

Cambodia: The Political Events and Social Conditions that led to the Khmer Rouge's Plans of Genocide

On April 17, 1975 in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge party set into motion its radical experiment in social construction of a nation state. In an effort to "purify" the Khmer (Cambodian) race and create an absolutely utopian classless peasant society, the Khmer Rouge began to empty all of the urban centers of their populations, and forced mass migrations to the country side. They systematically expelled all Westerners, banned religion and the press, shut down all border and cut off all communication with the outside world. They banned all Western drugs and smashed hospital equipment. Many members of the professional class were executed. The populations of the urban centers were forced to cultivate the land and risk execution if they hoarded or tried to scavenge for food. The brutality that occurred during this period of Cambodia's history is hard to imagine. Mass graves were dug and mass executions held. Older women were nailed to their homes before they were burned down. Of the total Cambodian populations from some 7 to 8 million in 1975, estimates are that 1 million to two million were killed either directly or through disease, starvation or overwork. ([http:...](http://...)) What were the events that lead up to this brutality? Because of the lack of documentation about the acts of the genocide, piecing together the reasons for the genocide can be rather difficult. However, by looking at the history leading up to the events that started in April of 1975, we can try to make conclusions about what economic, social, and political events rendered genocide possible.

The History of Cambodian Empires

The Khmers (the native peoples of Cambodia) have been in that area since 2nd and 3rd centuries BC. During that time Indian Brahmans migrated to that area integrating their spoken and written language, and their religious beliefs into that of the Khmers. The name Cambodia is the English equivalent of Kampuchea which comes from 10th century

folk lore concerning the *kampuchea* those of *kambu* a figure in India mythology. In the 1st century AD the Funan Kingdom organized life in support of the royal courts that adopted the Brahmanic cult of the god-king. The belief in the god-king is still very prevalent in Cambodian politics today. The Angkor Kingdom (9th to 15th century) is considered the glorious moment in Cambodian history. During that time period their architecture and military achievements reached their zenith and the empire maintain control over all of what now is Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos.

French Colonialism

The French took on Cambodia as a protectorate at a time when Cambodia would of otherwise dissolved as a nation-separated into pieces by Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. The French did not take an active role in the governing of Cambodia. All Cambodian affairs were conducted by the government of Cochin China...in fact it took the government of Cochin China seven years to discover that the king of Cambodia had not carried out their reforms. (Martin. 1989. 33) Cambodia was a county were officials were sent as punishment and that is shown in the fact that they never bothered to learn the fundamentals of the language. They did however, have respect for the indigenous cultures and maintained the King in power for symbolic reasons though he did not actually have any power to make any executive decisions. France did institute a basic public education and health system (with the building of one university and the institution of one French doctor for 13 medical zones. Cambodia became a protectorate of France officially in 1863 with King Norodom still visibly in power with light French authority instituted. In June of 1884 the French created a new treaty that was intended to modernize the Cambodian administration (by abolishing slavery, privatizing land, and by putting French officials at the heart of the system). Many serious rebellions broke out protesting the new French treaty, and the fighting lasted in some places for a year and a half. The rebels laid down their arms when King Norodom was allowed to proclaim that France would continue to respect Cambodian customs and laws. Under the French

power, Cambodians paid the highest taxes in Indochina which went to 1: supporting the French colonial budget, 2: supporting the parallel Cambodian administration and 3; paying the royal and aristocratic elites who still demanded traditional privileges and dues. "Taxation, however, increased, thus forcing peasants to seek more cash income than before, and the colonial authorities legalized private property and land to transform it into a commodity and to provide an inducement to higher productivity." (Vickery. 1986. 52) Prior to the privatization of land, ownership over land was determined by the man who cultivated it. Therefore, even though technically the land belonged to the King and it was impossible to inherit land, all peasants were able to gain access to and cultivate land. The French's demand for exports was directly responsible for the decline in social conditions. However, there was no elite intellectual opposition of the French colonial power, partially because the protectorate did offer some protection for the national elite. There are two events that led up to the independence of Cambodia: the first is the 1916 Affair, where some forty thousand peasants marched to Phnom Penh to protest the raising of taxes. The second is the 1925 murder of a French resident and tax collector, Félix Louis Bardex. His murder was caused by his visit and actions in the village of Krang Laav:

