

Scientific

THE LIFE COURSE OF POL POT: HOW HIS EARLY LIFE INFLUENCED THE CRIMES HE COMMITTED

*Myra de Vries*¹ *

Maartje Weerdesteijn **

ABSTRACT

International criminology focuses mostly on the lower level perpetrators even though it finds the leader is crucial for orchestrating the circumstances in which these people kill. While numerous theories from ordinary criminology have been usefully applied to these lower level perpetrators, the applicability of these theories to the leaders has remained underexplored. In order to fill this gap, the life course theory of Sampson and Laub will be applied to Pol Pot whose brutal communist regime cost the lives of approximately 1.7 million people. A unusual childhood, the influence of peers while he studied in Paris, and his marriage to a woman who shared his revolutionary mind-set, were all negative turning-points for Pol Pot.

I. Introduction

Mass violence is constructed as something extraordinary that violates cosmopolitan, and perhaps even universal, norms.² The extraordinary nature of these crimes lies in the fact that these are very often a state-directed effort to harm or kill marginalised groups. These crimes are also referred to as “crimes of obedience,”³ since lower level perpetrators often obey high level orders unquestioningly without taking personal responsibility for the ethical repercussions.⁴

¹Myra de Vries graduated her BSc Criminologie at Leiden University in 2012, and is currently a student in the MSc International Crimes and Criminology programme.

²Maartje Weerdesteijn is an assistant professor at the department of criminology at VU University Amsterdam and researcher at the Center for International Criminal Justice. Her PhD research “The Rationality of Dictators” was published with Intersentia and defended at Tilburg University in 2016. She previously worked as a lecturer at the History of International Relations department at Utrecht University.

The authors would like to thank Jantien Stuifbergen and Frank van Gemert for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of the article.

³M.A. Drumbl, *Towards a Criminology of International Crimes*, Washington: Washington & Lee 2003.

⁴H. C. Kelman, The Social Context of Torture: Policy Process and Authority Structure. In: Crelinston, R.D. & A.P. Schmid. (Eds.). *The Politics of Pain: Torturers and their masters*. Leiden: COMT 1993, pp. 21-38.

⁵H.C. Kelman, & V.L. Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Psychology of Authority and Responsibility*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

Crimes outside of this context are rather conceived as being somehow deviant – separate from mainstream society and culture.⁵ For those “normal” crimes many criminological theories have been developed to study the ‘nature, extent, cause and control of law-breaking behaviour’.⁶ Until recently criminology has largely ignored genocide and other international crimes.⁷ The extent to which ‘normal’ criminological theories apply to international crimes could also be questioned because of the special character of these crimes; they are extremely brutal, collectively perpetrated and often tied to a particular political ideology.⁸ However, over the last twenty years, international criminology⁹ developed into a thriving field in which traditional criminological theories have been usefully applied to situations of international crimes.¹⁰ These theories have been mostly used to explain the behavior of low level perpetrators who actually tortured, maimed or killed. While international criminology acknowledges the importance of leaders in orchestrating the situations in which people come to commit such heinous acts,¹¹ their behavior has rarely been analyzed using more traditional criminological theories.¹² However, not trying is unfortunate, as the leaders who orchestrate mass atrocities are vital examples of perpetrators of international crimes that do not act out of obedience – just like many ‘normal’ criminals. Applying more traditional criminological theories to these leaders, therefore, is worthwhile and may be able to provide significant insight into why these individuals commit their crimes.

The analysis in this paper will focus on Pol Pot, who took over power after a brutal civil war in Cambodia. In doing so, he initially and very explicitly acted against the societal norms at the time in an effort to bring forth an egalitarian, communist society. His communist ideals were extreme, and these extreme ideals led to the crimes he committed when in charge. After he took the reins of power in 1975, his brutal regime caused the death of approximately 1.7

⁵K. Anderson, *The Dehumanisation Dynamic: A Criminology of Genocide*. Dublin: National University of Ireland 2011.

⁶M. Lanier & S. Henry, *Essential Criminology*. Boulder: Westview Press 2004.

⁷J. Hagan, W. Rymond-Richmond & P. Parker, ‘The criminology of Genocide: The death and rape of Darfur’. *Criminology* 2005-4, pp. 525-561.

⁸H.C. Kelman, & V.L. Hamilton (1980) *supra* note 5.

⁹Meaning criminology that focuses on genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, also known as international crimes.

¹⁰A. Alvarez, *Governments, Citizens and Genocide: A Comprehensive Interdisciplinary Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001., A. Smeulers & N. Van Nickerk, ‘Abu Ghraib and the War on Terror – A case against Donald Rumsfeld?’ *Crime Law and Social Change* 2009-51(3-4), pp. 327-349., E. Day & M. Vandiver, ‘Criminology and genocide studies: Notes on what might have been and what still could be.’ *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 2000-34, pp. 43-59., D. Maier-Katkin, D.P. Mears, & T.J. Bernard, ‘Towards a criminology of crimes against Humanity’, *Theoretical Criminology* 2009-13, pp. 227-255., H. Nyseth-Brehm, C. Uggem & J.D. Gasanabo, ‘Age, Gender, and the Crime of Crimes: Towards a life course theory of genocide participation.’ *Criminology* 2016-4, pp. 713-743.

¹¹A.L. Smeulers & B. Hola, ICTY and the culpability of different perpetrators of international crimes. In: A. Smeulers, (Ed.). *Collective Violence and International Criminal Justice: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Antwerp: Intersentia 2010, p. 178.

¹²The exceptions often use rational choice, which is common in both criminology and political science. For examples where dictatorial leaders are analysed using rational choice theory, even though they are not written from an explicitly criminological perspective, see: B. Bueno de Mesquita & A. Smith *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behaviour is Almost Always Good Politics*. New York: Public Affairs 2011., A. Escriba Folch, ‘Authoritarian Responses to Foreign Pressure: Spending, Repression And Sanctions.’ *Comparative Political Studies* 2012-6, pp. 683-713., B. J. Kinne, ‘Decision Making in Autocratic Regimes: A Poliheuristic Perspective.’ *International Studies Perspectives*, 2005-1, pp. 114-128., R. Wintrobe. ‘The Tinpot and the Totalitarian: An Economic Theory of Dictatorship.’ *The American Political Science Review*, 1990-3, pp. 849-872.

