

# GENOCIDE IN CAMBODIA, 1975-1979



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

## Introduction

From 1975-79, an estimated 1.5-3.0 million people—probably around 1.8 million, about a quarter of the population—were killed in a systematic campaign of mass murder organized by the Cambodian government at the time, known as the Democratic Kampuchea (DK). This government was created by the Khmer Rouge, a group that started in the 1960s as the armed wing of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (Cambodia). Led by the dictator Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge occupied the capital, Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975. Their goal was to establish a classless, agricultural state that completely rejected capitalism and was based on communal living. To achieve this, they sought to eliminate anyone they deemed “New People,” namely, urban populations, intellectuals, and minorities who were thought to have been corrupted by outside influence. The Khmer Rouge favored peasants, who they called “Old People.”

## Historical Context

Historically, the Khmer Empire had been a flourishing agrarian state in the 9th-15th centuries, which at its height encompassed a large area in the region including parts of current-day Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. From the 15th-19th centuries, Cambodia was in decline and by the end of this period the dynasties of Vietnam and Thailand were vying for control of Cambodia. In an attempt to protect his Cambodia from Vietnam and Thailand, in 1863 the King invited France to establish a protectorate, starting a 90-year period of French rule. Cambodia was occupied by Japan during World War II, and then returned to French rule after the war until Cambodia became independent in 1953. The country was destabilized during the war in Vietnam (1955-1975), during which the United States bombed Vietnamese sanctuaries in rural Cambodia. There was a civil war in Cambodia from 1970-1975, which further added to a growing economic and cultural gulf between people in the cities and the countryside. This provided a perfect background for the Khmer Rouge to take over.

## Genocide

The Khmer Rouge ruled a totalitarian state in which citizens had essentially no rights – they abolished civil and political rights, private property, money, religious practices, minority languages, and foreign clothing. Citizens could be detained for the slightest offenses, and the government set up vast prisons where people were held, tortured, and executed. The most infamous of these prisons was known as “S-21,” located in the capital city of Phnom Penh, where accused “traitors” and their families were brought, photographed, tortured, and killed. Of the roughly 17,000 men, women, and children who were brought to S-21 there were only about a dozen survivors. There were mass graves throughout the country, areas that became known as “killing fields.”

The Khmer Rouge based their policies on the idea that citizens of Cambodia had become corrupted by outside influences, especially Vietnam and the capitalist West. The Khmer Rouge referred to people who supported their vision as “pure people,” and persecuted anyone they deemed “impure.” Within days of taking power, the regime killed thousands of military personnel and forcibly moved millions of people out of cities, killing anyone who refused or was too slow. They forced citizens into what they called reeducation schools, which were essentially places of state propaganda. The regime forced families to live communally with other people, in order to destroy the family structure. The Khmer Rouge targeted ethnic minorities, especially Chinese, Vietnamese, and Muslim Cham, of whom an estimated 80% were killed. In addition, anyone who was

believed to be an intellectual was killed: doctors, lawyers, teachers, even people who wore glasses or knew a foreign language became targets. Specially targeted were the inhabitants of the areas close to the Vietnamese border.

On December 25, 1978 Vietnam invaded Cambodia. The Vietnamese sought to remove the Khmer Rouge from power. At first, survivors of the Khmer

### Aftermath

Vietnamese troops stayed in the country until 1989, with armed clashes between Vietnamese and Cambodians going on throughout the 1980s. A post-Pol Pot government with some democratic features, led by a reestablished monarchy, took over. Yet the Khmer Rouge did not disappear until much later, and continued to hold Cambodia's seat at the United Nations for twelve years. On October 23, 1991 the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreement (commonly referred to as the "Paris Peace Accords") was brokered by the United Nations, ending the twelve year civil war in Cambodia. Cambodia was temporarily governed by the National Council and the United Nations Transit Authority of Cambodia. In May 1993 the first free elections in more than twenty years were held. In January 2001 the Cambodian government established the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to try leadership of the Khmer Rouge for crimes against humanity. Trials began in 2009 but have led to only three convictions, including that of Kaing Guek Eav, the commander of the S21 prison, who was sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity. The vast majority of the perpetrators suffered no consequences for their actions.