

Left-Wing Monster: Pol Pot
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This is the second article in a series, the first of which featured Humberto Fontova's profile of Fidel Casto. "Leftwing Monsters" is a feature of www.discoverthenetworks.org where the entire series will be archived.

Pol Pot was the leader of the Khmer Rouge, the Communist Party that ruled Cambodia from 1976-1979. "Khmer Rouge" (or Khmer Reds) was the French rendering of the organization's official name: the "Communist Party of Cambodia," later the "Party of Democratic Kampuchea" and also the "Communist Party of Kampuchea," or CPK. (Kampuchea is the local name for Cambodia.)

Pol Pot was born Saloth Sar in what is now the province of Kompong Thong, Cambodia in 1925. He came from a prosperous farming family that in 1931 moved to the capital, Phnom Penh, where the young Pol Pot learned some of the rudiments of Buddhism and was subsequently educated in a series of French language schools.[1] In 1946 he joined Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party and three years later was awarded a scholarship to study radio engineering in Paris.[2]

While in Paris, Pol Pot joined with other Cambodian students to create the Paris Student Group, forerunner to the Khmer Rouge. He also authored the pamphlet *Monarchy or Democracy*, in which he openly challenged the legitimacy of Prince Norodom Sihanouk's Cambodian government and pledged to someday institute a democracy "pure as a diamond." [3] In 1952 he joined the French Communist Party, a move that would prove to have a profound influence on the rest of his political life. Nearly all of his fellow Khmer Rouge leaders of the 1970s were educated in France and were members of the French Communist Party. [4] The professed goal of these leaders was to bring "real socialism" to Cambodia. [5] Vietnamese Communism exerted an even greater influence on the Khmer Rouge during its formative years; the CPK was originally part of the Vietnamese-controlled Indochinese Communist Party. [6]

Pol Pot returned to Cambodia in 1953 after his scholarship was revoked (due to his poor academic performance) and joined Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, the antecedent of the Viet Cong. He also became a member of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party. For the next several years, he earned a living by teaching geography and history at a private school while organizing resistance to Sihanouk, who was the King of Cambodia from

1941-1955, its Prime Minister from 1955-1960, and the country's head of state (with the title "Prince" thereafter).[7] In 1960, the Paris Student Group took control of the Kampuchean (or Khmer) People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), which began to break away from its Vietnamese connections and was renamed the Workers' Party of Kampuchea (WPK). Within three years, Pol Pot had been named the WPK's secretary-general.[8]

During 1965-1967, Pol Pot traveled extensively in North Vietnam and China. He entreated North Vietnam to provide him with military assistance to overthrow the Sihanouk regime but was turned down.[9] Officially Cambodia was "neutral" in the Indo-china conflict; this suited North Vietnam, which used Cambodia's position to advance its own aggression. The North Vietnamese created a "National Liberation Front (Vietcong) in South Vietnam to advance their aggressive designs on the South. In 1968 the Vietcong were wiped out during the Tet Offensive. But the North Vietnamese kept the fiction alive by continuing their infiltration of North Vietnamese army regulars into the South and pretending that they were revolutionary guerrillas representing the population of South Vietnam. The infiltration route was called the "Ho Chi Minh Trail," and part of it ran through "neutral" Cambodia. When the United States attempted to interdict this line of support, the international Communist community, backed by the Western "anti-war" movement, protested that the United States was "violating" Cambodia's neutrality. Pol Pot's strategy of Communist revolution in Cambodia immediately would have undermined this scheme.

Pol Pot's trip to China, then in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, inspired him to envision an agrarian Communist utopia where the very lifeblood of his nation could be poured entirely into agricultural projects of the grandest scale; this vision would prove to be the inspiration for the notorious "killing fields," to be described below, where many hundreds of thousands of slave laborers perished under the most oppressive conditions imaginable.

By 1968 the Khmer Rouge had gained the support of China and was in control of the Cambodian border with Vietnam. In 1969 the U.S., in an effort to prevent the Vietcong from withdrawing to bases across the Cambodian border, began a campaign of bombing raids against Cambodian targets; these raids, however, failed to achieve their desired ends.

In a 1970 coup, Sihanouk's government was overthrown and the Minister of Defense, Lon Nol, took control of the country. At this point Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, with the assistance of China and North Vietnam, initiated a guerrilla war that would persist for five years.

In November 1970, President Nixon asked the U.S. Congress to provide the Cambodian government of Lon Nol with \$155 million in aid, of which \$85

million would be earmarked for military assistance to help prevent the Khmer Rouge from taking power. American leftists, however, were adamantly against this proposal. One opponent of the policy was Anthony Lake, who in 1969 had become an aide to then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, but who - because he opposed Nixon's bombing raids (designed to support Lon Nol against Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge) in Cambodia - soon parted political company with Kissinger and the President. By 1972 Lake was an activist in the McGovern presidential campaign, whose platform was founded upon the axiom that the military conflicts of Southeast Asia were rooted in the "arrogance of American power" rather than in Communist aggression.[10]