million people.¹³ While his subordinates can potentially claim they were acting out of obedience, Pol Pot violated international human rights rules and norms. Therefore the behaviour of Pol Pot as the leader of the Khmer Rouge will be regarded as deviant behaviour. This paper aims to further the debate within international criminology by analysing Pol Pot in accordance with Sampson and Laub's life course theory.¹⁴ Pol Pot concealed, clouded and falsified many details about his life and, therefore, a personal analysis of him is complicated.¹⁵ However, using Sampson and Laub's life course theory¹⁶ might allow for more insight into the impact that different turning points in his life had on his intentions to commit the heinous crimes that would cost the lives of so many individuals. This leads to the research question: *to what extent can the life course theory of Sampson and Laub be used to analyse why political leaders decide to perpetrate or orchestrate international crimes?*

Sampson and Laub theorised that there are numerous turning points in an individual's life that could potentially lead individuals back into conformity. Later research has indicated that some of these same turning points can also have the opposite effect.¹⁷ We will analyse how these turning points influenced the behaviour of Pol Pot in his early life when he decided to join the resistance and fight a civil war in order to establish a brutal communist regime. Since he started to implement his ferocious policies immediately into his regime, our analysis will cover his life until he seized power. Before he gained control over the entire country, Pol Pot had already implemented the policies that led to the death of a large part of the population in the areas that were already under his control, which indicates that the later crimes were merely a continuation of earlier decisions.¹⁸ Most literature that analyses turning points in people's lives is either based on a quantitative analysis, or interviews in order to understand the individuals' choices at these crucial junctures in their life. Our data is necessarily much more limited and restricted to mostly biographies of Pol Pot's life, and the limited number of interviews and speeches he gave. Since the facts of his life are studied extensively by numerous historians, enough information was available to provide some insight into the effect that these turning points had on Pol Pot, but the lack of data remains a significant limitation of the present study.

Another important pitfall with a life course approach is that there is a risk of not attributing sufficient attention to the situation and historical or cultural context in which the crimes are perpetrated. Life course criminology too often neglects societal developments that have an impact on the individual.¹⁹ In this case the cultural context of Cambodian society has to be taken into account as well, since the life course theory was originally developed for crimes occurring in Western societies. This is potentially even more problematic in analyses of perpetrators of international crimes, since they often occur alongside extreme circumstances

¹³T. Broadhurst, T. Bouhours & B. Bouhours, *Violence and the civilising process in Cambodia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015.

¹⁴R. J. Sampson & J. H. Laub, *Crime in the making: pathways and Turning Points through life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993., R.J. Sampson & J. H. Laub, *Shared beginnings, Divergent lives. Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003.

¹⁵D.P. Chandler, *Brother Number one. A Political Biography of Pol Pot*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 1999., P. Short, *Pol Pot. The History of a Nightmare*. London: John Murray Publishers 2004.

¹⁶Sampson & Laub (1993, 2003) *supra* note 15.

¹⁷M. Van Schellen, R. Apel, P. Nieuwebeerta, (2012) "Because You're Mine, I Walk the Line"? Marriage, Spousal Criminality, and Criminal Offending Over the Life Course.' *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 2012-4, pp. 701-723.

¹⁸E. Becker, *When the War was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*. New York: Public Affairs 1998.

¹⁹F.H.M. Van Gemert, *Van prison gang tot TBS; Biografie van een gewelddadig man*. Meppel: Just Publishers 2011.

such as war and political and economic crises.²⁰ In order to minimize these problems, the turning points of Pol Pot's life will always be discussed in their broader cultural, historical and political context.

In the next section, the evolution of international criminology will be discussed with a particular focus on the manner in which leaders have been analysed. Thereafter, in section three, the theory of Sampson and Laub will be discussed more in depth. The sections that follow will focus on the case study. In section four, the history of Cambodia leading up to Pol Pot's reign will be detailed in order to provide the situational context in which he made his decisions. Subsequently in section five, Pol Pot's life course is outlined, focusing, in section six, on how the turning points influenced Pol Pot's decision to commit mass atrocities. In the conclusion the research question will be answered.

II. International Criminology: The Perpetrators

For a long time, criminology neglected international crimes like genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes because it focused on deviant behaviour that was criminalised by the state.²¹ Exemplary is the influential work of Sutherland, Cressey and Luckenbill²² in which they state that no matter how immoral behaviour is, it can only be called a crime when it is criminalised by the state. International crimes, on the other hand, were criminalised by the international community, while the acts themselves were often in conformity with the norms, and sometimes even the laws of the country. Criminologists only became interested in these crimes when, after the Cold War was over, international criminal justice was given a new impulse with the establishment of the ad hoc tribunals of Rwanda and Yugoslavia.²³

Scholars from various fields set out to explain genocide and other mass atrocities. Shortly after the Second World War, the assumption that there must be something wrong with the perpetrators of these horrible acts was quite prevalent in academia.²⁴ In the years that followed, the Eichmann trial which led to Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil and the socio-psychological experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo sparked more research which indicated that these were just "ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances."²⁵ The leader was mainly seen as someone who creates the "extraordinary circumstances" in which "ordinary

²⁰E. Staub, 'Genocide and mass killing: Origins, prevention, healing and reconciliation', *Political Psychology*, 2000-2, pp. 369-370., E. Wayne Nafziger & J. Auvinen, 'Economic development, inequality, war, and state Violence', *World Development*, 2002-2, pp. 153-163., L.M. Woolf & M.R. Hulsizer, 'Psychosocial roots of genocide: Risk, prevention, and Intervention', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2005-1, pp. 101-128.

²¹G.S. Yacoubian, 'The (in)significance of genocidal behaviour to the discipline of criminology', *Crime, Law & Social Change*, 2000-1, pp. 7-19.

²²E.H. Sutherland, D. R. Cressey, D. F. Luckenbill, *Principles of Criminology*, Lanham: General Hall 1992.

²³R. Haveman, A. Smeulers, 'Criminology in a State of Denial - Towards a Criminology of International Crimes: Supranational Criminology'. In: Smeulers, A. & R. Haveman (Eds.). *Supranational Criminology: Towards a Criminology of International Crimes*. Antwerpen: Intersentia 2008.

²⁴A.L. Smeulers & F. Grunfeld, *International Crimes and other gross human rights violations: a Multi- and Interdisciplinary Textbook*, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 2011.

