

A Flag with a Tortured Past

By Siegfried Ehrmann

The Prologue

The Cold War was still in full swing with China, the Soviet Union, and the United States jockeying for domination in a region known as Indochina, creating in the process many power struggles within the affected countries as well. The results are well known, yet the Cold War continued, and mostly under cover.

For most people on the outside world a country that once was called Cambodia had changed its name to Democratic Kampuchea, and for almost four years to come there was very little information of what was going on inside. The lights were turned off in Cambodia...

When the light came back, more than 1.8 millions (or more) of its own people were dead, Angkar was to blame. And *the organization* was synonymous with a group of Stone Age communists known as the Khmer Rouge who wanted to outdo Mao by turning the country and its people into an agrarian society with total disregard for human life, and within the shortest possible amount of time.

The man behind this ludicrous scheme turned out to be a man named Saloth Sar, who was to become known as Pol Pot or Brother Number One. He and his regime of *Brothers* not only terrorized the people and ruined the country during their reign from 1975-1979, they were even allowed to play a political role in the turbulent years that followed, thanks to the continued involvement of the various Cold War players.

While Pol Pot never faced an official court of law (he died in his sleep in 1998), other members of his regime are now on trial in Phnom Penh. After years of delays the UN backed *Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* (ECCC) genocide tribunal has finally started its work in 2007, with the trials to begin in 2008, and a process that is going to last for at least another three to four years, provided additional funds will can be secured.

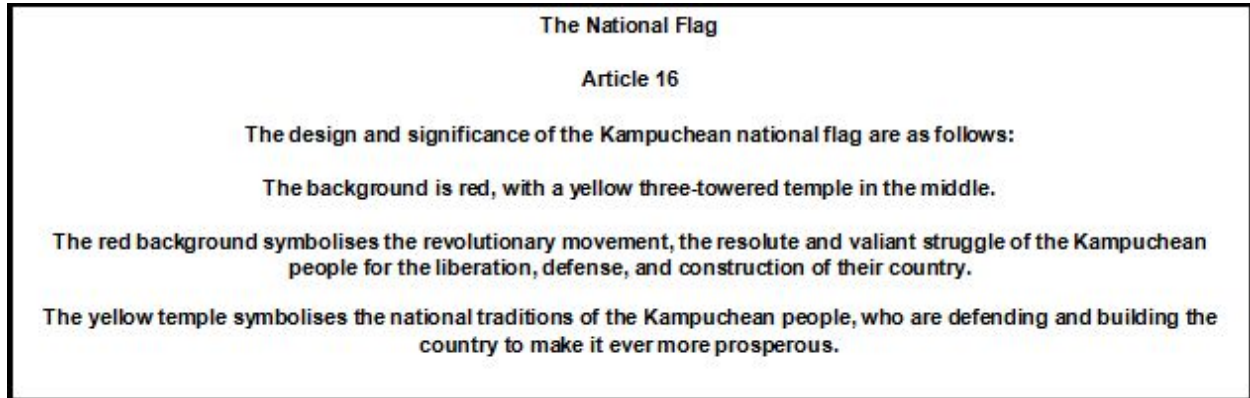
The only defendants so far are some of Pol Pot's closest associates: Khieu Samphan (former head of state), Nuon Chea (Brother Number Two and Pol Pot's deputy), Ieng Sary (former foreign minister), Ieng Thirith (wife of Ieng Sary and former social affairs minister), and Kaing Guek Eav (also known as Duch, the former head of S-21 Tuol Sleng). They are all facing charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and it is hoped by many Cambodians that a speedy trial will reach a verdict before the accused will die of ill health or old age.

Most of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime have been revealed over the years – historians have analyzed the political systems, the key players and their reasons; some victims have reported their stories in books, and some will have a chance to do so at the forthcoming trial; and for a broader audience the movie *The Killing Fields* portrayed the time after the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh, and then enslaved the entire country and its people.

However, with all the information available now, very little is known about the flag that represented the country during those fateful years. Let's take a look back.

Democratic Kampuchea and its Flag

On January 5, 1976, roughly nine months after the country was conquered by the Khmer Rouge, the government of Democratic Kampuchea promulgated a new constitution and declared in Chapter Eleven:



With that declaration in hand the United Nations in New York on April 6, 1976 accepted yet another name change - from initially Cambodia (1955-1970) to Khmer Republic (1970-1975), again to Cambodia (1975-1976), and now to Democratic Kampuchea.

That same year historian David P. Chandler mentioned in his article *The Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia): The Semantics of Revolutionary Change* that "the new flag closely resembled the flag of the so-called Khmer Viet Minh movement of the early 1950s".



