

**Escaping From a Nightmare:
The Khmer Rouge and Survival Stories from Cambodia**

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High School Western Civilization: Freshmen - Sophomores

[Of all the acts of terror committed in the 20th century few are so neglected as the atrocities in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Most students have a working knowledge of World War II and its associated bloodlettings. Cambodia however is faintly recognized, if at all, only as a footnote to the Vietnam War. Students should study the events that took place in Cambodia during the decade of the 1970's in order to gain a clearer perspective about the universal nature of evil and to enlarge their awareness of the world in general.]

Lesson Objectives:

- 1) Locate Cambodia on a map
- 2) Identify Pol Pot
- 3) Cite reasons for the coming into power of the Khmer Rouge
- 4) Cite examples of refugee experiences

Materials Needed:

- Handout, <http://ask.elibrary.com/printdoc.a...g+quest+to+create+a+rural+Utopia>
- Handouts, excerpts from The Far East Comes Near, eds. Nguyen-Hong-Nhiem, Lucy and Joel Martin Halpern. (University of Massachusetts Press) 1989.

Procedure:

Introductory Activity:

Ask class, "What was the single worst act of brutality of the 20th century?" Field a few answers. Students will probably volunteer things like the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Stalin's regime, or certain wars in general. Then say, "Although these events were certainly tragic, there is something that happened more recently that ranks with them. Can anyone tell me what happened in Cambodia in the 1970's?" Again, field a few responses. Chances are not many students, if any, will have heard of the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot. Continue: "During the Holocaust anywhere between 4 to 6 million Jews and others were killed. From 1975 through 1979 anywhere from between 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians were killed by their own government. Hitler was responsible for the Holocaust. Who was responsible for what happened in Cambodia?" If no one answers correctly, "A man called Pol Pot and his organization called the Khmer Rouge.

“Today we will look at one of the most horrible but little known tragedies of the 20th century. When Americans think of Southeast Asia the first thing that usually pops into their mind is Vietnam and the war we fought there. But after we pulled our troops out of Vietnam something terrifying and unbelievable occurred next door in Cambodia. A group of Cambodians calling themselves the Khmer Rouge came to power and began to kill and torture thousands, eventually millions of their own people in order to create a “perfect society” on Earth. We will learn who the Khmer Rouge were, who they were led by, and we will read some first-hand accounts of life under the Khmer Rouge by Cambodians who escaped to the United States.”

Body:

Part I: Indicate Cambodia’s location on a world map. Stress its proximity to Vietnam. Acquaint students with the location of Phnom Penh.

Part II: Pass out first handout (eLibrary: Pol Pot). Allow students time to read. Afterwards pose questions:

- Where did Pol Pot receive his education? [In France]
- What did he join in 1952? [The French Communist Party]
- What happened in 1970 that allowed Pol Pot an opportunity to seize power? [Sihanouk was overthrown by a coup]
- Which Cambodians did the Khmer Rouge specifically target? [Those with money and the educated]
- Why did tens of thousands of Cambodians starve to death? [The Khmer Rouge hoarded food for themselves.]
- What finally drove the Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge from power? [An invasion from Vietnam]
- Was Pol Pot ever brought to justice? [No. He died in 1998 in his bed]

Assignment:

Pass out handout from The Far East Come Near. Say to class, “Now that you’re familiar with the political background of Pol Pot and his regime, I want you to read some first hand accounts by people who were children at the time of the killings. These Cambodians all eventually fled to the United States. Read them carefully and answer the questions which follow.

Bibliography

<http://ask.elibrary.com/printdoc.a...g+quest+to+create+a+rural+Utopia>

Halpern, Joel Martin and Lucy Nguyen-Hong-Nhiem, eds., The Far East Comes Near, (University of Massachusetts Press) 1989.



TIME 100: Pol Pot Cambodia's ruthless dictator cheated justice, dying before he could answer for the atrocities committed during his unrelenting quest to create a rural Utopia

On April 17, 1998, barely 500 m inside Cambodia from Thailand, a frail, 73-year-old former dictator--known by his nom de guerre, Pol Pot--was cremated under a pile of rubbish and rubber tires. He had died two days earlier in a two-room hut, held prisoner by former colleagues who had accused him of betraying the revolutionary movement he had once led. It was an ignominious end for a man who inscribed a merciless agenda on the psyche of two generations of Cambodians.

