in: *Recreation Research* 34/1 (2009), 35–43.

Conclusions

Conversing with spectres, Colin Davis writes, is not undertaken in the expectation that they will reveal some secret, shameful or otherwise; rather, our encounter with spectres may bring to light the existence of secrets long buried.⁵⁹ A more complete account of the Khmer Rouge requires we conjure faraway ghosts of the past in order to hear the wails of the dead. The Khmer Rouge did not materialize in the ether of Pol Pot's imagination but instead on the battlefields of an illegitimate war waged on Cambodia's people. This is not to absolve the leadership of the Khmer Rouge; blood will always stain their hands. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the hauntology of the Cambodian genocide, as materially present in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, withholds other ghosts from making an appearance.

The 'official' narrative of the Cambodian genocide, given its early form through the curatorial decisions of Mai Lam, calls attention to the 'Pol Pot-Ieng Sary' clique.⁶⁰ The newly installed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government in 1979 following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge faced considerable international hostility. Vietnam's so-called invasion of Democratic Kampuchea was represented in world events, notably by the United States, as an illegal action taken upon a sovereign state. Indeed, the United States was exceptionally vocal in its condemnation of what they characterized as an instance of Soviet-backed aggression. Consequently, the PRK and Vietnam were impelled to justify their military intervention in the starkest terms possible: the elimination of a genocidal regime.

Vietnamese officials could not account for Khmer Rouge violence with ideological explanations, for both the Vietnamese communists and Khmer Rouge communists nominally shared a mutual Marxist-Leninist lineage. As such, the exhibition of violence at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was (and remains) embodied in the ghostly figures of Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, and a handful of other high-ranking Khmer Rouge cadre. In so doing, the 'official' narrative of the genocide did not (and still does not) consider other, foreign ghosts, particularly Nixon and Kissinger. Instead, the site remains much as it always was: a place "principally concentrated on a state-sanctioned prosecutorial agenda against the previous Democratic Kampuchean regime."⁶¹ As Lawther and colleagues write: "Selectivity in representation can lead to the creation of 'grievable lives' and 'grievable harms'

59 Davis, *État Présent*, (2005), 377.

60 See for example Ledgerwood, *The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum*, (1997); Chandler, *Cambodia Deals with its Past*, (2008); and Sion, *Conflicting Sites of Memory*, (2011).

61 Schlund-Vials, *Remembering Cambodia's Killing Fields*, (2019), 174.

while simultaneously filtering out the broader context of violence and other forms of victimization.”⁶²

The Cambodian genocide is effectively rendered to an aberration in time, a violent interruption that lasted three years, eight months, and twenty days – a period floating spectre-like in time. And on this point, the broader coordinates of the genocide – including those events that led up to and followed Khmer Rouge atrocities – remain hidden in the shadows. From 1979 onward, for example, as Vietnamese authorities struggled to bring Khmer Rouge atrocities to light, other foreign governments funnelled food and weapons to the former genocidaires. Indeed, the United States supported the Chinese who, in turn, provided much needed war materials and other supplies to the Khmer Rouge. Speaking in 1981, US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski explained, “I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot”. The United States, he added, “winked publicly” as China sent arms to the Khmer Rouge.⁶³

The absent-presence of foreign intervention in Cambodia’s genocide, particularly the lack of any geopolitical context of the genocide, remains a palpable omission in the commodified display of human atrocities at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. As such, the non-existence of geopolitical ghosts, including but not limited to those embodied by Nixon and Kissinger, will continually haunt the memory and memorialization of mass violence, as international visitors are shielded from the broad stage upon which the Cambodian genocide played out. Whether these ghosts *should* be exorcised at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, however, is a different matter. Justice demands a more complete account of the genocidal violence and should take seriously the countless hauntings of the past. If not here, then where?

62 Lawther et al., *Making (In?)Visible*, 2022, 68.

63 John Pilger, *How Thatcher Gave Pol Pot a Hand*, in: *New Statesmen* (17 April 2000), <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2014/04/how-thatcher-gave-pol-pot-hand> (25 March 2021).