

David Kelso
Prof. Krikun
12/27/2008

The Khmer Rouge: Why Did They Decide to Destroy?

Many of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge were a group of Cambodian students who returned from their studies in France with ambitions to free Cambodia from foreign influence and rule the nation. They fought against an American backed government along with other anti-colonial factions in Cambodia to satisfy their thirst for power. Upon gaining control of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge began a program of terror, murder, and genocide. This involved the forced relocation of families who lived in urban areas into rural labor camps and the savage torturing and killing of people who were thought to be subversive. The overarching goal of this paper is to discover why this campaign of death and destruction took place after the Khmer Rouge had obtained the power which they had fought for? I will attempt to answer this question by studying three sections of the party development and policy. First I will explore the time spent by party leaders who studied in France. What influences there may have led them to champion their rigid form of communism? Second, I intend to look closely at the mass murders. I will explore testimony from the victims and the soldiers as well as the ways in which these systematic killings took place; could the answers be found in the horrific acts themselves? Third, I will examine the Khmer Rouge leaders as the death count climbed, in order to determine what factors may have motivated them to enact policies which sought to disrupt the family unit and exterminate a large percentage of the Cambodian people. The answers to these questions will undoubtedly shed some light on the umbrella question; why did over a million people, one out of

five Cambodians, suffer and die in the almost four years of Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia?

Many of the future leaders of the Khmer Rouge were granted scholarships to study abroad in Paris. These Cambodian students were given funding, which amounted to their tuition payed in full and enough money to last them about a month in Paris.¹ Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Son Sen, were all studying in Paris during the early 1950's and were active members of a small community of Cambodians. Other influential members of the Cambodian enclave in Paris were Thiounn Mumm, Keng Vannsak, Mey Mann and Rath Samoeun. The students were also part of the Khmer Student Association which is abbreviated AEK.²

The AEK “elected a new six-man executive committee whose members included Keng Vannsak and Thiounn Mumm. One of its first actions was to set up informal student discussion groups, known as Cercles d'Etudes (Study Circles).”³

While receiving an education, these young men and many others became involved with the French Communist Party. They began to study Marxism and attended communist functions throughout Europe. Their study of varied interpretations of Marxism was spurred on because they all were interested in discovering and developing the form of communism that would work best in their homeland. Although many in the group were not politically motivated upon arrival in Paris, their desire to rid their nation of colonial rule grew considerably during their time in France. These nationalist feelings coincided nicely with the Marxist principles which focus on revolution.⁴ For these students communism seemed to offer the best political solutions to their questions of how to gain independence from Western powers.

1 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 42-45

2 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 47-51

3 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 51&52

4 Kiernan, Ben. “How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975” Verso, London, UK. 1985. pg 121

Saloth Sar experienced communism in a slightly different way than his fellow Cambodian students in France because during the summer of 1950, he traveled to Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia he volunteered for a work brigade. “Yugoslavia, like southeastern Europe in general, resembled Cambodia closely in its pre-revolutionary social and economic structures , and the way in which communism was developing there could not help but be relevant for study by young Southeast Asian communists.”⁵ This indicates that although the French Communist Party was still very pro-Stalinist, Saloth Sar did experience a more agrarian form of communism as a young man. The policy in Yugoslavia at the time focused on enforcing collective farming, “...at the expense of urban living standards.”⁶ At this time however, Sar did not have much influence among his Cambodian friends in France. He was still new to the scene and relatively inexperienced in political matters. I note this holiday in Yugoslavia because it may have shaped Sar's ideas of communism in action and the policies enacted twenty-five years later in Cambodia were similar to those in Yugoslavia.

The group in France, as it became more and more involved in communism, became much more clandestine. A new group was formed to discuss politics and the situation in Cambodia. This secret organization was called the Cercle Marxiste. The first meeting was called by Thiounn Mann and it was attended by students that were known for their progressive views. After the first meeting, the people who were at the first meeting were approached individually to join the Cercle. This group differed from the previous organizations that the students had been part of in two ways; the first major difference was that this group was intended to remain secret, the second major difference was that the group was divided into small cells that met separately. These cells were designed to keep the groups leadership unknown, even to most of the people in

5 Vickery, Michael. “Cambodia: 1975-1982” South End Press, Boston, MA. 1984. pg. 275

6 Kiernan, Ben. “How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975” Verso, London,UK. 1985. pg. 120

the cells. “It was rigidly compartmentalized: one member of each cell was in contact with a single member of the leadership, and no cell member knew who belonged to the other cells or how many cells existed.”⁷ I feel the formation of a organization such as this is example of the students interest in control and secrecy. This faction of Cambodian students hoped to function in secret because they had larger goals than simply studying Marxism, they wanted to eventually put the ideas they were studying into action in their homeland. The French, at the time, would not have accepted these aspirations, held by the separatist students, because they still wanted to wield the power in Southeast Asia.

