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### Pol Pot and His Gang of Murderers, the Khmer Rouge

As far as communist regimes go, the Khmer Rouge was relatively short lived. Lasting only four years and led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge was a “communist” group who sought to rule Cambodia and leave their permanent mark in history. As misfortune would have it, they did accomplish leaving their mark in history with the genocide of over one and a half million Cambodians. They accomplished the devastation of a people in only four years through the orders of a paranoid dictator who didn’t trust his own country people. While it was often the case that communist regimes appeared to have good intentions for the people of their nation, such description does not apply when describing the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot’s intentions as a leader. Ultimately, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime did not set out to benefit the Cambodian people during its four year rule due to the mass killings and torture, forced cultural assimilation, and the lowered standard of living it purposefully inflicted on its people.

The Khmer Rouge Regime was absolutely callous about slaughtering and torturing the Cambodians whom they deemed enemies of the state; it was a simple matter of deciding who to kill. This lack of value for the lives of Cambodians is emphasized by one of the slogans of the Khmer Rouge being “To keep you [is] no gain and to destroy you [is] no loss” (The Most Evil Men in History). With this sort of mindset, it should be no surprise that the regime accomplished a death toll of approximately 1.7 million Cambodians, with at least 500 000 being intentionally murdered and executed by the Khmer Rouge (Hay 38). Peauladd Huy, a young girl who grew up during the Khmer Rouge’s four year rule

and one of the many evacuated from the city (Powers 103), recalled how one man described to her how he had witnessed the Khmer Rouge soldiers executing a group of educated individuals, stating “they just shot them. All toppled like fallen trees” (Powers 108). This is a very accurate statement in terms of how the Khmer Rouge viewed the Cambodians; they were seen as just arbitrary beings. This explains not only how they were able to kill hundreds of thousands of their own fellow people, but also how Cambodians were treated in the infamous Tuol Sleng prison. A former school, Tuol Sleng had been turned into a center for executing and torturing political prisoners of the regime, including many former regime members (Most Evil Men). Here, Cambodians, even children (Most Evil Men), were tortured until they confessed that they were enemies plotting against the state (Sonneborn 38). Some were tortured to death before they could even confess (Most Evil Men), showing how the Khmer Rouge were absolutely careless of how they treated their prisoners. Overall, approximately 14 000 Cambodians were tortured in the Tuol Sleng prison (Also referred to as ‘S.21’ by the regime), ironically led by one of the former teachers Kaing Guek Eav (Sonneborn 38). All of these prisoners were well documented by the regime, accompanied by numbered photographs in a sort of sick, systematic way of degrading the Cambodians to numbers on paper while keeping track of them as ‘the enemy’ (Most evil Men). British journalist James Pringle described how he had learned that babies had been dropped from the third story of Tuol Sleng, plummeting to their deaths, simply because they were a ‘nuisance’ (Hay 142), showing complete disregard for the lives of human beings on the Khmer Rouge’s behalf. There were also the killing fields, where those who were declared enemies of the state, and even those who simply complained about the living conditions (Hay 60), were slaughtered by the Khmer Rouge. These Killing fields became mass graves, littered with thousands of skulls (Sonneborn 5), for approximately 1.1 million victims of the Khmer Rouge’s persecutions (Hay 73). This disrespect for the dead, combined with the

regime-implemented systematic torture and sheer number of Cambodians murdered by the regime shows that, not only was Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge cruel towards their people; they committed genocide upon them.

The Khmer Rouge also held no appreciation for the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of Cambodia and sought to homogenize its people. In a formal document issued by the Khmer Rouge in 1976 after the regime took over, they stated that they would not “allow individualism to rise again” (Hay 40). Thus, The Khmer Rouge wanted to destroy the individual altogether. This may sound like what one might expect from a communist regime, but the Khmer Rouge was especially rigid in the assimilation they inflicted on their nation, going to unheard-of lengths. First, they changed the name from Cambodia to the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea, immediately erasing the past identity and diverse history of the country. They then established the concept of “Year Zero” where they literally disregarded all history of the Cambodians before the regime’s takeover in 1976 as irrelevant, making 1976 become the official beginning of their calendar (Sonneborn 37). After destroying all signs of the nation’s past, the Khmer Rouge began to declare a cultural war on its own people. They attacked religious minorities like the Cham Muslims in particular, who had lived in Cambodia for many years, but who were brutally massacred with their children forcibly kidnapped and raised as though they were ethnic Khmers and were forbidden to speak their native language (Hay 60-61). But the Khmer Rouge did not stop at just assimilating the religious minority, but also the majority Cambodian Buddhists who were virtually non-existent by the end of the regime (Hay 61-62), with their entire culture wiped out after the regime outlawed Buddhism (Most Evil Men). The Khmer Rouge would even target individuals based on visual differences; in the documentary *The Most Evil Men in History: Pol Pot*, Loung Ung, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge’s regime, described how the regime would target Cambodians with lighter skin as being

