

‘To them, East Germany was a paradise’

NATIONAL

06 June, 2014 | post staff



The Berlin Wall may have fallen 25 years ago, but nostalgia for East Germany lives on in the hearts of the thousands of Cambodians who took refuge in the communist state during the civil war of the 1980s.

“To them, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was some sort of paradise,” said Nico Mesterharm, director at Meta House, who grew up on the other side of the Iron Curtain in West Berlin.

“In East Germany you had to queue for toilet paper, but at least they had toilet paper.”



While the West scoffed at the GDR, Cambodians found it in far better condition than their homeland. PHOTO SUPPLIED

From Saturday, Meta House will exhibit photos brought back to the Kingdom by some of the 4,000 Cambodian students and workers who once called East Germany home. The photos, shown under the title *Far Away From Angkor*, include a snapshot of a parade, jacket-clad Cambodians in the snow and a young man dancing next to a portrait of Lenin.

Among the contributors to the exhibition is Kaoeun Kannika, 45, who was 16 when he went to Potsdam in 1985 to study car mechanics.

“My father owned an Opel car, so that made me want to go to Germany to learn car mechanics,” said Kannika, although the Opel was West German.

After Pol Pot’s ultra-Maoism was replaced by Soviet-inspired Marxist Leninism when Vietnam overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Kannika’s options for studying abroad were limited to the Soviet Union, Cuba and East Germany.

“There was communism in Cambodia at that time, so they were the logical places to go,” Kannika said, adding that he was given no say in which country

he ended up. The USSR was the least popular destination among Cambodians, he said, due to its harsh winters.

Kannika spent three years living in a Potsdam dormitory with other Cambodian students while receiving training at a vocational school. He said he took to both the language and culture quickly and found himself invited to family Christmas dinners and East Berlin nightclubs. But the expatriates were constantly supervised by state handlers, who Mesterharm said were there to help the Cambodians adapt to German ways but also to keep tabs on their movements.

Although Kannika received six months of language instruction upon arrival, he said it was through his new friends that he really learned the language.



A young man dances next to a portrait of Lenin. PHOTO SUPPLIED

“I learned [German] with my heart,” he said.

The East German official who oversaw the program was Walter Rudeck, the GDR’s former state secretary for vocational training. Rudeck, who was responsible for similar programs throughout Asia, said that the Cambodians took best to life in Germany.

Rudeck said: “The Cambodians I worked with called me ‘daddy’. They were also very open to make contact with the East German population – very different from the Vietnamese and Laotians, who would stick to each other more.”

Rudeck said he felt personally moved to help Cambodia when he first visited in 1980. With Phnom Penh in shambles in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, which did not have diplomatic relations with East Germany, Rudeck said the city brought back childhood memories of the Second World War.

“I thought of postwar Germany when it was in ruins,” said the 80-year-old, who survived the 1945 British and American bombing of Dresden which claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Mesterharm said he became fascinated by Cambodia’s East German connection when he discovered numerous German-speaking Cambodians upon moving to the Kingdom.

But despite growing up in West Berlin, which was surrounded on all sides by East German territory, the Cambodians Mesterharm met had more experience in the GDR than he had.

“People tell me they have been to Germany, but it was a different Germany,” said Mesterharm, who had been blacklisted from visiting East Germany due to his father’s job at a West German publishing house with an anti-GDR slant.



Kaoeun Kannika was only 16 when he arrived. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Although Mesterharm is generally critical of the East German Soviet satellite state, which heavily controlled its citizens' movements and sent dissidents to prison, he said that the GDR's foreign aid to Cambodia was crucial to the country's redevelopment in the wake of Pol Pot's atrocious rule.

“There are things as a West German that I would hold against the GDR, but the story of what the GDR did here in Cambodia was a good story,” he said, adding that he is ashamed that Cold War politics prevented West Germany from providing any assistance to Cambodia in the 1980s due to the latter's alignment with the Eastern bloc.

“Without the help of the GDR, and Cuba and Russia, things would have been worse here and more people would have died,” he said.

Upon returning to Cambodia in 1988, Kannika initially opened a garage but later discovered that his German-language skills were far more valuable. He returned to the unified Germany periodically throughout the 2000s, where he was trained by the Goethe-Institut to teach German.

Although Kannika said he loves and misses Germany, he has decided not to emigrate permanently. A miniscule community of around 150 Cambodians live in the Berlin area.

He said that he would rather share his passion for Germany with his students here in Phnom Penh, who may one day decide to follow in his footsteps and move to Germany.

“I want to live here to pass on the knowledge to future generations – this is my calling.”

Far Away From Angkor opens at Meta House on Saturday at 6pm.

Bennett Murray

Lifestyle



KEEP READING



Japan urges renewed Cambodia-Thailand talks, pledges continued humanitarian aid

21 July, 2026



Nearly 20,000 hectares of Pursat wet-season rice hit by El Niño-linked dry spell

21 July, 2026



Foreign ministry rejects Thai claim UNCLOS process stalled land border talks

21 July, 2026



Chinese airliners to enter service with Air Cambodia by year's end

20 July, 2026



Analysts: Pursuing UNCLOS mechanism does not mean Cambodia has 'closed door' on border talks

20 July, 2026



Japan pledges defence support; communications equipment, patrol boats

20 July, 2026



DIGITAL MEDIA

SR Digital Media Co., Ltd.

Publisher of The Phnom Penh Post — delivering trusted news on Cambodia, business, politics, and regional developments.

The Phnom Penh Post

#41, Street 228, Sangkat Boeung Raing, Khan Daun Penh, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tel: 023 888 161/ +855 78 555 166/ +855 86 277 999

Email:

newsroom@phnompenhpost.com

advertising@phnompenhpost.com

OUR SOCIAL MEDIA



Facebook



Twitter



Instagram



YouTube



LinkedIn



TikTok

 Telegram

 Threads

© 2026 SR Digital Media Co., Ltd. All rights reserved. The Phnom Penh Post.

[Home](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Editorial Policy](#)