



One of the seven survivors of
Tuol Sleng prison in Cambodia

*David A. Harvey/National Geographic/
Getty Images*

CAMBODIA:

The Rise and Fall of the Khmer Rouge Regime

From 1975–79, Cambodia experienced one of the world's worst genocides, resulting in the death of up to two million people.

OVERVIEW

When one thinks about Cambodia, two things often come to mind. The first is Angkor Wat, an ancient temple complex built during the Angkorian period from the ninth to 15th centuries. The Angkorian period featured a powerful and vast Khmer Empire that was highly cultured and produced magnificent art and architecture. For many Cambodians, this period signifies the pinnacle of their civilization.

The second thing that often comes to mind evokes a starkly different set of images: the period of the Khmer Rouge, which ruled the country from 1975 to 1979. This regime tried to purify the nation of suspected corruption and counter-revolutionary tendencies in order to bring about its utopian communist vision for Cambodia. But the regime's ideology and tactics were so extreme that it targeted almost all aspects and segments of Cambodian society for destruction, and was ultimately responsible for the deaths of an estimated two million of the country's seven million people.



BACKGROUND

The second half of the 20th century was a period of radical change for Cambodia. The first part of this story begins in the aftermath of a revolution and a war of independence against the French in 1953, and ends in 1979 with a country that was traumatized, starving, and littered with landmines and the remains of people who had perished over the previous four years. In the 26 years in between, Cambodia cycled through several different governments, political systems, and sweeping social and cultural changes ushered in by war, modernity, globalization, and a radical communist ideology. And throughout these turbulent episodes, various alliances between rival factions and their leaders were formed, severed, and formed again.

The second part of the story is still being written. It is about how the people of Cambodia, since 1979, have sought to rebuild their lives and communities and to heal from the past. It is also about finding truth and accountability for those both in and outside the country who caused, enabled, or ignored one of the worst genocides of the 20th century.

THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE (1863–1953)

Cambodia had been a colonial subject since 1863, when King Norodom invited France to serve as the country's protector. The king did this in an effort to free Cambodia from the predations of the neighbouring Thai and Vietnamese, who had repeatedly attacked Cambodia and threatened its existence. The French colonial presence, the king believed, would offer Cambodia respite and relative peace and security.

KEY TERMS

COLONIALISM: policy or practice of a wealthy or powerful nation maintaining or extending its control over other countries, especially to establish settlements or exploit resources.

COMMUNISM: system of organizing a society so that the government owns the means of making and transporting products (such as land, oil, factories, ships, etc.), leaving no privately owned property.

KHMER ROUGE: communist guerrilla organization that opposed the Cambodian government in the 1960s and waged a civil war starting in 1970, until finally taking power in 1975. Undertook a forced reconstruction of Cambodian society, including mass executions and mass deportations from the towns to the countryside.

Sources (in order of appearance): www.thefreedictionary.com/colonialism; www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communism; www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/khmer-rouge.

The legacy of French colonialism—specifically, how it influenced social and political thinking in Cambodia—is mixed. On one hand, the French introduced Cambodians to ideas about nationalism and modernity that began to take root in the early part of the 20th century (although it was not the intention on the part of the French to instill in their colonial subjects a sense of nationalism). One of the most significant ways this happened was by giving scholarships to young, educated Cambodians from middle-class and elite families to attend universities in France. On the other hand, the French failed to bring education to the vast majority of people back in Cambodia; in fact, prior to independence, the country had only one high school.

The movement for independence from France emerged amid the chaos of the Second World War and early post-war period. This movement, called the Khmer Issarak, was a loose coalition of anti-French, anti-colonial activists with support from the Thai government and the Viet Minh, communist allies in neighbouring Vietnam. But the group's cohesiveness soon began to fray, and the movement split between those who sided with the Viet Minh and those who fought against them. Among the movement's members were a new elite intellectual class, some of whom had been part of the group that studied in France in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This included Saloth Sar (who later became known as Pol Pot), Son Sen, Ieng Sary, and Ieng Thirith (Ieng Sary's wife). These individuals would later become leaders of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, more commonly known as the "Khmer Rouge," meaning red/communist Khmer. (Kampuchea is another name for Cambodia, and Khmer is the name of the main language and ethnic group in Cambodia.) In addition to embracing ideas of nationalism, these future leaders also studied the communist teachings of Lenin and Marx, which shaped their ideas and plans for their nation's future.

FROM INDEPENDENCE TO DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA (1953–1975)

As Cambodia was trying to find its footing as a newly independent country, the dynamics of the Cold War were already in full swing. In the scramble for power and security, the U.S., the Soviet Union, and China all struggled for influence and control over smaller countries. One of the places where this competition was most intense was Southeast Asia. Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, which were collectively known as Indochina under French colonialism, became enmeshed in this struggle as they wrestled free from colonial rule.

KEY TERMS

COLD WAR: name given to the relationship that developed primarily between the U.S. and the USSR after the Second World War. It was to dominate international affairs for decades and many major crises occurred—Vietnam being one. It was a clash of different beliefs and ideology—capitalism versus communism—each held with almost religious conviction, formed the basis of an international power struggle with both sides vying for dominance, exploiting every opportunity for expansion anywhere in the world.

Source: www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/the-cold-war/what-was-the-cold-war/.