During this period, many American leftists openly supported a Communist takeover in Southeast Asia. Among the most notable spokespeople of this position was the popular actress Jane Fonda and her husband Tom Hayden, whose public comments were unambiguous in their expressions of contempt for America and sympathy for the Communists. On November 21, 1970, Fonda told a large University of Michigan audience, "If you understood what Communism was, you would hope, you would pray on your knees that we would some day become Communist." [11] At Duke University, she elaborated, "I, a socialist, think that we should strive toward a socialist society, all the way to Communism." The dual villains of Southeast Asian conflicts were, in her view, "U.S. imperialism" and "a white man's racist aggression." [12]

Fonda's husband Tom Hayden in the early 1970s organized an "Indo-China Peace Campaign" (IPC) to lobby Congress to cut off American aid to the regimes in Cambodia and South Vietnam. Assisted by radical Democrats in Congress like Ron Dellums, Bella Abzug, Robert Drinan, Elizabeth Holtzman, Pat Schroeder, and David Bonior, Hayden established a caucus in the Capitol, where he lectured and agitated for an end to anti-Communist efforts in South Vietnam and Cambodia. The IPC worked tirelessly to help the North Vietnamese Communists and the Khmer Rouge emerge victorious. Hayden and Fonda took a camera crew to Hanoi and to the "liberated" regions of South Vietnam to make a propaganda film called Introduction to the Enemy, whose purpose was to persuade viewers that the Communists were going to create an ideal new society based on justice and equality, when the Americans left. [13]

With a nation deeply divided thanks to the pressures of the anti-war left and a Democratic Party that had turned its back on the war, Nixon was persuaded that the United States could neither win the war nor maintain its armies in the battle. In 1973 he signed a truce with North Vietnam that led to the withdrawal of all American forces. Nixon hoped the agreement would preserve the governments of Cambodia and South Vietnam. But the North Vietnamese had no intention of observing the truce; neither did Pol Pot.

Months later the American "anti-war" left and its allies in the Democratic Party led by Senator Edward Kennedy brought down the Nixon presidency in the Watergate affair. Hayden and his likeminded supporters gained immense political leverage from Nixon's resignation in August 1974. That year's midterm elections, which were held just three months after the resignation, resulted in catastrophic losses for Republicans and ushered in a new group of Democratic legislators determined to undo the Nixon peace policy and surrender Cambodia and Vietnam to the enemy.

They succeeded all too well. The first act of the newly elected Democrat Congress voted to cut off funding for South Vietnam and Cambodia's Lon Nol government in January 1975. When Republicans had warned earlier that a Pol Pot victory would inevitably result in a "bloodbath" in Cambodia, anti-war Democrats like John Kerry and Anthony Lake brushed their concerns aside and accused them of trying to stir up "anti-Communist hysteria." [14] Turning a blind eye to all portents of the horrors that a Pol Pot regime was likely to bring, American leftists viewed him instead as an aspiring liberator of the Cambodian people. They thus repeated the same "mistake" they had made in regard to Lenin, Stalin and Mao, each of whose regimes were marked by targeted extermination campaigns implemented by leaders who saw themselves as infallible, who perceived the presence of political enemies everywhere, and who tolerated no dissent.

In March 1975 Anthony Lake, who was one of the Democrats' chief foreign policy experts (later to become Bill Clinton's National Security Adviser) wrote a Washington Post column titled "At Stake in Cambodia: Extending Aid [to Lon Nol] Will Only Prolong the Killing." Lake reaffirmed the left's position that the Khmer Rouge was not a totalitarian force, but rather a coalition of "many Khmer nationalists, Communist and non-Communist," whose only ambition was to gain independence for the Cambodian people. He warned that if America alienated Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge followers, it would only "push them further into the arms of their Communist supporters."

The Khmer Rouge, Lake conceded, "are indeed supported by Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow. But to the extent we know much about them, they include many Khmer nationalists, Communist and non-Communist. Once they gain power, we must hope for as much nationalism on their part as possible." [15] Calling for "an immediate, peaceful turning over of power" to the Khmer Rouge, Lake backed the American cutoff of support for non-Communists, who he believed should be barred from playing any role in Cambodia's new government. "Why should the Khmer Rouge agree to share power when they can expect to seize it?" he asked rhetorically. [16] (Notably, Lake's poor judgment cost him nothing politically. President Jimmy Carter appointed him to be the State Department's Policy Planning Director, and many years later President Bill Clinton named him to be his National Security Advisor.)

After U.S. funding was cut, the regimes of South Vietnam and Cambodia were quickly overrun by the Communists. The South Vietnamese capital of Saigon surrendered on April 30, 1975 and was immediately renamed Ho Chi Minh City, as the Communists proceeded to execute tens of thousands of Vietnamese while more than a million fled the country. Lon Nol's government in Cambodia fell thirteen days earlier, on April 17, when Khmer Rouge forces took control of Phnom Penh. The atrocities of Pol Pot commenced immediately thereafter.

>From the moment it ascended to power, the Khmer Rouge characterized its newfound preeminence as a turning point in human history. "The Khmer revolution has no predecessors," said the party leaders. "What we are trying to bring about has never been accomplished at any time in history." [17] That objective was the eradication of capitalism and the establishment of a Communist society dedicated to agricultural productivity. Pol Pot was prepared to pay any price to realize his goal; his currency of choice would prove to be the rivers of tears and torrents of blood flowing from the broken spirits and bodies of his own people. The result would be one of the most pitiable chapters of human suffering in the recorded history of mankind.

