

“TO WHAT EXTENT DID EXTERNAL FACTORS
INFLUENCE THE EXTREME NATURE
OF THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME?”

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My interest in the Khmer Rouge arose after my trip to Cambodia with school. It was a trip aimed primarily at the service section of CAS. We had collected donations prior to our trip and were to donate these to several deprived schools in Cambodia. Whilst in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, we were given a general historical overview of the country within the last half-century. Those who attended the trip were introduced to Cambodia’s most significant historical event, life under the Khmer Rouge. The prison camps and mass graves we visited introduced us to a horrific event that we had previously known close to nothing about. My interest in the Khmer Rouge carried on after the trip, and I decided to make Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge the topic of my Extended Essay.

This interest in the Khmer Rouge I developed, promoted me to formulate the research question: “To what extent did external factors influence the extreme nature of the Khmer Rouge regime?” I have evaluated the level of contribution of several of

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the more significant internal and external influences, while taking into consideration the interpretations of several renowned historians, in order to arrive at a balanced conclusion.

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The Khmer Rouge was formed in Cambodia in the mid-1950s by Paris-educated intellectual Communists. During the 1960s the party increased in numbers as a result of peasant discontent with government attempts to seize the surplus rice harvest. Despite their reverence for the Cambodian leader, Prince Sihanouk, government retaliations caused the Khmer Rouge to flee to the remote mountains of Northeast Cambodia. Here the growing guerrilla force received new recruits from the local hill tribe people. By 1970 Cambodia was mired in civil war and whilst on a visit to France, Sihanouk was overthrown by General Lon Nol. From his exile in Beijing, Sihanouk announced the formation of a government of national unity that included the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge, however, used Sihanouk as a popular figurehead, for they had their own plans for Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge's final push began on January 1, 1975, and they captured the capital, Phnom Penh, on April 17, and immediately began creating a new society.

In 1998, Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, died, having eluded all attempts to bring him to justice as one of the century's worst mass murderers, responsible for the systematic killing of nearly a quarter of the Cambodian population, including an entire generation of political leaders, professionals, and religious figures. Pol Pot remained unremorseful for his Khmer Rouge revolution that placed him among the ranks of Hitler and Stalin. Victims of the Khmer Rouge regime and Pol Pot's 'purging' were faced with few options: execution or incarceration in S-21, known today as Toul Sleng, the Khmer Rouge's interrogation and prison facility. Here the thousands of victims who entered were never seen exiting. Torture, humiliation, mental 'deconstruction' and, eventually, execution were the processes used to extract 'confessions' of treachery to the Khmer Rouge.

The sheer brutality of Pol Pot's regime came as a shock to the outside world. Whereas Hitler demonstrated his hatred for the Jews from the beginning, Pol Pot was seen by those who knew him, in his early years, as someone "who wouldn't hurt a chicken."¹ The question arises, where did these heinous acts come from? The history of Cambodia during the era of Democratic Kampuchea still remains a topic of great controversy and debate. Historians argue whether the factors in the vindictiveness of the regime originated from internal or external sources. That is why I formulated the research question: *to what extent did external factors influence the extreme nature of the Khmer Rouge regime?* I will examine which factors, both internal and external, contributed to the sheer brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime, taking into account the interpretations of several historians in order to arrive at a balanced conclusion.

The extent to which Vietnam and Cambodia were bombed during the Vietnam conflict is unparalleled. Cambodia in particular was targeted as a result of President Nixon's effort to de-escalate troop levels in neighbouring Vietnam in favour of large-scale 'carpet bombing' campaigns. Targeting Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge troops within Cambodia, a total of "2,756,941 tons were dropped in 230,561 sorties on 113,716 sites"² by the Americans, "three times the total tonnage dropped on Japan, atom bombs included."³ Revisionist historian Matthew Edwards argued, "at a psychological level the bombing so traumatized the population that it induced a form of mass psychosis that would last for much of the next decade"⁴—a claim meant to account not only for the ascendancy of the Khmer Rouge and harsh civil war efforts but also for the emergence of an "idiosyncratic, genocidal state: Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK)."⁵ In conjunction with anti-American animosity, the Communist Khmer Rouge launched a propaganda campaign "which they exploited to the hilt,"⁶ targeting capitalist societies within Phnom Penh to which the peasants already "bore a deep hostility."⁷ Closely associated with the U.S., the Lon Nol regime was blamed for the pain and suffering the peasant population was enduring.

