

The Killing Fields

In the turbulent wake of the Vietnam War, the world looked on as Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia scrambled to rebuild their ravaged nations. All three nations established communist governments, fueled by a renewed hatred for the capitalist West and bankrolled by Mao Zedong and the People's Republic of China.

This assessment is perhaps too open-and-shut, particularly concerning the communists' rise to power in what is now known as Cambodia, known at various times as the Kingdom of Cambodia (1953-1970, under the Cambodian monarchy), the Khmer Republic (1970-1975, under the far right wing Lon Nol), and Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979, under the communist Khmer Rouge regime)¹. The story of Cambodia is one of turmoil, corruption, and, most of all, resilience in the face of oppression and brutality. The ruthless regime of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge killed what most historians now estimate to be roughly 2 million Cambodians, with about 60% of the killings due to direct execution in the Khmer Rouge's infamous "killing fields," where nearly a quarter of the population of Cambodia was executed, often along with the families, and often at the hands of their neighbors.²

Perhaps most striking is the expeditiousness with which Pol Pot installed a dictatorship with such a stranglehold on the Cambodian people. This paper will discuss the Khmer Rouge's rise to power, their unrelenting bid to maintain it, and their eventual downfall. We'll also discuss the

¹Chandler, David P., and Overton, Leonard C. "Encyclopædia Britannica ." In Encyclopædia Britannica , December 9, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cambodia>.

²Seybolt, Taylor B., Jay D. Aronson, and Baruch Fischhoff. Counting Civilian Casualties: an Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 238

horrors (and the aftermath) of what Martin Shaw would describe as “the purest genocide of the Cold War era.”³

The Fall of the Monarchy

Prince Norodom Sihanouk assumed the throne of French-controlled Cambodia in 1941 after the death of the preceding king, his cousin Sisowath Monivong. After a series of power struggles — notably, Japanese occupation of Cambodia during World War II forced the French colonists out in 1941, only for the French to regain control in 1945, after the war — France eventually ceded control of Cambodia, due in large part to the adept political maneuverings of Sihanouk. In March of 1953, he traveled to France to negotiate independence, voicing the common belief in Cambodia that the tension between the right wing anticommunist nationalist group Khmer Serei, led by Son Ngoc Thanh, who had briefly served as prime minister in the interim between Japanese and French rule before being arrested and exiled by the French in 1945, and the communist Khmer Issarak guerilla group, closely tied to the Viet Minh of Vietnam and at points controlling more than 50 percent of Cambodia’s land, would inevitably lead to disruptive civil war and likely undermine the French protectorate.⁴ This concern, along with Sihanouk’s famous “Royal Crusade,” in which the Prince toured several neighboring countries, asking for their support in gaining independence from the French, led the French to withdraw from Cambodia and Sihanouk to assume the role of Prime Minister in the latter half of 1953 (though he concurrently served as King, until abdicating the throne and instating his father as King in 1955).⁵

Though Sihanouk was ostensibly quite popular with most Cambodians (a 1954 referendum showed 99.8% approval ratings for Sihanouk, though evidence shows that many voted under police duress⁶), he was vehemently opposed by many Cambodian students, who were largely left-leaning

³Shaw, Martin. *Theory of the Global State Globality as Unfinished Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006. pp. 41

⁴Ross, Russell R., ed. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987. *The Struggle for Independence*

⁵Chandler, David P., and Overton, Leonard C.

⁶Osborne, Milton E. *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*. Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1994. pp.

or communist and saw Sihanouk as a French collaborator. Among his most vocal opponents was a young Saloth Sâr, a Cambodian student in Paris who returned to Cambodia in 1953, and would later become Pol Pot, dictator of Cambodia and leader of the communist Khmer Rouge.⁷ Saloth Sâr returned to Cambodia on behalf of the Cercle Marxiste, a Marxist-Leninist organisation of Parisian students, to assess the unrest in Cambodia and determine the communist rebel groups to which the Cercle would pledge their support.⁸

Sâr (along with a dozen or so other members of the Cercle) to meet up with the Khmer Viet Minh, a largely Cambodian subsidiary of the Viet Minh, which he saw as the most promising of the several disparate communist organizations in Southeast Asia. Sâr rose to a secretarial position of some importance before the Khmer Viet Minh were forced to leave Cambodia following the end of the First Indochina War in 1954, at the behest of Prince Sihanouk.