To garner sympathy and support for their cause, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge depicted Kampuchea (Cambodia) as a nation whose people had been victimized and oppressed by others. The Khmer Rouge portrayed the Cambodian people as unmatched in their innate ability to bring about a pure socialist order; this laudatory portrayal of Cambodians was a remarkable irony in light of the atrocities the Khmer Rouge would soon inflict on those millions of unfortunate souls. "We are making a unique revolution," said the leaders. "Is there any other country that would dare abolish money and markets the way we have? . . . We are a good model for the whole world." [18]

Given their vision of their revolutionary rise to power as a watershed event in human history - the dawn of a new era - the Khmer Rouge strove to eviscerate all records and memories of the "ancient regime" that had preceded the revolution and everything that contradicted its vision for a new world order. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were inspired by Mao's infamous adage, "It is on a blank page that the most beautiful poems are written." [19] In accordance with that premise, they set about the task of consigning to flames the Cambodian people's identity papers, documents and certificates, and photograph albums. [20] Thus all records of those pre-revolutionary days - when the nation was, in the view of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, mired in ignorance and class oppression - literally went up in smoke. The faces of deceased loved ones that had once peered at their survivors from the pages of photo albums were no more. The Khmer Rouge had no patience for the human emotions that made such keepsakes valuable to those who held them.

The task of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge was to do to the spirits of their countrymen precisely what they had done to their papers and portraits - obliterate them, because emotions, like faded photographs, were of no use in furthering the cause of the revolution. The leaders systematically worked to dehumanize an entire population, separating all Cambodians from any sense of attachment to their own histories, identities, and loving relationships. There was no room in the soil of Pol Pot's utopia for individual personalities, desires, or dreams to take root. Henceforth, every waking hour of every living person was to be devoted entirely to the service of the dictator's Communist state.

A revolution of such self-declared magnitude merited, in the eyes of Pol Pot and his leading aides, the special honor of being identified as the dawn of a new era, the starting point from which all subsequent passage of time would be measured. Thus - like the Jacobins of the French Revolution - Pol Pot reordered the calendar itself, designating the year 1975 as year "Zero," a hugely symbolic act embodying the idea that the world was going to be created anew.[21]

Within hours after capturing Phnom Penh, which was home to some 2 to 3 million people, the Khmer Rouge forced the city's entire population to relocate to various regions of the countryside and begin working on massive agricultural projects as slave laborers who were compelled to devote, unquestioningly, every last drop of their sweat and blood to the communal creation of Pol Pot's agrarian utopia. In addition to these people, several hundred thousand residents of other cities were also forced to relocate and become agricultural slave laborers in service of the Khmer Rouge. All told, approximately half of Cambodia's population was uprooted all at once.[22] >From the moment the decree requiring their relocation was issued, the city-dwellers were given just 24 hours to leave their homes.[23] Bustling urban areas were transformed overnight into eerie, deserted ghost towns. If anyone asked why they were being forced to suddenly uproot their lives and families, Khmer Rouge authorities told them the lie that the United States was planning to bomb their city.[24]

The rationale behind these forced relocations was the Khmer Rouge's concept of the Communist ideal: a nation of simple, uneducated, hardworking peasants toiling for the realization of their infallible master's noble dream. Moving people out of the cities served the purpose of separating them from potentially "contaminating" outside influences that might cause them to question their loyalty to Pol Pot - things such as books, newspapers, television, and radio. The Khmer Rouge viewed city-dwellers as the detestable antithesis of the peasant ideal; because they had chosen city life for themselves, they were presupposed to have an allegiance to capitalism, which Pol Pot deemed the root of all evil.[25] Thus by a single

sweeping decree, the Cambodian dictator transformed them, en masse, into an army of agricultural slave laborers serving his Communist state.

In many thousands of cases, the forced relocations caused family members to be separated from one another when they were assigned to work in different districts or regions of the country. As the days and weeks thereafter passed, these people became increasingly aware that they would likely never see their loved ones again. The Khmer Rouge forbade, on pain of death, any clandestine correspondence between family members in separate work camps; the human feelings of the slaves mattered nothing to Pol Pot or the Khmer Rouge; the only concern was to squeeze out of them as much labor as possible, until they died of exhaustion or illness. And because in death they could no longer be of service to the revolution, their surviving loved ones were not permitted to grieve their passing; tears and expressions of mourning were strictly forbidden, again on pain of death.[26] Every vestige of humanity and sentiment was to be crushed out of existence; Cambodians had only two options: turn their hearts to stone, or die at the executioner's hand.