²⁵H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press 1963., J. Waller, 'Perpetrators of Genocide: An Explanatory Model of Extraordinary Human Evil', *Journal of Hate Studies*, 2001-2-1, pp. 5-22.

people” commit their crimes.²⁶ Criminologists built on these theories when they started to join the debate on mass atrocities. They drew parallels between theories that sought to explain mass atrocities, and criminological theories that were developed to analyse ordinary crimes.²⁷

It was argued that the leader was “most culpable” when international crimes were perpetrated²⁸, but the focus of most of the literature was on the motivations of the low-level perpetrator, and reasons why they committed the crimes²⁹. The motivations of the leaders were mainly explored by scholars in other disciplines who wrote biographies on them and thoroughly analysed their decision-making process.³⁰

The literature within international criminology continues to grow in sophistication and nuance as more field-research is done and scholars increasingly seek to move beyond the socio-psychological experiments that dominated the field for such a long time.³¹ Traditional theories are currently modified and refined to the specific circumstances of international crimes³², new theories are developed within criminology and related disciplines³³ and more traditional theories, including life course analysis³⁴, are used to study the perpetrators of international crimes. The focus of the abovementioned literature, however, continues to lay predominantly with the lower ranking perpetrators. This is regrettable, since leaders too, as Mandel, who examined Hitler from a social-psychological perspective, rightfully points out, are merely people and subject to the same social-psychological pressures.³⁵ Considering that they are not the ones that perpetrate crimes of obedience but, as this case study will show, initially often go against existing societal norms, traditional criminological theories might be more fruitfully applied to them.

III. Life course Criminology: Turning Points

In *Crime in the Making*, Robert Sampson and John Laub³⁶ proposed to explain crime over the life course through a theory of age-graded informal social control. They noticed that since crime rates peak during adolescence, many sociological studies of crime tended to focus on this period. Sampson and Laub³⁷, however, noted that by concentrating on the teenage years,

²⁶Woolf & Hulsizer (2005) *supra* note 21., D.R. Mandel, ‘Instigators of Genocide: Examining Hitler from a Social-Psychological Perspective’. In: L.S. Newman & R. Erber (Eds.), *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002.

²⁷Day & Vandiver (2000) *supra* note 11.

²⁸Smeulers & Hola (2010) *supra* note 12, p. 180.

²⁹For an overview of the crimes committed see: A.L. Smeulers & F. Grunfeld (2011) *supra* note 25.

³⁰See for instance: J.M. Post, *Leaders and their followers in a dangerous world: The psychology of political behaviour*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2004., Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16., Bullock, A. *Hitler and Stalin – Parallel lives*. London: HarperCollins 1991.

³¹A. Brannigan, I. Nicholson, F. Cherry, ‘Introduction to the special issue: Unplugging the Milgram machine’, *Theory & Psychology*, 2015-5, pp. 551-563., R. Overy, “‘Ordinary Men,’ Extraordinary Circumstances: Historians, Social Psychology, and the Holocaust’. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2014-3, pp. 515-530.

³²K. Anderson, *Perpetrating Genocide: A Criminological Account*. London: Routledge 2018., D.L. Rothe, C.W. Mullins, ‘Towards a Criminology of International Criminal Law: An Integrated Theory of International Criminal Violations’, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 2009-1, pp. 97-118.

³³A.L. Smeulers, ‘Historical Overview of Perpetrator Studies’. In: A.L. Smeulers, M. Weerdesteijn, B. Hola (Eds.). *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theory, Methodology, and Evidence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

³⁴H. Nyseth-Brehm, C. Uggen, J. D. Gasanabo, (2016) *supra* note 11.

³⁵Mandel (2002) *supra* note 27.

³⁶Sampson & Laub (1993) *supra* note 15.

³⁷*Ibid.*

sociological perspectives on crime have failed to address the life-span implications of childhood behaviour.³⁸ They based their theory on Hirschi's social bond theory, which studied the impact of social bonds on youngsters.³⁹ Sampson and Laub indicated that the social bond theory could be broadened to understand the continuity and change in offending across the entire life course – from childhood, to adolescence and into adulthood.⁴⁰ Their theory emphasizes the importance of social ties, at all ages, across the life course. The general principle was that crime and deviance are more likely to occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. Important are the role of informal social controls that emerge from the social exchanges and the structure of interpersonal bonds that link members of society to one another and to wider institutions such as work, family, school and community.⁴¹

During the first stages of life, the most salient social control is exercised by the family, using both direct controls (monitoring) and indirect controls (attachment). Parenting styles (supervision, warmth, consistent discipline) and emotional attachment to parents in childhood, affect the life course of a person. Beyond the family, deviant behaviour is fostered with weak school ties and attachment to delinquent peers.⁴² Individual traits and childhood experiences are important for understanding one's behavioural stability, but experiences in adolescence and adulthood can redirect criminal trajectories in either a more positive or more negative manner.⁴³ Moffitt, who conducted an elaborate study into adolescence-limited and life course persistent delinquents, adds to this that individuals with a more problematic past are less likely to change, causing one to persist with crime and deviance over a lifetime.⁴⁴

There is a strong connection between childhood events and experiences in adulthood. However, the turning points can redirect these paths.⁴⁵ Sampson and Laub state that during adolescence the main focus should be on social bonds. Weakening adult social bonds are likely to enforce delinquency. In spite of that, if meaningful social bonds are established during adulthood they can function as a "turning-point" that leads offenders into conformity. The major turning points defined by Sampson and Laub include marriage and, or spouses, having children, military service, school, work and residential change.⁴⁶

Turning points can be abrupt, creating radical "turnarounds" or changes in life history that separate the past from the future.⁴⁷ Adaptation to these turning points is crucial, for the same event or transition followed by different adaptations can lead to different trajectories.⁴⁸ Important about these turning points is that they all involve to varying degrees: (1) a new situation that 'knives off' the past from the present, (2) new situations that provide both supervision and monitoring as well as new opportunities of social support and growth, (3) new situations that change and structure routine activities, and (4) new situations that provide the opportunity for identity transformation. Investing time and resources in those life events makes risking these investments by conducting criminal behaviour non-negotiable.⁴⁹

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ T. Hirschi, *Causes of Criminology*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1969.

⁴⁰ Sampson & Laub (1993) *supra* note 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ T.E. Moffitt, 'Adolescence-Limited and Life course-Persistent Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental Taxonomy', *Psychological Review*, 1993-100(4), pp. 674-701.

⁴⁵ Sampson & Laub (1993) *supra* note 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ G.H.Jr. Elder, (1985). Perspectives on the Life course. *Life course Dynamics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1985, pp. 23-49.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ R.J. Sampson & J. H. Laub, 'A Life course view of the Development of Crime', *The Annals of the American Academy*, 2005-602(1), pp. 12-45.