On April 18, angered by reports that another village, Krang Laav, was delinquent in its payments, Bardex visited the village himself, accompanied by an interpreter and a Cambodian militia man. Summoning delinquent taxpayer stormed the village hall, or *sala*, he had several of them handcuffed and threatened to take them to prison, even though they would not be subject to fines for their delinquency for three months. His refusal to let the prisoners have lunch while he was eating himself destroyed the patience of the large crowd of people looking on, how lacked food or shelter, In a confused melee, Bardex and his companions were set upon by twenty or thirty people. Within half an hour, Bardex, the interpreter, and the militiaman had been beaten to death with chairs, fence palings, ax handles, and the militiaman's rifle butt. The corpses were then mutilated, and according to some witnesses, the murders were then mutilated, and according to some witnesses, the murderers dance around them. (Chandler. 1992. 157)

In an effort to gain control of the country, France introduced national elections for a Constitutional Convention in 1946 and in 1948 elections for the National Assembly (won by the Democratic Party-well known for being anti-Sihanouk and for having direct links to nationalist movements). It seems that while France thought national elections would stabilize the country, it in fact gave authority to a party eager for independence. The Democratic party gained its power at a time when rural armed resistance against the French was developing and with Vietnam's war for independence. In 1946 the Khmer independence movement gained support and aid from the Thai government. By 1952 the Khmer independence movement had gained control of one half to three-fifths of the country. In a radical move, Sihanouk dismissed both houses of parliament in 1953 and enacted special legislation that abridge all democratic rights. Later that year Sihanouk left the country and threatened to not return unless France granted Cambodia's independence. A month later, France granted Cambodia full independence.

In 1954 Cambodia's independence was confirmed by a UN Conference held in Geneva. In 1955 Cambodia held their own elections. The benefits of Cambodia gaining its own independence is still questioned today. What role did independence really play in Cambodian politics? The peasants continued to pay taxes after the French left only now it went to pay the salaries of

an indifferent government whose royal work almost by definition, removed it from contact with the people and made officials, for the most part, self-centered, concerned with status, and ill at ease with anyone else's aspiration. It was certainly just; in other words, to remove the Cambodian elite and the comparatively small intellectual class from French control. The removal left these people free not to govern themselves but so as to govern others without seeking their consent."(Chandler. 1992.87)

"...thousands of Cambodians were being asked for the first time to exercise their rights. Almost imperceptibly, the power balance in Cambodia was beginning to shift away from the King and his protectors toward a larger, more unpredictable segments of the populations." (Chandler. 1991. 29)

The Reign of Prince Sihanouk

Political Struggles

Sihanouk while in office tried desperately to minimize Cambodia's involvement in the Vietnam War. He rejected membership to SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization), began to accept military aid from China, broke off relations with South Vietnam and the US, and allowed North Vietnam to use Cambodian seaports to support their forces in South Vietnam. The later decision was a fatal one that succeeded in dragging Cambodia into the war. "Thus in trying to outsmart larger powers and sidestep the conflict Sihanouk compromised his neutrality and guaranteed that Cambodia would be dragged into the war" (Chandler. 1992. 71) In 1960 the US bombed the North Vietnam sanctuaries in Cambodia. "During that time a quarter of a million tons of explosives were dropped on a country that was not at war with the US and that had not US combat personnel within its borders." (Chandler. 1992. 101) It is estimated that 30,000 to a quarter of a million of citizens were killed by those bombings. The US's bombing of Cambodia is highlighted as an event that is seen as contributing to the Cambodian people's support of the radical "anti-modernism" ideologies of the Khmer Rouge. In the eye of a citizen whose only experience with modern technology is the military technology that wipes out villages, it is hard to support the idea of technically advancing one's country.

Economic Policies

In 1956 Sihanouk passed legislation prohibiting foreigners from engaging in 18 different occupations (some as obscure as manufacturing salt and barbering). Later that year legislation was passed that required 70% of the employees of business enterprises to be citizens of Cambodia. Also in 1963 he cut all connections with US foreign aid, nationalized the import-export sector of the economy and closed Cambodia's privatized banks all in an effort to jump start Cambodia's economy.

Social Reform and Perception

In 1958 Sihanouk passed a law requiring that military personnel participate in civil action programs for the construction of public works: building roads and bridges, clearing land for municipal town sites, erecting dams, model farms and public buildings in the countryside. Legislation following that later in the year required all civil servants to devote two weeks a year to manual labor on construction works in the countryside as a way to make manual labor look less menial. Usually the Royal Khmer Socialist Youth group would finish the projects that the civil servants started.