POST-INDEPENDENCE AND THE SIHANOUK YEARS, 1953–1970

After Cambodia achieved its independence in 1953, the country's king, Norodom Sihanouk, gave up his crown to his father so that he could become Cambodia's head of state. Sihanouk was a charismatic character with a taste for writing, music, and especially filmmaking. He was also ever adaptable to the changing tide that continuously swept through his nation. Many Cambodians generally recall the Sihanouk period as a time of harmony and co-operation, and he did much to expand education in Cambodia and build up and modernize the capital city of Phnom Penh.



IMAGE 1

Prince Norodom
Sihanouk

*Bettmann/
Getty Images*

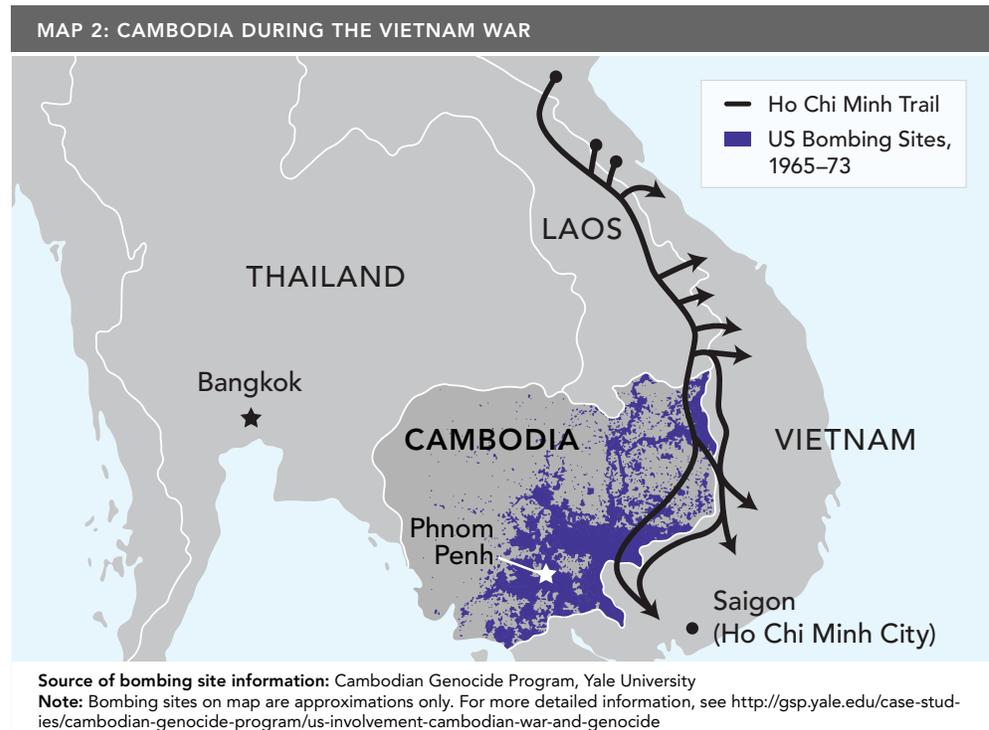
But his 17 years of rule were also a time of vast corruption and social and economic inequality. The division between the urban areas and the countryside became more severe; while the cities developed into modern cosmopolitan meccas offering education and opportunities to their residents, life in the countryside for the much larger number of peasants was relatively unchanged. In addition, the Cambodian government under Sihanouk did not tolerate ideological and political dissent, including dissent by communist groups that were forming within the country.

THE VIETNAM WAR, U.S. BOMBING, AND 1970 COUP

In addition to his mixed record in managing Cambodia's internal affairs, Sihanouk's success in handling the larger global forces swirling around his small kingdom were also mixed. His period of rule roughly coincided with

the Second Indochina War, also known as the “American War” in Vietnam and as the “Vietnam War” in many western countries. This conflict began in 1955, escalated in the 1960s, and ended when the U.S. withdrew from South Vietnam in 1975. This conflict was a proxy war between North Vietnam, which was supported by the Soviet Union and China, and South Vietnam, which was supported by the U.S. and other non-communist allies.

The North Vietnamese, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, sought to create bases and supply trails through Laos and Cambodia in order to send troops and supplies to their supporters in the south. This route became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. While this was happening, Vietnamese communist forces also sought to support Cambodia’s communist movement, which included the Khmer Rouge. The U.S. became increasingly enmeshed in this war through successive presidencies; shortly after he took office in early 1969, President Richard Nixon launched a secret bombing campaign, code-named Operation Menu, aimed at destroying North Vietnamese bases and supply lines that were being run through Cambodia (see Map 2).



Through the tumultuous post-independence years, Sihanouk pursued a policy of neutrality between the communists (i.e., the North Vietnamese and China) on one side and the Americans on the other. At the time, however, some had suspected that he was showing preference to the communist cause by allowing the North Vietnamese to set up bases within Cambodia. Amid these growing political tensions, Sihanouk was ousted in a bloodless coup in 1970 while he was out of the country. The man who replaced him was his prime minister,

Marshal Lon Nol. The U.S. had been unhappy with Sihanouk's compliance with the North Vietnamese and supported the change in leadership.