Between 1975 and 1979, Pol Pot presided over a communist regime known as Democratic Kampuchea. His harsh, utopian policies, derived in part from Maoist China, drove an estimated 1.5 million Cambodians--or one in five--to their deaths from malnutrition, illness or overwork. At least 200,000 more were executed as enemies of the state. The ratio of deaths to population made the Cambodian revolution the most murderous in a century of revolutions.

There was rough justice in the closing months of Pol Pot's life, when he must have been fearful--as everyone in Democratic Kampuchea had been--that each day might be his last. Pol Pot had emerged on two recent occasions to talk to journalists. He spoke fondly of his young daughter and fretfully about his health. Pressed to acknowledge responsibility for the past, he said, "I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people. Even now, and you can look at me, am I a savage person?" Pol Pot had either evaded the question or missed the point. No one had died because of his villainous appearance. Instead, victims had been sacrificed in a ruthless campaign to refashion Cambodian society. In the 1980s, Pol Pot had told his followers that "mistakes" had been inevitable during his rule because, using a revealing simile, "We were like babies learning to walk."

Pol Pot's own childhood was cosseted and secure. He was born in 1925, when Cambodia was still a protectorate of France. His father was a prosperous landowner, with elite connections. His sister and a female cousin were dancers in the royal ballet in the capital, Phnom Penh, living comfortably under the king's protection. Saloth Sar, as he was called in those days, went to live with them when he was six years old. He attended a series of French-language schools. Only a few hundred other Cambodians enjoyed this privilege. His academic record was lackluster; he earned no high-school diploma. He seems to have been relatively popular without making much of an impression. "His manner was straightforward, pleasant and very polite," a former classmate told me. "He thought a lot but said very little."

In 1949, because of his fluency in French and his political connections, Saloth Sar was given a scholarship to study radio-electricity in France. He lived in Paris for the next three years, neglecting his studies and spending much of his time, he told an interviewer later, reading "progressive books." In 1952 he joined the French Communist Party, drawn by its anti-colonial stance. Soon afterward, because he had failed to pass any examinations, his scholarship was revoked and he went home.

After Cambodia became independent in 1954, Saloth Sar led a double life, teaching in a private school in Phnom Penh while he worked in secret in a small, beleaguered communist movement.

He enjoyed the conspiratorial rituals of underground politics and dreamed of seizing power. By 1963 he was in command of Cambodia's Communist Party. Fearful of the police, he fled the capital and sought refuge with a handful of colleagues at a Vietnamese military base, "Office 100," on the Vietnam-Cambodia border. For the next two years he chafed under humiliating Vietnamese protection.

In 1965 Saloth Sar was summoned to North Vietnam for consultations. Walking north along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, he took two months to reach Hanoi, where he was taken to task for his nationalist agenda. The general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Le Duan, told him to subordinate Cambodia's interests to Vietnam's, to help Vietnam defeat the United States and to postpone armed struggle until the time was ripe.

Although bruised by these attacks, Saloth Sar said nothing to antagonize his patrons. Soon afterward, however, he travelled to China and was warmly welcomed by radical officials. Inspired by the early phases of the Cultural Revolution, Saloth Sar transferred his loyalties to a new set of patrons and a more vibrant revolutionary model. The visit to China was a turning point in his career. Prudently, however, he said nothing to the Vietnamese about his change of heart. Back home, he established his headquarters in a remote, heavily wooded section of the country. For the next four years, with a group of like-minded colleagues, he polished his utopian ideas and nourished his hatreds.

His chance came in 1970 when Cambodia's ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was overthrown in a pro-American coup. The Vietnamese communists swiftly allied themselves with the Khmer Rouge--as Sihanouk had dismissively labeled Pol Pot's group--against the new regime in Phnom Penh. The Vietnamese provided the rag-tag Khmer Rouge with arms and training. When they withdrew in 1972, Pol Pot felt betrayed. But by then, the Phnom Penh army had been badly battered and the Khmer Rouge had become a formidable guerrilla force.