In this sorrowful atmosphere, hopelessness, depression, and spiritual surrender quickly became the norm for Cambodia's people, whose families, freedoms, values, and aspirations had been wrenched from them overnight without warning or negotiation. As is told in *The Black Book of Communism*, "Scenes of death and despair abounded." [27] The early days of the Khmer Rouge regime were marked by an enormous spike in the incidence of suicides, especially by those who had been separated from their families; the elderly, who feared that they had become burdens and liabilities to their relatives; and those people who had previously been accustomed to living in relative comfort.[28]

The Khmer Rouge had a purpose for separating children from their parents; the goal was to train the youngsters, from the earliest age, not to develop their own personalities and talents but rather to blindly follow orders - not the orders of their parents, but the orders of the government. The objective was to turn them into heartless beasts who saw nothing sacred or worthy of honor in any human being, including themselves. Such training was designed to groom them as the Khmer Rouge soldiers of the future. As one survivor describes, "They [children] were taken very young, and the only thing they were taught was discipline. They learned to obey orders, without asking for any justification. They didn't have any belief in religion or in tradition, only in the orders of the Khmer Rouge. That's why they killed their own people, including babies, the way you kill a mosquito." [29]

In some cases family members who had been separated did eventually see each other again, but weeks or months would generally intervene between such contacts, leaving them always in a state of fear, longing, and worry over

the condition of their loved ones. These emotions were exacerbated by the fact that Pol Pot suspended all postal service in the country; consequently, it often happened that people did not learn of the deaths of their loved ones until many months after those deaths had occurred.[30]

In those instances where families did manage to stay together, the Khmer Rouge did its best to sabotage the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters. They coerced children to track the political views of their parents and to report any deviations from official Party doctrine "for their own good." [31] This was yet another way in which the Khmer Rouge turned even the most loving human bonds into sick admixtures of suspicion, fear, and betrayal. Moreover, the Khmer Rouge placed severe restrictions on sexuality (intercourse was a crime punishable by death for workers in the labor camps) and marriage (as innumerable couples were split apart by being assigned to separate camps). These restrictions, combined with the malnutrition and disease that characterized daily life in Pol Pot's Cambodia, resulted in a 65 percent decline in the country's birth rate.[32]

The population relocations were fraught with peril, in many cases requiring weeks of walking with insufficient food and water and no access to medical assistance. Many people died en route to their appointed work stations. The infirmed were simply permitted to die unattended and uncomforted; they were considered "useless mouths" that could only consume but could not produce, and thus their deaths were welcomed by the Khmer Rouge.[33] And as was noted previously, the Khmer Rouge permitted no displays of grief or sadness - even for the death of a parent or a child. The leaders of the revolution considered the death of the weak or the ill to be something positive, a type of Darwinian natural selection that weeded out those who were incapable of contributing to the building of Pol Pot's utopia.

When the uprooted city people arrived en masse in the rural villages, village life was thrown into turmoil and chaos. Private property was abolished, and all were forced to live on communal farms. Massive discontent prevailed. Rather than attempt to diminish hostilities, however, the Khmer Rouge instead tried to incite class hatred between the former city dwellers (referred to as the "New People" in the villages) and the country folk. To promote such antipathy, the Khmer Rouge depicted the villagers as the "patriotic proletariat" whose turf was being overrun by "lackeys of the capitalist imperialists." [34] To further stoke the flames of hate, Pol Pot instituted an apartheid system that obliged the New People and the villagers to live in two separate parts of town; nor were they permitted to speak to one another or interact in any way. An openly discriminatory legal system was established, wherein only the rural folk had any rights at all.[35]

The inter-group animosity that the Khmer Rouge encouraged was part and parcel of a larger political strategy. By keeping alive high levels of contempt between the two populations, Pol Pot could rest assured that no spontaneous, unified revolts against his authority would ever develop.[36] Frequently the New People, who had been stripped of all their former possessions, were offered an opportunity to "return to their native village" or to work in a cooperative where conditions were easier. Many jumped at such chances, only to discover, to their horror, that the offer was nothing more than a trap designed to identify those people whose concern for their own individual well-being had not yet been destroyed, and who were thus in need of "re-education" by means of still greater suffering and deprivation. As Pin Yathay, the victim of one such ordeal, explains: "This [offer of return to their native village] was really nothing more than a ploy to weed out people with individualist tendencies . . . Anyone who fell into the trap showed that he had not yet got rid of his old-fashioned tendencies and needed to go thru a more severe regime of retraining in a village where conditions were even worse." [37]

The conditions in Cambodia's overcrowded "re-education" centers were horrific: inmates received miniscule food rations and had no access to medical care, wash water, or toilets. Their ankles were chained to an iron bar fixed to the floor, and their elbows were tied behind their backs. The average life expectancy in such places was about three months.[38] Notwithstanding these horrors, Pol Pot boasted that his country was entirely without a single officially designated "prison." "We don't have prisons," he explained, "and we don't even use the word 'prison.' Bad elements in our society are simply given productive tasks to do." [39]

Pol Pot and his fellow Khmer Rouge leaders spoke passionately of the blissful future that presumably lay just ahead for Cambodia's people. In August 1976 Pol Pot unveiled the roadmap by which he hoped to arrive at his utopia - his Four Year Plan whose objective was to dramatically increase agricultural production and thereby raise capital, through exports, for the further cultivation of his dream. The short-term goal was the industrialization of agriculture and the development of diversified light industry, to be followed shortly thereafter by the development of heavy industry.[40] All this would be accomplished by the toil of Pol Pot's vast network of slaves. Giving motivational talks to the very people he had turned into destitute, dispirited creatures, Pol Pot said in a long 1977 speech, "Because we are the race that built Angkor [the capital of the ancient Khmer empire], we can do anything." [41]

