

Pol pot and the khmer rouge essay sample



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Section A: Aim of Investigation

After they seized power in Cambodia in April 1975, Saloth “ Pol Pot” Sar and the Khmer Rouge were responsible for the death of 1. 5-3 million Cambodian’s and were perhaps one of the most ruthless regimes of the 20th century. The aim of this investigation is to evaluate Pol Pot’s means of maintaining power from 1975 to 1979. An account of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge’s drastic internal reforms including the slaughter of millions, economic reorganization, political restructuring, and the cultivation of social/ethnic groups will appear in section B. External forces including funding from China and the United States and repressive measures such as censorship, torture, and execution will be assessed. This investigation will rely on and evaluate various sources relevant to Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge including The Pol Pot Regime and When the War was Over. An analysis of the methods will be weighed and considered in Section D. In section E, a conclusion will reached based on the evidence and analysis presented.

Section B: Evidence

1. Terror

Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge brutally killed millions of Cambodians through forced labor, torture, and starvation. Those who had previous ties with the former regime, people of the working class including lawyers, doctors, teachers, and even people who wore glasses were eliminated from this “ purified Cambodia” (Chandler 58). The Khmer Rouge targeted ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Christians, Muslims, Buddhist monks, and twenty other minority groups (News VOA). An estimated 50% of the 425, 000

Chinese living in Cambodia in 1975 perished - Muslims were also forced to eat port, those who refused were shot (Gavin).

Pol Pot's most infamous form of terror was his forced evacuation of an estimated two million inhabitants of Phnom Penh into the countryside at gunpoint. Pol Pot proclaimed in April 1975 to the people, " You must leave quickly. The Americans are going to bomb the city. Go ten to twelve miles away, don't take much with you, we'll take care of everything until you get back, you'll return in two or three days as soon as we've cleaned up the city" (Ponchaud 7). " In 1976, people were reclassified as full rights (base) people, candidates, and depositees - so called because they included most of the new people who had been deposited from the cities into the communes" (Stanton). Depositees were marked for destruction. Their rations were limited forcing hundreds of thousands to starve.

Civilians worked the killing fields on a " diet of one tin of rice (180 grams) per person every two days, where they would soon begin dying from overwork, malnutrition, and disease" (Gavin). The working conditions were horrendous as working days started as early as 4 a. m. and ended as late as 10 p. m. with only two periods of rest throughout this 18-hour day (Becker). Children were taken away from parents and forced into children brigades; the elderly were killed. Furthermore, " young Khmer Rouge soldiers" administered these communes " eager to kill anyone for the slightest infractions" (Kiernan add page number).

The main form of punishment for the crime for the crime of speaking out against the Khmer Rouge was death. In S-21 or Tuol Sleng, 20, 000 prisoners

were brutally tortured into giving false confessions, and exterminated during the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Torture methods were extremely cruel as the torture system was intended to “ make prisoners confess to whatever crimes their captors charged them with” (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum). These methods included “ electric shocks, searing hot metal instruments and hanging” (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum). Infringements punishable by death include not working hard enough, complaining about living conditions, collecting or stealing food for personal consumption, and grieving over the loss of relatives” (More or Less). An estimated 1. 5 million people were worked or starved to death, died of disease or exposure, or were summarily executed for infringements of camp discipline.

During Pol Pot’s rule, foreigners were expelled and embassies were closed.

2. Propaganda:

Until 1975, the Khmer Rouge were popular. Originally, they had promised to raise the living standards of the poor, thus assuring the support of the people. When they took over they collectivized everything: cattle, buffalo, plows, everything (Kiernan 185). Pol Pot wished to set up an agrarian utopia inspired by Mao Zedong. Like Mao Zedong, Pol Pot implemented a policy similar to the Great Leap Forward declaring “ Year Zero” in an attempt to purify society of all Western influences including “ capitalism, Western culture, city life, religion, and all foreign influences” and transform Cambodia into a peasant - Communistic state (Cook). “ The CPK [Communist Party of Kampuchea] attempted to distract people’s attention from their situation by informing the peasants that life in Cambodia was superior to that in Vietnam,

where people were reduced to eating chaff, while Chairman Mao's socialism was bringing progress in China" ensuring that Cambodia would soon follow (Kiernan 185).

Pol Pot insisted that Cambodia would not be independent until the economy and society grew collectively. " To achieve our independence, domestic peace, and unity, we must mobilize the people's forces to build an egalitarian society without rich or poor...if the economy grows, society grows too..." (Ponchaud 74). During Pol Pot's stay in power, Marxist books became widespread, including the Communist Manifesto. Libraries had reopened and shared these communist books with lycées (Ponchaud 154). Nevertheless, censorship was widespread and there was only one newspaper in circulation during Pol Pot's four years in power. This publication portrayed falsified information of Cambodia's economic developments and mistreatment towards its citizens (Chandler 35).

3. Foreign Aid:

Foreign aid came mainly from the United States and China - " in one estimate, [the United States gave] \$85 million in direct support - and it " pressured UN agencies to supply the Khmer Rouge," which " rapidly improved" the health and capability of Pol Pot's forces..." (Herman. China was Cambodia's main arms supplier and trade partner, providing them with rice, cloth, drugs, gasoline, and machines". Pol Pot also received equipment from Thailand, Belgrade, and other allies. China supplied Cambodia MiG's, Chinese built fighter planes and other weapons (Kiernan 317).

4. Internal & External Enemies:

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Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge made many enemies during his reign in power including those affiliated with the previous government and the well educated, because he deemed them “ detrimental to the Angkor State” (Cook). The Khmer Rouge also targeted ethnic groups deemed “ non-Khmer” including “ the Chams, Laos, Vietnamese, and ethnic Chinese,” however others claim that the regime discriminated against enemies of revolution rather than against specific ethnic or religious groups” (Kiernan 252).