The war ended in April 1975, when the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh. Most of the city's 2 million people, exhausted by years of violence, welcomed the invaders. They saw these silent, heavily armed young men as fellow Khmers, with whom a new society might be built. Their optimism was tragically misplaced. Within days, the Khmer Rouge drove them all into the countryside to become workers in agricultural communes. They also emptied Cambodia's other towns and abolished money, markets, schools, newspapers, religious practices and private property.

The Khmer Rouge spurned anyone with money or education. The revolution derived its energy, they believed, from the empowerment of the rural poor, from their recent victory and from what they thought was the intrinsic superiority of Cambodians to the hated Vietnamese. Pol Pot assumed that the Cambodian revolution would be swifter and more authentic than anything Vietnam could carry out. His Chinese patrons, hostile to Vietnam, agreed. By mobilizing mass resentments, as Mao Zedong had done, Pol Pot inspired tens of thousands of Cambodians, especially teenagers and people in their early 20s, to join him in dismantling Cambodian society and liberating everyone from the past.

The methods he chose were naive, brutal and inept. In 1976 a hastily written Four Year Plan sought to triple the country's agricultural production within a year--without fertilizer, modern tools or material incentives. The plan paid no attention to Cambodian geography or common sense; the nation's farmers were prostrate after five years of civil war. Attempting to meet impossible quotas and frightened of reprisals, Khmer Rouge workers cut back the grain allotted for consumption. Tens of thousands of Cambodians starved to death. Thousands more collapsed from overwork

and the almost total absence throughout the country of medical attention.

Pol Pot refused to accept responsibility for these disasters or to ameliorate rural conditions. Instead, he blamed "hidden enemies, burrowing from within" and set off a wholesale purge of the Communist Party. His paranoia, propping up his self-assurance, knew no bounds. In 1977 he made a state visit to China, which promised him military assistance against Vietnam and moral support for his radical agenda. Sporadic fighting between Cambodia and Vietnam flared up toward the end of the year, and full-scale war between the two countries broke out in 1978. Pol Pot declared that if every Cambodian soldier killed 30 Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge could win the war. He also asked China to send troops to help him. The Chinese refused. Trained as guerrillas, the Khmer Rouge were outmaneuvered and outgunned.

On Christmas Day 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia with more than 100,000 troops. The country cracked open like an egg. Pol Pot fled by helicopter to Thailand; when the invaders entered Phnom Penh on Jan. 7, the city was deserted. The Vietnamese established a puppet government composed largely of former cadres who had fled the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. Several of these men remain in power in Cambodia today.

Aside from brief forays to Bangkok and Beijing for medical treatment, Pol Pot spent the next 18 years in fortified encampments in the forests of Thailand and northern Cambodia, protected by Thai military forces and what remained of his guerrilla army. Throughout the 1980s, he conducted seminars for Khmer Rouge military leaders. He often mesmerized them with his sincerity, his low, melodious voice and his genteel charisma. To his disciples, there seemed to be no connection between this smooth-faced teacher and the violence of his past--except perhaps for his repeated emphasis on "enemies." In fact, Pol Pot's disconnection from reality seemed to many to be proof of his unworldliness, ardor and enlightenment.

Pol Pot remarried in the mid-'80s, after his first wife, a highly educated revolutionary he had married in 1956, succumbed to mental illness. In the mid-'90s, deprived of foreign support, the Cambodian communist movement gradually fell apart. In 1996, Pol Pot's brother-in-law, Ieng Sary, who had served as his foreign minister, defected. Thousands of Khmer Rouge followed suit. The remnants of the movement were commanded by a veteran military leader, Ta Mok, who arrested Pol Pot after the former dictator had ordered some of Ta Mok's subordinates killed.

Listening to a broadcast of the Cambodian service of the Voice of America on April 15, 1998, Pol Pot learned that Ta Mok planned to deliver him to the Americans for trial. Soon afterward, he told his wife that he felt faint. He lay down. By 10 p.m. he was dead, reportedly from heart failure, possibly from suicide. His death, like his life, left many questions unanswered.

