3. Hitler, Pol Pot, and Hutu Power: Distinguishing Themes of Genocidal Ideology

At the "Killing Fields" memorial near Phnom Penh, shelves filled with human skulls testify to Cambodia's tragic past during the regime of Democratic Kampuchea in the years between 1975 and 1979.

UN Photo / John Isaac

Photo: Michael Marsland

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Hitler, Pol Pot, and Hutu Power: Distinguishing Themes of Genocidal Ideology

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The Nazi Holocaust of the Jews was history's most extreme case of genocide. The State-sponsored attempt at total extermination by industrialized murder of unarmed millions in less than five years has few parallels. Wholesale destruction of 5 million to 6 million Jews and the cataclysmic invasions of most of Europe and the USSR that made it possible required an advanced economy and a heavily-armed modern state. Yet the Nazi killing machine also had a more antiquated power source. It was operated by interlocking ideological levers that celebrated race, history, territory, and cultivation—all notions which may crop up in a range of technological contexts.

These powerful perpetrator preoccupations are also characteristic of other genocides. Common features of genocidal thinking can be identified even in cases that lacked the destructive power of the Holocaust. Indeed their perpetrators' ideological preoccupations can often be discerned from early stages of their careers, before they come to power or amass the military or organizational apparatus

required to carry out genocide. Description of these features common to many cases may help in the prediction and prevention of future genocides.

I will juxtapose Nazi ideology with that of two other genocide perpetrators: the Khmer Rouge rulers of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, and Rwanda's Hutu Power regime of 1994. Leaders of all three regimes held visions of the future partly inspired by ancient pasts—mythical and pristine—in which they imagined members of their original, pure, agrarian race, farming once larger territories that contained no Jews, no Vietnamese, and no Tutsis. The perpetrators of genocide against those victim groups shared preoccupations not only with ethnic purity but also with antiquity, agriculture, and expansionism. Genocidal thinking is usually racialist, reactionary, rural, and irredentist.

Hitler praised Arminius ("Hermann"), who annihilated ancient Roman legions, as "the first architect of our liberty", and the aggressive medieval monarch, Charlemagne, as "one of the greatest men in world history". In 1924, Hitler urged that "the new Reich must again set itself on the march along the road of the Teutonic knights of old, to obtain by the German sword sod for the German plow".[1]

A second model was Roman history itself, which Hitler considered "the best mentor, not only for today, but probably for all time". He considered Rome's genocide of Carthage in 146 BCE "a slow execution of a people through its own deserts". Classical Sparta was a third Nazi model. Hitler recommended in 1928 that a state should "limit the number allowed to live", and added: "The Spartans were once capable of such a wise measure… The subjugation of 350,000 Helots by 6,000 Spartans was only possible because of the racial superiority of the Spartans." They had created "the first racialist state". Invading the USSR in 1941, Hitler saw its citizens as

1 *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-44* (London, 1973), 78, 25, 289; Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York, 1999) 140, 654. Further details and citations may be found in Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, 2007), chs. 11, 15.

Helots to his Spartans: "They came as conquerors, and they took everything." A Nazi officer specified that "the Germans would have to assume the position of the Spartiates, while ... the Russians were the Helots."[2]

"I've just learnt", Hitler further remarked, "that the feeding of the Roman armies was almost entirely based on cereals." Now, he added, Ukraine and Russia "will one day be the granaries of Europe", but they merited that responsibility only with German agricultural settlement. "The Slavs are a mass of born slaves", Hitler claimed, but under the German peasant "every inch of ground is zealously exploited". Thus, "all winter long we could keep our cities supplied with vegetables and fresh fruit. Nothing is lovelier than horticulture." Germans were more advanced because "our ancestors were all peasants". But the country suffered from excessive, "harmful" industrialization, causing "the weakening of the peasant". Hitler considered "a healthy peasant class as a foundation for a whole nation... A solid stock of small and middle peasants has been at all times the best protection against social evils." "Germany's future", he claimed in 1933, "depends exclusively on the conservation of the peasant."[3]

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2 Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 423, 612, 668; *Hitler's Table Talk*, 118; Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Second Book* (New York, 2003), xxi, 21; *Der Generalplan Ost*, in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 6 (1958), 296.

3 *Hitler's Table Talk*, 26, 28, 33, 26, 116; *Mein Kampf*, 233-34, 138; J.E. Farquharson, *The Plough and the Swastika* (London, 1976), 216.