However, historian Philip Short, who met Pol Pot in 1977, argues the contrary: “It would be wrong to suggest that the intensity of the bombings so brutalized Cambodians and thereby contributed to the nature of the regime which Pol and his colleagues installed.”⁸ Short’s argument is valuable when drawing relationships between Cambodia and that of other heavily bombed nations. His argument could be supported by the fact that a far greater quantity of explosives fell on Vietnam and Laos, yet the Vietnamese did not establish a system like that of the Khmer Rouge. After all, policy was not created by the peasants but by Pol Pot and the other members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), who had not necessarily experienced the bombings at first hand.

To begin to understand Pol Pot and what happened in Democratic Kampuchea, we need to place him inside a Cambodian context and inside a wider set of influences from abroad. Although Pol Pot was characterized as introspective and xenophobic, his ideas and his career were shaped to a large extent by foreign influences. The greatest influences for Pol Pot originated from three sources.

As a student in France, he was introduced to “the idea of progress and the concepts of democracy, imperialism, and revolutionary change.”⁹ In the three years he was in Paris, he encountered Marxist-Leninist ideas which led him to adopt a radical alignment—“he probably joined the Communist Party of France (CPF) in 1952.”¹⁰ The CPF, one of the strongest parties in France, was considered the most ‘Stalinist’ party outside Eastern Europe. The years 1949-1953 also marked the victory of Communism in China. To many young Khmer and millions of young people in France, Communism seemed to be the wave of the future.

The second foreign influence was the Vietnamese-dominated Indochina Communist Party (ICP). When he returned to Cambodia in early 1953, Pol Pot joined the ICP. Through the ICP, he learned about “party discipline, organization, and theory, as well as the importance of clandestinity and concealment.”¹¹

However, “the most important foreign influence on Pol Pot was probably Communist China, which he first visited in

1965-1966.”¹² Still tied to the ICP, Pol Pot, through Mao Zedong’s notions of independent revolution and continuous class struggle, found an ‘inspiring ideology’ that freed him from the Vietnamese movement, which had shaped and guided them, and provided a model for Cambodia’s transformation. Historian David P. Chandler argues that the greatest foreign influence on Pol Pot “was the so-called Cultural Revolution in China.” This mass movement was engineered to accelerate Mao’s ideas on continuous revolution, class warfare, and the empowerment of the poor. It was in China that Pol Pot “absorbed the importance of rooting out concealed enemies of the party”¹³ which explains the brutality of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) high-ranking officials with regard to ‘purging’ or ‘cleansing’ the party.

The perpetrators of the 1975-1979 Cambodian genocide at first disguised the party’s title of CPK under the alias “Angkar” (The Organisation). It was only after the death of Mao Zedong that Pol Pot revealed the CPK, declaring its allegiance to Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao. For the four years the CPK were in power, Cambodia experienced a combination of communal labour projects, class and political purges and mass population displacement. Hence, “one could characterize Democratic Kampuchea as a product of ideological diffusion.”¹⁴ Chandler argues “clear parallels, and probably inspirations, can be found in China’s Great Leap Forward (and famine) in the 1950s, in the Soviet collectivization of Ukraine (and famine) 20 years before that, and in the purges in both countries of ‘elements’ considered dangerous to revolutionary leaders.”¹⁵

Such diffusion of collective ideologies characterized Khmer Rouge Communism but did not account for the extreme nature and brutality of the regime. This occurred when Communist practice combined with more indigenous features of the regime. These included “territorial expansionism; racial and other social discrimination and violence; rhetorical idealization of the peasantry; repression of commerce and the cities in favor of autarchy (which is ironic as this did not define true Communism); communalism; and assaults on the family.”¹⁶ These elements of

Democratic Kampuchea (DK) derived from long-standing Khmer cultural and historical developments which, world-renowned Cambodian historian Ben Kiernan argues, “in conjunction with global external influences, can give rise to genocide.”¹⁷ Kiernan presents a valuable argument that considers both internal and external influences on the brutal nature of the Khmer Rouge regime. Kiernan can be considered a reliable and valuable source, as he is recognized as an authority on Cambodian history and is currently a professor of history at Yale University. Kiernan also helped put together Yale’s Cambodian Genocide Project, one of the most extensive databases documenting the Cambodian regime.