Ieng Sary who was one of the three leaders of the Cercle Marxiste, along with Thiounn Mumm and Rath Samoeun, became obsessed with the work that had to be done. His non-stop “work to be done” attitude became more than some members of the group could handle and they decided to leave the organization. Even, “Mumm himself and his girlfriend moved to a different hotel after Sary took to banging on their door at six o'clock in the morning to tell that there was 'political work to be done'.”⁸ This obsession with “political work” is another way in which the Cercle Marxiste was different from the previous Cercles d'Etudes, which were set up as legitimate out in the open study groups. They did not have a political bend to them in the same way that the new Cercle did. Ieng Sary saw himself as the revolutionary leader early on. Keng Vannsak later quoted Sary as saying, “I will direct the revolutionary organization...I will hold the dossiers; I will supervise the ministers; I will watch that they do not deviate from the line laid down by the central committee in the interests of the people.”⁹ Ieng Sary was the only one of the few leaders of the Cercle Marxiste that would eventually lead the Khmer Rouge. He, Saloth Sar, and Son Sen were not the most intellectual of the students, but they would all end up as the upper

7 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 62 & 63

8 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 64

9 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 68

leadership of the Khmer Rouge.¹⁰ In some ways, this may explain why the Khmer Rouge was to take a staunch anti-intellectual stance once achieving power in Cambodia. Other members of the Cercle Marxist like Thiounn Mumm, Keng Vannsak, and Rath Samoeun who were more intellectual and flourished in the Parisian sphere of academia, eventually left the group and did not become as influential as their less educated colleagues. Khieu Samphan was an exception to this rule because he was both highly educated and remained highly involved throughout the rule of the Khmer Rouge.¹¹ The anti-intellectual stance taken by the Khmer Rouge played a large roll in the killings. The fact that so many of the leaders of the KR were part of the student group in France, but remained scholastically uneducated themselves, must have effected the policy towards the intellectuals living in Cambodia. They were educated enough to understand that education inevitably fosters a desire for rebellion and once they had obtained power, they didn't want to be creating their eventual enemies by educating the masses. They also must have seen the need to eradicate the people who were already educated in Cambodia when they did gain power.

I will now begin to focus on the victims and the lower level solders of the Khmer Rouge. I do this to explore how the killings were carried out and, hopefully, gain some insight into why these horrific and savage actions took place. This was a difficult undertaking for me. In many of the testimonies, these people are looking back into their childhoods; which are haunted by the most gruesome and retched experiences a child can have. Many of the solders were only children too. They have guilt to live with. I have used these memoirs, in spite of my understanding that memory is not perfect and is shaped by feelings and ideologies, because these are the only people in the world who were there and had to endure the chaos. If there is anyone

10 Kiernan, Ben. "How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975" Verso, London,UK. 1985. pg. 122

11 Kiernan, Ben. "How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975" Verso, London,UK. 1985. pg. 122

that should be heard when researching this catastrophe it is them. Their family members and they themselves were the catastrophe. Because of this I forced myself to continue reading and now begin to try and make some sense of it.

It was shocking for me to observe, while reading these difficult testimonies, that close parallels could be found between the experiences of the victims and the soldiers. Both groups were forced to do things they didn't want to do through the coercion of observed brutality. The soldiers knew that they would be punished severely if they didn't do as they were instructed, and the forced laborers did as well. This is one of the saddest parts of war for me. Nobody wins. Both sides have good and bad people and unfortunately, because of tyrannical leadership, all lose. The pawns of the government were afraid everyday. Even though their side was in control at that time, many must have been anxiety ridden. They had to fear their leaders and they had to fear a bullet from the opposition. I do not give them a pass for their actions and they should be ashamed of their deeds. In life, however, self preservation is one of the most powerful motivators and because of this I do have an amount of empathy for the low level Cambodian soldier. That empathy was boosted after reading their stories.