The Pol Pot regime's guide to Cambodia's ancient temples revealed its own official preoccupation with antiquity. It began: "Angkor Wat had been built between 1113 and 1152." Enemies such as the local Cham minority, victims of genocide under Pol Pot, were perennial. The temple of Angkor Thom, the guidebook went on, was built "after the invasion of Cham troops in 1177, who had completely destroyed the capital". Another publication added: "The marvellous monuments of Angkor [are] considered by the whole Humanity as one of the masterpieces of the brilliant civilization and the creative spirit of the working people of Kampuchea." As Pol Pot put it, "If our people can make Angkor, we can make anything." His victory in 1975 was of "greater significance than the Angkor period". Stalinism and Maoism offered the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) the political means to rival this medieval model and restore the rural tradition of an imagined era when, Pol Pot claimed, "our society used to be good and clean".[4]

It announced that the countryside itself, not the urban proletariat, comprised the vanguard of the revolution: "We have evacuated the people from the cities, which is our class struggle."

Maoism reinforced a Khmer Rouge fetish for rural life. In the 1960s, Prince Sihanouk's regime denounced Khmer Rouge rebels for "inciting people to boycott schools and hospitals and leave the towns". Rebels said of Sihanouk, "Let him break the soil like us for once." In his memoirs the former CPK head of state, Khieu Samphan, recalled meeting guerrilla commander Mok in the jungle. His account suggests Samphan was mesmerized by a rural romance. He found Mok dressed "like all the peasants", in black shorts and unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt. "The diffuse glow of the lamp nevertheless revealed to us the deep and piercing eyes which stood out on his bearded face."

4 Democratic Kampuchea, *Angkor* (1976 typescript), 11; *Democratic Kampuchea is Moving Forward* (Phnom Penh, 1977), 6, 2; David P. Chandler and Ben Kiernan, eds., *Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea* (New Haven, 1983), 35; Pol Pot, *Toussena: sopheapkar padevatt kampuchea baccabon*, 13 (?) July 1978, 16.

Mok "moved about freely, … sometimes bare-chested, revealing his hairy chest and arms … In fact, in the face of his activity, I became well aware of my limits. And more deeply, I felt pride to see this man I considered a peasant become one of the important leaders of a national resistance movement."[5]

As it expanded through Cambodia's countryside, the CPK divided Khmer society into "classes". In theory, the working class was "the leader", but in practice "the three lower layers of peasants" formed "the base" of the Party's rural revolution. The victorious CPK forcibly emptied Cambodia's cities in 1975, and acknowledged: "Concretely, we did not rely on the forces of the workers … they did not become the vanguard. In concrete fact there were only the peasants."[6] The CPK's main vision remained rural. Samphan claimed: "water is flowing freely, and with water the scenery is fresh, the plants are fresh, life is fresh and people are smiling … The poor and lower middle peasants are content. So are the middle peasants." Pol Pot added: "People from the former poor and lower middle peasant classes are overwhelmingly content … because now they can eat all year round and become middle peasants." That seemed to be the Party's view of the future. It went beyond even Maoism when it announced that the countryside itself, not the urban proletariat, comprised the vanguard of the revolution: "We have evacuated the people from the cities, which is our class struggle."[7] In crushing "enemies", CPK cadres resorted to agricultural metaphors such as "pull up the grass, dig up the roots", and proclaimed that victims' corpses would be used for "fertilizer".

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5 *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (SWB), FE/2784/A3/2; Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (New Haven, 2004), 287-88; Khieu Samphan, *Prowattisat kampuchea thmey thmey nih ning koul chomhor rebos khnyom cia bontor bontoap* (Phnom Penh, 2004), 27, 35.

6 *Rien saut daoy songkep nu prowatt chollana padevatt kampuchea kraom kar duk noam rebos paks kommunis kampuchea*, trans. in Chandler, D.P., Kiernan, B., and Boua, C., *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea*, 1976-1977 (New Haven, 1988), 219.

7 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (New Haven, 2008), 204; United States CIA, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 29 September 1977, H4; *Tung Padevat* (Sept.-Oct. 1976), 40, 52.

Territorial expansionism accompanied the agrarian cult. The regime launched attacks against all Cambodia's neighbours: Viet Nam, Laos and Thailand. The cost in Cambodian lives is unknown, but according to Hanoi, the Khmer Rouge killed approximately 30,000 Vietnamese civilians and soldiers in nearly two years of cross-border raids.[8] Pol Pot aimed to "stir up national hatred and class hatred for the aggressive Vietnamese enemy". Attacks into Viet Nam would "kill the enemy at will, and the contemptible Vietnamese will surely shriek like monkeys screeching all over the forest". Cambodia declared an expanded maritime frontier, and projected territorial changes in "Lower Cambodia" (*Kampuchea Krom*), land lost to Viet Nam since the early nineteenth century. Many CPK officials announced their goal to "retake Kampuchea Krom". Pol Pot ordered troops to "go in and wage guerrilla war to tie up the enemy by the throat". A CPK report claimed that most of the people of Kampuchea Krom sought "to join with the Kampuchean army in order to kill all the Vietnamese [*komtech yuon aoy os*]". In Cambodia, the Party accused most of its Khmer victims of having "Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds". The regime launched its biggest massacres of Cambodians with a call to "purify … the masses of the people".[9] From 1975 to 1979, CPK rule caused the deaths of approximately 1.7 million people, from overwork, disease, starvation, and murders of political and ethnic "enemies", including Vietnamese and Cham minorities.[10] Obsessions with race, history, cultivation, and territory all played roles in the Cambodian genocide.

