
Setting the Stage

Cambodia won its independence from France in 1953. The war in neighboring Vietnam (1955 – 1975) contributed to the destabilization of Cambodia; the United States bombed Vietnamese sanctuaries in rural Cambodia. Between 1970 and 1975, there was a civil war in Cambodia, 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. The Khmer Rouge, a group started by the armed wing of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (Cambodia), was led by Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge occupied Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Their goal was to establish a classless, agricultural state based on communal living. To achieve this, the Khmer Rouge sought to eliminate anyone they deemed “New People”—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.”

Genocide

The Khmer Rouge established a totalitarian state, and Pol Pot was a dictator. The Khmer Rouge believed that citizens of Cambodia had become corrupted by outside influences, especially Vietnam and the capitalist West. 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, people who spoke more than one language, and even people who wore glasses became targets. 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.”

End of the Khmer Rouge

On December 25, 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia; the Khmer Rouge government was overthrown by the Vietnamese army. Vietnamese troops stayed in the country until 1989, with armed clashes between Vietnamese troops and Cambodian citizens going on throughout the 1980s. Yet the Khmer Rouge did not disappear until much later, and continued to hold Cambodia's seat at the United Nations for twelve more 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. 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. The vast majority of the perpetrators suffered no consequences for their actions.

Cambodian Genocide Testimony

USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History archive includes testimony from five (5) Cambodian Genocide survivors. Two of the interviews are in Khmer, with English subtitles, and three are in English. Testimonies in the Cambodian Genocide collection seek to establish full-life histories of the individuals, including their social and cultural life before and after the Cambodian Genocide.



Children at work during Democratic Kampuchea.
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