Alexander Laban Hinton describes his interactions with a former Khmer Rouge soldier in his book *Why Did They Kill?*. This interview is compelling for me because it clearly shows the internal pressures the Khmer Rouge put on their soldiers to kill. The soldier Hinton interviewed was named Lor. Hinton asked Lor if he had killed people for the Khmer Rouge. Lor responded that he had killed one or two people. Hinton asked Lor to explain the situation behind Lor's killings to which Lor responded, "At the time, my boss was also present...As we walked he asked me, 'Have you ever dared to kill one of them Lor?' I responded, 'I never have, elder brother.' So he said, 'Like your heart isn't cut off (chett min dach khat), go get that prisoner and try it once.

Do it one time so I can see.” As he had been instructed by his superior, Lor went over to the prisoner and using an iron bar, he smashed in the head of his victim. Lor went on to explain the motivation behind his actions in this case. Lor claims, “Afterwards, I threw the bar aside and returned to the place where I marked off names. When my boss asked me to do this, if I didn't do it [pause]...I couldn't refuse.”¹² This story displays clearly the desire for Khmer leaders to force their men to actively participate in the killing of their enemies. There were strong coercive tactics used in order for the leaders to be sure that their men had “cut off their hearts”. They wanted to have an army that was ruthless and capable of committing the most gruesome actions without hesitation.

The victims of the Khmer Rouge were also coerced to do as they were told and many of them saw their close family members and friends suffer if they refused to do what they were instructed to do. For most victims it was their job to work most of the day doing physical labor. They worked on projects like growing food, digging canals, and cutting back forests. They had to live in small communities often isolated in the countryside. Everyday they had to toil in fear. Fear for their families and for themselves. For the urban dwelling Cambodians, this period of their lives began with a long forced exodus from their homes.

Youkimny Chan, a survivor, describes the trek, “Now everyone in our family had to walk, and we had to divide the remaining food among us to carry it on our backs. It was the dry season and it was very hot. There was no water. People began to get heatstroke and fall down on the road...There was no time for funerals. Soldiers threw the bodies into ponds and kept everyone moving.”¹³ This account is similar to many others which I have read. This was a modern day Trail of Tears. During the evacuation of the cities, the people learned quickly that their captors

12 Hinton, Alexander Laban. “Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide. University of California Press. Berkeley, CA. 2005. pg. 3

13 Pran, Dith. “Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields” Yale University Press. New Haven, CT. 1997. pg. 21

were a ruthless bunch with no care for their wellbeing.

Once the city dwellers had been relocated they witnessed horrible acts of violence regularly. This made them very passive and afraid. Roeun Sam, a girl only fourteen at the time, remembers the soldiers murdering an innocent man in front of her and many other workers in their work group. She says, “Suddenly one of them hit him from the back, pushed him, and he fell face to the ground. It was raining. We sat in the rain, and then the rain became blood. He was hit with a shovel and then he went unconscious and began to have a seizure. Then Angka (This is the name the victims use to describe KR troops) took out a sharp knife and cut the man from his breastbone all the way down to his stomach. They took out his organs.”¹⁴ This form of execution was not atypical for the Khmer Rouge soldiers. The brutality they displayed was intense and was meant to send a message to the other prisoners who were forced to watch these acts of violence. Because of this, I feel that many of the killings were done to maintain control. As revolutionaries, the Khmer Rouge leadership must have learned that to maintain power, a government must use incredible force to show the people that they were willing to do anything to stop rebellion. The Khmer Rouge ruled with an iron fist and like so many other like minded regimes throughout history, they brutalized the souls of their people. Darith Keo, who was a boy only seven years old, remembers how the Khmer Rouge worked to instill fear into their captives. He says, “Once they made the people sit in a circle and watch as they executed an unmarried couple. They were clubbed on the neck and fell near a ditch. The Khmer Rouge henchmen pushed them into a hole with their shins. The couple went into spasms and were buried alive.” Darith Keo continues on to say, “They feared rebellion and we feared them. A few people tried to escape, but they were caught and killed.”¹⁵ Again, it appears that the Khmer Rouge was

14 Pran, Dith. “Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields” Yale University Press. New Haven, CT. 1997. pg. 77

15 Pran, Dith. “Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields” Yale University Press. New Haven, CT. 1997. pg. 164

interested in preserving their position of control. I think it would be fair to say that they knew first hand about rebellion and their fear of losing power was so great that they implemented policies that aimed to break the people's will.

