

Teacher information sheet

Genocide in Cambodia



HOLOCAUST
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In 1975 the Khmer Rouge, a radical communist political party, seized power in Cambodia under their leader Pol Pot.



Flag of Cambodia, re-adopted in 1993

Khmer Rouge ideology

The Khmer Rouge ruthlessly imposed an extremist programme to reconstruct Cambodia. They aimed to remove social classes and Western influences from the country – creating a 'Year Zero'. This was based on the belief that Cambodia should be returned to an alleged 'golden age' when the land was cultivated by peasants and the country would be ruled for and by the poorest amongst society.

Religion of all kinds was banned as were music and radios. Money was abolished and all aspects

of life were subject to regulation. People were not allowed to choose their own marriage partners. They could not leave their given place of work or even select the clothes that they would wear. used as forced labour or subjected to forced sterilisation and medical experimentation.

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After seizing power, the Khmer Rouge ordered that all towns and cities be emptied. No-one was spared: people who were ill, disabled, old and very young were driven out, regardless of their physical condition. People who refused to leave, those who did not leave fast enough, and those who would not obey orders were all murdered.

The vast majority of those forced into the countryside were made to work as agricultural slave labourers in a federation of collective farms. These farms are now known as 'The Killing Fields' because so many workers died or were murdered there.

Working days were long and food rations meagre. Civilian deaths in this period, from execution, disease, exhaustion and starvation, have been estimated at well over two million people.

All human rights were abolished. Children were taken from their parents and placed in separate forced labour camps. Factories, schools, universities and hospitals were shut down. Intellectuals in any field were murdered, along with their extended families. It was possible for people to be shot simply for knowing a foreign language, wearing glasses, laughing, or crying. The Khmer Rouge also attacked minority ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Vietnamese people. One Khmer Rouge slogan ran: 'To spare you is no profit, to destroy you is no loss.'

For the Khmer Rouge, children were central to the revolution as they believed they could be easily moulded, conditioned and indoctrinated. They could be taught to obey orders, become soldiers and kill enemies. Children were taught to believe that anyone not conforming to the Khmer laws were corrupt enemies.

S-21

In the now empty capital city, Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge established a concentration camp - Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21. Previously a high school, the building was converted into the Khmer Rouge centre for interrogation, torture and murder.

It is estimated that approximately 20,000 men, women and children were imprisoned in S-21 during the years of the genocide.



Prisoners at S-21 © David Parker

Most prisoners were held for between two to three months before they were killed. Within the first few days following their arrival, the prisoners were interrogated. Torture was carried out to force prisoners to confess to whatever their captors wished. There were only seven known survivors of S-21.

Liberation

After three and half years of Khmer Rouge rule, relations with neighbouring Vietnam had deteriorated because of the number of refugees fleeing Cambodia and because of border disputes. The Vietnamese invaded after being provoked by an attack ordered by Pol Pot.

Phnom Penh was liberated by Vietnamese troops on 7 January 1979. Some members of the Khmer Rouge defected and formed a new government with Vietnamese support. The Khmer Rouge retreated westwards to continue fighting a civil war which would last into the late 1990s. China and the West provided assistance to the Khmer Rouge, whilst Vietnam and the USSR backed the new Cambodian government.

Cambodia today

It is difficult to give precise figures for how many people lost their lives during the Genocide in Cambodia. People died through starvation, disease and exhaustion. Thousands were executed. Estimates of the number of people murdered range between one and three million.

Cambodia has gradually recovered from the Khmer Rouge regime, although the psychological scars remain for survivors and their families. Both civil war and the threat of the Khmer Rouge remained real until the late 1990s.

Buddhism has recovered since the Khmer Rouge attempt to wipe it out – almost all Cambodians define themselves as Buddhists.

S-21 was left as it was when the Khmer Rouge fled. Today it is a museum, bearing the mainly anonymous photographs taken of the prisoners during interrogation.

Find out more...

Genocide in Cambodia: hmd.org.uk/cambodia
Other information for teachers: hmd.org.uk/education
HMDT's range of free resources: hmd.org.uk/resources