enemies of the state because their lighter skin tone was associated with the elite class of the city, while people with darker skin were seen as farm and field workers and were therefore seen as good and valued for their labour. This leads into what is perhaps Pol Pot's main obsession in regards to cultural extermination: the city dwellers. To Pol Pot, the capital Phnom Penh's ethnic diversity and education system represented western corruption and contamination which he believed had been destroying the true and pure Khmer way of life (Most Evil Men). Because of this, people with higher academic careers such as doctors and teachers or even individuals who wore glasses were persecuted by the regime (Hay 58). He forced city dwellers out of the city and into the rural areas and forced them to assimilate to the rural lifestyle (Most Evil Men). He also targeted those who were ethnically Chinese, Vietnamese and all other non-Khmer ethnicities, many of whom were former city dwellers, as they were seen as outside influences corrupting the country as well (Most Evil Men). Some were deported, as some 100 000 Vietnamese Cambodians were (Hay 35), while others were not as lucky and were instead slain such as 250 000 Chinese Cambodians killed in the countryside (Hay 35). Spouses of Vietnamese Cambodians were even told to kill their partners as they were seen as the enemies of the state (Most evil Men). In summary, essentially Pol Pot's idea of the perfect Kampuchean was someone who was an uneducated, unquestioning labourer who was non-religious, lived in rural areas on farms and was an ethnic Khmer. This was his concept of the 'base person' (Hay 33). To accomplish this ideal, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge destroyed not only the lives but also the many cultures that Cambodians held as important to their identity, successfully crushing individualism within Cambodia as they had planned and causing mass assimilation.

Finally, despite proclaiming communism as the state ideology, the Khmer Rouge did not take care to ensure the well-being of Cambodians, including the Khmer people. Instead, the regime purposefully

forced the Cambodians into poorer conditions for the sake of their socio-economic ideals. When they first took over, Khmer Rouge soldiers forced all city dwellers to evacuate the city and move into the villages of the countryside (Powers 103), immediately displacing them from their homes and forcing them into impoverished rural communities. Here, Cambodians received not the support of the state, but rather the burden of harsh labour and severe neglect on the government's behalf. Forced to work in the rice fields, workers were given very little to eat and were left to find their own food, while Khmer Rouge soldiers, on the other hand, were well-fed by the regime (Watkins). According to scholar Gregory H. Stanton, approximately one million Cambodians died from starvation or being overworked to death by the Khmer Rouge soldiers (Hay 58). This means that the lives of millions of individual Cambodians were reduced to essentially slave labour and scraps for food, including the Khmer people themselves whom Pol Pot had supposedly cared a great deal for. Living off of only one meal a day, children often went to bed unable to sleep due to the hunger and pain of their empty stomachs (Powers 109). Rice that was farmed by the workers' hard effort was shipped off to the capital Phnom Penh (where Khmer Rouge officials now resided) where it was stored by the regime (Watkins). Much of the rice was exported by the Khmer Rouge to the rest of the world as part of their economic plans to sustain the country (Watkins). Despite the obvious fact that Cambodians were clearly starving, the regime did nothing to accommodate workers losses from when the crops failed, leaving them to perish as 'sacrifices' for the economic goals of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge (Watkins). Cambodians also suffered from poor sanitary conditions (Watkins) which lead to the spread of diseases which, like the hunger, was left ignored and untreated by the Khmer Rouge (Hay 103). In fact, disease spread so fast in the work camps and fields that, by 1976, already eighty percent of Cambodians had come down with cases of Malaria (Sonneborn 42). Yet even still, Pol Pot claimed no responsibility for the suffering of his neglected

people (Most Evil Men). At this point it becomes most obvious that the Khmer Rouge had next to no empathy for any of the Cambodians, for if they did care, surely they would have done something to stop the mass disease and starvation. After putting the Cambodians through genocide and forced cultural assimilation, even Pol Pot's ideal workers whom he had deemed 'base people' were mishandled and abused by the Khmer Rouge by being denied proper food, rest and medical treatment and instead being left to endlessly work and suffer.

Whether you can call them communist or not, one thing is absolutely certain: the Khmer Rouge was a cold-blooded regime. Pol Pot and his gang, the Khmer Rouge, had an undoubtable disregard for the Cambodian people; a disregard for the value of their lives, their culture and their well-being. They did not 'fail' to improve the lives of the Cambodian people, but rather they made their lives outright worse and left permanent scars on their nation's history. Pol Pot just might be the single most cruel, unfeeling and sociopathic dictator of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the harsh social changes he and the Khmer Rouge imposed onto his fellow Cambodians were nothing short of crimes against humanity.

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