The Khmer Rouge, with support from the North Vietnamese, were already fighting in the Cambodian countryside and eventually began taking control of territory from the Lon Nol government. Other renegade groups of Cambodian fighters were also engaged in the struggle for control of the country. Adding to the violence and chaos in the countryside, in 1973, the U.S. escalated its bombing campaign in Cambodia, now code-named Operation Freedom Deal. Out of a total of 500,000 tons of explosives dropped by the U.S. military on Cambodia from 1969 to 1973, roughly half were dropped within a seven-month period in 1973. (By comparison, the U.S. dropped approximately 180,000 tons of explosives on Japan during the Second World War.) Many times, the American B-52 bombers missed their targets, resulting in the death and destruction of entire Cambodian villages. While estimates are unclear as to the number of Cambodian deaths that resulted from these bombings, they range between 50,000 and 300,000.¹

KEY TERMS

GUERRILLA WARFARE: form of irregular warfare in which a small group of combatants such as paramilitary personnel, armed civilians, or irregulars use military tactics including ambushes, sabotage, raids, petty warfare, hit-and-run tactics, and mobility to fight a larger and less-mobile traditional military.

Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guerrilla_warfare.

Unsurprisingly, the bombing fostered anger and fear among the Cambodian people, driving some from the countryside to seek shelter in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Others joined the Khmer Rouge, whom the Cambodians believed were fighting on their side because of the Khmer Rouge's promises to secure more rice and to alleviate taxation and other burdens and limitations imposed on them. But there was another significant factor in nudging more Cambodian peasants towards the Khmer Rouge: after Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970, he joined the Khmer Rouge from exile in China and, through a radio broadcast, called on his fellow Cambodians to join him. Given his widespread influence and appeal, many people, especially from the countryside, heeded his call, thereby encouraging the Khmer Rouge's eventual rise to power.

Of course, not all people freely chose to join the Khmer Rouge. When the Khmer Rouge took control of an area, they would simply draft those old enough to fight or serve the movement in other ways. To resist would mean death. By 1973, the Khmer Rouge had gained control of most of the countryside and started requiring villagers to live in co-operatives and engage in large-scale agricultural projects.² They also began executing people whom they accused of being traitors.

As the majority of the countryside came under Khmer Rouge rule, the situation in the capital city of Phnom Penh became increasingly dire. The city's population continued to swell, and food was running scarce as rice production was disrupted due to the civil war and the blocking of supply routes by the Khmer Rouge. The Lon Nol government could no longer hold its ground against the Khmer Rouge, especially after the U.S. ended most of its bombing after 1973 and the South Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia, leaving Lon Nol's government troops to fend for themselves. The last helicopter carrying the remaining U.S. citizens and a number of high-ranking Cambodians left on April 12, 1975. Five days later, the Lon Nol government collapsed and Khmer Rouge soldiers marched into Phnom Penh.

THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME AND "DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA" (1975–1979)

The teenage Khmer Rouge soldiers who took the city—uneducated, hardened by war, and loaded with weapons—were alien to the city's sophisticated residents. Initially, some in Phnom Penh expressed relief that the war had come to an end. But any sense of relief they felt quickly vanished. Khmer Rouge soldiers ordered the city's residents to evacuate their houses immediately and head to the countryside. The rationale they gave was that now that they had taken over the capital, the Americans would most certainly bomb the city. The residents were given no time to pack and were ordered at gunpoint to leave. There were no exceptions. Patients were dragged from their hospital beds and women were forced to give birth along the road. The young, the old, the frail, and the sick all had to keep moving or risk being shot. Under the scorching hot April sun in Cambodia, many who were frail died along the road, their bodies left to swell in the heat.



IMAGE 2

Young Khmer Rouge
Soldiers March into
Phnom Penh, 1975

*Roland Neveu/
LightRocket via
Getty Images*

Both city residents and those in the countryside were assigned to work in agrarian labour camps to grow rice and build dams and dikes, or work on other agricultural projects. The Khmer Rouge, known only as Angkar (“the organization”), also sought to eliminate all vestiges of the previous regime that they considered corrupt or dangerous. Their idea was to wipe the slate of society clean so they could start over in building a new society at “year zero.” This meant the abandonment and destruction of cars, jewelry, money, clothes (that were anything other than the farmers’ typical black clothing), radios, books, personal items of any kind, and anything that represented wealth, class, or individuality.

KEY TERMS

URBICIDE: obliteration of urban living space as a means of destroying the viability of an urban environment, undermining the sustainability of its population, and eroding the cosmopolitan values they espouse.

XENOPHOBIA: fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or anything strange or foreign.

Sources (in order of appearance): Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, p. 29; www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/xenophobia

In addition to eliminating personal property, the Khmer Rouge were also determined to root out ideas that were considered counter to their revolution. This included religion, education, and knowledge. They closed schools, destroyed libraries and temples, and banished religion. But even that was not enough; in their desire to purify the nation from all dissent and corrupting elements, they also annihilated anyone deemed a threat. For example, when Khmer Rouge soldiers seized Phnom Penh, they quickly executed government and military leaders. They also targeted the wealthy, the educated, and the religious for eradication. The urbanites who managed to survive this initial round of executions quickly learned to conceal their education and to avoid displaying manners that might be associated with the higher classes.