The CPK leadership had accumulated “a long record of aggressive militarism. It launched a peacetime rebellion against the Sihanouk regime, and after the 1973 Paris Agreement, continued attacking Lon Nol’s regime until victory.”¹⁸ In 1977-1978 the CPK initiated border conflicts with three neighbouring countries: Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, in an attempt to re-unite all ancient Khmer-speaking areas once part of the Angkar empire. The CPK also “unilaterally declared a new expanded maritime frontier. Such expansionism required both “tempering” (*lot dam*) the country’s population to become hardened purveyors of violence, and mobilising primordial racial rights to long-lost territory.”¹⁹

Territorial expansionism and uniting of Khmer-speaking peoples echoes Hitler’s *lebensraum* policy, where Germany sought to provide ‘living space’ for its people through the re-uniting of German-speaking peoples and imperialistic pursuits to the East.

Existing alongside Communist ideology, racism was a key component of Khmer Rouge ideology, which supported the CPK’s expansionist ambitions. Cambodia was not unfamiliar with such racism. “The Cambodians have massacred all the Cochinchinese [Vietnamese] that they could find in the country,”²⁰ wrote a French missionary in 1751. The new Khmer king, Ang Snguon, “gave orders or permission to massacre all the Cochinchinese who could be found, and this order was executed very precisely and very cruelly; this massacre lasted a month and a half; only about 20 women and children were spared; no one knows the number

of deaths, and it would be very difficult to find out, for the massacre was general from Cahon to Ha-tien, with the exception of a few who were able to escape through the forest or fled by sea.”²¹

Between 1975 and 1979 “the death toll was about 25% of the population of some 7.8 million; 33.5% of men were massacred or died of unnatural deaths as against 15.7% of the women, and 41.9% of the population of Phnom Penh.”²² Of this 25%, “15-20% were Khmer majority, 36% Cham Muslims, 40% Lao, 50% Chinese, and virtually all of the Vietnamese remaining in Cambodia after 1976 perished.”²³

The Khmer Rouge, true to their Communist model, idealized the ethnic Khmer peasantry as the true national class, where as the ‘urban workers’ were seen as ‘untrustworthy’. Communal agriculture was a component of the CPK, as rice would be the fundamental food source for the new society. The countryside soon became a checkerboard of rice paddies and harvest fields. In their violent repression, “the Khmer Rouge regularly used agricultural metaphors such as ‘pull up the grass, dig up the roots,’ and proclaimed that the bodies of city people and other victims would be used for ‘fertiliser.’”²⁴

The Khmer Rouge saw the cities for two things: a gateway for foreign influences, from which the Khmer Rouge so longed to distance themselves, and a security issue. Henry Locard states, “most state crimes perpetrated by the leadership originated from the brutal evacuation of all the towns, the trademark of that radical brand of Communism.”²⁵ The KR was too small in number to be able to control the cities. The town dwellers or ‘potential enemies’, had to be scattered. From the very first day of the revolution, all private property was *de facto* seized by the state; the rule of law was abolished and replaced by the rule of violence. Markets and currency vanished, hospitals, schools and universities were closed, private transport ceased to operate, as did “all freedom of movement, association, information and thought.”²⁶ Those summoned to serve the new regime, including civilian and military cadres and many notables, were slaughtered. In their place, a caste system was installed subdividing the population into geographical, racial

and political categories. At first, the “base people” comprised ethnic Khmer peasants, and the “new people”²⁷ were from the towns contaminated by foreign and capitalist influence. “This geographic discrimination placed the urban working class in the enemy camp.”²⁸

The Khmer Rouge saw the bonds between family members as a connection that needed to be broken. The Khmer Rouge “criticized family-ism as an ideology to be discarded”²⁹ and would often use songs to help do so. This was particularly effective on children. One such propaganda song entitled “We Children Love Angkar Boundlessly” went as follows:

Before the revolution, children were poor and lived lives of misery.

Living like animals, suffering as orphans.

The enemy abandoned all thought of us..

Now the glorious revolution supports us all.³⁰

Similar to the Nazi’s anti-Semitic indoctrination of their youth, the KR conditioned their children to view parents as the enemies and the revolution as its true parent.