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8 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 July 1988, 14.

9 Pol Pot, *Sekkedei nae noam rebos 870*, 3 January 1978, 12, 15-16, 4-8; Mam Nay, *Ompi sopheapkar niw srok phnom 7 (Svay Tong) kampuchea kraom*, 19 March 1978, 5; Phnom Penh Radio, 10 May 1978, BBC SWB, FE/5813/A3/2, 15 May 1978.

10 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 458; and "The Demography of Genocide in Southeast Asia: The Death Tolls in Cambodia, 1975-79, and East Timor, 1975-80", *Critical Asian Studies* 35:4, 2003, 585-97.

In ancient times, Rwanda had been a peaceful Hutu realm, "before the arrival of the Tutsis", wrote a leading perpetrator of the 1994 genocide. He asserted that "the Hutus of the great Bantu family and the Twa or pygmies of the smaller ethnic group were living harmoniously since as early as the ninth century". Then in the sixteenth century came a race of northern interlopers, the "Tutsis from Abyssinia".[11]

In 2003, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda convicted the major Hutu chauvinist historian, Ferdinand Nahimana, of genocide. Nahimana began his research in 1978 in the north-west of Rwanda, home of then President Juvénal Habyarimana and his wife, Agathe Kanziga, a princess of the former local Hutu court of Bushiru. Nahimana wrote that long before "the expansion and installation of Tutsi power" throughout Rwanda, northern Hutus had organized themselves into "States", each with a long history. From oral accounts by "direct descendants of the last Hutu princes", Nahimana listed nine kingdoms and their rulers. He projected these Hutu realms back into history, adding a generation of 33 years for each reign, and calculated that they had all "emerged in the course of the sixteenth century (6 monarchies) and the seventeenth century (3 monarchies)". The first king of Bushiru supposedly ruled from 1600 to 1633; Buhoma's founder "reigned between 1499 and 1532". Only after "429 years (1499-1928)", did Buhoma fall to "Tutsi occupation".[12] In part, the genocide of Tutsis was an attempt to reverse that historical outcome.

Like the Nazis and Khmer Rouge, Hutu Power's genocidal ideology combined conceptions of history and race with notions of agriculture and territory.

Nahimana concluded, for instance, that the term *umuhinza*, applied to north-western Hutu rulers brought under the Tutsi

11 Théoneste Bagosora, *L'assassinat du Président Habyarimana; ou, L'ultime opération du Tutsi pour sa reconquête du pouvoir par la force au Rwanda* (Yaoundé, 30 October 1995), 14.

12 Ferdinand Nahimana, "Les principautés Hutu du Rwanda septentrional", in *La civilisation ancienne des peuples des grand lacs* (Paris and Bujumburra, 1981), 125, 119, 115-16, 128-31, 134.

monarchy, derived from a word that denoted both "agricultural prosperity" and "territorial security". These north-west Hutu princes had retained local ritual prestige through this title, which meant in part, "the farmer par excellence governing a people of cultivators", or "President of Crops". Hutu-dominated regimes saw Rwanda's Tutsi minority not only as historical oppressors, but also as urban dwellers or cattle-raising pastoralists, not hardy peasant cultivators like the Hutu. Rural life and work became a fetish of Hutu Power. Nahimana rhapsodized about intellectuals who "have taken up the hoe, the pruning-knife or any other manual tool and have joined with the peasant masses to move earth with their hands and to live the effective reality of manual labour … Together, they have restored value to the hoe." As director of Rwanda's Office of Information from 1990, Nahimana determined to allow "at last, 'rural truth' to come out".[13]

The Hutu Power radio station, *Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines* (RTLM) combined agrarian themes with violent racism. It proclaimed in 1993: "Tutsi are nomads and invaders who came to Rwanda in search of pasture." RTLM's editor-in-chief announced three weeks before the genocide began in April 1994: "We have a radio here, even a peasant who wants to say something can come, and we will give him the floor. Then, other peasants will be able to hear what peasants think." At the height of the slaughter in mid-May, RTLM urged continuing efforts to "exterminate the Tutsi from the globe" and "make them disappear once and for all". A listener who became a killer told researcher Charles Mironko of hearing broadcasts of statements such as: "While a Hutu is cultivating, he has a gun", and "When the enemy comes up, you shoot at each other. When he retreats, then you take up your hoe and cultivate!" The hunt for Tutsis was expressed in slogans like "clear the bushes", or "separate the grass from the millet", and "pull out the poison ivy together with its roots". The official