Sâr stayed behind in Cambodia and, along with the other remaining Marxists, attempted to gain control electorally, forming the nominally socialist party Prachacheon (a front organization for the remnants of the rebel groups remaining in Cambodia, for which Sâr served as assistant deputy party secretary) to vie for the Prime Ministership in the rapidly approaching 1955 election. Prachacheon was not heavily supported, and the opposing Democratic Party (led by less radical Cambodian students returning from France) were clear favorites in the election, impelling Sihanouk to abdicate his role as King in order to form a political party, Sangkum Reastr Niyum, and vie for the election.⁹ In an “election” rife with electoral fraud, Sihanouk took all 91 available seats in a landslide election, after which Prachacheon was effectively disbanded.¹⁰

Tensions between Sihanouk and the leftists came to a fever pitch in 1962, two years after Sihanouk amended the Cambodian Constitution to allow him to assume the role of head of state for life. Student protests and violent riots led Sihanouk to dissolve the Sangkum party and attempt to make good with the left by populating his regime with 34 left-leaning politicians. The new

⁷Chandler, David P., and Overton, Leonard C.

⁸Short, Philip. *Pol Pot: the History of a Nightmare*. London: J. Murray, 2005. pp. 89

⁹Chandler, David P., and Overton, Leonard C.

¹⁰Post Staff. “1955 Polls: the Sangkum Takes Hold.” *Phnom Penh Post*, February 13, 1998.

leftist additions to Sihanouk's government were placed under constant surveillance and forced to sign documents that Sihanouk was the only possible leader of Cambodia.¹¹ One of the men Sihanouk commanded to serve in his new administration was Saloth Sâr. Sâr, refusing to work with his political and ideological enemy, fled Cambodia to join the ranks of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.¹² Sâr was one of only 2 of the 34 men summoned by Sihanouk that managed to escape. It was at this point that Sâr turned from a politician to, as historian David Chandler puts it, a "full-time revolutionary."

In 1965, Sâr flew to Beijing, where he was hosted by the governing Communist Party of China's Deng Xiaoping (who would later become Mao Zedong's successor) and met regularly with various party leaders to be trained in such topics as "dictatorship of the proletariat, class struggles and political purge."¹³ Sâr returned to Cambodia the following year to reunite with the Cambodian Marxist-Leninists, who renamed themselves the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Sihanouk began referring to this group as the Khmer Rouge.

Sâr's ideology took on a new form, informed both by the violent, guerilla nature of the Viet Cong and the highly systematic and structured nature of the CPC. These attributes are what would come to characterize the Khmer Rouge's eventual rule over Cambodia, which made fearsomely effective use of peasant militias to achieve its political goals. For the next several years, the Khmer Rouge toured the Cambodian countryside, drumming up support for their cause and recruiting soldiers. In 1968, supported by Northern Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge began a nationwide insurgency, which Sihanouk and the Cambodian military were completely unable to resist.¹⁴ This insurgency marked the beginning of the Cambodian Civil War, a violent power struggle that would rage until 1975.

¹¹Frey, Rebecca Joyce. *Genocide and International Justice*. Infobase Publishing, 2009. pp. 266–267

¹²Chandler, David P. *Brother Number One: A Political Biography Of Pol Pot*. Routledge, 2018. pp. 67