KHMER ROUGE IDEOLOGY

The set of beliefs that shaped life under Democratic Kampuchea, which was the formal name given to Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, drew from Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought and integrated communist ideology with pre-existing Cambodian religious and cultural ideas. The result was a utopian philosophy that sought to free Cambodia from dependence on other nations. In 1976, one Khmer Rouge cadre wrote in a notebook that the aim of the revolution was to create a “national democracy and revolution that provides rice fields for the masses” and to rid the nation of all forms of feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism.³ This revolutionary program required that individuals be ever vigilant against enemies of the revolution. As a result, the Khmer Rouge employed spies to report on any activities that might be interpreted as countering the ambitions of the revolutionary movement.

IMAGE 3
Cambodian youth
learning about
agricultural methods
under the
Khmer Rouge

Apic/Getty Images



The degree of distrust within Democratic Kampuchea became all-pervasive as more traitors were “discovered” and increasing numbers of real or alleged associates were identified in forced confessions. As “enemies” of the Khmer Rouge revolution were arrested and tortured into confessing their allegedly traitorous activities, they were also required to supply the names of people they were associated with and who were part of their supposed “network.”⁴ “In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the distrust was sustained, rationalized, and reproduced, creating a warped logic whose conclusion could only be total annihilation.”⁵

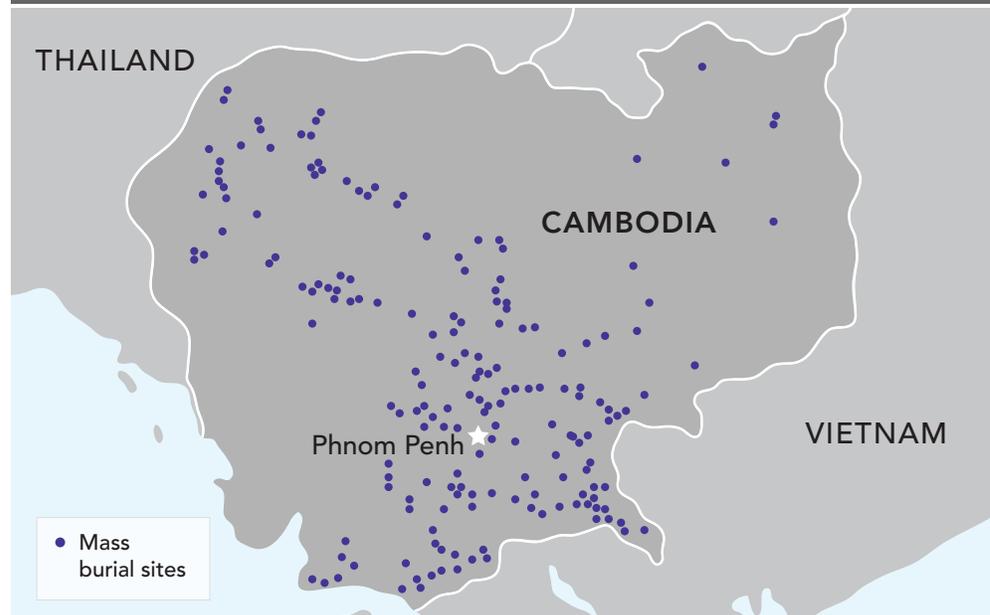
By 1977, the distrust on the part of the leadership had reached paranoiac heights and the purges of suspected traitors increased. Even the ranks of the Khmer Rouge cadres themselves were purged, sending increasingly larger numbers of them and their families to prisons where they were tortured and then murdered. The most notorious of these prisons was S-21, a high school in Phnom Penh that was converted into a prison and torture centre run by Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch.⁶ Out of an estimated 15,000 prisoners who were sent to S-21, only seven survived. Prisoners housed there were photographed and tortured to produce confessions. When the interrogators were finished, the prisoners’ corpses were carried by truck to the “killing fields” outside of Phnom Penh. There are approximately 20,000 of these mass graves in various locations in the country.⁷

KEY TERMS

THE KILLING FIELDS: mass killings perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979 and the location of the mass graves of those killed during the genocidal period. The killings and graves were in virtually every region of the country.

Source: *Dictionary of Genocide, Vol. 1*, p. 245.

MAP 3: MASS BURIAL SITES FROM KHMER ROUGE PERIOD, 1975-79



Source: Cambodia Genocide Program, Yale University

Note: Burial sites on map are approximations only. For more detail information, see <http://gsp.yale.edu/provincial-killing-fields-maps-genocide-sites>.

The years of the Pol Pot regime had been a living hell. The people who endured it survived on a ladle of watery rice gruel a day and were subjected to forced labour for most of their waking hours. They were separated from their families, forced to eat in co-operatives, and treated worse than the farm animals. Life under the Khmer Rouge was lived in constant terror of being reported for even minor acts, such as taking a coconut from a tree or allowing cattle to graze in the wrong field. Massive numbers of people, both peasants and urbanites, died as a result of these conditions. The Cham Muslim minority and ethnic Vietnamese minority groups were particularly singled out for persecution and annihilation. And the urbanites certainly suffered harder work and greater suspicion than did the peasants. In the end, an estimated two million men, women, and children perished under the regime.

