

CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE, 1975 - 1978



In order to create a Communist agricultural peasant society, the Khmer Rouge government killed over 25% of the country's population in only three years.

Where?

Cambodia, a country in Southeast Asia, is less than half the size of California. Following independence from France in 1953, Cambodia elected a prime minister who was subsequently overthrown by General Lon Nol in a coup. The population was 7 million.

When?

The genocide began in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge overthrew Lon Nol and lasted until the Vietnamese invaded in 1978.

Who?

Perpetrators: The Khmer Rouge began as a guerilla movement in the 1960s, led by Pol Pot. Pol Pot sought to deconstruct Cambodia back to a primitive and classless "Year Zero," where all citizens would participate in rural work projects and all Western innovations would be removed.

Victims: In order to achieve the "ideal" communist model, the Khmer Rouge believed that all Cambodians must be made to work as laborers in a huge federation of collective farms and all opposition was to be eliminated. Potential 'opposition' included intellectuals, doctors, teachers, professionals, monks, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, and Cambodians with Chinese, Vietnamese, or Thai ancestry. The Khmer Rouge vigorously interrogated its members and frequently executed members on suspicions of treachery or sabotage. Survival in Khmer Rouge Cambodia was determined by one's ability to work.



How?

During the Vietnam War, the United States backed South Vietnamese forces and Cambodia became a battlefield, despite its neutrality. High Cambodian civilian casualties resulted in opposition to western democracy, driving new recruits to the Khmer Rouge guerilla movement. Pol Pot's communism brought images of new hope, promise, and national tranquility. Within days of the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975, Pol Pot implemented his extremist policies of collectivization and communal labor.

Cambodians nationwide were forced from their hometowns and villages. The ill, disabled, old, and young who were incapable of making the journey to collective farms and labor camps perished. Entire cities were forcibly evacuated to the countryside; all political and civil rights were abolished. Children were taken from their parents and placed in separate forced labor camps. Factories, schools, universities, hospitals, and all other private institutions were shut down and their former owners and employees were murdered, along with their extended families. Religion was banned: leading Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries were killed, and temples and churches were burned. It was common for people to be shot for speaking a foreign language, wearing glasses, smiling, or crying.

Cambodians who survived the purges and marches became unpaid laborers, working on minimum rations for endless hours. They were forced to live in public communes, similar to military barracks, with constant food shortages and rampant disease. These conditions of genocide continued for three years until Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978 and overthrew the Khmer Rouge government.

The Aftermath

Over two million were killed – more than 25 percent of the total population. Cambodia lay in ruin under the newly-established Vietnamese regime. The economy failed under Pol Pot, as all professionals, engineers, technicians, and planners who could potentially reorganize Cambodia had been killed or fled during the genocide. Guerilla forces continued fighting between 1978 and 1989, and a peace agreement was reached in 1991. The nation's first democratic election was held in 1993.