¹³Chandler, David P. pp. 74

¹⁴Frey, Rebecca J. pp. 269

Civil War, Intervention, and the Rise of the Khmer Rouge

But the Khmer Rouge did not immediately gain control of Cambodia: in 1970, taking advantage of the nation's extreme instability, Sihanouk's (right wing) Premier Lon Nol spearheaded a military coup, usurping and exiling Sihanouk, who fled to Beijing to be received by the CPC, who saw the political instability as a chance for Sâr and the communist Khmer Rouge to seize control of (what Lon Nol's regime called) the Khmer Republic.¹⁵ The CPC convinced Sihanouk to form an alliance with the Khmer Rouge; he became a party leader waged against their common enemy, Lon Nol and the Khmer Republic. While U.S. President Richard Nixon was reluctant to provide anything but air support to aid the Khmer Republic in the skirmishes and pitched battles erupting across Cambodia, the CPC gave 400 tons of military aid to the Khmer Rouge in 1970 alone.¹⁶

While China and Vietnam's roles in the Cambodian Civil War were fairly straightforward (they provided supplies, arms, and shelter for Khmer Rouge forces), the effects of the United States' intervention are more hotly disputed. In 1969, Richard Nixon worked in secret with Henry Kissinger, informing *only* 5 members of Congress, to plan *Operation Menu*, a 6-stage bombing mission targeting communist strongholds in Vietnam and Cambodia. Nixon and Kissinger went to great lengths to keep *Operation Menu* a secret, devising a complicated chain of command among Air Force officers that would obscure the nature and number of the bombings from any one officer. In fact, neither the Secretary nor the Chief of Staff of the Air Force *even knew* there were bombing strikes in Cambodia, until *Operation Menu* was exposed in 1972. Air Force Major Hal Knight, a key component of the *Operation Menu* chain of command, complained to his superior officer with concerns over the legality of his actions. He was subsequently discharged from the Air Force, and he wrote a 1972 letter to Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire expressing his concerns about the bombings of Cambodia, which led to a Congressional investigation of *Operation Menu*¹⁷.

There are few reliable estimates of the death toll caused by the *Menu* bombings, in part because the mission was kept under such tight wraps. Estimates range between 30,000 and 500,000 civilian

¹⁵Chandler, David P., and Overton, Leonard C.

¹⁶Ross, Russell R. *Insurrection and War, 1967-1975*

¹⁷Vietnam War: The Essential Reference Guide. United States: ABC-CLIO, 2013. pp. 156-158

casualties as a direct result of U.S. bombings of Cambodia.¹⁸ What *is* known is that Khmer Rouge forces sharply increased in number immediately following the implementation of *Operation Menu* (the Khmer Rouge numbered 4,000 in 1970 and 70,000 by 1975¹⁹), and that they continued to grow in strength for the duration of the campaign. Many historians speculate that this sharp increase was due to the *Menu* bombings inciting strong anti-U.S. sentiments among affected Cambodian civilians, particularly peasantry in the countryside that were quick to join the Khmer Rouge forces opposing the U.S.-backed Khmer Republic.²⁰ Yale's Ben Kiernan assesses the situation as follows:

Apart from the large human toll, perhaps the most powerful and direct impact of the bombing was the political backlash it caused ... The CIA's Directorate of Operations, after investigations south of Phnom Penh, reported in May 1973 that the communists there were successfully 'using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda' ... The U.S. carpet bombing of Cambodia was partly responsible for the rise of what had been a small-scale Khmer Rouge insurgency, which now grew capable of overthrowing the Lon Nol government²¹

Other scholars claim that the bombings were key in delaying the progress of the Khmer Rouge, since the group was already rapidly gaining support due to a 1970 invasion of North Vietnamese troops spreading communist sentiments among Cambodians.²² In any case, it's difficult to say whether Nixon and Kissenger were wise (let alone justified) in intervening so brazenly, without a more careful statistical or political evaluation of the consequences. Considering the weakened state of Lon Nol's forces following the coup of 1970, it's quite possible that the Khmer Rouge, backed the North Vietnamese and the CPC, would have eventually prevailed regardless of American intervention, but whether Nixon and Kissenger's actions accelerated or decelerated this is unclear.

A more interesting question is whether American bombings of Cambodia were immoral or illegal, or if Nixon and Kissinger's actions (along with their clandestine nature) can possibly be justified. *Operation Menu* was not the only Cambodian bombing campaign under Nixon. *Opera-*

¹⁸Ross, Russell R. *The Widening War*

¹⁹Shawcross, William, and Philip Nobile. *New Yorker*, November 5, 1979.