When looking at Sampson and Laub's life course theory, it could seem as if turning points only influence the desistence of crime.⁵⁰ However, as is pointed out by them, when not accepting a situation as a turning point, it has no deterrent influence on the criminal career of an individual. It may even enhance the deviant behaviour of someone, largely depending on the quality or strength of social bonds involved.⁵¹ In a Dutch study, Van Schellen, Apel, and Nieuwebeerta found that for a marriage to function as a turning point it is important who you marry, as marriage to a criminal partner could sustain or even stimulate an offender's engagement in criminal activities over time.⁵²

The study that Sampson and Laub conducted and based their theory on was quantitative, and most researchers who use this life course theory also mainly rely on such data. One of the main critiques on their study came from John Modell.⁵³ He stated that despite the claims of Sampson and Laub that they integrated a person-based and a variable-based analysis in *Crime in the Making*, their main focus was largely variable-based.⁵⁴ In their more recent work, Sampson and Laub⁵⁵ had a more qualitative approach, but most research that analyses life course trajectories continues to be based predominantly on larger datasets. The present study will deviate from this general trend. It will make use of an in-depth case study of Pol Pot, using predominantly the biographies written by Chandler and Short as its main sources.⁵⁶ Although it is not done very often, there are some well-known examples of biography life course studies in criminology.⁵⁷ This study will be a contribution to the field of life course criminology by applying this method to a situation of international crimes.

IV. Cambodia: The Situational Context

When applying criminological theories that have been developed for ordinary crimes to international crimes, it is important to remember the context in which these crimes occurred. International crimes are often perpetrated in periods of major social upheaval.⁵⁸ Leaders are influenced by the history of the country, thus they should be analysed in the context of societal developments during their lives.⁵⁹

Most Cambodians consider themselves Khmer, descendants of the Angkor Empire that extended over much of South-East Asia and reached its zenith between the 10th and 13th centuries.⁶⁰ During those years, the massive temples of Angkor Watt were built. Attacks by the Thai and Cham (today Vietnam) weakened the empire, ushering in a long period of decline.

⁵⁰Sampson & Laub (1993) *supra* note 15.

⁵¹R. J. Sampson & J. H. Laub, 'Crime and Deviance Over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds'. *American Sociological Review*, 1990-55(6), pp. 609-627.

⁵²Van Schellen, Apel & Nieuwebeerta, P (2012) *supra* note 18.

⁵³J. Modell, 'Book review of *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life*.' *American Journal of Sociology*, 1994- 99(5), pp. 1389-1391.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵Sampson & Laub (1993/2003) *supra* note 15. Sampson & Laub (2005)*supra* note 50.

⁵⁶Chandler (1999) & Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

⁵⁷N. Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1923. E. Sutherland, *The Professional Thief*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1937. C. Shaw, *The Jack-Roller*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1930. D. Steffensmeier & J. Ulmer, *Confessions of a Dying Thief: Understanding Criminal Careers and Illegal Enterprise*, New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction 2005.

⁵⁸Alvarez (2011) *supra* note 11, pp. 68-71. Staub (2000) *supra* note 21. Wayne Nafziger & Auvinen (2002) *supra* note 21. Woolf & Hulsizer (2005) *supra* note 21.

⁵⁹E. Staub, *Overcoming Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 174.

⁶⁰O.W. Wolters, 'Jayavarman II's military power: The territorial foundation of the Angkor Empire', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain*, 1973-1(1), pp. 21-30.

The ruler placed the country under French protection in 1863, and Cambodia became a part of French Indochina in 1887.⁶¹ During the Second World War, the country became occupied by Japan. However, after the Japanese were defeated during the Second World War, the French repositioned their colonial control of Indochina.⁶²

In 1954, Cambodia obtained independence from France, and King Norodom Sihanouk came to power. He adopted a policy of cold-war neutrality, a way to keep Cambodia out of the escalating conflict in neighbouring Vietnam. Not everyone supported his policy, labelling him a US puppet.⁶³ In the countryside a civil war loomed, and the government stood up against the Communists, who opposed his regime with renewed vigour. This drove the above-ground moderates into the arms of the underground extremists. The US escalated the Vietnam War during 1963-1964, destabilising Cambodia even further. Rice was smuggled across the border to both sides of the conflict, thus bankrupting the Sihanouk regime, depriving it of export duties. In 1967, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), led by Pol Pot, mounted an insurgency. This in combination with the economic crisis and the effects of the Vietnam War made the regime of King Sihanouk weak. On 18 March 1970, General Lon Nol overthrew King Sihanouk, establishing the Khmer Republic.⁶⁴

From exile in Beijing, Sihanouk joined forces with the Khmer Rouge, led by the CPK. During these years, Vietnamese and Cambodian communist forces spread over the country, as did US and South-Vietnamese troops. From 1969 to 1973, US air forces dropped over half a million tons of bombs on Cambodia, making it one of the heaviest bombed countries on earth.⁶⁵ William Shawcross, a British writer and commentator, goes as far as to suggest the US bombings 'created' the Khmer Rouge.⁶⁶ Many survivors were driven into the flanks of the Khmer Rouge, who were, rather than the troops of General Lon Nol, in charge in the rural areas of Cambodia. On 17 April 1975, Khmer Rouge forces entered the capital city of Phnom Penh, following the United States' withdrawal of assistance to the Lon Nol regime. After seizing control of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge forced its two million citizens to move out of the city. Prince Sihanouk resigned on 2 April 1976, and Pol Pot became the country's Prime Minister.⁶⁷

V. The Life course of Pol Pot

The man known to the world as Pol Pot was born as Saloth Sar. He adopted the name Pol Pot after coming into power in 1976 as his revolutionary name to hide his identity. In this paper, when referring to the leader of the Khmer Rouge, the name Pol Pot will be used. Pol Pot preferred working in secret rather than living in the open. Therefore, it took more than a year after he came into power to ascertain the identity of Pol Pot.⁶⁸

There is even some confusion about his date of birth. Short, journalist and author of the biography 'Pol Pot: the history of a nightmare', states that he was born in March 1925.⁶⁹ According to historian David Chandler⁷⁰, author of the biography 'Brother Number One', the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² B. Kiernan, 'Introduction: Conflict in Cambodia, 1945-2002', *Critical Asian Studies*, 2002-34(4), pp. 483-495.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ T. Owen & B. Kiernan, *Bombs over Cambodia*. Connecticut: Yale University Press 2006.

⁶⁶ W. Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the destruction of Cambodia*, Maryland: Cooper Square Publisher Inc 2002.

⁶⁷ Kiernan (2002) *supra* note 63.