The specifics of the Four-Year Plan called for the tripling of Cambodia's rice production (without any improvement in agricultural equipment or methods). The people were put to work on the daunting task of tripling the surface area of the rice fields in the country's northwest, a project that

involved clearing vast tracts of land and massive irrigation projects. Pol Pot's goal was to have two and eventually three harvests per year.[42] The average workday for his slaves was 11 to 12 hours, but sometimes went as long as 19 hours. In some places workers were given no days of rest; every day was a workday; in other places, one day in ten was a day of rest - but that day was filled with long, mandatory indoctrination meetings the workers were obliged to attend.[43]

One survivor of Pol Pot's regime recalls life in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge: "[T]here were no prisons, no courts, no universities, no schools, no money, no jobs, no books, no sports, no pastimes . . . There was no spare moment in the twenty-four-hour day. Daily life was divided up as follows: twelve hours for physical labor, two hours for eating, three hours for rest and education, and seven hours for sleep. We all lived in an enormous concentration camp. There was no justice. The Angkar [Angkar Padevat, or Revolutionary Organization, the semisecret cover for the CPK] regulated every moment of our lives. . . The Khmer Rouge . . . would compare people to cattle: 'Watch this ox as it pulls the plow. It eats when it is ordered to eat. If you let it graze in the field, it will eat anything. If you put it into another field where there isn't enough grass, it will graze uncomplainingly. It is not free, and it is constantly being watched. And when you tell it to pull the plow, it pulls. It never thinks about its wife or children.'"[44]

In short, people were turned into beasts of burden; the idea that human life had any special value distinguishing it from that of a goat or a spider was dismissed as a sentimental absurdity. "Losing you is not a loss," went one popular adage, "and keeping you is no specific gain." [45] People were forced to repress their personalities entirely; their individual character traits were deemed inconsequential. Their only duty was to blindly obey the authority of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. In a manner reminiscent of Stalinist Russia, people were forced to attend long rallies during which they were obliged to look alert, shout praise or disapproval on demand, and voice public criticism of themselves or others.[46]

All traces of human creativity, ingenuity, and individualism utterly vanished from the country. Education, freedom of movement, trade, medicine, religion, and writing disappeared. Strict dress codes were put in place, requiring everyone to wear black, long-sleeved shirts buttoned up to the neck. The range of acceptable public behaviors became exceedingly narrow: public displays of affection were outlawed, as were arguments, insults, complaints, and tears.[47] People were drilled to become automatons bereft of all emotion; such creatures, of course, would be well suited to obey orders - even those requiring them to crush another man's skull.

The inhabitants of Pol Pot's Cambodia were further demoralized by the hunger from which they constantly suffered. Since the 1920s, Cambodia had regularly exported hundreds of thousands of tons of rice each year while simultaneously feeding its own population. But after the collective canteens of Pol Pot became the norm in 1976, the average Cambodian's daily diet consisted of only thin rice soup containing about four teaspoons of rice. To supplement these meager rations, people foraged for anything they might be able to swallow: snails, frogs, rats, crabs, lizards, snakes, red ants, spiders, mushrooms, and roots. Some were reduced to stealing food from the troughs of farm pigs. In many cases, these desperate, starving wretches had no choice but to steal from one another.[48]

Dehumanized by this miserable existence, the Cambodian people underwent a profound loss of moral values. Cheating, stealing, and lying became survival mechanisms and drastically altered the character of Cambodian culture.[49] Barbaric practices like cannibalism became commonplace. Cambodians lost entirely their traditional Buddhist compassion.[50] The Black Book of Communism recounts an incident where one individual demonstrated empathy for another who was suffering greatly. He was harshly reproved by a Khmer Rouge soldier, who told him: "You don't have a duty to help these people. On the contrary, that proves you still have pity and feelings of friendship. You must renounce such sentiments and wipe all individualism from your mind." [51]

The people's hunger served the political ends of Pol Pot; the less they ate, the more their bodies wasted away; this in turn diminished the amount of food their bodies could store, thereby diminishing the possibility that they might try to run away.[52] Still, many did try to escape. So profound was their despair, that tens of thousands of refugees braved terrible dangers, often wandering for weeks through deep and perilous jungles in search of freedom, knowing that if they were captured they would be instantly put to death.[53]

In this land of want and starvation, Pol Pot presented his grand agricultural schemes as precisely what would ultimately lift the people out of their misery. But it was not to be. In practice, Pol Pot's agricultural projects proved to be poorly planned, inadequately coordinated, and in many cases colossal failures. One reason for this was the Khmer Rouge's intransigent rejection of technology and technicians. The party's leaders, convinced of their own omniscience, generally dismissed the notion that they needed anyone to advise them in the science of building dikes, dams, and canals.[54] "To build dams," said the Khmer Rouge, "all you need is political education." [55] With this mindset, the leaders dictated unchangeable - and in many cases nonsensical - orders, resulting in the construction of inadequate dams and canals that were washed away by floods which sometimes engulfed hundreds of workers at a time. Other projects

resulted in water flowing in the wrong direction or ponds silting up. Hydraulic engineers in the workforce who could foresee these disasters were obligated to remain silent, lest their warnings be perceived as evidence that they were questioning the authority and wisdom of the Angkar;[56] this would only gain them a round of barbaric torture, or possibly execution.