Education

In 1955 there were 14,000 civil employees, and the majority of them were unable to do more than just office work. The problem lies in the fact that the French used foreigners for all civil positions and after independence, the Cambodian government was left with no trained personnel. In 1963 there were 600 technical job openings, but no qualified applicants. The educational system that Sihanouk set in place emphasized quantity not quality and more primary and secondary institutions were developed than institutions of higher education. Education, however, is free at all levels but the quality is highly questionable. In the late 1950s only 5% of the teachers were 'diploma' personnel (those who had 13 years of primary and secondary education and one year of teacher training). Sihanouk's most radical educational campaign occurred in 1964 where, in an effort to increase the country's literacy rate, he instituted a fine for all of those citizens who, by the year 1965, were unable to demonstrate a basic knowledge of reading and writing. So far that fine has not been imposed considering the numbers of citizens who still remain illiterate.

Health and Welfare

The French built the first hospital in Phnom Penh in 1931. After independence, Sihanouk placed emphasis on the health care system as is seen by the increase of budget

expenditures for health care. In 1955 \$83 million riels were spent on health care and by 1962 that number increased to 4385 million riels. In 1967 a welfare system was introduced which basically only applied to civil servants or those employees of private enterprises that instituted their own welfare system. Overall, however, Sihanouk greatly increased the health care system in Cambodia only for it to be completely obliterated along with his other accomplishments by the Khmer Rouge.

Sihanouk's Mistakes

One of Sihanouk's greatest mistakes is his handling of a peasant revolt that occurred while he was overseas on political businesses. "The trouble began in 1965-66, when peasants clandestinely sold at least one quarter of Cambodia's surplus rice to North Vietnamese and NFL (North Liberation Front) forces camped along the border. " (Chandler. 1992. 81) Sihanouk sent 'action teams' with military escorts to Battambang (the region the peasants lived in) to purchase unmilled rice from the government prices which were lower than what the Vietnamese would pay for the rice. This made the peasants think that Sihanouk had sold out to the US. On April 1967 two hundred local people bearing anti-American banners, attacked the Cambodian army posts near Samlaut. the violence then spread to the neighboring villages. Lon Nol's army quickly, violently repressed the protesters looting and killing them along the way. Estimates are that over 1,000 people were killed in the military's attempt to squash the revolt. This entire time Sihanouk was overseas and when he returned he unknowingly blamed the popular left political leaders for the peasant revolt and had them jailed. Violence sputtered in that area for over the following year. Sihanouk then found out that Mao's Little Red Book (where Mao's political ideals are explained) was circulating in the schools, so he rounded up suspected radicals. Many pro-Chinese students and other activists were killed by the police. During an overseas trip, The National Assembly voted 86 to 3 for removing confidence from Sihanouk and replace him with Cheng Heng the president of the Assembly. Sihanouk, instead of flying back to Cambodia, flew to Peking and five days

later announced the formation of the National United Front of Cambodia and a liberation army to fight the "reactionary and pro-imperialist" Lon Nol and "US imperialists". One month later he allied with the Vietnamese and Lao Communists. His motivation for the alliance with Communist forces was merely personal.

I disavow nothing of my religious beliefs or of my nationalism....If I am fighting in the name of the Indochinese an Asian revolutionaries, it is because on a personal level, I want to see justice done me some day after having been odiously calumniated and dishonored by the Lon Nol group; and because on the national level, I must fulfill my duty as a patriot, a Khmer-and a Asian. With Lon Nol and the armed intervention of the foreign powers that support him, my homeland and my people have lost everything-peace, dignity, independence, territorial integrity-and are immersed in the worst sufferings, the worst misfortunes and the worst catastrophe of their history. In these circumstances I can only hope for the total victory of the revolution, in which I shall certainly not have anyplace but which cannot but save my homeland and serve the deepest interests of the mass of the "little" Khmer people.(Isaacs. 1983. 199)

At this point, Sihanouk does not realize that his allegiance to the Communist party will not lead to an end of his people's sufferings, but the beginning.

The Rise to Power of the Khmer Rouge

The "Red Khmers" originally meant a leftist political group affiliated with Sihanouk in 1950s. Since then the name has come to mean the particular faction of the left: the Khmer Rouge, led by a group of Communists-the most visible of which was Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot). On April 17, 1975, after slowly capturing the country-side, The Khmer Rouge defeated the US-backed Khmer Republic of General Lon Nol and gained control over Phnom Phen and the country. As soon as they gained control of the country, they instituted the mass emptying of the cities that led to the genocide of the Cambodian people. The attack of Phnom Phen was well organized and premeditated and led to the deaths of millions of people and the total annihilation of whatever remained of Cambodian society.