The final portion of this research paper will be devoted to investigating the leaders of the KR government and their policies to get a better understanding of the reasoning behind their policies of murder and fear. The amount of death that the Khmer Rouge dealt is still not well known or agreed upon by historians. “A Yale University project, subsidized by the State Department under the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act enacted to support efforts to bring the K.R. leaders to justice, by early 1996 estimated the number of mass graves to be between ten and twenty thousand, each holding an average of 100 to 250 corpses.”¹⁶ This figure does not account for people that were randomly killed and thrown aside by the soldiers, but it gives a good idea of the magnitude of the organized killings which took place to weed out possible rebels.

The regime, headed by Pol Pot, executed major purges once they had already gained control and had exacted revenge on many of the soldiers and supporters of the Lon Nol government. In 1977 the purges meant, “harsher living conditions and, above all, more numerous and more systematic executions.”¹⁷ In December of 1976, Pol Pot discussed the problems the party was facing. He said, “There is a sickness inside the Party, born in the years [of struggle]...we searched for the ugly microbes without success...[Now], as our socialist revolution advances...we can locate the ugly microbes...They will rot society, rot the Party and rot the army...”¹⁸ This quote from Pol Pot shows the paranoia that was infecting the regime and in the end, this paranoia may very well have led to the destruction of the “Party” more than the microbes he describes could have. The purges of 1977 made life much more brutal for the

16 Deac, Wilfred P. “Road to the Killing Fields: The Cambodian War of 1970-1975. Texas A&M University Press. College Station, TX. 1997. pg. 235

17 Vickery, Michael. “Cambodia: 1975-1982” South End Press, Boston, MA. 1984. pg. 140

18 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 360

people of Cambodia. They watched as their relatives were rounded up and executed or just taken away and never heard from again. This made the people in areas, in which life was tolerable up to this point, realize the ruthlessness of this regime which had taken over two years before. The 1977 purges were carried out mostly by cadres from the Southwestern zone. The idea of communal dining was put into place to create larger surpluses for export. This system was opposed by the cadres in the North and Northwest, those cadres were removed.¹⁹ Michael Vickery writes, “Their removal also served the political goal of destroying all leading communists who had belonged to, or supported, the pre-1960 party which had cooperated with the Vietnamese...”²⁰ It is apparent that the leaders of the Khmer Rouge realized that their most likely advocacy was going to be Vietnam. This would become even more obvious because of the events that were to take place in 1978.

The second round of purges, in 1978, also took action towards people who could be considered pro-Vietnam. This was a severe and brutal time in the Eastern regions of Cambodia. Many members of the Khmer Rouge and many civilians were slaughtered along the border with Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge also decided to change their policy which gave rural peasants privileges over the “new” rural peasants, who had been relocated from the cities to the countryside after the 1975 KR takeover. This was also a move against the Vietnamese because it had been the urban population that had been staunchly against Vietnam under Lon Nol's regime.²¹ These two decisions, made by the Khmer Rouge, were in my view cataclysmic blunders. First, the decision to crack down on the cadres in the East left them with new leadership governing over people that had just seen incredible suffering and loss. In my opinion this action would weaken that region, in terms of withstanding an attack by the Vietnamese,

19 Vickery, Michael. “Cambodia: 1975-1982” South End Press, Boston, MA. 1984. pg. 141

20 Vickery, Michael. “Cambodia: 1975-1982” South End Press, Boston, MA. 1984. pg. 141

21 Vickery, Michael. “Cambodia: 1975-1982” South End Press, Boston, MA. 1984. pg. 142

because the people would not rally behind a government that had just demoralized their region and because the new cadres would not be ready to lead effectively. Secondly, the decision to strip the “old” peasants of their dominate position in society, goes against the philosophy which they had put in place immediately after obtaining power. The “old” peasants had been the regimes biggest supporters because they liked being looked at as more important than the formerly urban citizens or “new” peasants. By taking away this privilege, they also upset their base and hurt them politically. Their thinking was also flawed because they believed the “new” peasants would get behind them if they were given equal status again with the “old” peasants. This was not the case because of how terribly the regime had treated the “new” peasants once they gained power.

Pol Pot also claimed to have had attempts on his life while ruling Cambodia. He used these assassination attempts as reasons to clean up the party and get rid of those microbes which he was terrified by. There is debate about how many attempts there were, and Ieng Sary refuted the claims made by Pol Pot. “‘There were no coup attempts,’ he said, ‘It was all greatly exaggerated. In Pol's mind, there were serious incidents. But in fact they were a pretext – a pretext for a crack-down.’”²² This is an example of creating enemies in order to explain away policies which may have been rejected. Stooping to this resort is usually a sign that control is slipping away because by having to create an excuse to justify actions, one admits they can not simply do as they would like and they are subject to others.