But by 1977, there were also skirmishes breaking out between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam, which by then was under the control of its communist government. By December 1978, Vietnamese forces entered Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge and their Democratic Kampuchea in January 1979. In its place, they installed a new Vietnam-friendly government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Khmer Rouge leaders and many of their followers fled to the Thai border where they sought refuge and continued their fight against the Vietnam-backed PRK. The United Nations voted not to recognize the new government in Cambodia, and instead Cambodia's seats went to the Khmer Rouge, who were still aligned with Norodom Sihanouk and a non-communist political party.

In the early years after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, the people of Cambodia were starving, traumatized, and scattered across the country. Some had escaped the regime earlier and were now in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines. Families were separated and often had no idea whether their sisters, brothers, parents, or spouses were alive or dead. For many, the homes where they once lived no longer existed. The country's infrastructure was in ruins, and the once beautiful capital was an urban wasteland of blackened and bombed buildings not fit for habitation.



IMAGE 4
Cambodian
refugees, 1979

AP Photo

In 1979, Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, and Ieng Sary, a member of his inner circle, were tried in absentia by the PRK government for their crimes during Democratic Kampuchea. They were found guilty of genocide, but there were no sentences given. This did not mean that the Khmer Rouge surrendered; in fact, many of its soldiers and leaders continued to fight, and the struggle to bring out the truth and some sort of justice and reconciliation would take many, many more years.

THE POST-GENOCIDE YEARS (1979–PRESENT)

In 1989, with the Cold War nearing an end, Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia. Without the Soviet Union's backing, supporting the PRK government in Cambodia became too costly an affair for Vietnam. In October of 1991 there were meetings in Paris where the Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, known as the Paris Agreement, were

established. The agreements formally ended the conflict between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam, and established the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). UNTAC'S mandate included the following:

- Establishment of peace;
- Repatriation of refugees and displaced persons;
- Holding of free and fair elections;
- Organization and control of civil administration;
- Maintenance of law and order;
- Protection of human rights; and
- Generally aiding in the reconstruction and recovery of the nation.

This mandate was supposed to be accomplished by bringing together the Cambodian government under Hun Sen and three opposition factions:

- The Khmer Rouge;
- The royalist FUNCINPEC party, led by Sihanouk's son, Prince Ranariddh; and
- The Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party.

In 1993, UNTAC held national elections in which these four parties were expected to compete. However, the Khmer Rouge boycotted the elections, thereby prolonging the civil war. Following the election, a tenuous coalition government was formed with co-prime ministers Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh. In 1994, the Cambodian government passed a motion outlawing the Khmer Rouge, which had regained control of parts of Cambodia during the civil war. One of the areas it controlled was the mineral-rich town of Pailin on the Thai border, thus enabling it to fund its movement through the illicit sale of gems, timber, and other products. Nonetheless, the wars took a toll on the Khmer Rouge and there were divisions among its high-ranking leaders.

In 1996, Ieng Sary, who had been one of the key architects and leaders of the Khmer Rouge, accepted an offer of amnesty by the Cambodian government. This decision instigated a mass defection of Khmer Rouge soldiers, many of whom became government soldiers. Meanwhile, other Khmer Rouge leaders such as Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, and the infamous Ta Mok (known as "the butcher") continued their struggle. But there was much discord between them, and Pol Pot was eventually put on trial by the Khmer Rouge. In April of 1998 he died in his sleep. The following year, in 1999, the last of the remaining Khmer Rouge were defeated. Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea continued to live peacefully in Pailin with a number of their former comrades in arms until they were eventually called for trial.



IMAGE 5

Human remains of victims found in the "Killing Fields"

*AP Photo/
Peter Stalder*

THE KHMER ROUGE TRIBUNAL

In 1997, the Cambodian government requested United Nations assistance in creating a tribunal to bring the most senior Khmer Rouge leaders to justice. It would be another six years before such an agreement was reached, in 2003. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, is a hybrid court, meaning it has both international and national judges and prosecutors. The court's aim is to try the surviving top leaders of the Khmer Rouge and those most responsible for the atrocities that occurred during the years of Democratic Kampuchea. The crimes being addressed include genocide, crimes against humanity, and serious war crimes.

KEY TERMS

INTERNATIONAL WAR CRIMES TRIBUNALS: courts of law established to try individuals accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Sources: www.beyondintractability.org/essay/int-war-crime-tribunals.

In 2007, five of the most senior Khmer Rouge leaders were arrested and put under detention to await trial. This was a significant turning point in the history of the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, as it was a sign that the top leaders were no longer exempt from accountability for their actions and policies during the period of their rule. On March 30, 2010, the court opened its proceedings with the trial of Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, who had been in charge of the S-21 prison. This was the first of what was to be four cases (although others would also be considered).⁸ In 2010, Duch was found guilty of a variety of crimes against humanity and sentenced to life in prison. Nuon Chea and Khieu

Samphan were the next to be tried, in Case 002, with charges against them including crimes against humanity and genocide of the ethnic Vietnamese and Cham Muslim minorities. Both men were given life sentences. The second component of their trial, in which they are accused of genocide, is ongoing (as of August 2016).