⁶⁸ Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

French colonial records state May 25, 1928 as the date of birth and in an interview with Thayer, Pol Pot declares that he was born in January 1925, stating that he lied about his age earlier in order to remain eligible for a scholarship.⁷¹

Pol Pot was born in Prek Sbauv, a village 90 miles north of Phnom Penh in, by local standards, a wealthy ethnic Khmer family.⁷² His father, Loth, owned 50 acres of rice-paddy, which was ten times the average,⁷³ and their house was one of the biggest in the village.⁷⁴ Pol Pot himself recalled his family as neither rich nor poor but acknowledged that his father was one of the many employers for farmers in Prek Sbauv.⁷⁵ In total, the family consisted of nine children.⁷⁶ However, what really differentiated the family from others in the region were their connections with Cambodia's Royal Palace. One cousin was the favourite consort of Prince Sisowath Monivong. Furthermore, his oldest brother worked as a clerk at the palace, while his sister joined the ballet, and later also became a consort of Monivong, who by that time had become king. Since informal adoptions by prosperous relatives are a traditional feature of Cambodian life,⁷⁷ at the age of nine, Pol Pot was sent to live with his family in Phnom Penh.

After arriving in Phnom Penh, Pol Pot first spent a year at a Buddhist monastery. Fellow students describe him as an 'even-tempered, polite, unremarkable child, which did not fight or got in quarrels with other students.'⁷⁸ Life at the monastery was difficult. Many of the novices were terribly homesick.⁷⁹ The children were not seen as individuals but treated as objects. Their behaviour had to be moulded to ensure the faithful transmission of immutable values. They were taught a spirit of detachment, renouncement of worldly desires, and abhorrence of material things.⁸⁰

After a year, Pol Pot transferred to a regular secondary school, and moved in with his cousin. This secondary school was run by catholic French nuns, creating tension between European and Cambodian culture and customs.⁸¹ His former classmates remember Pol Pot as 'not making a strong impression, just drifting along without clear ambitions'.⁸² Ironically Pol Pot's best friend at school was Lon Nol, later President of the Khmer Republic (1970-1975). During those school years Pol Pot visited the palace often. According to Short, he was still regarded as a child, and therefore allowed in the women's quarter. Two of the palace women remembered that when 'little Sar' came in, the women would gather around him, teasing him and eventually loosen his waistband and fondle his genitals, masturbating him to a climax.⁸³

In 1947, Pol Pot left secondary school and became a carpentry student at the Ecole Technique due to failing the entry examination that would have allowed him to join his friends at the more prestigious Lycée Sisowath. There are no clear records about his time at the Ecole Technique.⁸⁴ However, according to Short, Pol Pot could not have been in a very happy place. The school itself was depressing, making it a dreadful come-down for a boy who first seemed

⁷¹N. Thayer, 'An interview with Pol Pot, Master of the Killing Fields', *Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition*, 1997-13(3), pp. 1-8.

⁷²Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

⁷⁵Thayer (1997) *supra* note 72.

⁷⁶Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹A. Koopmans, *Pol Pot. Bihar, India: Lucent Books 2005.*

⁸²J. Farren, (Executive Producer), & Williams, A. *Pol Pot: The journey to the killingfields.* [BBC Timewatch]. Great Britain: BBC Four 2015.

⁸³Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

⁸⁴Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

on track to go to university.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Pol Pot was not entirely welcome at the Ecole Technique. A peer described: ‘He was regarded as an intruder. We didn’t ostracise him- but he was a rival.’ This was due to the fact that the best three students would be granted a scholarship to study in France. Pol Pot came from an influential family, and chose the easiest track offered.⁸⁶ In 1948, Pol Pot was indeed among the twenty-one Cambodian students who were granted this scholarship, many whom later became Khmer Rouge Central Committee members.⁸⁷

In Paris, most of the other Khmer students earned at least one diploma, came from a less cosseted milieu, and made more of an impression on people than Pol Pot did in those years.⁸⁸ Pol Pot, who was in his early twenties, seemed indifferent about his academic career, taking no examinations, consequently, losing his scholarship.⁸⁹ In the winter of 1950, the 25-year-old Pol Pot “met some students with progressive views, and [he] often stayed with them. And little by little they began to influence [his] views.”⁹⁰ In 1951, the young Khmer formed a political group, Marxist Circle, where they studied Marxist texts, often led by Ieng Sary. In the documentary ‘Tyrants and Dictators: Pol Pot (a military history)’, Ieng Sary recalls that back then it was not about the communist ideology, but rather liberating the country from foreign influences.⁹¹ Recollections about Pol Pot during those meetings are contradictory. One participant recalled that ‘he attended irregularly, kept in the background and made little impression.’ However, another source remembered Pol Pot as ‘the one who was most intelligent, and most convincing.’⁹² In retrospect, Pol Pot declared that he indeed stayed in the background, since ‘[he] did not wish to show myself.’ He states that he found the meetings fascinating, but ‘the discussions were often above [his] head.’ Adding that ‘the leaders were appointed on the basis of diplomas they held, so [he] was not among them.’⁹³

A few months later, many Khmer students, including Pol Pot, joined the French Communist Party. Contradictorily, here his lack of diplomas was an advantage, since the Party was anti-intellectual.⁹⁴ Influenced by the party, Pol Pots’ mind-set transformed into a revolutionary one. He stated to a fellow student: ‘I will direct the revolutionary organisation in Cambodia, I will hold the dossiers, I will supervise the ministers and I will watch that they do not deviate from the line laid down by the Central Committee in the interests of the people.’⁹⁵

During his time in Paris, Pol Pot made a trip to Yugoslavia, where being part of such a massive post-war national reconstruction movement made a great impression on him. One of his fellow students described the environment there: ‘the force and faith of the people united around their leaders allows them to win successive victories, aware that this is a question of national independence.’⁹⁶ In addition, Pol Pot also started reading a lot in Paris, especially Revolutionary, Communist and Marxist literature. The three core principles of the *Great Revolution* by Robespierre would always stick with Pol Pot: “Revolution requires an alliance between the intellectuals and the peasantry; it must be carried through the end, without compromise or hesitation; and egalitarianism is the basis of communism.”⁹⁷

⁸⁵Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷Chandler (1999) *supra*note 16.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰Farren & Williams(2015)*supra* note 83.

⁹¹History Channel, ‘Tyrants and Dictators: Pol Pot (a military history)’ at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZH11GctMLGw> (accessed on 4 February 2018).