Notwithstanding the many setbacks and tragedies, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge stubbornly refused to acknowledge any need for education or specialized knowledge to guide their development projects. Because life was so cheap in their eyes, they were quite willing to squander the toil, the health, and even the lives of millions of people whom they considered utterly expendable, no more intrinsically valuable than oxen. "We don't need the technology of the capitalists," said one Khmer Rouge leader defiantly. ". . . Under our new system, we don't need to send our children to school. Our school is the farm. We will write by plowing. We don't need to give examinations or award certificates. Knowing how to farm and how to dig canals - those are our certificates. We don't need doctors any more. They are not necessary. If someone needs to have their intestines removed, I will do it [he made the motion of carving an imaginary knife against his stomach]. We don't need any of the capitalist professions! We don't need doctors or engineers! We don't need professors telling us what to do. They were all corrupted. We just need people to work hard on the farm!"[57]

There were also tragic consequences resulting from the massive, forced population movements of the Cambodian people to regions where they were put to work on Pol Pot's land-clearing and irrigation projects. With so many people displaced from their homes, fully 80 percent of Cambodia's already-existing farmland became depopulated and went untended. Meanwhile, starving, underfed workers struggled to be productive on the projects they had been assigned. As one eyewitness describes: "The spectacle was frightening: indescribable human misery, total disorganization, and appalling waste."[58]

As Cambodian life and culture collapsed under the weight of Pol Pot's disastrous policies, a key tactic of the Khmer Rouge was to keep people ignorant of all ideas contrary to its own dogmas. Consequently, education was all but eliminated throughout the country. In those locales where schooling still existed, it amounted to nothing more than an hour per day devoted to teaching revolutionary songs to young children (ages 5 to 9); the instructors were frequently barely literate themselves.[59] Literacy was immaterial to the Khmer Rouge; in fact, it was seen as something negative. Pol Pot and his henchmen preferred to lord over a population of simple-minded folk who had never been taught to question anything; who had never been exposed to ideas about freedom or human dignity. The only knowledge the Khmer Rouge countenanced was of a practical, rather than a

scholarly or philosophical, nature: "[O]ur children in the rural zones . . . know a calm cow from a nervous one. They can stand both ways on a buffalo. They are masters of the herd. . . . They know all the different varieties of rice like the back of their hands. . ."[60]

Foreign influences in general were cast out of the country by the Khmer Rouge. All publications containing "imperialist writing" - French or English - were destroyed. Capitalism was vilified as an evil system whose every last vestige needed to be obliterated. "No more capitalistic books now," was a popular slogan spoken by Khmer Rouge soldiers to Cambodian children. ". . . Why do you have foreign books? Are you CIA? No more foreign books under the Angkar."[61]

Virtually all Cambodians who had received even moderate levels of formal education prior to the revolution, such as civil servants and intellectuals, were eliminated in stages in a series of purges. Each successive purge called for the slaughter of those further down the hierarchy.[62] Among those specifically targeted were people who wore eyeglasses, which were symbols of reading and learning; Pol Pot perceived such individuals as threats because they were carriers of the ideas of the pre-revolutionary culture. As one Khmer Rouge leader said in 1975, "We have some people among us who still wear eyeglasses. And why do they use eyeglasses? Can't they see me? If I move to slap your face and you flinch, then you see well enough. People wear them to be handsome in the capitalist style. They wear them to be vain. We don't need people like that any more."[63] In time, educated people were virtually nonexistent in Cambodia.

While Pol Pot was carrying out his genocide, numerous American leftists functioned as his apologists. Notable among these was the American-hating MIT professor Noam Chomsky, who viewed Pol Pot as a revolutionary hero. When news of the "killing fields" became increasingly publicized, Chomsky's faith in Pol Pot could not be shaken. He initially tried to minimize the magnitude of Pol Pot's atrocities (saying that he had killed only "a few thousand people at most").[64] He suggested that the forced expulsion of the population from Phnom Penh was most likely necessitated by the failure of the 1976 rice crop. Wrote Chomsky, "the evacuation of Phnom Penh, widely denounced at the time and since for its undoubted brutality, may actually have saved many lives."[65] In a 1977 article in *The Nation*, Chomsky attacked those witnesses and writers who were shedding ever-brighter rays of light on Pol Pot's holocaust; he accused them of trying to spread anti-communist propaganda. In 1980, when it was indisputable that a huge proportion of Cambodia's population had died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, Chomsky again blamed an unfortunate failure of the rice crop rather than systematic genocide. He also quibbled about the number of dead, saying that most estimates were inflated, and that the actual number could not have exceeded a million. Finally, he concluded that whatever had in fact

occurred in Cambodia, the U.S. was to blame.[66]

