

Background and Resources

Cambodian Genocide, 1975-1979

Cumulative Civilian Death Toll: 2 million

Name(s): _____

In 1975 the Khmer Rouge (KR), a communist rebel group, defeated the U.S. backed Lon Nol democratic regime. At first, many Cambodians welcomed the overthrow of the corrupt Lon Nol government. However, the KR soon began a ruthless campaign to reconstruct Cambodia into a collective of farms according to the communist model of Mao's China. Under threat of death, the residents of cities and towns were forced to relocate to the countryside where they would live in communes and work as unpaid laborers under impossible conditions. Those who refused to leave their homes or didn't vacate quickly enough (including the sick and elderly) were killed. Factories, schools and hospitals were shut down and people were stripped of all civil rights. Religion was banned and temples were destroyed. Music and radios were forbidden. Anyone perceived to be in opposition — including doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other educated and professional people — were eliminated along with all "un-communist" elements of Cambodian society. People were shot for simply knowing a foreign language or wearing glasses, and were discouraged from forming personal relationships or expressing affection. The country was "cleansed" of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Thai nationals as well as Muslims and Buddhist monks. Children were taken from their parents and placed into forced labor camps, where they were "reeducated." In 1978 Vietnam invaded Cambodia to stop Khmer Rouge border attacks and defeated the murderous regime in two weeks. By that time, approximately two million people had died from execution, starvation, disease, and exhaustion, making the Cambodian genocide one of the most devastating in human history.

Web Resources

- Cambodia 1975 (Peace Pledge Union)
http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g_cambodia.html
- Cambodia: Oral Histories and Biographies (The Mekong Network)
http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/oral_hst.htm
- The Cambodian Genocide (Historywiz.com)
<http://www.historywiz.com/cambodia.htm>
- Cambodian Genocide Group
<http://www.cambodiangenocide.org/front.htm>
- Cambodian Genocide Program (Yale University)
<http://www.yale.edu/cgp/index.html>
- Cambodian Killing Fields (The Digital Archive Of Cambodian Holocaust Survivors)
<http://www.cybercambodia.com/dachs/index.html>
- From Sideshow to Genocide: Stories of the Cambodian Holocaust (EdWeb)
<http://www.edwebproject.org/sideshow/>
- Pol Pot in Cambodia (United Human Rights Council)
http://www.unitedhumanrights.org/Genocide/pol_pot.htm
- Pol Pot in Cambodia 1975-1979 2,000,000 Deaths (The History Place)
<http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/pol-pot.htm>

Books

Clay Marble by Minfong Ho

In the late 1970s twelve-year-old Dara joins a refugee camp in war-torn Cambodia and becomes separated from her family. *1993, 163 pages, grades 5-9, Farrar, Straus and Giroux*

First They Killed My Father: A Girl of Cambodia Remembers by Loung Ung

Ung was the child of a high-ranking government official in Phnom Penh, who was five when the Khmer Rouge stormed the city and her family was forced to flee. Her story of starvation, forced labor, beatings, attempted rape, separations, and the deaths of her family members is one of horror and brutality. *2001, 256 pages, grades 10 & up, HarperCollins*

Heaven Becomes Hell: A Survivor's Story of Life under the Khmer Rouge by Y Ly

A first-hand account of four years (1975-80) of survival and death in Khmer Rouge labor camps. Included are a map of Cambodia, family photos, and freedom papers for US resettlement. *2000, 232 pages, grades 10 and up, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies*

The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79 by Ben Kiernan

An account of the Khmer Rouge revolution that shows how an ideological preoccupation with racist and totalitarian policies led a group of intellectuals to impose genocide on their own country. *2002, 477 pages, grades 10 and up, Yale University Press*

Stay Alive My Son by Pin Yatlay

The author's memoir details his family's mistreatment in Khmer Rouge Cambodia and their courageous escape into Thailand. *1988, 264 pages, grades 10 & up, Simon & Schuster*

The Stone Goddess by Minfong Ho

After the Communists take over Cambodia and her family is torn from their city life, twelve-year-old Nakri and her older sister attempt to maintain their hope as well as their classical dancing skills in the midst of their struggle to survive. *2003, 208 pages, grades 6-10, Scholastic*

The Stones Cry Out: A Cambodian Childhood, 1975-1980 by Molyda Szymusiak

The memoir of the daughter of a high Cambodian official, who was twelve years old when Khmer Rouge radicals seized the capital and drove all its inhabitants into the countryside. The author kept her identity a secret, assuming a "revolutionary" name to avoid being branded as an aristocrat, and was one of only three family members to survive. *1999, 245 pages, grades 10 & up, Indiana University Press*

Teenage Refugees from Cambodia Speak Out by Stephanie St. Pierre

Following a brief description of each country's history and culture are six to eight interviews with native teenagers who are now living in the U.S. The young people talk about their lives here and in their homeland, their trip to the U.S., and the adjustments they have made. *1995, 64 pages, grades 8 & up, Rosen Publishing Group*