Party Ideology/Polices

Pol Pot derived a lot of his ideas from the Chinese cultural revolution that he witnessed in 1966 and the mass movements of Mao. Mao believed in the idea of continuous revolution, class warfare, and empowerment of the poor. Many of these same ideas can be seen applied to Pol Pot's revolution in Cambodia. "Some of the measures introduced in China at the time- for example, the partial evacuation of cities, 'storming attacks' on economic problems, and the abandonment of differential military ranks- were later adopted by the Red Khmer." (Chandler. 1992. 70)

The emphasis of the party's ideology was a quick economic jump forward into modernity for Cambodia without and increase in technology. The Khmer Rouge believed that this could be achieved through a emphasis on agricultural production. In 1960 the average agricultural output from one hectare was one ton. Throughout the Khmer Rouge's documents and speeches there is the reiteration of the party's three ton per hectare goal which must and should be reached within the next four years. But all of this must happen quickly without delay. In the words of Pol Pot: "We want our country to advance very quickly so that our people advance, and are able to quickly resolve their living conditions as a hallmark of our people. ..If we are not strong and do not leap forward quickly, outside enemies are just waiting to crush us..." (Chandler. 1988. 24) The Khmer Rouge really did believe that they could just jump all of the periods of development in order to improve the social conditions of Cambodia right away. "We have leaped over the semi-colonial, semi-feudal society of the American imperialists, the feudalist and capitalist of every nation, and have achieved a socialist state straight away...We don't need a long period of time for transformation." (Chandler 1988. 36)

This jump forward is accomplished through agricultural production which will also in kind solve all social problems. By focusing on agriculture, there need to be any deviation of energy for any other social structures, for through agriculture all social problems will solve themselves. This link is clearly augmented by Pol Pot and through party documents.

"health services and social actions also stand on agriculture. Hospitals are to cure those who are already sick. The important medicine to prevent sickness is food. If there were enough to eat, there would also be little sickness. The same goes for culture. Once we have the capital we can expand scientific culture. But now we must produce rice first. Rice production is a very great lesson... Our subject of study is real work. Real work provides experiences. If we have the experience, we only need to be further equipped to measure length and breadth, to become scientific. The important point is to resolve the food problems first. When we have the food, we will expand simultaneously into the learning of reading, writing and arithmetic. Our Experimental Institute is the base areas, and so we know the land in our Regions, the chemicals, the experiences and expand experience in our areas." (Chandler. 1988. 30)

The Use of Violence

Nothing is to stand in the way of the further progress of the party. One party headline reads: "The Authority to Smash (People) Inside and Outside the Ranks." (Chandler. 1988. 3) and it further goes on to expound on the importance of authoritarian command in order to squash any opposition. "The Enemy" is never clearly defined, and one gets a sense that what they really mean is any citizen of Cambodia (or any outside force) that doesn't openly support the regime is an enemy and must be killed. That is why the Khmer Rouge emptied the cities of all the intellectuals first and foremost in order to squash any opposition. Everyone must understand party politics and must support the revolution.

We do so by grasping politics tightly, to make people understand the very important political line of the party. Grasp hold of their consciousness, make things clear to them. The Party's every task and plan must be explained to them until they understand and things become clear to them...If they understand clearly, they are happy, they do their own fighting, they have their children join the army or the work brigades to raise dikes and dig canals. (Chandler. 1988. 17)

This notion of happiness within the party was often taken to the extreme so that any deviations from complete contentment for the party and its politics was seen as treacherous. "Weeping, said one woman after she escaped to Vietnam, was considered criticism of the regime, and informers crept under the stilts of village houses listening so they could denounce anyone heard sobbing in the night." (Chandler. 1992. 289). The

five standpoints of the party which must be explained to the population and the accepted by all are:

1. Independence, mastery, self-reliance, control of one's future;
 2. Revolutionary patriotism; revolutionary pride in one's nation, revolution, people and Party;
 3. Believe totally in the Party, the revolution, the people the workers, the peasants and the army;
 4. Let the great revolutionary movement of the people spring up with the speed of a super great leap forward;
 5. Save up, improve, and think up new ideas to win the fight, and spring forward bravely. Use little capital, which is the nation's important resource, but produce many high quality results.
- (Chandler. 1992.42)

Regime Organization

The revolution was very highly organized and planned. There is even party documentation which outlines what the food and clothing rations to each individual should be and how the party will "take care" of each individual within this socialist system. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, however, were brutal in their implementation. The individual was of the utmost importance, but on the other hand he was easily replaceable and any dissonance should be dealt with fatally. Unbeknownst to Pol Pot, he murdered his own older brother who died on one of the many mass migrations to the countryside. All of the powers behind the party were faceless or operated under aliases in a true form of collective leadership. Each cadre (many of whom were young adolescents taken from their parents) were given new name to symbolize their surrender of all individual consciousness. They were trained into blind submissiveness to the orders of the regime and were constantly criticized for any assertion of personal views or feelings. They were also trained to be brutally violent by forcing them to play games of torture with either humans or animals. (Sihanouk. 1980. 82) "Cambodian Communist were called by the Vietnamese to provide military and logistical support. Several hundred Khmer Communists traveled to North Vietnam, without Sihanouk's knowledge, for military and political training. " (Chandler 1992. 71)