Despite--or perhaps because of--his paranoia, ineptitude and distance from reality, Pol Pot's place in history is assured, thanks largely to the damage he inflicted on his people. In the late 1970s, along with Mao Zedong, he enjoyed a moment of fame among those who felt, as he did, that the best way to change the world was to dismantle most of its social structure, violently and at once, regardless of the human cost. In his headlong rush toward independence and ideological perfection, Pol Pot was spurred by more experienced communist powers, eager to see if the Cambodian experiment, more radical than anything they had tried, might work.

When the extent of the disasters in Cambodia was known, Pol Pot survived in relative comfort and became a useful bit player in the cold war. When that conflict ended and Pol Pot lost his capacity for harm, his former friends began to consider bringing him to justice. He cheated their half-hearted efforts by dying in his bed, leaving history as his only judge.

DURING the regime of Pol Pot my family suffered. The Khmer Rouge who were Pol Pot's followers separated us. In July 1976, we were forced to leave Battambang, the second largest city in Cambodia for the countryside. There, the Khmer Rouge separated me and my younger brother (who was 7 years old) from my parents. At that time I was eight years old. My brother and I lived in the same camp with my third sister. The reason the Khmer Rouge separated Cambodian families was because they wanted people to work in different situations. They placed children five to fifteen in one place. These kids had to do work like picking grass from the rice fields and carrying rocks from one place to another. On the other hand, the young adults of sixteen and over lived in a different camp. Married couples also lived in different places. For these people, the work was harder than that the children had to do. They had to carry logs and work in factories.

Every morning all of the children had to wake at 5:00 A.M. to go to work in the rice fields until 5:00 P.M. Can you imagine how hard it was for young kids like my brother and me to work twelve hours a day and eat only a little food? Every single day we went to work. We were tired and always hungry. We didn't have shoes to wear. As a result our feet were sore and itchy. There were plenty of thorns on the paths and it was very hard to walk with bare feet. Many people caught diseases because they weren't wearing shoes. There was no medicine for curing diseases related to the feet. I always cried when I went to bed at

night because I was hungry and exhausted. I also missed my parents. I badly wanted to go home but I could only do that if the leader of the camp gave me a permission slip. The slip certified that I was allowed to go home. I couldn't stay in my camp without seeing my parents, therefore I left without anyone knowing. When I got home, I found that my parents were very thin because they were working very hard and eating very little. My mother was upset when she found out that the village chief wouldn't let me have any food, so she shared the small amount she had with me. I felt very bad because I couldn't stay with my parents for even one full day. I left my house and returned to my camp. When I got there I was punished because I went home without permission. The leader of the camp forced me to work longer than usual, until late at night, without eating.

At the beginning of 1977, the amount of food that Khmer Rouge provided us was getting even less. Later, they said that they didn't have any more rice. We were given chaff, which is usually for animals. Since we were only eating chaff, we didn't have the energy to work as hard as they wanted us to. I began to get sick and was unable to go to work. The leader of the camp said that people could have food only if they worked. If you didn't work, you didn't eat. At that time, I didn't dare to quit working, so I still went to work while I was sick until I fell down. Then the leader of the camp brought me back. Since I had worked so hard, my sickness had become more serious. I couldn't walk, and was not able to go to work. My meals were reduced. When my friend heard that, she secretly sent a message to my parents. After they learned what had happened, they were very worried because they didn't think I could survive until the time they could get to see me. Therefore, my parents went to ask the leader to let me stay with them and rest for a few days. He agreed, and I was allowed to go home. Five days later, I got better and returned to the camp.