²⁰Shawcross, William. *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*. New York: Washington Square press, 1979, pp. 396

²¹Kiernan, Ben, and Taylor Owen. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 8, no. 26 (June 28, 2010). <https://apjjf.org/-Taylor-Owen/3380/article.html>.

²²Timothy Carney, "The Unexpected Victory," in Karl D. Jackson, ed., *Cambodia 1975–1978: Rendezvous With Death* (Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 13–35.

tion Freedom Deal was another such campaign, begun in 1970 with the intention of bombing Viet Cong bases in Vietnam, but eventually directed toward Khmer Rouge encampments in Cambodia in direct support of Lon Nol's Khmer Republic, in January 1973, after the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords and agreed to cease bombings of Vietnam and Laos.²³ *Freedom Deal*, criticized heavily by Congress and widely seen as a clear abuse of executive power, led directly to the passing of the War Powers Resolution of 1973, which, among other restrictions, requires the President to notify (and obtain consent from) Congress before ordering any military action abroad, with some exceptions for cases of *e.g.* national emergency.²⁴ The need for the War Powers resolution suggests that Nixon's intervention in the Cambodian Civil war was, in the eyes of Congress, illegal at worst and underhanded at best.

It should also be noted that it was roughly at this point that Sâr took over a dominant role in the CPK and began referring to himself as "Pol Pot." In 1970, Pol Pot became the secretary of the North East Zone and established a military base called K-5 in a mountainous area called Naga's Tail.²⁵ Pol Pot helped assemble and train the Khmer Rouge Army in the years to come, notably implementing a policy that only "poor peasants" could join the CPK — no students or anyone regarded as middle-class could join. This policy was perhaps inspired by Pol Pot's interpretation of Marx, *i.e.* that revolution is the result of the union of the working proletariat (the peasants enlisting in the CPK) and the "intellectual elite" (delegates and senior party members). In 1972, the CPK held a congress, and Pol Pot was elected both Secretary of the Central Committee (the most powerful committee within the party) and Chairman of the Military Commission, essentially giving him full reign over the CPK's military force, which was quickly growing in number and strength.

By 1973 word of brutal atrocities committed by communist insurgents had reached every corner of Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge did a remarkable job of maintaining secrecy regarding their

²³Ross, Russell R.

²⁴Wikipedia contributors, "Operation Freedom Deal," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Operation_Freedom_Deal&oldid=948112917 (accessed April 26, 2020).

²⁵Short, Philip. pp. 277

organizational structure and system of governance. The underground nature of the Khmer Rouge was vital in their resistance of both American bombings and counter-insurgency measures by Lon Nol's Khmer Republic.²⁶ A 1973 writing by Ith Sarin, a Khmer Rouge defector, is one of the best accounts of the rule of the CPK during the Civil War, which referred to itself as the "Angkar" (meaning the "Organization") to further obscure its true nature. The Khmer Rouge ordered its subjects to wear simple black clothes, red scarves, and sandals made of car tires to emulate the garments of poor peasants. The CPK cultivated fanatical contempt for Lon Nol and the United States, and they encouraged people to spy on each other and report any ideological transgressions to the Angkar. Party members were made to attend regular meetings in which they engaged in harsh criticism of their fellow party members, in order to foster an air of suspicion and distrust. Though no one could safely express it explicitly, Sarin assessed that most nearly every person living under CPK rule despised the Khmer Rouge and supported the Khmer Republic in the Civil War. The Khmer Rouge began collectivizing villages it controlled, leading some villagers to slaughter their own livestock to prevent it from being owned by the CPK.²⁷