When combining the Khmer Rouge’s amalgamation of Communist ideals with some of Cambodia’s deep-rooted indigenous influences, the potential for genocidal action becomes more predictable and less of a reaction to a series of events.

The heinous treatment of the Vietnamese through the CPK years has often been related to Hitler’s racial policy towards the Jews. Virtually all Vietnamese in Cambodia had perished before the end of 1979 in what has been coined the Cambodian ‘Final Solution’. Arguments put forth indicate that just as Hitler set about creating “a racially pure German state,”³¹ there is clear evidence that the Khmer Rouge regime “waged a campaign of genocide against the ethnic Vietnamese.”³² To examine the extent to which the ethnic Vietnamese population suffered at the hands of the CPK, we must understand the differences between the two nations. We must look at the “history and geopolitics of the region and how the region was affected by the Sino-Soviet split and by

deteriorating relations between China and Vietnam”³³ and how these factors contributed to the brutal nature of the regime.

Cambodia’s relationship with Vietnam has always been a major foreign policy concern. Cambodia’s accessibility, low-population, and desirable resources have made it an attractive place for Vietnamese migration. For centuries, “Vietnamese disdain and Khmer distrust have colored relations between the two nations and thwarted mutual understanding.”³⁴ With Khmer Rouge victory came Cambodia’s independence from Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge considered themselves invulnerable because of the ‘purity’ of their revolution and because of their Chinese and North Korean support.

Frequent clashes with Vietnamese forces followed the Khmer Rouge’s seizure of power in 1975. Territories were captured and re-captured by both sides, Vietnamese troops were slow to withdraw from Cambodian territory, and at the heart of these disputes lay “wounded Cambodian pride, suspicions of Vietnamese patronage, and disagreements over the sea borders.”³⁵ Tensions built up as the two sides proclaimed their associations with neighboring nations. Vietnam’s ‘special friendship’ with Laos in 1976 was viewed as hegemony by the Khmer, just as the Vietnamese were nervous about similar offers of ‘intimacy’ from the Chinese. Knowing he was allied to China and feeling himself empowered, Pol Pot gave vent to his hatred of the Vietnamese and encouraged everyone else in the CPK to do the same.

Cross-border conflicts occurred throughout 1975-1976. Had it not been for increased military aid from China, the Khmer Rouge would not have been able and willing to mount offensive operations against Vietnam. Although Chandler argues “it is not certain when or why Cambodia—or Vietnam, for that matter—decided to step up the pace of hostilities,”³⁶ the shift to a more aggressive Cambodian policy came with the rounding up of the few ethnic Vietnamese still in Cambodia (most had been repatriated under General Lon Nol). Those who remained, often women married to Khmer men, were hunted down and killed. Increased border raids into Vietnam ensued, often with hundreds of civil-

ians slaughtered. One official Vietnamese record states: “Most barbarous crimes were committed. Women were raped, then disemboweled, [and] children cut in two.”³⁷ Pol Pot’s anxiety about Vietnam increased in July 1977 when Vietnam signed a friendship treaty with Laos. Documents or ‘confessions’ came pouring in from Toul Sleng, the prison where individuals opposing ‘Angkar’ were detained. These confirmed Pol Pot’s suspicion that the CPK was swarming with Vietnamese agents. What began as the systematic rounding up and expatriation of the ethnic Vietnamese population, eventually led to their complete annihilation by the end of 1979.

The Communist Party of Kampuchea leadership was constantly faced with the issue of security, or so they believed. Ieng Thirith, wife of Ieng Sary, foreign minister of Democratic Kampuchea—the one man “Pol Pot trusted to put forward the true face of revolutionary Cambodia to the outside world,”³⁸—said the “Center never felt it truly controlled the country and that the party felt threatened by the scores of enemies trying to rob it of power.”³⁹ Pol Pot himself remained vigilant to potential power seizures throughout his political reign. This spurred the hysterical yet methodical purging of the Cambodian population. First, “the party blamed the elite of the old society and killed many of them. Then the party launched its version of the socialist revolution, and when the revolution went out of control, the Center began to suspect the men it had appointed as ministers in the government of March 1976. They were arrested and killed.”⁴⁰ In 1978, the Center went after the powerful zone directors and killed many of them. Feeling embattled, “the party initiated class warfare in a desperate search for enemies, and purged peasants and party alike for not coming from an extremely poor, hence proper, class, or for associating with an ill-defended enemy class bent on sabotaging the revolution.”⁴¹ Anxiety grew and spread through the Communist Center. They suspected the United States, the Soviet Union and Vietnam had agents within the Cambodian Communist party. Elizabeth Becker’s account of the hysteria regarding the purging of enemies is a clear example of the paranoia the CPK Center was immersed in. Purge followed purge, but “the enemy