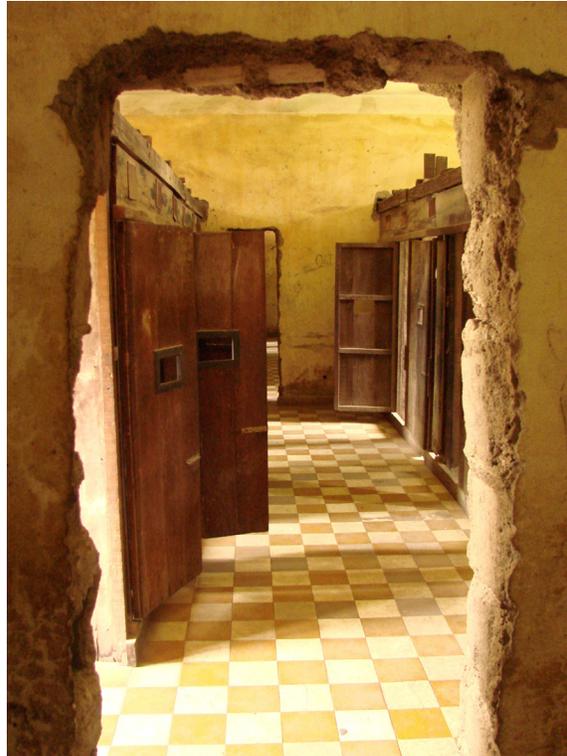


IMAGE 6

Tuol Sleng prison,
also known as S-21

*Adam Jones,
Ph.D./Global Photo
Archive/Flickr*

Although the Tribunal has been seen as mostly successful, it also has been subject to criticism. One of the main criticisms is that the Cambodian government under Prime Minister Hun Sen has delayed the tribunal and limited its reach. The lengthy delay has meant that many elderly top leaders died before they could stand trial, including Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Ta Mok. Not only were they never brought to justice, but the testimony they may have provided is forever lost. In addition, many Cambodians have complained of how long the trials have gone on and how much they have cost. Some have argued that money spent on the tribunal could have been better spent on improving the lives of Cambodians living today, many of whom live in dire poverty.

More positively, the tribunal has created an opportunity for both victims and leaders to give their testimonies—something that helps to fill in the pages of this dark chapter of Cambodia’s history. The tribunal has also resulted in education through the ECCC and through textbooks and teaching that have informed the population about this part of Cambodia’s history, and bridged the understanding between Cambodia’s younger and older generations. In fact, many younger Cambodians did not believe the stories they heard from their parents about their experiences during the Khmer Rouge period.

But the tribunal is not the only source for justice and recovery for Cambodians, who have a rich and resilient culture and their own tools for negotiating and understanding these types of devastating atrocities. Even before the tribunal was set up, Cambodians engaged in ceremonies that cared for the spirits of the deceased; interpreted the Khmer Rouge period through other devastating historical episodes, such as the memory of the 19th-century Thai invasions that brought destruction and enslaved Cambodians (mentioned in the beginning of this piece); and sought ways to narrate their history and reconnect to the past that existed prior to the Khmer Rouge.⁹

In addition, as a Buddhist country, healing and a sense of justice enacted through karmic consequence. This explains why some lower-level members of the Khmer Rouge who committed atrocities now give service to Buddhist temples or help heal the sick through traditional medicines. Not all of these former perpetrators are forgiven, and some remained shunned. But there are a number who have been reabsorbed into the communities in which they reside through tolerance and sometimes forgiveness that draws from a sense of Buddhist order where justice is enacted through karmic rebirth. These are just some of the many sources of healing and justice that are part of Khmer culture and tradition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Eve Monique Zucker is an independent scholar and research affiliate of the Council on Southeast Asian Studies, Yale University. She has researched and written extensively on the Cambodian genocide.

ENDNOTES

1. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) website puts the number at around 300,000, and the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University at 50,000 to 150,000—see <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/> and <http://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/cambodian-genocide-program/publications/chronology-cambodian-events-1950>.
2. The Cambodian Tribunal Monitor website states that in early 1973, 85 per cent of the countryside was controlled by the Khmer Rouge—see <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/>.
3. D2183–Srei Ha 1976, Khmer Rouge Cadre Notebook.
4. Many of these confessions remain in the archives at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia. For a rigorous and compelling analysis of the torture and confessions at Tuol Sleng, see David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, 1999, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
5. Eve Zucker, *Forest of Struggle: Moralities of Remembrance in Upland Cambodia*, 2013, University of Hawaii Press. Page 54.
6. Duch's trial was the first held at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia.
7. The Documentation Center of Cambodia lists 19,733 mass grave sites—see <http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Mapping.htm>, accessed July 27, 2016.
8. More information on the individual cases and the tribunal can be found on the ECCC website: <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en>.
9. See Eve Monique Zucker, "Trauma and its Aftermath: Local Configurations of Reconciliation in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal," *Journal of Asian Studies*. 72, no. 4 (2013), pp. 783-800.