These are all versions of standard tactics employed by dictatorships to maintain ideological homogeneity and suppress individuality. What distinguishes the Khmer Rouge was the extreme brutality of its rule. The CPK was well known for forcing children, usually between the ages of 8 and 17, to join the army. These children were armed and expected to fight alongside the rest the Khmer Rouge, as well as to perform menial or undesirable tasks, like digging graves, transporting dead bodies, and carrying supplies.²⁸ These child soldiers were often much more easily manipulated than enlisted peasants, and were brainwashed to follow all commands without question. Child soldiers were forced to commit acts of mass murder not only throughout the Civil War, but also during the Cambodian Genocide, from 1975 until 1979, and during the resultant guerilla wars following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, until 1998.²⁹

²⁶Osborne, Milton E. pp. 116

²⁷Carney, Timothy Michael. *Communist Party Power in Kampuchea (Cambodia): Documents and Discussion*. New York: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1977. pp. 34-42

²⁸Voa. "Former Child Soldier Describes Khmer Rouge." VOA. VOA Cambodia, September 28, 2009. <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/a-40-2009-09-28-voa4-90171232/1354614.html>.

²⁹Southerland, Dan. "Cambodia Diary 6: Child Soldiers - Driven by Fear and Hate." Radio Free Asia. Radio Free

One common method of torture employed by the Khmer Rouge, used on both enemy soldiers and nonconforming civilians, was gradual decapitation by slow or intermittent sawing, often lasting over the course of several days. The Khmer Rouge were also known to murder non-violent monks and destroy Buddhist temples. A common theme throughout the Cambodian Civil War and the resultant genocide was the systematic killing of children and babies who had been orphaned by the Khmer Rouge, in order to preclude the possibility of creating a generation of young Cambodians resentful toward the Khmer Rouge and set on avenging their parents.³⁰ This practice led to the notion of “Chankiri Trees”, large trees near execution sites where babies were taken and against which they were beaten until dead. Soldiers often laughed while doing so, as not to show any trace of sympathy, so oppressive was the Khmer Rouge’s pressure to conform. Many of these trees have been turned into memorials in present day Cambodia.³¹

The Fall of Phnom Penh and the Cambodian Genocide

The capital city of Phnom Penh became a safe haven for victims fleeing both American bombings and the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. The city more than doubled in population from 1971 to 1974, at points having as many as 2.5 million inhabitants, as compared to 1.2 million in 1971.³² Of course, capturing Phnom Penh was the CPK’s primary goal, as it would mean sure victory over the Khmer Republic. Furthermore, fanatic CPK members were menacingly contemptuous toward the population of Phnom Penh, who the Khmer Rouge saw as traitors: most were people fleeing the Khmer Rouge, wealthy or middle-class, or educated. Phnom Penh braced itself as the waxing Khmer Rouge closed in on the capital and Lon Nol’s waning forces. In 1973, after a failed foray into the city, the Khmer Rouge began a nearly two year bombing campaign on Phnom Penh, with

Asia, February 8, 2008. https://www.rfa.org/english/features/blogs/cambodiablog/blog6_cambodia_southerland-20060720.html

³⁰Tyner, James A.; Philo, Chris. War, violence, and population: making the body count. Guilford Press, 2009. p. 2

³¹Cockerell, Penny. “Cambodian Shadows.” Dart Center, October 13, 2015. <https://dartcenter.org/content/cambodian-shadows-0>

³²Ross, Russell R. Early Khmer Rouge Atrocities

almost constant shelling of besieged civilians from 1973 until early 1975.³³

Those within the walls of Phnom Penh lived in constant fear of random death or mutilation. On January 1, 1975, the Khmer Rouge began bombing supply ships bringing food and ammunition to Republican soldiers within the city. The U.S. began conducting supply drops in February, with limited success amid Khmer Rouge rockets. As the Republican army starved and ran low on ammunition, the Khmer Rouge advanced and ravaged the beleaguered Republican army and entered the city on April 17, 1975, 16 days after Lon Nol resigned his position and fled to the United States, for fear of being captured by the Khmer Rouge. American embassy personnel were evacuated by helicopter, inviting along several key members of Lon Nol's regime, who all chose to stay and fight. Every last one of them was executed by the Khmer Rouge.³⁴

Once Phnom Penh fell, Pol Pot and other CPK leaders immediately began work on instating a new communist government. Headquartered in various former Republican administrative buildings, the new regime decided to focus first on promoting an agrarian society, determined that the new government's first priority should be on attaining self-sufficiency, without having to rely on food aid from China and other sympathetic nations.³⁵ The purpose of this initiative was two-fold: it was not only meant to bolster the party's collectivist ideology, but also to prepare the new nation to face any wars or revolutions that might alight in the immediate aftermath of the transition of power.

