



## Overview: Cambodia

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In merely a few years during the 1970s, perpetrators of the Cambodian Genocide murdered up to 3 million of their fellow countrymen and caused unimaginable suffering to a great number of others. Members of the Khmer Rouge, the radical political regime behind the terror, invoked a dubious justification of their crimes by alleging that such actions would ultimately improve everyday people's quality of life through the establishment of a more egalitarian society under communist rule. This purportedly utopian pursuit has left the Cambodian people with a painful legacy, one that they are still struggling to overcome.

Cambodian history was not always so mired in atrocity. In fact, for a long time, visitors recorded being favorably impressed by the region's promise of an affluent lifestyle to its residents, known as the Khmer. From the 9th through 15th centuries, the Khmer Empire was based in Cambodia and ruled most of southeastern Asia. Its capital city of Angkor boasted a population greater than one million residents, making it for hundreds of years the largest city in the world. Angkor boasted a reputation for prosperity, but was finally sacked in the 15th century, an event that helped usher in generations of hardship. By the 1800s, the region of Cambodia was locked in a power struggle between neighboring Siam and Vietnam. The French entered at mid-century, and a colonial system soon emerged. While never genocidal, French encroachment was for the people of Cambodia but one more marker on their recent historical downslide. The Japanese invasion during the Second World War saw the weakening of French forces in Cambodia and the installation of Cambodia's King Sihanouk, whose reign began in 1941. Sihanouk is largely credited with inciting peasants to a successful rebellion against the French after the war, thereby establishing Cambodia as an independent state in 1955.

Cambodia's independence bolstered optimism within its citizenry. However, that sentiment was soon tempered by the 1962 outbreak of the Vietnam War. Determined to halt the spread of communism, the United States provided huge sums of economic aid to Cambodia and bombed communist bases at its eastern border. Yet Sihanouk hoped to protect Cambodians by endorsing strict neutrality. When he signed a treaty of friendship with Vietnamese communists, the United States halted its military and economic aid, crippling the Cambodian economy. This turn of events helped elevate to prominence the Khmer Rouge, a radical communist group that found the reigning monarchy too moderate. Members of the Khmer Rouge, however, were not the only political players on the rise. In 1970, the Cambodian monarchy was toppled when one of its ministers took power. Lon Nol was eager to regain American support, but was successful only to an extent. While the United States appreciated the regime's return to its sphere of influence, burgeoning anti-war protests increasingly limited Washington's options. Under the Nixon Doctrine, the administration once again provided military and economic help to Cambodia, but notably still stopped short of sending additional American soldiers to fend off the communist Vietnamese. The situation in the East grew bloodier. From 1970 to 1973, American bombs totaling hundreds of thousands of tons fell on Cambodia, often annihilating not just communist targets, but also helpless civilians. With the country weakened and undeniably incapable of defending its own people, Cambodia descended into chaos. The Khmer Rouge seized the opportunity to assume power by storming the city of Phnom Penh in April of 1975.



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Rule under the Khmer Rouge immediately and intentionally transformed Cambodian life. Pol Pot, former schoolteacher and dictator at the head of the newly renamed “Democratic Kampuchea,” put forth genocidal policies that relocated, enslaved, tortured, and murdered enormous numbers of Cambodians. Once in control, the Khmer Rouge evacuated the city of Phnom Penh, moving three million civilians to the nation’s rural fields. The people were made to work long hours of backbreaking slave labor and received little, if anything, to eat. Malnutrition and medical neglect were rampant. When their labor fell short of production goals, men, women, and children were beaten. What became known as “The Killing Fields,” where piles of decaying bodies littered the earth, notoriously bore witness to the genocide. The perversion of familiar institutions helped support the regime’s genocidal policies. In probably the most infamous example, one high school was converted into the S-21 Prison, where up to 20 thousand prisoners were tortured into writing confessions to crimes they had never committed. With this ruse, the perpetrators could maintain some illusion that their practice of mass executions was warranted.

That Cambodia no longer had a system of currency or a market for international trade further hindered its war-ravaged economy and added to a general tone of desperation. But the people’s problems extended beyond harsh economic circumstances and into every facet of life. The regime was fiercely nationalistic and xenophobic. Especially after its history of foreign interference, Cambodians might be seen as justified for harboring such sentiments. However, the Khmer Rouge took that mood to a fanatical extreme. The totalitarian nature of the new government meant that Cambodians were expected to be loyal to the state above all, an ideal that by design worked to tear apart familial bonds. The very notion of individual free choice was systematically demonized by the regime, which also condemned as traitorous any allegiance to more traditional authorities. Foremost among them was a longstanding essential component of Cambodian culture, Buddhism. Deprived of Buddhism’s ancient wisdom for enduring hardships, Cambodians were now even more ill-equipped to survive.

While throwing traditions by the wayside, the Khmer Rouge still assumed something of a reactionary character, at least insofar as it privileged through propaganda the agrarian lifestyle that characterized the earlier Khmer Empire. Only by embracing the simple life of the farmer, it was taught, could Cambodia reclaim its stolen grandeur. With the peasant lifestyle propped up as the new ideal for virtually everyone, urbanity and learning were actively disparaged, frequently to points of absurdity. Eventually, the simple act of wearing glasses was enough to mark a Cambodian as an intellectual, and thus as an enemy of the regime, deserving death. The Khmer Rouge also targeted for murder potential political rivals, but did not stop there. The sheer volume of executions attests to a policy of widespread victimization and terror.

By 1979, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, anywhere from a fifth to a third of the Cambodian population had been murdered by the Khmer Rouge, the vast majority of survivors of the genocide were traumatized and functionally illiterate, and the region was in shambles. Under Vietnamese auspices, Cambodia became the People’s Republic of Kampuchea for a decade, until Vietnam withdrew in 1989. The Paris Peace Accords of the early 1990s restored the Cambodian monarchy under Prince Sihanouk, but this conscious move towards normalcy could



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not mask the wounds of a country that was still clearly in crisis. International aid to Cambodia accounted for over half of the country's annual budget. Enormous craters could be seen scattered across a land that remained one of the most underdeveloped in the world.

The death of Pol Pot and the surrender of the last of the Khmer Rouge soldiers did not occur until the turn of the century, and it was not until 2006 that formal criminal proceedings regarding the genocide began. Four cases began against senior commanders, including the head of the S-21 Prison. Now, nearly four decades after the atrocity, cases are still being brought to court in a sincere if belated effort to foster some sense of justice.