Members of the middle class were also targets of Pol Pot's purges, as were all people with any degree of social standing. In addition, Pol Pot ordered the execution of all members of the Lon Nol government (including thousands of politicians and bureaucrats alike), and all those suspected of being loyal to the Sihanouk regime. In these executions, which were generally preceded by torture, there were never any trials or clear charges brought. The aim was to crush anyone with an independent spirit, with an educated mind, with an ethical or religious value system, and with any quality that might threaten Pol Pot's preeminence. Pol Pot's paranoia about suspected enemies was reminiscent of Stalin's. All that was required for an arrest was three allegations that a suspect was a "CIA agent." [67] To satisfy their bosses, interrogators extorted confessions from such people by any means necessary; in one particular district, fully 40,000 of the 70,000 inhabitants were put to death as "traitors collaborating with the CIA." [68]

The Khmer Rouge also exterminated large proportions of various ethnic minority groups, including about half of the 400,000 Chinese, and an even higher percentage of the Vietnamese who had stayed in Cambodia after 1975 (lowball estimates of the death rates for both groups hover around 37 to 38 percent). [69] After mid-1976, all Vietnamese people in Cambodia were forbidden to leave the country. An April 1977 directive required that all Vietnamese be arrested and turned over to security forces. Also to be arrested were their friends and anyone who spoke Vietnamese. [70]

Among the particularly notable victims of Pol Pot's wrath were the Cham, the largest indigenous minority in Cambodia, who numbered some 250,000 in 1970. They were Muslims who made their living mostly as farmers and fishermen. In 1975 the Khmer Rouge, demanding that the Cham take new names that resembled Khmer names, decreed: "The Cham mentality is abolished forthwith. Anyone who does not conform to these orders will be punished accordingly." [71] Thereafter, merely speaking the Cham language was an offense punishable by death. [72] After mid-1978, the Khmer Rouge began systematically exterminating Cham communities. [73] By the end of Pol Pot's regime, 40 to 50 percent of all Cham in Cambodia had perished. [74]

Contemptuous of religion in general, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge targeted people of faith aggressively. During Pol Pot's reign, more than 48 percent of Cambodian Catholics disappeared; [75] the number of monks living in the country dwindled from approximately 60,000 to 1,000. [76] The cathedral in Phnom Penh was razed to the ground. Nor were Catholics the only religious group whose ranks were decimated. Muslim clerics were put to death as well. Mosques were razed or converted into buildings dedicated to other purposes; prayers were banned; and Korans were burned. Muslims were often forced to choose between raising pigs and eating pork [acts forbidden by their

traditions], or being killed.[77]

Notably, Pol Pot chose not to cultivate, for his own self-aggrandizement, a cult of personality like that of Kim Il Sung in North Korea. Instead - knowing that phantoms in the dark may inspire greater fear than those revealed in the light of day - he deliberately sought to terrorize the population by making himself mysterious. His fearsome presence loomed everywhere, but few had ever seen his face. He never once appeared in public until after the 1976 "elections." He authorized no official portraits or statues made in his likeness; he authorized no official biography; he published no compendium of his thoughts or philosophy; and few photos of him existed anywhere.[78] To further create an atmosphere of terror, Pol Pot ordered landmines to be set around the countryside; these were, like him, invisible but deadly. Pol Pot referred to landmines as his "perfect soldiers" who discouraged attempted escapes.[79]

Under Pol Pot, Cambodians' lives always hung by the barest thread; people were at all times just a single minor mistake or accident away from the torture chamber or the executioner's rifle. Between 1975 and 1979, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians were executed by Khmer Rouge henchman. A popular Khmer Rouge slogan was, "All we need to build our country is a million good revolutionaries. No more than that. And we would rather kill ten friends than allow one enemy to live." [80] Among the offenses punishable by death in the work camps were: not working hard enough, wearing jewelry, stealing food, drinking an alcoholic beverage, making a secret visit to a family member in another camp, having sexual relations, grieving over dead relatives, losing or striking a cow, failing to control an ox, plowing a crooked furrow, failing to complete one's assigned work, making a negative comment or a joke about the regime, complaining about conditions, saying that one was hungry, taking part in religious trance ceremonies, and expressing religious beliefs generally. Even exhibiting emotional closeness to one's family members was a serious transgression; though the first offense was generally not grounds for execution, the second often was.[81]

But specified offenses were by no means prerequisites for execution. Khmer Rouge guards murdered many Cambodians merely because they could. In some cases, people were killed to make fertilizer; their corpses were buried in mass graves situated near crop fields.[82]

Records from the Tuol Sleng interrogation center in Phnom Penh indicate that from 1975-1978, some 14,499 Cambodians were tortured and executed there; only seven survived the interrogation process.[83] At least twenty other such camps operated in the country during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. In each of the twenty provinces that have been investigated to date, more than 1,000 mass burial grounds have been found.[84]