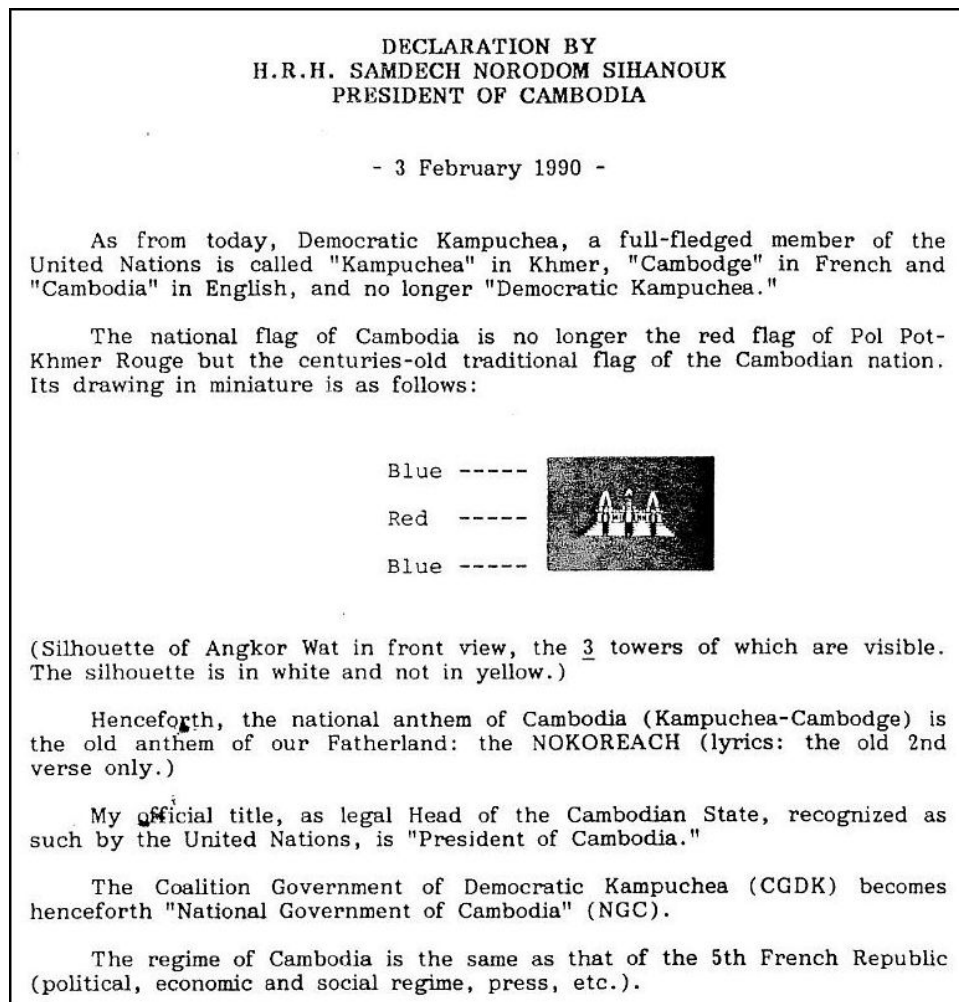
Laos - Kampuchea - Vietnam United Front meeting in Laos, 1950

DC-CAM

Although the Khmer version of the constitution contains without any doubt the word "temple", it has also been reported that a French language version of the new constitution was supposedly handed out by the Pol Pot government in which the term "temple" was replaced by the word "monument", however, a copy of the document supporting that version has not been found.

After the defeat of the Pol Pot regime in 1979 Cambodia went through some major political turmoil, with numerous political parties, government coalitions, and foreign powers struggling for dominance, and some flag changes went along with it. But those flags never made it to the UN, and neither did the interim governments that were de facto arranged by Vietnam and generally opposed by most other countries, and as a precedent it was not to be accepted for fear of future repetition by others countries. The paradox: "you may kill millions of your own people, as the Khmer Rouge had done, but for a neighboring country to step across the border to overthrow that government, was seen as bad manners and a disregard of a country's sovereignty" (Cambodia expert Bruce Sharp).

And so, at the United Nations in New York, the flag of Democratic Kampuchea kept flying, even though the new Cambodia was recognized by the UN on February 3, 1990, supported by Norodom Sihanouk's declaration of the same day.



Cambodia's Declaration to the UN introducing the new flag

Image: UN Archive

Neither the UN nor their official flag contractor were able to provide any records as to the exact time frame the flag of Democratic Kampuchea was actually in use at the UN in New York.

But in his 1999 article *Cambodia's Twisted Path to Justice* historian Ben Kiernan writes that “from 1979 to 1982 the Khmer Rouge continued to hold Cambodia's seat alone, using the name 'Democratic Kampuchea.' Then two smaller non-communist parties joined them in a 'Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea' -- in fact neither a real coalition, nor a government, nor democratic, nor in Cambodia! Thus the Khmer Rouge flag flew over New York until 1992”.