Pol Pot quickly established himself as the *de facto* leader of the newly-founded Democratic Kampuchea, after touring Asia to meet with and learn from Mao Zedong and Kim Il-Sung, founder of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He established a puppet parliament, that met once for three hours.³⁶ Worried that the popular Sihanouk, at this point estranged from the CPK and exiled in China, might inspire revolution against the Khmer Rouge, Democratic Kampuchea invited Sihanouk, who was well-known to the international community, to become the nominal head of state for the remainder of 1975. Sihanouk met with various leaders to discuss the new Khmer

³³Becker, Elizabeth (28 January 1974). "The Agony of Phnom Penh". The Washington Post.

³⁴Ross, Russell R. The Fall of Phnom Penh

³⁵Short, Philip. pp. 288

³⁶Ibid.

Rouge regime, even addressing the United Nations General Assembly at the end of 1975. These measures were carefully devised by Pol Pot to mislead the international community and give his regime an air of legitimacy in anticipation of further aggression from the U.S. and its allies.

The Khmer Rouge began its agricultural reform program in 1975, which would eventually evolve into Pol Pot's *Maha Lout Ploh*, meant to be a Cambodian analog of Mao's Great Leap Forward. By 1979, *Maha Lout Ploh* would be responsible for the deaths of nearly 1 million Cambodians due to starvation. Most notably, the Khmer Rouge began executing any Cambodians deemed to be detrimental to the party's ideology, using their corpses as fertilizer. Such "bad elements" included former supporters of the Khmer Republic, professionals or intellectuals, as well as artists and musicians (*i.e.* anyone with an education or who could speak a foreign language — a common story is that the Khmer Rouge indiscriminately executed any Cambodian with glasses), non-Cambodians living in Cambodia (mostly ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, or Thai), and so-termed "economic saboteurs," *i.e.* those who the Khmer Rouge did not deem to be poor peasants. Combined, these killings resulted in the decimation of nearly all of Cambodia's urban population.³⁷

These killings set the precedent for the systematized genocide in the following years. Nuon Chea, Pol Pot's second-in-command, the party's chief ideologist, chief engineer of the Khmer Rouge's propaganda machine, instituted several oppressive policies on the people of Cambodia in order to promote party ideology. Cambodians were expected to work 10 day weeks, with a single day of rest between them. Men and women were largely segregated, and all written materials not produced by the party were forbidden, as was sport. The nation's vocabulary was altered as well, with the Khmer Rouge insisting upon the use of the plural "we" in favor of the singular "I", in order to cultivate a collectivist culture.³⁸

Sihanouk, growing increasingly uncomfortable with the Khmer Rouge policies implemented by Pol Pot, resigned from his position as Head of State in early 1976. He was denied permission to emigrate to China, and was kept under house arrest, living quite lavishly in his palace for the

³⁷Frey, Rebecca. J. pp. 267

³⁸Ibid. pp. 326

remainder of the Khmer Rouge regime. Pol Pot was installed as Prime Minister, with Nuon Chea taking the role of President of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly and one Khieu Samphân as Head of State. The CPK became more comfortable in its new role as a governing body, eventually formally revealing itself to be a Marxist-Leninist organization (though this was already quite well-known) and acknowledging their association with the Angkar.