S-21 AND THE DISCOVERY OF A TRAGEDY

On January 7, 1979, Vietnamese forces reached the outskirts of Phnom Penh, after less than two weeks of full-scale fighting, sending Khmer Rouge leaders fleeing into exile. The next day, two Vietnamese photojournalists who were accompanying the troops followed the scent of what they believed to be decomposing bodies. The trail led them to an abandoned compound walled off by a corrugated tin fence. Although initially unsure of the building's purpose, once inside, they observed that it looked like it had once been a school. The scattered papers and office equipment left behind suggested that it had more recently served some kind of administrative purpose.¹

Then they found the corpses. The bodies of several men were chained to iron beds, some with their throats cut. The blood on the floor was still wet, indicating that they had been killed only recently.²

The photojournalists were standing in what was the Khmer Rouge's secret prison, code-named S-21. From 1975 to late 1978, it was where the regime interrogated, tortured, and ordered the execution of more than 14,000 men, women, and children. Most of the victims were Khmer Rouge members who were suspected of betraying the regime. Many of the accusations likely had no basis in fact, but the "confessions" the prisoners gave under duress fed the regime's compulsive search for enemies. Many of these confessions included the naming of others, not because they were guilty of anything, but because it was what the prisoners believed would make the torture stop.



IMAGE 7

Tuol Sleng-S21

Adam Jones,
Ph.D./Global Photo
Archive/Flickr

The prison guards kept careful records of the supposed traitors and their supposed crimes, which explained the paper and other office equipment found in the facility. Among the records were 6,000 black and white negatives left in an old cabinet.³ These were photos taken of each prisoner just shortly after their arrival, and “moments after their blindfold[s] [were] removed.”⁴

Historian David Chandler reminds us that many of S-21’s lower-ranking guards, just like those who worked at the Nazi death camps, “were not inherently brutal or authoritarian.” In fact, he says, most “appear to have been unexceptional, often poorly educated men and women who were cast in brutal roles. How much free choice, peer pressure, obedience, and ambition were involved in what they did is impossible to determine.”⁵ Most of the people who played various roles at the prison were teenagers or in their early 20s.⁶

The same cannot be said of Comrade Duch (pronounced “doyk”), the *nom de guerre* of Kaing Geuk Eav, a former math teacher who became the prison’s director and personally ordered the executions and torture. Years later, he came to be known as case number 001: In 1999, he was captured, and in 2007, became the first senior Khmer Rouge official to be formally tried through the International Tribunal. Cambodia’s most notorious prison guard is now a prisoner himself, serving a life sentence for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Although Duch is described as sometimes having taken on a detached tone during his trial, [he has publicly accepted responsibility](#) for his role. In 2008, as part of his trial, he was escorted to the prison he once ran. A video of the incident shows him reading a statement of apology to the victims, then suddenly stopping to wipe “his forearm across his eyes and let out a cry that sounded like the bark of a seal, before turning away in tears.”⁷

Today, the S-21 facility has been re-named the [Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide](#) (Tuol Sleng was the name of an adjoining primary school, and means “hillock of the sleng tree”⁸). Hundreds of the black and white photos of former prisoners are on display, as are the beds and chains once used to restrain them. The museum is a frequent stop for both tourists and foreign dignitaries. But for Cambodians, it is a vivid reminder of the inhumanity of the genocide years.

TO LEARN MORE:

- Tuol Sleng: Photographs from Pol Pot’s Secret Prison, www.tuolsleng.com.
- Kaing Geuk Eav, Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/indicted-person/kaing-guek-eav>.
- S-21, Tuol Sleng, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/cases/cambodia/violence/s-21>.
- (Video) Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, “Statements apology 25 August 2009: Kaing Geuk Eav alias Duch,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9vOXx2R5Zo>.

ENDNOTES

1. This description is summarized from David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 1-3.
2. Chandler, p. 3.
3. Adrienne Williams, "Photographs from S-21, 1975-1979," Museum of Modern Art, 2008.
4. Harriet Fitch Little, "Forty Years after Genocide, Cambodia Finds Complicated Truths Hard to Bear," *The Guardian*, 16 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/16/forty-years-after-genocide-cambodia-finds-complicated-truth-hard-to-bear>.
5. Chandler, p. 147.
6. "S-21: Where People Go in But Never Come Out," available at <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~amamendo/S-21.html>.
7. Seth Mydans, "Torture and Death Recounted at Cambodian Trial," July 14, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/15/world/asia/15cambo.html>.
8. Chandler, p. 4.

HARD CHOICES, DEALING WITH THE PAST, AND THE WELCOME RETURN OF POP MUSIC: INTERVIEW WITH GORDON LONGMUIR, FORMER AMBASSADOR TO CAMBODIA

Gordon Longmuir was born in Trail, B.C. and grew up in Esquimalt on Vancouver Island. After serving as an officer in the Royal Canadian Navy, he joined the Canadian Foreign Service, and held diplomatic postings in Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and India. From 1995–1999, he served as Canada’s Ambassador to Cambodia, where he had a front-row seat to the early post-genocide reconciliation processes, including the planning for the International Tribunal. He now lives in North Vancouver, but has remained active in supporting democratization and development in Cambodia.



In 1996, while you were Ambassador to Cambodia, the government there granted amnesty to Ieng Sary, one of the top Khmer Rouge leaders. Why did they do that?

There’s a lot of history behind this, but a good starting point is the late 1980s. After Vietnam withdrew its forces in 1989, there was the start of a peace process that required bringing the warring factions together. This included the Vietnam-installed government, led by (current prime minister) Hun Sen; the royalists, led by Sihanouk; the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF), formed after the Vietnam invasion in 1979; and of course the Khmer Rouge. The idea was that at the end of the peace process, all four groups would disarm. But the Khmer Rouge hold-outs did not accept that condition. And if they wouldn’t agree to disarm, neither would the others.