In Search of a flag

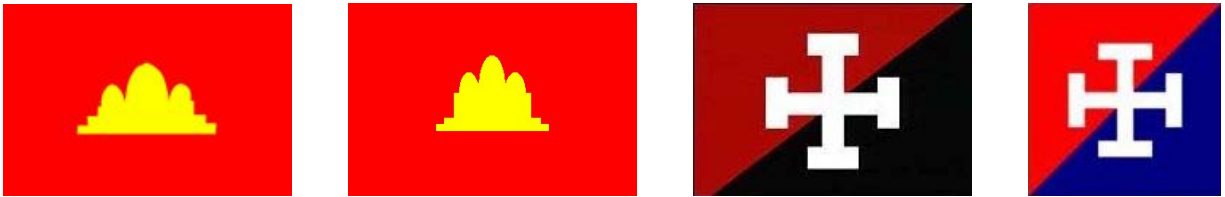
During a recent visit to the *War Museum* in Siem Reap the author noticed some small red and yellow flags with a stylized Angkor Wat design that reminded him of the Khmer Rouge, and a museum guide volunteered that they were surely from that period, without providing any additional information.



Display at the *War Museum*, Siem Reap

Image: Siegfried Ehrmann

However, a quick search on the internet revealed various flag depictions but no images of an original Democratic Kampuchea flag.



Commonly featured Internet versions of the flag of Democratic Kampuchea

Some of the internet flags feature either some rendition of “a yellow temple with three towers on a red background” with little or no resemblance of Angkor Wat, or show a flag in either red/black or red/blue with a so called white crutch cross - the latter version belonging to the Mouvement National (Monatio), a small obscure political faction that enthusiastically welcomed the Khmer Rouge upon their arrival in Phnom Penh (as filmed by Christoph Maria Froehder), but were quickly eliminated in the process.



Monatio member on April 17, 1975 in Phnom Penh
Image by Christoph Maria Froehder/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Because the commonly featured yellow temple internet flags are graphically created postmortem renditions and not a document, a major research project was started to find a photo of the actual flag of Democratic Kampuchea.

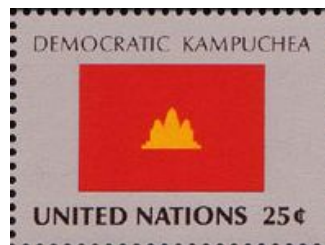
Very few foreign journalists were invited by the Khmer Rouge regime, and not too many photos have survived that period, except for the many thousands that were taken at the S-21 Toul Sleng detention center.

Occasionally black/white photos would surface that feature a red flag, but due to the bad quality of the image it could not be determined if it contained the Angkor Wat design, if it had a hammer and sickle on it, or if it was simply just that, a red flag.



Democratic Kampuchea Magazine (April 1978) - Image: KRTrial/DC-CAM

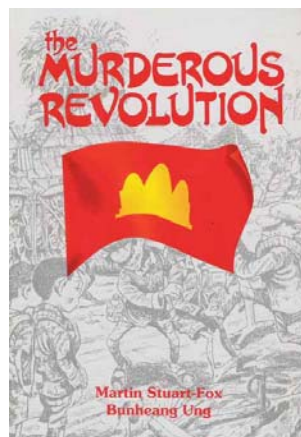
The first breakthrough came with the discovery of a postage stamp. It turned out that on September 22, 1989 the Postal Administration of the United Nations (UNPA) had issued as part of their flag series a stamp featuring the flag of Democratic Kampuchea (in a block together with those of Honduras, Guinea-Bissau, and Cyprus).



