

UTOPIA AND TERROR IN THE 20TH CENTURY

CAMBODIA AND POL POT'S KILLING FIELDS

Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime lasted three years. Even by the standards of dictatorships it was strange in its nature and distinctive. When they came to power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge declared that they were starting a new epoch in human history.

They would build a pure racial utopia, and to this end, they emptied the cities, expelled people into the countryside, and purged the population again and again of those who were considered enemies of the people. In the last analysis, they would end up causing the deaths of some two million people in Cambodia, or over a quarter of the population.

The man who would later be known as Pol Pot—an assumed revolutionary name that didn't have any specific meaning—was born as Saloth Sar to a farmer family along the border of Thailand. He later claimed that he had spent two years as a Buddhist monk before setting out on the route to his new personality. Upon turning to politics, he cut himself off entirely from his family and his earlier life. Years later, his family would be stunned to realize that leader of the country was, in fact, a family member.

Throughout his rise to power and during his dominance in Cambodia, Pol Pot remained obscure and



POL POT.

unknown. In contrast to such dictators as Hitler, Stalin, or Mao, no cult of personality was encouraged around Pol Pot. An anonymous comrade, his very unknown nature was supposed to be all the more imposing. No statues, no omnipresent portraits, were established to this shadowy leader of the Khmer Rouge.

At the beginning of the rule, proclaimed "The Year Zero," the Khmer Rouge announced that they were bringing something entirely new and unprecedented to Cambodia. Paradoxically, however, they claimed to be returning the country to the rural idyllic conditions from a bygone age.

The Khmer Rouge immediately mounted a campaign of what they called ruralization. They viewed cities

as "tainted," full of impurities and deviations, full of lapses in those virtues that were associated with the peasantry. The cities were slated for annihilation, ordered to be emptied out in 24 hours. With tremendous dislocation, including the evacuation of hospital patients in their beds, the cities were, indeed, turned out, their populations expelled.

Sixty percent of the entire population of the country was exiled from its earlier place of residence, and Phnom Penh, the capital city, a great cosmopolitan city of two million people was deserted in short order, silent, and vacated. The social transformation of Cambodia had begun.

Former city dwellers, now thrust into a new context that many of them had not known before, were labeled even in their rural exile as the "new people." As such, they were segregated from the peasantry, who were judged more healthy and virtuous. These "new people" would be uprooted again and again, and deported from one part of the countryside to another and being decimated in the process. They had few supports, or people to draw upon, in unfamiliar regions, as a way of securing survival.

The fury of the revolutionaries focused on those who had moved away from their original roots; in particular those who had been tainted, as they saw it, through education. What

amounted to a manhunt now began of Cambodians who were educated. Those who spoke foreign languages—French had often been the language of advancement in the colonial period—were now targeted for persecution or extermination. The wearing of eyeglasses could be the distinguishing feature that would slate one for execution, because such a person, clearly, was one who had need of such corrective lenses for reading, education, or other subversive activities. Such so-called “enemies of the people” faced a dire fate.

Religion was also focused upon as a target. Buddhist monks, as well as members of the minority religions in Cambodia, including Muslims and Catholics, were persecuted and suspected of being enemies of the people. The ethnic minorities of the Chinese and Vietnamese were now eliminated, viewed as “impure,” imperfectly Cambodian. Executions became commonplace.

Many of the executions took place without the benefit of modern technology, but instead were meted out with the most primitive of objects and tools. Agricultural tools, such as the hoe, in particular, would be used in executions where victims would be struck from behind, with a blow aimed at the neck. The Khmer Rouge functionaries who meted out these revolutionary executions prided themselves on being polite as they did so. This was supposed to emphasize that this form of revolutionary justice was not personal, was not motivated by hatred, but rather, by the purity of revolutionary rationality and fervor.

Those who were not immediately executed were instead sent to prisons strewn throughout the country. Conditions in some of these prisons were so bad that many guards are said to have died there as well from the pri-

visions. Photographs which were carefully recorded, filed, and organized by the Khmer Rouge administrators of these prisons show the faces of those who were imprisoned there, or who faced imminent execution. Pictures of men, women, children, mothers and their children show a range of dismaying human emotions: fear, anxiety, resignation. These pictures form a terrifying documentary, the legacy of the Khmer Rouge.

The pits where the bodies of those who were executed were thrown came to be called the “killing fields” of Cambodia. The country was dotted with hundreds of mass graves, large and small, scattered throughout the land. It’s estimated that some two million died as a result of the Khmer Rouge policies, out of a total population of seven million in Cambodia, as a result of the executions, the killings, hunger, and abuse.

Why was this done? The promise was that the Khmer Rouge, by endorsing revolutionary violence, would create a new society. To make that new society, the regime was to follow radical measures to purify the human material of the people within, while the world would be cut off from the country, so that the country would be isolated and would form a universe of its own. The Khmer Rouge felt that they had a chance to create the world anew in Cambodia.

There were symbolic actions that immediately made their resolve clear. Money, currency, was abolished in one week within their coming to power. It was replaced by a new form of economic equality. Total collectivization of land was decreed. These were not the measures of the Soviet Union or China, which had been extensive enough, though they still allowed some private plots to be kept by the peasants. By contrast, the Khmer

Rouge demanded total collectivization of land. People ate in collective canteens, in dining halls, where they were not separated into families, but rather, worked in a collective. There they shared the same thin rice soup that represented the same starvation diet of ordinary Cambodians.

Moreover, all Cambodians were ordered to wear black clothes, on the model of the Khmer Rouge themselves. They were to shed vestiges of individuality, and instead, were to become uniform, to become one in their appearance.

Religion, writing, and education all disappeared. In their places, the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot argued that revolutionary fervor itself would be able to bring the benefits of higher civilization, medicine, and industrialization, even in the hands of young children. In many senses, this echoes Mao’s insistence upon will, and its capacity to achieve remarkable transformations.

Indeed, the Khmer Rouge sought to control even the most intimate parts of people’s lives. Only arranged marriages that were approved by Khmer Rouge officials were allowed. Those who engaged in relations outside the bounds of such sanctioned relationships would be punished most harshly.

Individualism was seen as something that needed to be overcome. In chilling propaganda slogans, the Khmer Rouge didn’t hide how they viewed human nature, or indeed, the individuals under their own control. Instead, they emphasized their disregard for the individual. One potent slogan stated, “Losing you is not a loss; keeping you is not a gain.” The individual was relegated to a revolutionary mass that was to be formed and remade. People were seen as human materiel for the revolution. ■