⁹²Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

⁹³Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

In January 1953 Pol Pot, at age 28, arrived back in Cambodia. A month later, he joined the resistance, giving his family the notion that he was ‘most truly interested in democracy.’⁹⁸ A colleague from the Indochina Communist party described him as a young man of average ability but with a clear desire for power.⁹⁹ Since the Vietnamese realize Pol Pot could be of great value and his connections with the Cambodian elite, and the French democrats and communists, he was transferred to the headquarters.¹⁰⁰

When Pol Pot came back from the Maquis, he fell in love with a Cambodian girl, Soeung Son Maly, daughter of a wealthy family. Before engaging herself, she was waiting for the Democratic Party to triumph so that Pol Pot could become an important politician. After the democrats lost in 1955, Maly ended her relationship with Pol Pot, and started dating the second in command of King Sihanouk, member of the party who won the elections.¹⁰¹ Keng Vannsak, a friend and role-model of Pol Pot, later recalled that ‘this dual setback touched off a cycle of sexual and political frustration that would bitter Pol Pot for life’.¹⁰² Almost year later Pol Pot, who was around 31 at the time, married Khieu Ponnary, the sister of Ieng Sary’s wife, which was received as surprising by their mutual acquaintances, especially since Khieu Ponnary was older than Pol Pot, and higher in social ranks. Chandler states that perhaps their common interest in utopian politics and their ideas about transforming the country radically drew them together.¹⁰³ Soon after the marriage, Khieu Ponnary found out she had uterine cancer, making it impossible for her to have children.¹⁰⁴

For the next couple of years both Pol Pot, in his mid-thirties, and his wife worked as teachers at a private college. The students recall Pol Pot as someone with a smooth face, deep voice and calm, reassuring gestures. He seemed to explain things in such a way that ‘you came to love justice and honesty and hate corruption.’¹⁰⁵ Students recall him as ‘easy approachable, always dressed in a short-sleeved and white shirt and dark trousers.’¹⁰⁶ Pol Pot was living a double-life then, known by some as a progressive schoolteacher, and to some the executive of the Communist movement.¹⁰⁷ By 1962, Pol Pot, who was approximately 37 years old, led a meeting, where he held an important speech, foreshadowing his years in power. He stated that the government was rotten and led the people into greater poverty. Instead a ‘new society’ had to be created, where no fees had to be paid because everybody would be working.¹⁰⁸

From 1963 onward, Pol Pot and the other members of the Party Committee spent seven years underground in the Cambodian jungle. Pol Pot was in his early forties by then. During those years the Party leaders did not have to dilute their ideas with practice, compromise or competition, since they spend their time underground with each other, all supporting and enhancing their common beliefs.¹⁰⁹ They renamed the party to Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) in 1966, and by doing so declared total independence from the Vietnamese and reasserted the control of Pol Pot. Support to the Khmer Rouge especially grew within the tribal minorities in the countryside. Those tribal people had no access to markets, money or the state and they enjoyed a long tradition of autonomy, solidarity and mutual aid,

⁹⁸Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁰¹Farren & Williams(2015)*supra* note 83.

¹⁰²Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

¹⁰³Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹⁰⁴Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

¹⁰⁵S. Pulin, J. Colvin & L.C.E. Leong, ‘The diabolic sweetness of Pol Pot’, *Manoa*, 2004-16(1), pp. 21-25.

¹⁰⁶Koopmans (2005) *supra* note 82.

¹⁰⁷Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

which led them to having a great aversion of the government.¹¹⁰ Pol Pot came to see simple village life as communism in its purest form, and began to convert the tribesmen into revolutionaries.¹¹¹ From 1968 on, militias led by the Khmer Rouge often clashed with the troops of Sihanouk. This caused further oppression by governmental troops, driving more people into the flanks of the Khmer Rouge.¹¹²

In the areas that came under the control of the Khmer Rouge, the party at first forced everyone to join them by threatening to kill everyone who resisted. Party cadres used their positions to exact revenge for past perceived wrongdoings, or to get rid of people they disliked. Soon the Party demanded more; all villagers were gathered and forced to hand over their property, equipment, and gold.¹¹³ A classless society was build, where all property was shared and all were farmers.¹¹⁴ When Pol Pot was in charge of Cambodia entirely, family life was abolished by separating children from their parents and organising forced marriages.¹¹⁵ Communal eating was installed, and markets, money, and religion were abolished.¹¹⁶ Although people had to live under such strict rules, the Khmer Rouge had many supporters in the rural areas. However, when they did not obey, people were punished harshly, or even killed. The culture of accusation and suspicion created a lynch mob mentality, and no-one could be trusted. Not even family members.¹¹⁷

In 1970, Lon Nol overthrew the government of Sihanouk. As a reaction, Sihanouk supported the Khmer Rouge from his exile in Beijing. Pol Pot also became the military commander of the CPK, and his forces were trained by the battle-hardened Vietnamese troops.¹¹⁸ Most of the fighting against Lon Nol during 1971-1972 was done by the Vietnamese, or under Vietnamese control. China sponsored the Khmer Rouge soldiers with approximately 1,300 guns.¹¹⁹ From 1971, documents of the Party became more dogmatic in the manner in which they differentiated among the different classes of Cambodian society; they praised the working peasant-class, and condemned the middle/higher class people (often citizens).¹²⁰ During those years Pol Pot also made a study trip to China to visit his great inspiration, Mao.¹²¹ In 1973, 1974 and 1975 Pol Pot and his party undertook three attempts to capture Phnom Penh, of which only the latest succeeded, marking the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime.¹²² Pol Pot was in his fifties when he gained power over the country.

VI. The Turning Points of Pol Pot

VI.1. Childhood

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹¹History Channel (2011) *supra* note 92.

¹¹²Kiernan (2002) *supra* note 63.

¹¹³G. Chon & S. Thet, *Behind the Killing Fields. A Khmer rouge leader and one of his victims*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press 2011.

¹¹⁴J.M. Gangi, *Genocide in contemporary Children's and Young Adult Literature: Cambodia to Darfur*. New York: Routledge 2014.

¹¹⁵Chon & Thet (2011) *supra* note 114.

¹¹⁶Koopmans (2005) *supra* note 82.

¹¹⁷Chon & Thet (2011) *supra* note 114.

¹¹⁸Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹¹⁹Farren & Williams(2015) *supra* note 83.

¹²⁰Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

¹²¹For an overview of the manner in which Pol Pot was inspired by Mao, see Quinn 'Explaining the Terror'. In: K.D. Jackson (Ed.). *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989.