UN postage stamp Democratic Kampuchea, 1989

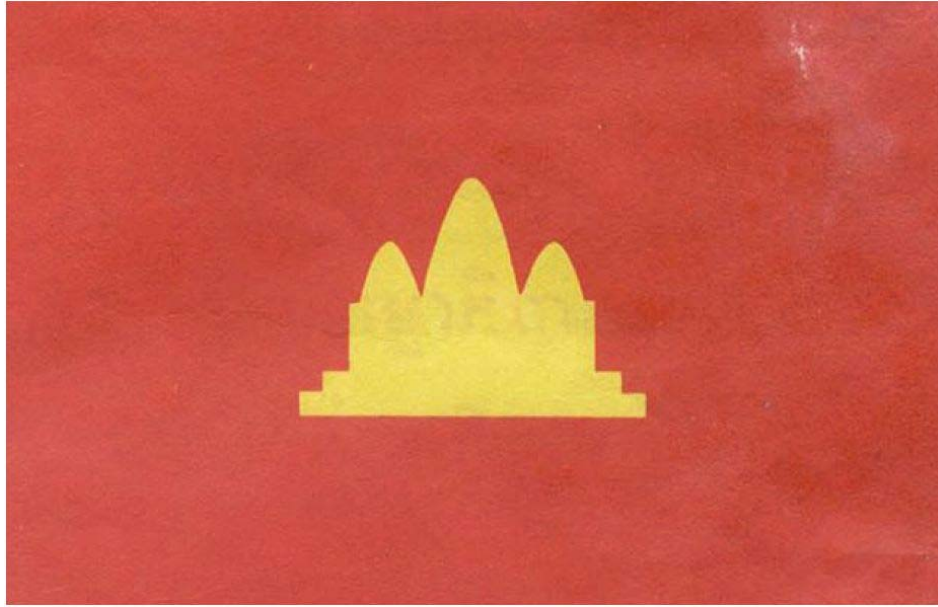
The UN stamp features a flag depicting Angkor Wat with pointed towers, and according to sources at the United Nations, the same flag design used to fly there in New York.

Another version of the flag came to light on the cover of the book "The Murderous Revolution" by Martin Stuart-Fox and Bunheang Ung.



"The Murderous Revolution"
Image: Orchid Press

Ultimately, the only confirmation of the actual Angkor Wat design on the flag of Democratic Kampuchea was discovered on a photo in the book "*A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*" by Khamboly Dy (Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007).



The flag of Democratic Kampuchea

Image: DC-CAM

The Conclusion

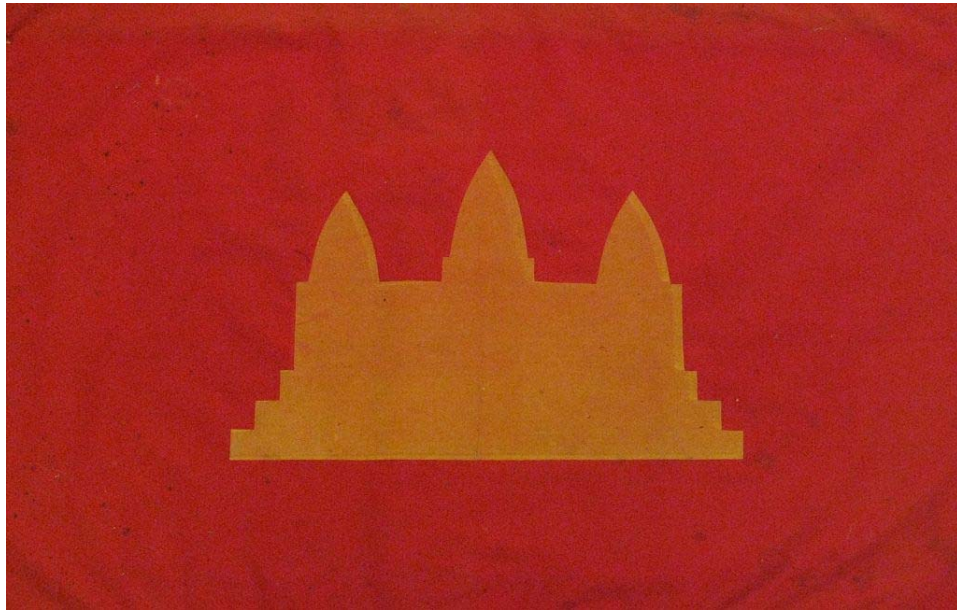
And that will basically answer the question what the flag of Democratic Kampuchea actually looked like.

It is not known if those flags were initially manufactured by friendly socialist states, or if they were made within the country. It can possibly be assumed that they were made locally, the colors might have varied according to what kind of dye was available at the time, or the colors might have faded, and in addition some variations might have occurred as well. Also, it will never be learned how many of those national flags were ever made.

For sure, the Khmer Rouge were not design minded and used very rudimentary depictions that would not conflict with their anti-bourgeoisie agenda as is reflected in the design of their national emblem or their bank notes, and since they did not have to show off the flag it is quite possible that a simple red flag would have sufficed most of the time.

The initial purpose of the investigation was to learn more about the background of the museum flag in Siem Reap, in the process the real flag of Democratic Kampuchea was rediscovered.

Yet in the end, the question still remains – where does the flag from Siem Reap's *War Museum* fit in?



Flag at the *War Museum*, Siem Reap

Image: Siegfried Ehrmann

With its more pointed towers and three instead of two tiers it could have been used prior to 1975, perhaps as a variant during the time from 1975 to 1979, or even after 1979 by some of the Khmer Rouge's remaining followers.

Perhaps historian Steve Heder has the best explanation by saying that “the differences reflected mainly the skill and ambition of the tailor or seamstress”.

And of course, it could also be a fake.

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