I have found that the regime was motivated to execute massive amounts of their civilians because they were paranoid, conniving and preparing for battle with Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge leadership had a huge amount of trouble trusting their subordinates or anyone else for that matter. They had to continually cleanse their party because they were so afraid that descent

22 Short, Phillip. “Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare” Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005 pg. 360

would come from within. They also had to be afraid of their neighbor to the East. They foolishly broke ties with Vietnam once they had overthrown the Lon Nol government and this caused them to be motivated by fear and paranoia. There seems to have been a repeating cycle of mistrust and fear which caused the Khmer Rouge to kill more and more people, which lead to more mistrust and fear. The people had to bare the brunt of the regimes anxiety and paranoia.

The actions displayed by the Khmer Rouge clearly show that in order to remain in power they were willing to do anything, including harming their citizens. It is sad that self-preservation seems to be the number one motive driving the killing spree that took place in Cambodia, because if staying in power takes priority over the policies you had hoped to enact , what was the point of gaining control in the first place. This group was fighting for years to be able to rule Cambodia but once they could actually command, they were too preoccupied with staying in power to improve the country at all.

The people who lived in Cambodia during these years will be forever scared by the darkness which covered their land during the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Families were torn apart, communities were devastated and the citizenry was turned against itself in order for the Khmer Rouge to try and save the nation from imperialism and colonization. This comes as no surprise. Often when power is transferred back to people, who had been ruled for generations by a foreign power, there are voids that must be filled and control that must be ceased. Unfortunately, the people who grab hardest and with the most aggression often succeed in filling the voids and obtaining power. This can lead to brutal retaliation against others that had been striving to fill the gaps left by the colonizers.

Human beings as a species must look at past examples of genocide and massive human suffering in order to prevent disasters like 1975-1979 Cambodia from happening again. Too

often in the past 100 years did the world watch as cataclysmic events took place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Nazi Germany and Bosnia-Herzegovina. We must be courageous enough to take a stand as a unified people and stop these catastrophes at the first sign of their development. It is difficult to unify many sovereign nations but an attempt must be made in cases where innocents is being devoured by people hell-bent on satisfying their personal quest for power and control. The world as a whole must be prepared to step in on the side of human rights, which are universal.

Bibliography

Deac, Wilfred P. "Road to the Killing Fields: The Cambodian War of 1970-1975. Texas A&M University Press. College Station, TX. 1997.

Hinton, Alexander Laban. "Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide. University of California Press. Berkley, CA. 2005.

Kiernan, Ben. "How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975" Verso, London,UK. 1985.

Pran, Dith. "Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields" Yale University Press. New Haven, CT. 1997.

Short, Phillip. "Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare" Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2005.

Vickery, Michael. "Cambodia: 1975-1982" South End Press, Boston, MA. 1984.

Why is the genocide verdict significant? The Khmer Rouge's crimes have long been referred to as the "Cambodian genocide", but academics and journalists have debated for years as to whether what they did amounts to that crime. image copyrightEPA. The UN Convention on Genocide speaks of "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group". So prosecutors at the tribunal tried to prove that the Khmer Rouge specifically tried to do that to these groups - something some experts, including Pol Pot biographer Philip Short, say they did not. The Khmer Rouge waged an insurgency after they were toppled from power, although thousands defected to the government in the 1990s before the group disbanded completely in 1999. The Khmer Rouge was a brutal regime that ruled Cambodia, under the leadership of Marxist dictator Pol Pot, from 1975 to 1979. Pol Pot's attempts to create a Cambodian "master race" through social engineering ultimately led to the deaths of more than 2 million people in the Southeast Asian country. Those killed were either executed as enemies of the regime, or died from starvation, disease or overwork. Historically, this period—as shown in the film *The Killing Fields*—has come to be known as the Cambodian Genocide. Pol Pot. Although Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge didn't come to power until the mid-1970s, the roots of their takeover can be traced to the 1960s, when a communist insurgency first became active in Cambodia, which was then ruled by a monarch. There are allegations that the United States (U.S.) directly armed the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian-Vietnamese War in order to weaken the influence of Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia. It is not disputed that the United States encouraged the government of China to provide military training and support for the Khmer Rouge and that the United States voted for the Khmer Rouge to remain the official representative of the country in the United Nations even after 1979, when the Khmer Rouge...