1976 marked the beginning of *Maha Lat Ploh*, which would result in one of the deadliest famines of the 20th century. Several irrigation projects were begun across Cambodia, with many failing due to the technical incompetence of the party. Villages were forced to live communally, living and eating all meals together. Foraging and hunting were expressly prohibited and punishable by death. Once children turned 7, they were stolen from their families and sent to live with Khmer Rouge instructors, with the intention of fully indoctrinating the nation's first new generation. These cooperatives produced far less than the CPK expected, due to exhaustion and lack of motivation among workers, as well as diversion of most of the strong workers to irrigation projects and the construction of dams. Food shortages led to death by starvation for many Cambodians, which only lessened food production even more in the following years. It's estimated that around 20 percent of the approximately 2 million killed during the Khmer Rouge regime died of starvation due to the food shortages resulting from *Maha Lat Ploh*.³⁹

Most of the killings during the Khmer Rouge regime took place in the so-called "Killing Fields," death camps set up by the Khmer Rouge to carry out mass executions. Generally, anyone accused of a crime — the definition of "crime" here is quite broad, and can range from complaining about food shortages to questioning party ideology to foraging fruit — was given harsh physical discipline and a formal warning from the Angkar. A second transgression doomed one to "re-education," at which point they were sent to the Killing Fields and faced near-certain death. Most did not even know the crimes of which they'd been accused. The Angkar also encouraged Cambodians to confess to and repent for any crimes they'd committed before CPK rule, promising to reward them for their repentance. Those that confessed were sent to the Killing Fields as well.

³⁹Ibid. 344-353

As during the Civil War, parents were often killed with their children in a bid to suppress any animosity the youth might harbor regarding the Khmer Rouge. Those that were accused of crimes by the Khmer Rouge were tortured before their executions, in order to elicit names of other “guilty” Cambodians.⁴⁰

The most notorious prison camp was S-21, a prison established in a former secondary school at which more than 20,000 political prisoners were interrogated and tortured by means of waterboarding, electric shock, burning alive, hanging, removal of fingernails, drowning, rape (interestingly, torturers found guilty of rape were executed as well, since this was strictly against the CPK’s official policy), removal of organs without anesthetic, sleep deprivation, starvation, and others. The torture ceased only when victims confessed fully to their “crimes,” often telling imaginary stories of crimes they didn’t commit, and gave lists of names of their friends and colleagues, who were subsequently brought in for questioning, as well.⁴¹

To conserve ammunition, most of the actual executions at the Killing Fields were by means of beating or stabbing with farm instruments. Modern researchers have uncovered mass burials containing nearly 1.4 million victims of execution, though many suspect that far more were killed. Along with the hundreds of thousands that died from starvation, exhaustion, exposure, or disease, it’s estimated that as few as 1.5 million and as many as 3 million Cambodians died of unnatural causes during the Khmer Rouge’s reign of terror. The international community would have little knowledge of these atrocities until the decline of the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s.⁴²

The Downfall of the Khmer Rouge

Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge retained power for just under 4 years. Pol Pot, fearing Vietnamese encroachment on Khmer Rouge policies, ordered a pre-emptive invasion of Vietnam in April of 1978. Khmer Rouge forces ransacked the Vietnamese countryside, most notably massacring the

⁴⁰Vannak, Huy. *Bou Meng: a Survivor from Khmer Rouge Prison S-21: Justice for the Future Not Just for the Victims*. Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2010. pp. 32-35

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²Seybolt, Taylor B., Jay D. Aronson, and Baruch Fischhoff, pp. 238

entire population (save 2 survivors) of the 3000 strong Vietnamese village Ba Chúc, in what came to be known as the Ba Chúc massacre. This was the catalyst of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, a 10 year long armed conflict between Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and Vietnam.⁴³

Tensions grew along Cambodia's border with Vietnam, with both sides intermittently shelling enemy bases. After the years of genocide, the Cambodian people were severely crippled and the Khmer Rouge army was weak. Anticipating conflict with Vietnam, China began actively supporting the Khmer Rouge, sending aircraft, tanks, artillery, and boats as well as several thousand Chinese advisers and strategists. Nonetheless, Vietnam had also been gearing up for an all-out offensive, and the Vietnamese army still vastly outnumbered Cambodian forces.⁴⁴