¹²²Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

As indicated by Sampson and Laub, during the first stages of life the most important influence on the life course of a person is exercised by the family.¹²³ During the first years of his life, Pol Pot lived with his parents and eight siblings. From Sampson and Laub's research it can be concluded that large family sizes have negative effects on the life course of a person, for this is mostly accompanied by poverty. However, in the case of Pol Pot this was not the case, since his family was one of the wealthier families of the area¹²⁴, and large families were (and to a certain extent still are) common in Cambodia.¹²⁵

At the age of nine, Pol Pot was sent to live with his cousin and brother in Phnom Penh. Although this was a common practice for wealthy families in Cambodia¹²⁶, it must have influenced his parental attachment. According to Sampson and Laub, weak parental attachment is a strong predictor of deviant behaviour.¹²⁷ Moffitt even argues that when a child's vulnerability is compounded by such negative family conditions, life course persistence of deviant behaviour is most likely.¹²⁸

This negative effect might be enhanced by the fact that when Pol Pot was sent to Phnom Penh, he first spent a year in a monastery, which was – as mentioned above – very tough. One can imagine that for a nine-year-old child, it must be terrible to be away from everyone familiar, and on top of that to be objectified rather than treated as a sentient being.¹²⁹ Living with his cousin and brother, and attending a normal school, might have felt like a relief after this hard year in the monastery.¹³⁰

From the information known about the childhood of Pol Pot, it can be concluded that he did have a somewhat exceptional childhood, compared to other Cambodian children. He grew up in a large family and was sent to the capital but was slightly on the upside of society in terms of wealth. Most families were only able to send their oldest son to the small village school.¹³¹ His family was able to send him, as the second son, to school in Phnom Penh. However, as previously mentioned, he experienced weak parental attachment as a result, which is a strong predictor of deviant behaviour. And the harsh living conditions in the monastery potentially had a great impact on the young child. Generally, childhood events are strongly connected to experiences in adulthood. Yet the turning points can redirect these paths.¹³²

VI.2.School/residential change

Ecole Technique could have functioned as a turning point for Pol Pot. He had to go to a completely new school, 'knifing off' of his secondary school period, which caused a change in structure routines and routine activities. This could have given him the chance of identity change, where he could restart with a clean slate, and the supervision at school by teachers could have offered him opportunities of social support and growth. Although his change to the Ecole Technique meets all the requirements of being a positive turning point, it did not

¹²³Sampson & Laub (1993/2003) *supra* note 15.

¹²⁴Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

¹²⁵A. Peang-Meth, 'Understanding the Khmer: Sociological-Cultural Observations', *Asian Survey*, 1991-31(5), pp. 442-455.

¹²⁶Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹²⁷Sampson & Laub (1993) *supra* note 15.

¹²⁸Moffitt (1993) *supra* note 45.

¹²⁹Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*

¹³¹K. Frieson, 'Sentimental education: Les sages femmes and Colonial Cambodia', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 2000-1(1), pp. 12-24.

¹³²Sampson & Laub (1993/2003) *supra* note 15.

function as such for Pol Pot. As pointed out, social bonds are also of great influence. During his time at Ecole Technique, his peers were quite hostile to him, making him feel lonely, which eventually might have affected the decisions he made while staying in Paris.

His move to Paris could have been a clear turning point as well. Indeed, it did function as a turning point, maybe even the most important one for Pol Pot, but as would turn out later, a negative one. Before, Pol Pot was not engaged in the revolution, but in Paris he got connected with people of the French Communist Party, and fellow Cambodian students who believed Cambodia had to be transformed into a Communist Society. What might have influenced this period is that Pol Pot had been quite lonely before. In Paris he was accompanied by friends, as they joined the Marxist Circle together. This might have given Pol Pot a feeling that he finally belonged to peers, reducing his loneliness. As many researchers have concluded, the attachment to unconventional persons are considered to be amongst the most important predictors of delinquent behaviour during adolescence: adolescents who have delinquent friends are more likely to become delinquent themselves and commit more crimes than adolescents without deviant connections.¹³³

Concluding, during his school period and the residential changes this involved, several turning points could have occurred. During his school period at the Ecole Technique, Pol Pot was not yet involved in criminal behaviour (as far as evidence shows), but it seems an important period, influencing the decision of Pol Pot to join the Marxist Circle in Paris. The residential change to Paris fulfilled all the four requirements of a turning point but turned out as a negative turning point. Here, Pol Pot came in touch with the communist beliefs that would underlie his later reform plans for Cambodia. During his time in Paris, his aversion to school and diplomas was strengthened. He dropped out of school without obtaining a diploma himself, but because of that, he did not really fit into the group. Altogether this feeling of not belonging because of his lack of education might explain the hatred for intellectuals showed during his regime.¹³⁴

VI.3. Marriage

Engaging in a relationship or marriage is another turning point according to the life course theory of Sampson and Laub.¹³⁵ A couple of women played an important role in Pol Pot's life. His first encounter was with the women in the women's quarter at the palace, where the concubines sexually abused him.¹³⁶ His second experience was also negative and influential for his later partner choice. Pol Pot fell in love with Soeung Son Maly, who left him with a broken heart after his party lost the election. She traded him for someone else, who was more influential at that time. Due to his loss of the election, the big future Pol Pot had in mind collapsed. Not only was his party defeated, but also his heart broken. The double loss may have caused Pol Pot to be attracted to someone who shared his political beliefs. Approximately a year later he married Khieu Ponnary – a revolutionary herself.

When ties are strong and stable, a marital relationship creates obligations and restraints that increase the cost of offending. It decreases the time spent with (delinquent) friends and thus reduces the opportunities and reinforcement of criminal behaviour. As mentioned above, marriage to a delinquent person enhances the probability that one continues to commit crimes,

¹³³D.L. Haynie, P.C. Giordano, W.D. Manning & M.A. Longmore, 'Adolescent romantic relationships and delinquency involvement', *Criminology*, 2005-43(1), pp. 177-210. R.L. Simons, E.A. Stewart, L.C. Gordon, R.D. Conger & G. H. Jr. Elder, 'A test of lifecourse explanations for stability and change in antisocial behavior from adolescence to young adulthood', *Criminology*, 2002-40(2), pp. 401-434.

¹³⁴Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹³⁵Sampson & Laub (1993/2003) *supra* note 15.

¹³⁶Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

and, in the extreme cases, may even intensify one's criminal behaviour.¹³⁷ This turning point relies heavily on the impact of social bonds. Not only the social bond with a spouse, but also with the social circle and family of the spouse, since more time will be spent with them as well. For Pol Pot, his marriage turned out to be a negative turning point. Instead of turning him away from the revolution, his ideas were enhanced by his equally revolutionary wife.¹³⁸

Another life event, often regarded as a turning point in conjunction with marriage, is having children.¹³⁹ But due to uterine cancer, this was impossible for Khieu Ponnary and Pol Pot. Within Cambodian society it was (and still is) quite important to have children. Children can support a family by helping on the land or looking after their parents when they get old or sick.¹⁴⁰ It is not known how Pol Pot felt about this inability to have children. Pol Pot did not have a strong bond with his own parents when he was a kid, and without children of his own he also did not experience the bond between a parent and his kid from the other side.¹⁴¹ This might influence the way Pol Pot looked upon family life, and his decision to abandon family ties in the areas where he seized power.¹⁴²

Since Pol Pot was unable to have children with Khieu Ponnary, this was not an available turning point during his life. With no evidence about how Pol Pot felt about it, it is hard to relate this event to his feelings about family life in general, and ascertain whether this led to the abandonment of traditional family life once he seized power.