In the middle of 1977, my baby brother (who was two years old) died from hunger. We were very upset to learn that. Moreover, we heard that my mother's sister's family was killed by the Khmer Rouge soldiers because her husband was a member of Lon Nol's army. When we received news that my two sisters were forced to get married, my mother almost became a maniac. When someone wants to marry your daughter, he has to ask your permission first. If the parents agree to let their daughter marry, it won't hurt their feelings. My parents were furious and very hurt when they received that bad news. None of us was

satisfied with the wedding ceremony because it was worthless. Before 1975 a wedding always had food and drink for the guests. It was strange to me that when Pol Pot came to power in Cambodia, they didn't have any food for the ceremony. When the couples' families saw them, they quietly cried. During the announcement of the wedding, I knew the seventy-five couples included my two sisters. When each name was called, that couple had to get up and shake hands with pale faces. Then the ceremony was over. Because my mother was worrying about the death of my aunt's family and my brother's death, she became very sick. My sisters and I tried to find a way to come home, but the leader of the camp wouldn't let us visit my mother at all. They said that even if we went to visit her, she would not get better and that we shouldn't waste our time, we should just stay in the camp and keep working harder. We felt very bad when they said that to us. There was nothing we could do except to stay in the camp and cry.

CHARD HOUN, a Cambodian refugee, has been in the United States since 1983. Like so many others from his country, Chard suffered through a lifetime's worth of struggling and brutality during the eight years he endured the mass insanity that made up life under Cambodia's Khmer Rouge government. He can talk matter of factly about mines going off and about watching people being forced to walk off cliffs into pits, and at first it doesn't seem real. Maybe he has made the whole thing up. But the grim details are too bizarre to come out of anyone's mouth as fiction, and you realize that this slightly built twenty-year-old really did live through what many have called the world's third holocaust.

His story is mostly bits and pieces. The quotes are his own words, the phrasing and word choice have not been corrected, and the greatest emphasis was placed on getting his words across in the context of what we have learned in class about life in Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia.

Chard Houn was born in Sisopom, a city in the Battambang province of Cambodia, in 1965. His parents owned a restaurant and an import business, and they lived above it. Chard recalls that the family worked a lot, and that there were always people around when he was growing up. He remembers that his father liked politics and soccer, and that he too was interested in politics, though he was discouraged early from getting involved.

"My father told me once that we had to go with the Communists. He said they were just people like us. . . . I was so interested in it, he said 'Why do you want to know about politics?' My mother and sisters never paid any attention to it, my father always said 'why do you want to know that?'"

Chard Houn's room is on the third floor of a Greenfield rooming house. There is no window, only a skylight which lets in pale dusty light. On the wall there are posters of Sylvester Stallone, posing as Rambo holding a tremendous gun and, next to him, Clint Eastwood. We spoke on several evenings about his long road from "the killing fields" to Greenfield. One of the first things I asked him about was Rambo, though he did not explain his reasons for idolizing this star who has made millions by acting out the murdering of Southeast Asian people. Chard just likes these two actors and Bruce Lee, and doesn't see the connection that is so ironic to me, his American interviewer.

We began by my asking a question that Dith Pran addressed during his talk at the University of Massachusetts. Why did Cambodia's nightmare happen?

"The Khmer Rouge have psychological problems, they just kill so many people, no reason. I wish you could tell me how people can do things like they do. At night, husband sleep different place than wife, 'cause they don't want them to hear them complain against them. They walk around your house and see if they can hear you complain; they come in and kill you if you complain."

How did you survive? Why didn't you get killed?

"Well, you know, just lucky, I was lucky. Whenever the full moon was out, they'd make the people work all night . . . with just a little bit of food."

Were you able to make friends with people during those times? It must have been very scary, and you weren't that old.

"People sometimes is hard to talk to each other, because they are so scared. The children work for the Khmer Rouge they teach them when they are seven or eight, 'when you hear them talk about something, just tell us'; the children kill their mothers and parents. They turned the children against their own parents.

"This country is a hard situation. I have bad dreams every night. Boom, boom, I wished they had killed me. I can't stand to see the people killing you know, sometimes the kids would just unload their guns on people, or put a knife up to my throat here like this. Some serious suffering I saw . . . people having dinner and a bomb drops and legs go flying here, heads, go there."

What things do you miss about Cambodia the most?

"First of all my parents, my brothers and my sisters. And our place."

What do you think it's like in Cambodia right now?