Cambodia’s ongoing strife with Vietnam was an opportunity for Pol Pot to unite the Cambodian people. He inspired the Cambodian people by proclaiming “ the enemy is hesitant towards us...It is impossible for the enemy to attack us” (Kiernan 358).

Section C: Evaluation of Sources

Kiernan, Ben. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*. 2nd. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002

This book was written by an Australian Yale University professor, Ben Kiernan, who has extensive knowledge on the history of Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia, peasant studies, and genocide. The second edition of *The Pol pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge* was published in 2002 as part of the Yale University Genocide Studies Program by the Yale University Press. This work was written to inform individuals of the nature of the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot with a focus on the Khmer Rouge revolution, the Totalitarian policies of the

Khmer Rouge, and the genocide that killed roughly a quarter of the Cambodian population.

This book is beneficial to my research as it provides an in-depth analysis of what reforms took place and how the Cambodian people were treated once Pol Pot took power in 1975. The book provides several interviews with Cambodians describing what they endured and how the Pol Pot regime transformed Cambodian society. Seeing that Ben Kiernan is an Australian writer, his view of the events in Cambodia is strictly as a spectator. Being a non-Cambodian, Ben Kiernan's outlook might be influenced by Western culture, therefore having a slight bias. Kiernan's most recent publication was published in 2004 and is entitled *How Pol Pot Came into Power*.

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

This piece is written by an American journalist and author who specializes in Asian affairs, Elizabeth Becker. She started her career as a war correspondent for *The Washington Post* covering Cambodia. She left Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge expelled all foreigners from the country in April 1975. She was one of two American journalists allowed by the Khmer Rouge to return to Democratic Kampuchea briefly in 1978. This book focuses on the Cambodian French colonialism era, revival of Cambodian nationalism, the education of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, and the killing fields of Cambodia. This book aids in my research as Becker merges original historical research with the many voices of those who lived through the times including exclusive interviews with every Cambodian leader of the past

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quarter century, to analyze how Pol Pot systematically reorganized Cambodian society. This book is also beneficial because Ms. Becker lived in Cambodia and was able to see the effects of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia first hand. Although this book is written from a Western viewpoint, Elizabeth Becker was present in 1978 to view Cambodia under Pol Pot's regime. She also provided accounts from civilians and top officials of the period. However, the accounts of Pol Pot himself are not provided - this in itself is a minor limitation.

Section D: Analysis

Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were able to stay in power between 1975 and 1979 due to a variety of reasons. The Khmer Rouge initially used propaganda to obtain the support of the Cambodian people. They promised peasants higher living standards and representation in the government - gaining support in the masses. Pol Pot successfully evacuated the cities by telling the citizens that it was a safety precaution in the case of an American attack - ridding Cambodia of all Western Influence.

Pol Pot used censorship as a means of glorying Cambodia's economic developments and societal growth. This also ensuring the tranquility of the Cambodian people. Nevertheless, propaganda was not the only method used by Pol Pot to stay in power throughout those four years. Terror was used to frighten Cambodians into submission. The Khmer Rouge politically oppressed opposing parties and " Non-Khmer" ethnic groups, claiming they were enemies of the revolution. By Pol Pot's oppression of political parties, he

hindered the spread of oppositional messages and a growth of an opposition to him - preventing an early overthrow.

By establishing communes, Pol Pot was able to seize absolute control over the Cambodian population. Tuol Sleng, a prison and interrogation center was used by the Khmer Rouge to brutally torture some 20, 000 prisoners (Carvin). Torture, although highly repressive and brutal, instilled fear in the hearts of Cambodians, which presented the possibility of rebellions. The use of terror had many benefits for the Khmer Rouge as they utilized it as a means to eliminate people with ties to the former regime, intimidated the Vietnamese and Buddhist monks to further purify the Cambodian society, and eliminate opposition. Pol Pot's evacuation of an estimated two million people from the city of Phnom Penh to the fields of Cambodia was necessary not only to effectively transform Cambodia into an Agrarian based society, but also to

Although foreign aid did not play a significant role in maintaining Pol Pot's power, it should be addressed. The United States and China played a role in funding and supporting the Khmer Rouge. China funded the Khmer Rouge with arms and equipment to modernize Pol Pot's military. Pol Pot's alliance with China, Thailand, Belgrade, and other U. S. allies increased the United States' sphere of influence in South Asia. Considering Cambodia's ongoing tension with the Soviet funded Vietnam, their alliance with the United States was inevitable. Being that the United States and the U. S. S. R. were in an ongoing battle to expand their spheres of influence in South Asia, Pol Pot's siding with the United States was due to foreign circumstances, more specifically, Vietnam's siding with the U. S. S. R. (Herman).

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As mentioned, Cambodia's strife with Vietnam was an opportunity for Pol Pot to unite the Cambodian people - channeling nationalistic sentiment amongst civilians, by persuading the people that Vietnam was an aggressor, militarily incapable of attacking Cambodia.

Section E: Conclusion

Pol Pot was not able to stay in power due to a sole factor or method, but rather a number of reasons. As illustrated, Pol Pot worked under the pretext that Cambodia should rid itself of the enemy and revert to an Agrarian society similar to that of Mao Zedong. His maintenance of power was initially assured by the means of propaganda to gain support of the masses. Once in power, the Khmer Rouge instituted terror to instill fear in Cambodians alike. Foreign funding modernized the Cambodian military and this helped Pol Pot achieve the aim of maintaining power through military forces.

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