

# Cambodian genocide



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Cambodian genocide lasted from 1975-1979 and was one of the worst examples of genocide in history. Nearly 1.5 million deaths are attributed to the Khmer Rouge regime, which had taken power at that time. In the first few weeks after Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge in April 1975, the nation's cities were evacuated, hospitals emptied, schools closed, factories deserted, money and wages abolished, monasteries emptied, and libraries scattered. Freedom of the press, movement, worship, organization, association, and discussion all completely disappeared for nearly four years (Kiernan 339). Pol Pot's Cambodia perpetrated genocide against several ethnic groups, systematically dispersed national minorities by force, and forbade the use of minority and foreign languages.

It also banned the practice of religion. The Khmer Rouge repressed Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, but its fiercest extermination campaign was directed at the ethnic Cham Muslim minority. (Gellately & Kiernan 30) Pol Pot, the head of the Khmer Rouge regime, was born in 1925 as Saloth Sar. He enjoyed a life of privilege in an area where many were poor rice farmers. He attended Catholic school and had access to the royal palace through his sister, who was a palace consort. He did not interact with the locals and had a limited understanding of his culture because of his sheltered upbringing. Having qualified for a technical study scholarship, he studied in Paris from 1949-1953. It was during this time that he became involved in politics. In 1950 he joined the French Communist party and in 1951, joined a secret communist cell called the Cercle Marxiste.

He quickly joined the leadership ranks in this organization. After an academic failure, he was forced to return to Cambodia in 1953. As a member of the

Cercle, he was in charge of evaluating the rebel groups forming against the government of Cambodia. The day prior to his arrival home, King Sihanouk had declared martial law to suppress Cambodia's independence movement, which was becoming radicalized by French colonial force. Pol Pot's closest brother, Saloth Chhay, joined the Cambodian and Vietnamese Communists, and took Pol Pot along.

In this first contact, Vietnamese Communists began teaching him, as one of them later put it, how to "work with the masses at the base, to build up the independence committees at the village level, member by member." It seemed a patronizing slight, like his failure to quickly rise to the leadership, despite overseas experience. A former Cambodian comrade claims that Pol Pot "said that everything should be done on the basis of self-reliance, independence, and mastery. The Khmers should do everything on their own" (Kiernan, 1985a, p. 123). (Kiernan 341)

By 1968, Pol Pot had risen from party leader to absolute leader of the Khmer Rouge. He maintained a personal staff and a troop of guards and no one was allowed to approach him uninvited. In the beginning, the Khmer Rouge had around 1500 member but had a large support group in the surrounding villages. Most of the villagers had lived in a feudal state and were ready for a change. The Khmer Rouge seemed to offer such an opportunity. In 1970, when the Vietnamese were kicked out of Cambodia and the borders closed to them, they contacted Pol Pot.

He had approached the Vietnamese some years before for support for his political goals and been refused, now however, the Vietnamese were more than willing to provide whatever Pol Pot needed. The Democratic

Kampuchea, as Cambodia was known during the Khmer Rouge regime, immediately sealed off Cambodia both internally and externally. Its borders were closed, all neighboring countries militarily attacked, use of foreign languages banned, embassies and press agencies expelled, local newspapers and television shut down, radios and bicycles confiscated, mail and telephones suppressed.

Worse, Cambodians had little to tell each other anyway. They quickly learned that any display of knowledge or skill, if "contaminated" by foreign influence (normal in modern societies), was a folly in Democratic Kampuchea. Human communications were reduced to daily instructions and orders. (Kiernan 342) At work sites and meetings, in cramped vehicles, and in mess halls, Cambodians, many of whom were exhausted, malnourished, and ill, found themselves inundated with the revolutionary arts. DK songs lauded the sacrifice of slain revolutionaries and urged the populace to seek out and destroy enemies who remained hidden within their midst.

Many of these songs, such as "Children of the New Kampuchea," specifically targeted children, who were viewed as "blank slates" upon whom revolutionary attitudes and a selfless devotion to the Party could be more easily imprinted. On more important occasions, revolutionary art troupes performed dances and skits that conveyed a similar message of indoctrination, often modeling revolutionary attitudes and behavior through their dress, lyrics, and movements. During the DK era, the country had no stores, markets, schools, temples, or public facilities, except for a warehouse in the capital serving the diplomatic community.

In Phnom Penh, barbed-wire fences enclosed factories, workshops, barracks, and government offices. Street signs were painted over, and barbed-wire entanglements blocked many streets to traffic. Banana trees were planted in vacant lots. Automobiles abandoned in 1975 were rusted in piles along with refrigerators, washing machines, television sets, and typewriters. Scraps of paper in the gutters included prerevolutionary currency, worthless under the Khmer Rouge. (Chandler 2) In an old high school, the DK created a secret prison and document warehouse which they called " S-21".

In large classrooms on the upper floors of the western buildings, the patrol found heaps of shackles, handcuffs, whips, and lengths of chain. Other rooms on the upper floors had been divided by clumsily bricked partitions into small cells where each prisoner's foot had been manacled, as William Shawcross later wrote, " to a shackle large enough to take a ship's anchor. " Ammunition boxes in some of the cells contained human feces. 10 On the third floor were slightly larger, more elaborately constructed cells with wooden walls and doors. (Chandler 3)

Everyone was forced to work 12 - 14 hours a day, every day. Children were separated from their parents to work in mobile groups or as soldiers. People were fed one watery bowl of soup with a few grains of rice thrown in. Babies, children, adults and the elderly were killed everywhere. The Khmer Rouge killed people if they didn't like them, if didn't work hard enough, if they were educated, if they came from different ethnic groups, or if they showed sympathy when their family members were taken away to be killed. All were killed without reason.

Everyone had to pledge total allegiance to Angka, the Khmer Rouge government. It was a campaign based on instilling constant fear and keeping their victims off balance. (Kienan 239) People were starved, tortured and executed at random. It was this mass slaughter that earned the Cambodian area the name of “ the Killing Fields”, due to the mass graves found everywhere in the area. People were encouraged to confess minor or political crimes in exchange for a forgiveness from the government. They were then sent for re-education, which meant a trip to the killing fields.

Some 30% of the Cambodian population was exterminated in this manner, many of them women and children. The psychological effects of the Khmer Rouge regime remains with the Cambodian people to this day. Many shrines and monuments have been devoted to the innocent people killed by Pol Pot and his party. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime held power until 1979, when they were driven out by the Vietnamese Army. Pok Pot fled to Thailand where he continued to lead his party until 6 years later when he moved to China for health reason. He has never been officially charged with the genocide of the Cambodian people.