

The Rise of the Khmer Rouge

In 1970 Cambodia's ruler was deposed by a coup d'état. Lon Nol took over and attempted to fight the Vietnamese Communists and the Khmer Rouge. By 1973 the Khmer Rouge exercised *de facto* control over the majority of Cambodian territory. When the U.S. Congress bombed Cambodia but eventually stopped. On April 1, 1975, President Lon Nol resigned. The communists had marked him for execution. On April 17, 1975 the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh, the capital.

The Khmer Rouge soldiers told residents that they would be moved only about "two or three kilometers" outside the city and would return in "two or three days", and that the Khmer Rouge would "take care of everything" until they returned.

1. How did the Khmer Rouge come to power?

The Khmer Rouge in Power

Pol Pot immediately seized and executed as many Khmer Republic civil servants, police, and military officers as it could find.

In one incident more than 300 former military officers were told to put on their dress uniforms in order to "meet Sihanouk." Instead, they were taken to a jungle clearing and were machine-gunned or clubbed to death. The wives and the children of people with government backgrounds were also killed, apparently to eliminate people who might harbor feelings of revenge toward the regime.

The Khmer Rouge attempted to turn Cambodia into a classless society by depopulating cities and forcing the urban population into agricultural communes. The entire population was forced to become farmers in labor camps. During their four years in power, the Khmer Rouge overworked and starved the population, at the same time executing selected groups, including intellectuals and killing many others for even minor breaches of rules.

The Khmer Rouge forced people to work for 12 hours non-stop, without adequate rest or food. They did not believe in western medicine but instead favored traditional peasant medicine; many died as a result. Family relationships were also banned, and family members could be put to death for communicating with each other.

1. What did the Khmer Rouge execute only certain people?
2. In what ways did the Khmer Rouge abuse the peasants?

Killings and Torture

The Khmer Rouge regime arrested, tortured and eventually executed anyone suspected of connections with the former government or with foreign governments, professionals, intellectuals as well as ordinary Khmer people who breached their rules.

S-21, a high school turned prison camp was the most violent place in Cambodia. This place was known simply as "the place where people go in but never come out." The sole purpose of S-21 was to extract confessions from political prisoners before they were taken away for execution. Nearly 20,000 people are known to have entered S-21; of these only six are known to have survived.

The methods of extracting confessions at S-21 were cruel and barbaric. Prisoners were tortured with battery powered electric shocks, searing hot metal prods, and other terrifying implements. Though many prisoners died from the constant abuse, killing them outright was discouraged.

As is evident from the accounts of refugees, the greatest causes of death were hunger, disease, and exposure. People died from the bites of venomous snakes and were killed by wild beasts in jungle areas. Nonetheless, executions accounted for as many as 1 million deaths. Western journalists have been shown "killing fields" containing as many as 16,000 bodies.

In 1962, the last census before Cambodia was engulfed by war, the population of the country was 5.7 million. A decade later, in 1972, the population was estimated at 7.1 million. Using Amnesty International's estimate of 1.4 million deaths, 20 percent of the population died between 1975 and 1978.

1. Who were the people getting tortured and killed?
2. What are some ways in which the Khmer Rouge extracted confessions?

The Fall of the Khmer Rouge

During the spring of 1978, Vietnam amassed thousands of troops along the Cambodian border. Khmer Rouge forces fought with Vietnamese troops in isolated incidents. On December 25, 1978 100,000 Vietnamese troops poured into Cambodia. By January 7, 1979, less than two weeks after their initial attack, Vietnamese forces successfully occupied Phnom Penh, forcing the Khmer Rouge to flee into the wilderness. Pol Pot himself escaped by helicopter as the city fell.

Vietnam established a new Cambodian government known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Hundreds of thousands of Cambodian families began the long march to their home villages in the hopes of finding surviving relatives. In many cases, though, Cambodians returned to find nothing left of their former lives - no homes, no possessions, and most tragic, no relatives. The Khmer Rouge came hauntingly close to succeeding in their radical attempt to erase all memories of the old Cambodia.

Throughout the countryside, Cambodia was pockmarked by sunken depressions of dirt, as if hell had sucked in small pockets of earth in the hopes of devouring the world above it. As we all soon discovered, the depressions were indeed the stuff of hell, for each marked the spot of another mass grave: the graves of the hundreds of thousands of Cambodians slaughtered by their own countrymen. Even though he was officially out of power Pol Pot still spoke against the west until his death in 1998. He was never charged for these crimes.

1. How did the Khmer Rouge fall?
2. What happened after the fall?