VI.4. Work

After their marriage, Pol Pot worked as a teacher and lived a double-life; being both a school teacher and working for the communist party.¹⁴³ From 1963 onwards, Pol Pot fled into the jungle together with the other members of the Party Committee, which led to an intensification of their common beliefs.¹⁴⁴

Again, work can function as a turning point when it is a new situation that 'knives off' the past from the present, a new situation that provides both supervision and monitoring as well as new opportunities of social support and growth.¹⁴⁵ These new situations can change structure routine activities, and provide the opportunity for identity transformation.¹⁴⁶ When they are employed, people can experience close and frequent contact with conventional others¹⁴⁷, and because of the informal social control of the workplace, this encourages conformity.¹⁴⁸ This, however, did not apply for Pol Pot's job as a teacher, since he used it as a cover up for his "real job," working for the party. When one invests so much in a job, the stakes of committing a crime become too high. One does not want to take the risk of being fired.¹⁴⁹ Pol Pot, however, did not want to invest in his job as a teacher, although he enjoyed it. His colleagues say they did

¹³⁷Van Schellen, Apel & Nieuwbeerta (2012) *supra* note 18.

¹³⁸Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹³⁹Sampson & Laub (1993/2003) *supra* note 15.

¹⁴⁰Peang-Meth (1991) *supra* note 126.

¹⁴¹Pol Pot later remarried and had a daughter with his second wife, long after his time in power (Thayer, 2014, <http://www.nate-thayer.com/pol-pots-little-girl-grows-wedding-dictators-child-divorce-traumatic-childhood/>)

¹⁴²According to Thayer (2014) *supra* note 142, Pol Pot spoke with pride about his daughter.

¹⁴³Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵Sampson & Laub (1993/2003) *supra* note 15.

¹⁴⁶Sampson & Laub (2005) *supra* note 50.

¹⁴⁷M. Warr, 'Life course transitions and desistance from Crime', *Criminology*, 1998-36(2), pp. 183-216.

¹⁴⁸Sampson & Laub (1993/2003) *supra* note 15.

¹⁴⁹C. Uggen & I. Piliavin, 'Asymmetrical causation and criminal desistance', *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 1998-88(4), pp. 1399-1422.

not have much contact with him, or his wife,¹⁵⁰ so not much informal social control was exercised in that regard. Pol Pot rather invested in his work for the Party, since he dreamed of becoming their leader long before his role as teacher.¹⁵¹

VI.5. Military service

Although strictly speaking, Pol Pot never joined the military, his time spent in the Maquis comes closest to military service in the more conventional setting. Within normal military service, one gets into contact with other young people of approximately the same age, but with different religious or cultural backgrounds, from across the country. It is a closed environment, away from family and other influences. The ideal opportunity to start over and redirect your life in a different direction.¹⁵² However, the Maquis functioned differently from normal military service. In the Maquis Pol Pot and his fellow Comrades functioned as each other's most meaningful social bond, instead of having boys from all over the country around. The Comrades were all very much alike, and they spent their time underground with each other, all supporting and enhancing their common beliefs.¹⁵³

Instead of being an opportunity for a turning point by getting in touch with people with different backgrounds and beliefs, the Party leaders were even more indoctrinated and supported in their views by each other. The 'military service' of Pol Pot therefore turned out to enhance his communist beliefs, and function as a negative turning point.

VII. Conclusion

When applying the life course theory of Sampson and Laub to Pol Pot, the turning points seem to have played an important role and were at times life-changing for Pol Pot but never led him away from the atrocious crimes he would commit. His childhood was quite lonely, which is regarded as a strong indicator for deviant behaviour later in life.¹⁵⁴ During adolescence his peers played an important role, introducing him to the Communist beliefs. Due to his lack of academic success, Pol Pot experienced feelings of rejection and during his time in Paris, he did not have an important role in their Marxist Circle. Another influential turning-point could have been his choice in spouse with his marriage to Khieu Ponnary. She, however, reaffirmed his communist beliefs, and enhanced the importance of them in his life. Similarly, his time in the Maquis reinforced the bonds with his fellow revolutionaries. Instead of providing him with a chance to start over, as is usually the case when an individual joins the military, it strengthened his commitment to their shared goal of creating a communist utopia. Therefore, from this case study, it becomes apparent that the turning points, at least for Pol Pot, worked quite differently from how they were envisioned by Sampson and Laub. Rather than strengthening bonds with conventional society, these turning points strengthened the bonds between Pol Pot and the small sub-set of Communist revolutionaries making his commitment to the brutal policies, all the greater. While the most important (negative) turning point was his time in Paris, Pol Pot did not become a criminal until he enough power to implement his oppressive ideology.

Overall, this particular case study seems to indicate that applying ordinary criminological theories may provide important insights into the choices of leaders to perpetrate international crimes within their societies. However, when applying Sampson and Laub's life course theory, it

¹⁵⁰Short (2004) *supra* note 16.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*

¹⁵²G.H. Elder, 'Military times and turning points in men's lives'. *Developmental Psychology*, 1986-22(2), pp. 233-245.

¹⁵³Chandler (1999) *supra* note 16.

¹⁵⁴Sampson & Laub (1993) *supra* note 15.

becomes apparent that these turning points do not impact the individual in the same way, potentially enhancing the commitment to the perpetration of atrocities, rather than lessening it. Additional research on different case studies could potentially shed more light on the extent to which these dissimilarities were particular to Pol Pot or could prove that there is indeed a difference between individuals who perpetrate ordinary crimes and those who orchestrate and perpetrate international crimes. The extraordinary nature of international crimes could potentially change the way normal turning points influence one's life.

Applying the life-course theory of Sampson and Laub to the life of Pol Pot is challenging for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the secretive nature of his regime makes it difficult to fully assess the impact that specific turning points had on the motivations of the leader to implement the communist policies that cost so many people their lives. Secondly, applying life course theory to leaders who have orchestrated international crimes, make the criticism that life course theory does not sufficiently take into account the societal context all the more important since these crimes tend to take place during tumultuous times. Especially, with in-depth case studies, however, this can be remedied by analysing not only the impact of the turning points on the individual, but also the wider societal changes in which these decisions unfolded. Thirdly, when life course theory is applied to individuals in societies that differ significantly from the US, particular attention needs to be paid to the customs and culture surrounding these turning points in that place and time. Despite these limitations, it seems worthwhile to further explore the insights that can potentially be gained by applying life-course theory through qualitative analyses of leaders who orchestrate mass atrocities.