The most popular method by which the Khmer Rouge put people to death was by blows to the head, which scholars say accounted for about 53 percent of all executions; gunshots accounted for another 29 percent; 6 percent were hanged or asphyxiated; and 5 percent had their throats slit. Another 2 percent were executed publicly; their deaths were generally extremely gruesome so as to serve as a warning to onlookers; they were often buried up to their chest in a ditch filled with firebrands, or their heads were doused with gasoline and set ablaze.[85]

But even such awful forms of execution did not mark the end of Pol Pot's complete control over the fate of every Cambodian. His assault on his countrymen's traditional values followed them even beyond the grave. In Cambodia, longstanding custom called for the cremation of the remains of the dead; survivors were comforted by their possession of even a few ashes of their departed loved ones. But Pol Pot refused to show respect for such "primitive" practices. He banned cremations and instituted, in their stead, simple, unceremonious burials. In Cambodians' traditional belief system, consigning the body of a loved one in the earth without traditional rites was not only disrespectful, but also compromised the possibility of the dead person's reincarnation.[86] Such things counted for nothing in Pol Pot's Cambodia, where the dead were considered useless cowards who, by dying, had robbed the Angkar of manpower.[87] As a logical extension of this outlook, Pol Pot forbade people to even speak of the dead. The very word "death" became taboo; people were required instead to refer to a dead person as "a body that has disappeared." [88]

The exact extent of the genocide wrought by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge has defied calculation. 1.2 million dead is the low estimate, from U.S. officials; the Vietnamese-sponsored government, the PRK (People's Republic of Kampuchea), claimed 3 million; Amnesty International claims 1.4 million, and the Yale Genocide Project claims that the final tally was 1.7 million. Whatever the precise figure may be, it is clear that between one-seventh and one-fourth of Cambodia's population was exterminated by Pol Pot.[89]

In 1978 the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and quickly overthrew the Khmer Rouge, causing Pol Pot to flee into Thailand. The following year, a people's tribunal in Phnom Penh sentenced Pol Pot to death for genocide.[90] For the next 18 years, Pol Pot maintained an army on the Thai-Cambodian border; he yielded military command of the Khmer Rouge to his brother-in-law, Ieng Sary, in 1985.

The Vietnamese-backed government was overthrown in 1989. Refusing to recognize the new coalition government that emerged in 1993, Pol Pot continued to order arrests, purges, and murders within the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. His influence was steadily eroding, however. In 1997 Khmer Rouge leader Ta Mok had Pol Pot arrested for a particular series of murders

he had ordered. Pol Pot died in April 1998, shortly after learning that he was to be handed over to the Americans for trial. In an interview given shortly before his death, Pol Pot claimed that he had never intended to kill so many people; that the calamities brought about by his regime were the result of his inexperience in government and his inability to rein in the zealous movement that he had started; and that all his actions had been "[f]or the love of the nation and the people." [91]

Today millions of Cambodians bear deep physical and mental scars from the reign of Pol Pot. A host of social evils - such as violent crime and corruption - plague present-day Cambodia at rates that are exceedingly high for a Southeast Asian country. Cambodian refugees now living abroad are frequently haunted by nightmares and suffer from the highest rate of depression of any Indochinese group. [92]

It should be noted that the atrocities of Pol Pot were not at all unique among Communist revolutions. His extermination campaign had many parallels with those of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, who between them may have killed 100 million people who stood between them and the progressive future. In each case, there was the systematic extermination of the class enemy as they sought to wipe clean the slate of the past and usher in the dawn of the new; in each case there was the creation of vast slave networks and concentration camps; the widespread use of torture; the implementation of crackpot economic theories inspired by Marx, the paranoid perception that enemies of the regime lurked everywhere; the determination to stamp out every last dissident, both real and imagined; the designation of particular classes as being "enemies of the people," unworthy of the most rudimentary human rights; the complete subjugation of the individual; an omnipotent state that sought to control every imaginable aspect of people's lives; and the banishment of all spiritual rites and beliefs, effectively making the dictator the only "deity." In short, the abominations of Pol Pot were not an aberration, but a culmination of the Communist fantasy, a fulfillment of the long, grotesque tradition of the movement for "social justice."

ENDNOTES:

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- [29] Dith Pran, quoted in Sidney schanberg, "The Death and Life of Dith Pran," *New York Times Magazine* (January 20, 1980).
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- [32] Marek Sliwinski, *Le Genocide Khmer Rouge* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), p. 67.
- [33] Stephane Courtois et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 585.
- [34] *Ibid.*, p. 584.
- [35] Stephane Courtois et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, pp. 584-585; Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 93.
- [36] Stephane Courtois et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 585.
- [37] Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 124.
- [38] Stephane Courtois et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, pp. 611-612.
- [39] *Ibid.*, p. 611.
- [40] David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, pp. 191-193 and 197-198.
- [41] *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- [42] Stephane Courtois, et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 599.
- [43] *Ibid.*, p. 599.
- [44] Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 317.
- [45] Stephane Courtois, et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 597.
- [46] *Ibid.*, p. 598.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., p. 602.

[49] Ibid., pp. 603, 605.

[50] Ibid., p. 603.

[51] Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), pp. 242-247, 336.

[52] Stephane Courtois, et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 601.

[53] Ibid., pp. 588, 599. Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 159, 368-413.

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