In December of 1978, Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia with an estimated 150,000 soldiers and strong artillery and air forces. The Khmer Rouge attempted to combat the Vietnamese via conventional war methods, but this proved extremely ineffective despite their Chinese backing, resulting in the death of almost half of the Khmer Rouge army in just *two weeks*. Quickly realizing that the Vietnamese wouldn't easily be resisted, the Khmer Rouge switched to guerrilla tactics. Vietnamese forces took Phnom Penh in January 1979, forcing Khmer Rouge leadership, including Pol Pot, to flee to neighboring Thailand, while still calling for stubborn guerrilla resistance from the Khmer Rouge. In any case, a new administration, the communist People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), was quickly established under close watch by the Vietnamese and set to work dismantling the Khmer Rouge rule over the rest of Cambodia. Khmer Rouge forces continued resisting for the next decade, but were never able to regain control from the PRK.⁴⁵ Regardless, their dogged attacks against PRK bases kept the new government from ever getting to its feet, keeping the nation in a constant state of unrest and violence.

Unsettled as it may have been, the PRK got to work reinstating basic rights for Cambodians, as well as attempting to reinvigorate Cambodian culture, which had largely been lost during the Khmer Rouge regime. One of the first official acts of the PRK was restoring Buddhism as the state

⁴³Ross, Russell R. The Fall of Democratic Kampuchea

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

religion of Cambodia, reopening and restoring thousands of temples across the nation. The CPK had imposed a strict policy of atheism in Democratic Kampuchea, executing monks en masse. The PRK also reopened movie theaters across Cambodia, screening Vietnamese and Soviet films. The Khmer Rouge's genocide of educated Cambodians proved to be a major stumbling block in the development of the PRK. The PRK sent many Cambodians to be schooled in the Soviet Union, but it was impossible to replace the millions of lives that had been lost and the country floundered.⁴⁶ This is a problem that Cambodia still struggles with today, with the nation (now back under monarchical control) reporting 77.2 percent adult literacy in 2015, rankings 117th of all UN member states.⁴⁷ Fighting finally ceased with the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, which marked the official end of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War. The Peace Agreement was met with much criticism, since, in order to gain approval from representatives of Democratic Kampuchea, any language mentioning "genocide" was omitted. Nonetheless, the date of the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement is today a public holiday in Cambodia.⁴⁸

Chea and Samphân, having long since fled to Thailand, were both arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment at the hands of what is now the Kingdom of Cambodia in 2012 and 2007, respectively. Both have expressed great remorse and have taken full moral responsibility for the genocide they helped to engineer. Pol Pot, on the other hand, took no such responsibility for the actions of the Khmer Rouge. A tribunal at the behest of the PRK took place in 1979, trying Pol Pot *in absentia* and finding him guilty of genocide. In 1997 Pol Pot ordered Cambodian politician Son Sen killed, and was subsequently arrested by what remained of the Khmer Rouge and tried, where he was sentenced to life in prison. Pol Pot died in his sleep a few months later, by what many suspect to be suicide via a valium overdose, fearing the Khmer Rouge's plans to hand custody of Pol Pot to the United States.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall & Helen Hardacre. Asian visions of authority, Joint Committee on Southeast Asia. University of Hawaii Press, 1994

⁴⁷UIS Data Centre, UNESCO. "Adult literacy rate, population 15+ years (both sexes, female, male)". 20 November 2019.

⁴⁸"Paris Peace Accords Signed." History.com. A&E Television Networks, November 16, 2009. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/paris-peace-accords-signed>.

⁴⁹Poole, Teresa. "Pol Pot 'suicide' to avoid US trial". The Independent. London. January 21, 1999

In late 1997, only months before his death in 1998, Pol Pot was interviewed by American journalist Nate Thayer. In this interview, he denied any responsibility for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, claiming instead that he was only an administrator, oblivious to their atrocities. He claimed that his goal was never to kill people, but instead simply to incite communist revolution, and hence that he had a clear conscience. Pol Pot's claims are patently false, with very strong evidence pointing to the contrary.⁵⁰



⁵⁰Mydans, Seth. "In an Interview, Pol Pot Declares His Conscience Is Clear." The New York Times, October 23, 1997.