"Probably Soviet, or Vietnam, boom, boom, boom. To live like that, under the Communists, it's hard, you have to rebuild everything. You know they destroy everything machinery, factory, they exploded it and wrecked it. That is so stupid . . . that's why they just killed all the professional people. One of my friend's father was killed while he was taking a shower, just boom, right in the water."

One night, I missed my parents so much that I ran away from the camp to see my parents. Around eleven o'clock at night, I had run about half way through the camp when one of the leaders caught me. I was very scared! He took me back and had his vice leader punish me. My hands were tied. They beat me with a bamboo stick again and again. It was very painful but I dared not cry. Instead, I begged them to let me go to see my parents. Although I begged them, they kept saying no. They told me if I dared run away again, I would be killed. I was not given any food to eat for three days, but I was still forced to go to work.

When I told them that I had been very sick, they gave me medicine which was made from the bark of a tree and told me to go to work. There was no hospital. I had to go to work with my sickness in order to be allowed to eat one meal a day. I missed my parents very much. They had never punished me at all.

Two months later, my brothers' and sisters' camps were moved near my camp. These groups worked harder than ours and ate more food than we did. One day, my sister saved her meal for me because I told her that I was very hungry and that I was sick. At night, she brought it to me and then quickly left my camp. I was very happy then and I looked for a quiet place to hide while eating the rice she had brought. Rice! I had not seen enough for more than a year. When I looked around and did not see anybody I opened the rice box and ate it. Unfortunately my leader caught me while I was eating.

Here goes my life again! He took me to his leader and told him what I had done. They kicked me while they were questioning me about how I got the rice. I lied to them that I had stolen it in order to save my sister's life. It was true that no one could offer anything to someone else. It was against Angka's rule. No religious belief, no individual love, one had to love Angka.

A month later, my brother was taken away by Angka. He was never released to return to the camp. The reason was that Angka found out about his past occupation in Lon Nol's regime. He had been a police officer in Phnom Penh. He was killed by Pol Pot's soldiers. The Khmer Rouge killed many people: doctors, lawyers, police, teachers, engineers, soldiers, businessmen, and wealthy people.

My parents' past was not discovered, but life in the village was cruel. All old and young people were forced to dig irrigation ditches. My parents were not able to work hard anymore because they were old

and did not get enough food to eat. My mother's sickness was getting worse. She died from her illness. My father died of starvation. The Khmer Rouge killed people in many ways. They were obsessed with the act of genocide. Death was everywhere. It was very scary!

The Khmer Rouge destroyed temples and the monks' residences. They did not believe in Buddhism or any other religion. They did not even celebrate the New Year days. They eliminated our old culture and its traditions. They changed the New Year days into their most important meeting days. Everyone had to attend these big meeting days. There the Khmer Rouge forced everyone to answer questions about family background. When the meeting ended, everyone had to go back to where they belonged and go back to work the next day.

In 1979 my family had five people—my brother, my three sisters, and me. Fortunately the Vietnamese soldiers invaded Cambodia. My brother, sisters, and I moved from the village to live in the city of Battambang. Although the Vietnamese came to rescue us from the "killing fields," the living conditions were still difficult. We did not have food because we did not have any gold with which to buy rice. We decided to go to the Thai-Cambodia border in order to live under better conditions. When we arrived at the border we met many Cambodians who came from different places. They came from all over war-torn Cambodia. We stayed there for two months. Then Thai people took all of us to Doung Rek mountain and left us there. We were among a number of people who tried to walk back to Cambodia. Unfortunately many were killed by the mines and bombs or died of hunger. We got back safely to Battambang and decided to live there. My brother and older sister planted vegetables to trade for rice. My little sister and I happily went back to school. We made friends and studied very hard and helped our brother and sisters on the farm. Hospitals, temples, and other businesses were reopened. My brother decided not to move because he could make his living in Battambang.

In 1982 I asked my brother and sisters to let me leave Cambodia for Thailand because I heard that one could come to America through a special organization. They would not agree to let me so I ran away from home and left a note saying that I was going to Thailand.

1. What impact did the Khmer Rouge have on family relationships?
2. How did the Khmer Rouge feel about religion?
3. How did marriage ceremonies take place under the Khmer Rouge?