

Remember the Khmer Rouge

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A forgetful society lives on the precipice of history's abyss. [Lloyd Billingsley](#) reminded us of this when he warned, "as ever, the struggle against genocide is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

Billingsley was referencing the [Communist Khmer Rouge's democidal frenzy](#) of 1975-1979 that killed over 2,000,000 people,

specifically "Cambodian children were [clubbed to death](#) and babies smashed against trees." He provided a link to an historical, contemporaneous 1977 account of the communist regime and its bloodthirsty Angka Loeu ("organization on high") leadership's initial crimes against the Cambodian people and humanity: [Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of Communist Genocide in Cambodia](#), by John Barron and Anthony Paul. It is a horrific chronicle of how the insidious tactics and crimes into which the murderous ideology of communism metastasizes and, ultimately, consumes a people.

It is a lesson of history that humanity ignores at its peril. Consequently, in the hope of reminding the present about the past to preserve the future, let us delve into Barron and Paul's reportage of the survivors' accounts of the Khmer Rouge's barbarity perpetrated in the name of the very people these communists tortured and killed.

When he was deposed and in temporary exile in Mao's China, in his attempt to return to power Prince Norodom Sihanouk became the titular leader of Cambodia's Royal Government of National Union. It was not long until the communists controlled this organization.

Thus, through little enterprise of their own, the Cambodian communists almost overnight achieved a textbook objective of communists everywhere—a coalition that cloaked them with respectability and put at their disposal the resources of others. Stigmatized as foreign agents, they could not attract popular support. Now, with their real identity and aims obscured in the coalition, they would appeal to the people in the name of a prince trusted and esteemed by much of the populace.

Having taken power in now "Democratic Cambodia," the Khmer Rouge regime and its Angka Loeu leadership immediately went about emptying the cities and purging the populace.

In assaulting the material manifestations of Cambodian culture and civilization, the communists were striking at the concepts the objects of their fury symbolized. And the assaults presaged systematic attempts to undermine or eliminate entirely the traditional concepts of family, home, religion, education, commerce, and technology that formed the foundations of society . . . Having emptied and vandalized the cities, Angka Loeu proclaimed the birth of 'Democratic Cambodia' and proudly declared, 'More than 2,000 years of Cambodian history have virtually ended.' It is difficult to dispute that claim.

Human dignity and core liberties were immediately ended by the communist regime, as the cities and large villages were arbitrarily emptied and their residents forced into the countryside and jungles. No dissent was too small to go unpunished.

[A man said] 'your order won't work . . . How will we get to our destination without a car?' 'Now is the time of revolution! And you don't talk back to Angka!' the soldier shouted in response. Then he sprayed the man with bursts of machine-gun bullets. The man immediately crumpled to the ground, and several others around him also fell.

Indeed, all free speech brought a death sentence. How eerily familiar to present ears echoes the edict of a Khmer Rouge communist officer who, after shooting a vocal dissident, shouted, "In times of revolution, protest is forbidden!"?

Parental rights were abolished; the family unit decimated by communist design.

And children were singled out for the most intensive brainwashing, calculated to estrange them further from their parents and transfer their loyalty from family to Angka Loeu. In the village of Khna Sar university student Ung Sok Choeu observed: 'The only subjects the students were being taught were revolutionary thinking and the aims of the Khmer Rouge struggle and how to detect the enemies of both. As a result, all the children turned into little Khmer Rouge spies, reporting everything that was said at home.'

Angka Loeu directed Khmer Rouge soldiers to lead reeducation sessions for those who were not starved, shot, or dying of treatable diseases that the communist regime deemed potentially useful to their new "Democratic Cambodia."

Angka spokesmen attempted to indoctrinate the prisoners at night, repeatedly sounding a basic refrain: 'All of you are technicians. You are educated men, and the simple village people didn't dare reeducate you. But we, your brothers from the army, are happy to reeducate and reshape you. In two years' time, maybe, when you have adapted yourselves to the new regime, you will be allowed to return to Phnom Penh and your former profession. Meanwhile, you have to help Angka produce rice, to defend the country. Never refuse Angka's orders, and stop thinking about your families.

Yet, the Cambodian people did keep thinking about their families, at least those they hoped were still alive, wherever the Khmer Rouge sent them. For these heartbroken family members, and those who recalled life before the regime, Angka Loeu declared them afflicted by a mental condition:

Simultaneously, Angka identified and proclaimed the existence of a dreaded new malady—*chhoeu sattek aram*, literally, ‘memory sickness.’ Angka considered that a person was suffering from ‘memory sickness’ if he or she thought too much about life in precommunist Cambodia Angka attempted to cure the ailment by halving the rice ration of the afflicted. Sometimes the punishment for presumed malingering was more swift and direct.

Overall, the Khmer Rouge’s aim was to create “true communism” by eradicating everything:

An Angka official in the Mongkol Borei district declared, ‘To build a democratic Cambodia by renewing everything on a new basis: to do away with every reminder of colonial and imperialist culture, whether visible or tangible or in a person’s mind; to rebuild our new Cambodia, one million men is enough. Prisoners of war [people expelled from the cities and villages controlled by the government on April 17, 1975] are no longer needed, and local chiefs are free to dispose of them as they please.’ [Emphasis in the original.]

This was not an isolated instance. It was Khmer Rouge policy:

The commander of a thirty-man communist detachment stationed at a large farm 8 kilometers west of Sisophon summoned New Villagers and warned: ‘Everything which belonged to the old society must be banished.’ All behavior henceforth had to be ‘revolutionary’: all conversation was to be conducted in ‘revolutionary terms;’ any lapses into ‘old ways’ would be severely punished.

During its heinous reign, by its own admission what were the achievements of Democratic Cambodia under the communist Khmer Rouge?

After the destruction of more than 1,000,000 human beings, a once happy country and a whole civilization, the premier of Democratic Cambodia sums up the accomplishments of Angka Loeu: In short, we have not made any noteworthy achievements except the revolutionary movement of the masses.

As Pol Pot indicated in the interview, Cambodia today is a land without universities. It also is a land without cities, commerce, art, music, literature, science or hope. And as the young refugee said, ‘There is no love anywhere.’

By 1979, the killing fields were stilled. The Khmer Rouge’s tyrannical rule over Cambodia was in history’s dustbin, but its butchers were not before the bar of justice. For those Khmer Rouge who were not internally purged by the regime, the wheels of justice ground far longer than did the “wheel of history” that Angka Loeu claimed compelled the democide. Decades passed.

Ultimately, trials were held, though the justice wrought was scant. Given the depths of the Khmer Rouge's crimes against humanity it is impossible to imagine a justice that would have been comprehensive. Still, one could hope for more than the meager justice meted out to these bloodthirsty bastards.

In Cambodia and some foreign quarters, compassionate people honored the dead and heralded the survivors' courage, vowing to never let the victims and their suffering be forgotten. Yet most of the world forgot, if they had even paid attention at the time. This lesson of history, paid for by the suffering and slaughter of the Cambodian people, was cavalierly lost in the mists of memory and indifference. So doing, the world only serves to ensure "never again" will be vowed yet again and again over the bodies buried in the latest killing fields by murderers masquerading as their victims' saviors.

Historical ignorance isn't bliss. It's suicide.