



ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
& EDUCATION CENTER

THE CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE

ORIGINS, GENOCIDE, AND
AFTERMATH





ORIGINS OF GENOCIDE

- Cambodia became an independent country from France in 1954.
- In 1961, an armed resistance led by a communist named Pol Pot (in image on left) was started against the Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Pol Pot means “Original Cambodian”, but Pol Pot’s real name was Saloth Sar. He chose to go by the name Pol Pot to deliberately express his racism against those who were not “pure” Cambodians.
- As Vietnam’s neighbor, Cambodia fell victim to many of the warfare between the United States and Vietnam during the Vietnam War. 150,000 Cambodian peasants were killed by US bombs during the years of 1969 – 1973.
- In 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War, the US stopped supporting the Cambodian military government.
- On April 17, 1975, Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge army (most comprised of teenage peasant boys) marched into Cambodia’s capital city and took over control of the country and renamed it Democratic Kampuchea (DK).

THIS IS YEAR ZERO

- Pol Pot's goal was to "purify" Cambodian society. He declared "This is Year Zero," and began turning back time in Cambodia by banning all foreign influences including actual foreign people, newspapers, radio, mail, television, and money.
- Cambodians had no human rights of any kind. There was no free speech, no freedom to practice religion, no ability to travel. People were murdered for violating any of the new rules and schedules of their society.
- Their goal was to turn the country into an egalitarian "utopia" where people had no material possessions or money. They sought to eliminate the basic family structure, individual thought, and "impure" elements of western capitalism.

A fall in the spring: a Cambodian soldier gives his puppy a drink near Phnom Penh.

If Phnom Penh falls some people expect to see a bloodbath. MARTIN WOOLLACOTT reports on the fears of those who must remain

Life or death under Khmer Rouge?

[The article contains multiple columns of text, including a sub-headline 'Life or death under Khmer Rouge?' and a photo caption 'A fall in the spring: a Cambodian soldier gives his puppy a drink near Phnom Penh.']



High officials have sent their children to the provinces, as they fear a fall in the spring. A British air force plane was shot down by Phnom Penh area forces. The British government has sent a message to the Khmer Rouge to stop the violence. The British government has sent a message to the Khmer Rouge to stop the violence.

FORCED EXODUS TO COUNTRYSIDE

- In another bizarre rule under Pol Pot's regime, he and the Khmer Rouge forced all city inhabitants to move to the countryside. 2 million people were marched out of the capital city of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.
- Approximately 20,000 people died on their forced exodus from cities. Those who were former government or army officials were murdered and others died of starvation.
- For those who survived the journey to the countryside, they were forced into slave labor in rice fields and other agricultural sites. Many people died from overwork, exhaustion, starvation, and disease. The Khmer Rouge told them "whether you live or die is of no great significance."



LIFE ON THE KILLING FIELDS



- People were forced to work long hours without wages or leisure. These sites became known as killing fields, as the many people who died or were murdered on these sites were buried in mass graves.
- People were forced to attend indoctrination sessions where they were to assess their loyalty to the regime and “reconstruct” themselves along the Khmer Rouge ideology. Many people were killed during the nightly sessions to intimidate the population into obeying the rules of the regime. Communication between people completely stopped in fear that the Khmer Rouge would accuse them of not being loyal and ultimately murdered.
- Indoctrination of children was very important to the Khmer Rouge regime. In order to destroy the basic family structure, children were taught not to love their parents and to transfer their love to the regime.

VICTIMS OF THE KHMER ROUGE

- The Khmer Rouge opposed and murdered the “New People” (those who lived in cities) vs. the “Old People” (pure peasants who did not live in cities).
- Those who were targeted and executed by the Khmer Rouge included: former government and army officials, soldiers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, Buddhist monks, and those who were not “pure Khmer people” such as Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, and Muslims.
- Anyone who opposed the regime were also targeted by the Khmer Rouge.



TUOL SLENG PRISON

- Tuol Sleng Prison, known as S21, was the largest of many prisons during the Cambodian genocide. S21 was a former high school, which was converted into a prison for political prisoners. The former classrooms were reassigned to be torture units and interrogation units.
- The Khmer Rouge forced thousands of prisoners in S21 to confess “I am not a human being; I am an animal” before murdering them. Many of these interrogations and murders were recorded, and they kept thorough records of the 6,000 prisoners, including pictures, some shown here.
- Only 7 people of the approximately 15,000 prisoners who went through the walls of S21 survived.
- Today, the site has been converted into the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.



AN END TO GENOCIDE

- Cambodia attacked Vietnam, so Vietnam sent troops into Cambodia to fight the Khmer Rouge. They took back the capital city of Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979. Pol Pot sought exile in Thailand.
- The Vietnamese withdrew their forces in 1989, and the country was renamed Cambodia again.
- Pol Pot lived in Thailand for almost 20 years, and sources say he died in his sleep in April 1998.
- 1.7 million Cambodians were murdered during the Cambodian genocide, approximately 1/4th of the total population of the country.



A Cambodian woman looks at portraits of Khmer Rouge victims at the Tuol Sleng genocide museum in the capital Phnom Penh.



EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: DITH PRAN

- Dith Pran was a photojournalist who was unable to escape and got caught up in the Cambodian Genocide. He ended up working in the countryside and termed the phrase “killing fields” to describe the mass murders and death.
- Watch this video to learn more about Dith’s experience:
<https://www.nytimes.com/video/obituaries/1194817114251/last-word-dith-pran.html>
- After viewing the video, reflect on the following questions in a journal or video response for your teacher:
 1. What is the importance of photojournalism during times of war and genocide?
 2. What are the challenges of photojournalism in times of war or genocide?
 3. What is Dith’s legacy?

SOURCES

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