The Beliefs of the Cambodian people

The role of Buddhism needs to be carefully examined in order to understand the social context that let the genocide happen. Buddhism is a very prominent part of Cambodian life. Until and even for some time after independence, the schools that existed were Buddhist-run and only provided primary education. In Cambodia, there is no cohesive social structure. Families easily disintegrate, family names do not exist, records of genealogy are not kept and ancestors are not objects of reference. The only social coherence that exists is found in their traditions that are kept orally and through the Buddhist monks. By destroying Buddhism, the Khmer Rouge was able to successfully destroy the Cambodian's sense of identity. Buddhism had to be destroyed by the regime because its principles were directly in opposition to that of the regime. Buddhism "preaches for people to help one another and the social action for the advancement of humankind in struggling against corruption and social injustices, stressing a great respect for humankind." (Ear. 1995. 36) Buddhism also stressed a fatalistic view toward your position in life. "The rectitude and permanence of these relationships has been drummed into everyone from birth. Cambodian proverbs and didactic literature are filled with references to the helplessness of the individual and the importance of accepting power relationships as they are." (Bit. 1991.106)

Reasons for the Genocide

Many things made the genocide of the Cambodian possible, one of which is Cambodia's involvement in Vietnam. By the time the Khmer Rouge assumed power, 2 million Cambodians had flocked to Phnom Penh as refugees from the Vietnam war. The condition of Cambodia had deteriorated to a critical level spurred on by the American bombings. Not only did the bombs falling on the villages create homeless and injured peasants (not to mention the thousands who died) but it also created a psychological fear of modernity and a creation of "outsiders". Not only had the Vietnamese stolen jobs and opportunities from Cambodian for years, but now they were stealing the land and homes

from Cambodians in the form of US bombs. In a time which survival was tentative at best, Pol Pot offered a solution that because of the circumstances, made sense.

Cambodia's pride has always been in agriculture, and point Cambodian's wanted no part in technology. Desperate for a solution to their problems, many young people join Pol Pot's regime...in order to gain a sense of community, and security, and in a way prestige. Cambodians also are extremely loyal to their leaders once they pledge their support.

"Proud and sometimes arrogant, Khmers do not accept unsolicited aid from a stranger...Conversely, they vow eternal gratitude for a service rendered them. " (Martin. 1989. 28) Those that joined the regime were offered much needed food and shelter and in return they became submissive to Pol Pot's demands.

By abolishing Buddhism, the social restraint of the Cambodian's was abolished and violent behavior reigned unrestricted. The victims of the regime didn't even know what was happening given the speed in which Pol Pot emptied the cities. Many citizens were told they were evacuated because the US were going to bomb the city. Others weren't given an explanation, only yelled at to leave all their belongings and to hurry at gun point. Anyone who tried to fall out of ranks was either beaten or killed.

Certain social conditions need to be present in order for genocides to occur and Cambodia is no exception. With the presence of war, Cambodians were on a self-survival basis and were willing to go to any lengths to secure their own well-being. Pol Pot's regime was well organized, his theology easily explained and any opposition "squashed". By destroying the only vehicle for collective social responsibility, it became frighteningly easy to convince his followers to act brutally if need be. During social mayhem, it is almost too easy to provoke violence in Cambodian society. For example, "...in the aftermath of the coup against Sihanouk, two members of the legislature were killed and their livers eaten by a protesting crowd." (Bit. 1991. 67)

"Khmer Rouge fanaticism sprang from several roots. The ideology of the leader, the backwardness and ignorance of those they trained as cadre, the youth and inexperience and perceived friendlessness of their movement among the Indochinese revolutionaries, all contributed to the barbarism that began to characterize their rule. but so to, I believe, did the shattering of all normalcy in Cambodian life to which American bombs contributed . Khmer culture is one of those that traditionally permit little outward expression of hostility, and thus does not teach its people to control aggressive drives when customary restraints are loosened.. The phrase 'running' amok' was contributed to our language by the Malays, a people culturally akin to the Khmer and similarly nonaggressive: 'amok' is a Malay word of someone in the grips of uncontrollable bloodlust." (Isaac. 1983. 231)