Then, in 1996, Ieng Sary surrendered, along with thousands of Khmer Rouge soldiers still under his command. The Cambodian government approached this in a pragmatic way. First, they knew that if these soldiers were still armed and didn’t have jobs, they could easily go back to fighting. So it was better to bring them under government control by incorporating them into the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces.

Second, Sihanouk officially pardoned Ieng Sary, cancelling the death sentence he had been given when the Vietnamese tried him in absentia. But Sihanouk left open the possibility that new charges could be brought against Ieng Sary under a future tribunal.

It is important to bear in mind also that Prime Minister Hun Sen was wary of cracking down too hard on the Khmer Rouge because he feared it could re-ignite the conflict. This was especially the case in rural areas where there was

still some nostalgia and loyalty to the Khmer Rouge. After all, under the Khmer Rouge's ideology, poor rural people were seen as the 'good people,' so they were not treated as harshly as urban dwellers, intellectuals, monks and minority people.

Since your ambassadorship, you have remained very involved in Cambodia, including monitoring elections in 2003 and assisting with a project to strengthen their Parliament. When you return to Cambodia, what is your sense of the mood of the Cambodian people about the trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders?

It's really a mix. One group feels that they need to bring all former Khmer Rouge to justice. But that's a minority view.

Another group has grown tired of the Tribunal process. They are generally skeptical that it can bring about any kind of useful conclusion to this chapter of Cambodia's history, and many feel that the money spent on the Tribunal could have been spent in other ways to help Cambodians.

Underlying this view is something like a culture of forgiveness—or at least a sense that it's time for Cambodians to put the past behind them. Even Prime Minister Hun Sen has said, "That's in the past, let's bury it." He was voicing the opinion of a lot of Cambodians.

But there is a third group who feel that any tribunal, even one that is flawed or incomplete in terms of how many people it tries, is a good tribunal. In this view, the process has been important because it has brought to light a lot of information that can help the general public reach a fuller understanding. For a long time, teachers in Cambodia didn't want to teach about [the genocide], and older Cambodians often didn't want to talk about it, even to their own children and grandchildren.

Does that mean that younger Cambodians don't know much about the genocide?

On the one hand, there are many younger Cambodians who know that their grandparents are no longer with them, but they don't know why. But on the other hand, they and other young people have become interested in getting information about it. And now they can easily find this information simply by going online.

In addition, the idea that high school students should learn about the genocide has started to catch on. (In 2007, it was announced that "the first history book written by a Cambodian author about the Khmer Rouge" would be available to be used in Cambodian classrooms—that textbook is now used everywhere, with the blessing of the Ministry of Education.)

Your interaction with Cambodia goes back decades. What do you like and respect most about the people?

For me, the biggest thing I think of is their resilience and how well they have come back from the genocide period. Things are gradually getting better. The economy is growing. Cambodians are hard-working, but they also enjoy life. It's great fun to go to a Cambodian beer hall in a small town in the interior of the country where people are singing. And pop culture has come back.

Also, I have found Cambodians to be very frank, and they don't hold grudges for a long time.

Finally, what advice would you have for young Canadians who are thinking about becoming a diplomat?

First, learn French and one other language. If you're in high school, you still have plenty of time.

Second, read widely. And not just tweets and Facebook posts – read novels, newspapers, history books, etc. Don't narrow yourself too much in terms of topics. It's good to read on a broad range of topics so that you can have a similarly broad outlook.

And third, have opinions and be prepared to share them!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Gordon Longmuir says that Leng Sary and the many soldiers under his command were pardoned "for pragmatic reasons." In your own words, what do you think he meant by this?
2. Mr. Longmuir says that some people in Cambodia want to "put the past behind them." What do you think explains this sentiment? Can putting the past behind you mean different things to different people?
3. Based on Mr. Longmuir's advice for aspiring diplomats, what would you suggest to a Canadian who has just been appointed the new Ambassador to Cambodia? What should they learn, and who should they talk to?

CHRONOLOGY OF POST-GENOCIDE CAMBODIA

- 1979** Vietnam invades Cambodia; many Khmer Rouge leaders flee to western border.
- 1979–1990** UN continues to recognize the Khmer Rouge as Cambodia’s government.
- 1991** Warring parties sign peace agreement in Paris, plan for national election under UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) supervision.
- 1993** Elections held, but Khmer Rouge boycotts.
- 1998** Pol Pot dies while hiding in the Cambodian jungle.
- 1999** Ta Mok (“the Butcher”) is captured and held in a military prison.
- 2001** Law passes to set up Tribunal to try Khmer Rouge leaders.
- 2006** Ta Mok dies while in custody before charges of genocide are brought against him.
- 2007** Tribunal begins questioning suspects. Nuon Chea is arrested, charged with crimes against humanity.
- 2010** Duch (Kaing Geuk Eav) is convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- 2011** Ieng Thirith, the highest ranking woman in the Khmer Rouge was ruled unfit to stand trial for health reasons.
- 2013** Ieng Sary dies while awaiting trial.
- 2014** Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, another top Khmer Rouge leader, sentenced to life in prison.
- 2015** Two more former Khmer Rouge commanders are charged with crimes against humanity.

Sources: <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/chronology-of-the-khmer-rouge-movement/>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13006828>

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