13 Ferdinand Nahimana, "Les principautés Hutu", 123-24; Ferdinand Nahimana, *Conscience chez-nous, confiance en nous: Notre culture et la base de notre développement harmonieux* (Ruhengeri, 1998), 58; Charles Mironko, *Social and Political Mechanisms of Mass Murder: An Analysis of Perpetrators in the Rwandan Genocide* (Yale University Ph.D. dissertation, Anthropology Department, 2004), 148-49.

broadcaster, Radio Rwanda, also urged people to hunt down Tutsis, for instance on 12 April: "Do communal work to clear the brush, to search houses, beginning with those that are abandoned, to search the marshes of the area to be sure that no *inyenzi* [cockroaches, i.e. Tutsi] have slipped in." The Prefect of Kigali later portrayed the 1994 killings as the result of provocation by ethnic Tutsi attacks on an agrarian Hutu paradise. He blamed the supposedly "inter-ethnic" massacres on the opposition "Monoethnic Tutsi Army", which had disrupted "the sweet years of the Second Republic, when milk and honey flowed in plenty".[14]

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Hutu Power's world view was territorial too, with an expansionism that was both internal and aimed beyond Rwanda's borders. Habyarimana's 1973 coup, Gérard Prunier writes, had not only brought to power a Bushiru princess, but also ushered in a wave of "northern revenge" by a "fiercely Hutu" faction against the more liberal and tolerant southern Hutu communities. After Habyarimana's death on 6 April 1994, the northern chauvinists immediately turned to conduct the genocide of Tutsi. Prunier calls them "'the real northwesterners', the representatives of the 'small Rwanda' which had conquered the big one".[15] Their campaign suggests that they aimed to extend throughout Rwanda the ethnic Hutu purity of Bushiru, turning a regional identity into a racialized form of domestic irredentism.

Hutu Power's ethno-territorial ambitions were also external. Nahimana pointed out that the pre-colonial Tutsi kingdom of

14 Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York, 1999), 68-69, 249; Charles Mironko, *Social and Political Mechanisms*, 153, 151, 170; International Monitor Institute, "Kantano Habimana", *www.imisite.org/rwanda.php#3* (accessed 13 January 2006); Tharcisse Renzaho, *Guerre civile et les massacres inter-ethniques d'avril 94* (undated typescript), 14.

15 Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis* (New York, 1997), 86, 222.

Rwanda had also "extended its influence" to eastern Congo and southern Uganda, yet "this influence did not always signify political and administrative submission" by local polities. Like the Hutu kingdoms of north-west Rwanda, "these territories beyond modern Rwanda never ceased to be ruled by their own authorities". A historical potential therefore existed for an anti-Tutsi alliance transcending Rwanda's frontiers. Nahimana complained that European colonial regimes, too, had "murdered and mutilated" Rwanda, and "amputated" it by transferring Kinyarwanda-speaking districts to their colonies in Congo and Uganda. By the time of the fall of Hutu Power in July 1994, traditional Hutu claims to the north-west extended beyond the rest of Rwanda and now spread outside its borders as well. Hutu Power took its genocidal violence into neighbouring countries and attacked their Tutsi minorities. As Rick Orth has noted, they "not only continued to kill Tutsis in Rwanda but also targeted Banyarwanda Tutsis living in Eastern Congo". There, Hutu militias ranged across the Kivu provinces, massacred the local Tutsi cattle herders, and penetrated the Masisi plateau in an attempt "to eliminate the Banyamasisi Tutsi". Prunier explains that in this way they could create "a kind of 'Hutuland' which could be either a base for the reconquest of Rwanda or, if that failed, a new Rwanda outside the old one".[16]

A brief comparison of three twentieth century genocides shows that the history of the Nazi Holocaust includes warning signs that throw light on subsequent and possibly future cases. Along with violent racism or religious prejudice, obsessions with antiquity, agriculture and expansionism may often become signposts to genocide.

16 Richard Orth, "Rwanda's Hutu Extremist Insurgency: An Eyewitness Perspective", in Susan E. Cook, ed., *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda: New Perspectives* (New Brunswick [NJ], 2006), 224; Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 381.

Discussion questions

1. Although these genocides occurred in different social and historical contexts, what are the similarities and differences among them, according to Professor Kiernan?

2. What would be the benefit to taking a broad-based thematic approach to the study of genocide as opposed to analysing each occurrence individually?

3. How can the distinguishing characteristics of genocidal ideology defined by Professor Kiernan be applied to genocides other than the Holocaust, Rwanda or Cambodia?

4. To what extent could the feeling of economic and social insecurity create the preconditions for the development of genocidal ideology? In what ways can education help prevent irrational fear?

5. What intergovernmental mechanisms would be necessary to identify and act upon the warning signs of an impending genocide?