grew ever more elusive, and ever more pervasive in the party's mind.⁴² The Khmer Rouge never commended popular support and understanding; instead Elizabeth Becker argues, they ruled "through violence and terror."⁴³ Becker is a valuable source in the sense that she was one of two American journalists allowed back into Cambodia, after the expulsion of all foreigners by the Khmer Rouge. However, her American affiliation must be taken into consideration with regards to reliability, specifically with regards to Vietnam and the American situation.

Although Becker takes into consideration both internal and external factors when assessing the reasons behind the nature of the DK regime, she argues "while the United States and Vietnam do share responsibility for much of Cambodia's sorrows, ultimately Cambodians were the victims of their own leaders and their own traditions and history."⁴⁴

No matter what the context, revolution cannot succeed without action; and with action comes violence, and innocent people suffer. In Democratic Kampuchea everything outside the Khmer Rouge revolution would be regarded as a genuine target. The systematic murder of one quarter of Cambodia's population was not simply because life had no value, just that killing had no consequence. These grounds however, do not justify the brutality of the regime, they simply indicate how their actions were committed with such fluidity and lack of remorse, that the thought of being consciously aware of the enormity of their actions seems highly unlikely. The origins of the brutality of the regime can play host to a range of factors, the typical excuses being external—from the American 'carpet bombing' of villages in the 1970s; from Stalinism; from Maoism; from the sadistic warped minds of a small group of intellectual men. The question 'how could they do it?' still arises even though the various stimuli have been presented. What was it that drove these individuals to commit the atrocities that still haunt Cambodia to this day? The question could be applied in a greater sense to encompass the Nazis in Germany or other nations suffering at the hands of a seemingly stoic political leader. The answer does not lie in some genetic defect resulting

in violent behavior; the answers lie within the country. The causes lie in history—which creates the conditions for nations to seek solutions to alleged problems; in geography—which promotes/justifies nations to seek solutions to demographical issues ('lebensraum', Hitler); in culture—which forms the backbone of views and opinions; and in the political and social system—which encourages or represses the individual from acting on his or her own accord. However, moral disjunction is a key component in terms of an individual's ability to commit barbaric actions, for if human law is not present within the individual's psyche, the division between right and wrong becomes far less evident. For these reasons alone, one external factor cannot be determined as the sole influence behind the brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime. All factors played a role in influencing and stimulating the nature of the regime, some more than others, but ultimately it is the internal influences—the historical, geographical, cultural, political and social—that caused the Khmer Rouge to act in ways that still haunt Cambodia today.



- ¹ Philip Short, Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare (London: John Murray Publishers, 2004) p. 28
- ² Ben Kiernan, Bombs Over Cambodia (Canada: The Walrus, October 2006) pp. 62-69
- ³ Short, p. 216
- ⁴ Matthew Edwards, The rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; internal or external origins? p. 9
- ⁵ Ben Kiernan, External and Indigenous Sources of Khmer Rouge Ideology p. 3
- ⁶ Short, p. 216
- ⁷ John Wood, Vietnam and the Indochina Conflict (New Zealand: Macmillan Ltd., 1990) p. 70
- “Despite the peasants’ reverence for Sihanouk they bore a deep hostility towards the ruling classes in the cities.”
- ⁸ Short, p. 216
- ⁹ David P. Chandler, Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2000) p. 6
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 6
- ¹¹ Ibid. p. 6
- ¹² Ibid. p. 6
- ¹³ Ibid. p. 6
- ¹⁴ Kiernan, External and Indigenous p. 3
- ¹⁵ Chandler, p. 4
- ¹⁶ Kiernan, p. 3
- ¹⁷ Ibid. p. 3
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p. 3
- ¹⁹ Ibid. p. 4
- ²⁰ Ibid. p. 4
- ²¹ Ben Kiernan, Recovering History and Justice in Cambodia, p. 77. See also: A. Launay, Histoire de la Mission de Cochinchine 1658-1823, II (Paris, 1924) pp. 366-370
- ²² Henry Locard, State Violence in Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979) and Retribution (1979-2004) p. 121
- ²³ Ben Kiernan, The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79 (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005) p. 458
- ²⁴ Kiernan, External and Indigenous, p. 7
- ²⁵ Locard, p. 122
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 123
- ²⁷ Kiernan, The Pol Pot Regime, p. 456
- ²⁸ Kiernan, External and Indigenous, p. 6
- ²⁹ Ibid. p. 7
- ³⁰ Kiernan, The Pol Pot Regime, p. 247

³¹ Frank McDonough, The Origins of the First and Second World Wars (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997) p. 60

³² Kiernan, The Pol Pot Regime, p. 460

³³ Chandler, p. 139

³⁴ Ibid., p. 139

³⁵ Ibid., p. 133

³⁶ Ibid., p. 134

³⁷ Short, p. 372

³⁸ Elizabeth Becker, When the War was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution (USA: Public Affairs, 1986) p. 199

³⁹ Ibid., p. 209

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 209

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 209

⁴² Ibid., p. 209

⁴³ Ibid., p. 209

⁴⁴ Ibid., Preface XV

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Just as the Holocaust expressed the quintessential nature of National Socialism, so did the Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia (1975-1978) represent the purest embodiment of Communism: what it turns into when pushed to its logical conclusion. Its leaders would stop at nothing to attain their objective, which was to create the first truly egalitarian society in the world: to this end they were prepared to annihilate as many of their people as they deemed necessary. It was the most extreme manifestation of the hubris inherent in Communist ideology, the belief in the boundless power of an intellectual elite guided by the Marxist doctrine, with resort to unrestrained violence in order completely to reshape life. The result was devastation on an unimaginable scale.

The leaders of the Khmer Rouge received their higher education in Paris, where they absorbed Rousseau's vision of "natural man," as well as the exhortations of Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre to violence in the struggle against colonialism. ("One must kill," Sartre wrote. "To bring down a European is to... suppress at the same time the oppressor and the oppressed.") On their return to Cambodia, they organized in the northeastern hills a tightly disciplined armed force made up largely of illiterate and semiliterate youths recruited from the poorest peasantry. These troops, for the most part twelve- to fourteen-year-old adolescents, were given intense indoctrination in hatred of all those different from themselves, especially city-dwellers and the Vietnamese minority. To develop a "love of killing and consequently war," they were trained, like the Nazi SS, in tormenting and slaughtering animals.

Their time came in early 1975, when the Khmer Rouge overthrew the government of Lon Nol, installed by the Americans, and occupied the country's capital, Phnom Penh. The population at large had no inkling what lay in store, because in their propaganda the Khmer Rouge promised to pardon servants of the old regime, rallying all classes against the "imperialists" and landowners. Yet the instant Khmer Rouge troops entered Phnom Penh, they resorted to the most radical punitive measures. Convinced that cities were the nidus of all evil—in Fanon's words, the home of "traitors and knaves"—the Khmer Rouge ordered the capital, with its 2.5 million inhabitants, and all other urban centers to be totally evacuated. The victims, driven into the countryside, were allowed to salvage only what they could carry on their backs. Within one week all Cambodian cities were emptied. Four million people, or 60 percent of the population, suffered exile, compelled to live under the most trying conditions, overworked as well as undernourished. Secondary and higher schools were shut down.

Then the carnage began. Unlike Mao, whom he admired and followed in many respects, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot, did not waste time on "reeducation" but proceeded directly to the extermination of those categories of the population whom he suspected of actual or potential hostility to the new order: all civilian and military employees of the old regime, former landowners, teachers, merchants, Buddhist monks, and even skilled workers. Members of these groups, officially relegated to the lowest classes of citizens and deprived of all rights, including access to food rations, were either summarily shot or sent to perform forced labor until they dropped dead from exhaustion. These condemned unfortunates constituted, potentially, over two-thirds of the population. They were systematically arrested, interrogated, and tortured until they implicated others, and then executed. The executions involved entire families, including small children, for Pol Pot believed that dissenting ideas and attitudes, derived from one's social position, education, or occupation, were "evil microbes" that spread like disease. Members of the Communist Party, considered susceptible to contagion, were also subject to liquidation. After the Vietnamese expelled the Khmer Rouge from Cambodia, they discovered mountains of skulls of its victims.