

Crimes of the Khmer Rouge regime in Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979): mechanisms of extermination, forced migrations, and problem of dealing with the past

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the criminal activities of the Khmer Rouge during the existence of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979). It presents the mechanisms of extermination, repression against ethnic and religious minorities, the persecution of educated individuals, and the functioning of the prison system, with particular emphasis on S-21 (Tuol Sleng). Internal and external forced migrations are also discussed, including the forced displacement of urban residents to rural areas and the flight of refugees to neighboring countries. The final section addresses the issue of accountability for atrocities and the blurring of the line between victim and perpetrator in post-genocidal society. The analysis indicates that Khmer Rouge terror combined direct violence with administrative population control, forced labor, famine, and displacement, and its consequences remain visible in post-war processes of memory, reconciliation, and transitional justice.*

Keywords: *Khmer Rouge; Democratic Kampuchea; Tuol Sleng (S-21); genocide; forced migration; urbicide; torture.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Khmer Rouge regime, which held power in Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979, constitutes one of the most brutal exterminatory experiences of the twentieth century¹. Under Pol Pot's leadership, the regime aimed to construct a classless, self-sufficient agrarian society. This project entailed the abolition of state institutions, private property, and cultural influences deemed foreign or imperialist. Its implementation required the complete subjugation of the population to a new social order, with mass terror serving as a fundamental instrument of policy. Forced desurbanization, the establishment of detention centers, party purges, and the systematic persecution of specific social, professional, ethnic, and religious groups formed a mutually reinforcing apparatus of repression².

The objective of this article is to present a synthesis of the mechanisms of extermination, the operation of the prison and torture system, the scope of forced migrations, and the targeted repression of specific minorities. S-21 occupies a central place in this analysis because its preserved documentation demonstrates how violence was integrated with bureaucratization and the systematic recording of victims' data³. The final section focuses on the challenges of dealing with the past: the co-existence of victims, former perpetrators, and individuals whose wartime biographies encompass both experiences, alongside the difficulties of implementing a clear-cut policy of accountability⁴.

It should be emphasized that the system did not function exclusively through centralized decision-making⁵. Local cadres executed directives while interpreting and adapting them to regional conditions. Consequently, while violence manifested in diverse forms, it was underpinned by consistent principles: pervasive suspicion toward the populace, the complete subordination of the individual to the collective, and the classification of specific social categories as impediments to the construction of a new society. This structural model facilitated the expansion of enemy categories,

¹ Kiernan, 2008, p. 9–12.

² Ibidem.

³ Tyner, 2008, p. 45–48.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Chandler, 1999, p. 14–18

generating a self-perpetuating mechanism in which successive purges eventually targeted earlier participants in the revolution⁶.

A critical distinction must be drawn between planned violence and locally executed violence⁷. Not all deaths resulted from direct executions; a significant proportion of the physical destruction stemmed from broader socio-economic policies. Consequently, an accurate account of the regime requires simultaneous examination of security structures, forced labor systems, migration policies, and population classification measures. Only through this holistic framework can one understand how repression encompassed such a vast section of society and why its structural ramifications persisted long after the formal collapse of Khmer Rouge rule⁸.

2. VICTIMS OF KILLINGS AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES:

The Khmer Rouge directed state violence against multiple social categories, with criteria for persecution evolving alongside regime policy⁹. Targets included civil servants, soldiers, and police officers associated with the Lon Nol's administration, representatives of the former political order, educated individuals, religious clergy, urban residents, ethnic minorities, and internal Khmer Rouge cadres accused of treason. Repression was thus not confined to a single demographic group. Over time, the designation of "enemy" expanded to encompass virtually anyone perceived as incompatible with the revolutionary trajectory¹⁰.

The persecution of minorities was exceptionally severe¹¹. The official state doctrine envisioned a monolithic Kampuchean nation defined by a single language—Khmer. Between 1975 and 1979, substantial proportions of the Chinese, Cham, Lao, and Thai populations were annihilated. The fate of the Vietnamese minority was particularly stark. Prior to 1978, ethnic Vietnamese constituted approximately 5% of the total population; after this period, virtually no ethnic Vietnamese remained in Cambodia who had not been forcibly repatriated or fled across the border. Foreign nationals detained at S-21 were similarly executed; surviving archival records document victims of Vietnamese, Thai, American, Indian, French, British, and Australian nationality, among others¹².

Educated professionals were systematically targeted¹³. Data indicates that the number of practicing physicians in Cambodia dropped precipitously from approximately 430 in the early 1970s to merely 43 by the end of Democratic Kampuchea. Research reports further document high mortality rates among lawyers, professors, schoolteachers, university students, journalists, artists, and Buddhist monks. Despite its deep-seated social influence, the Buddhist clergy was declared an unproductive class and subjected to systematic suppression, including forcible defrocking, expulsion from monasteries, hard labor, starvation, and disease¹⁴.

Extermination operated through both direct and indirect mechanisms¹⁵. While substantial numbers were executed, vast populations succumbed to starvation, preventable diseases, physical exhaustion, and lethal working conditions. Scholars of Cambodia frequently employ the concept of "creeping genocide" to describe this violence, which was dispersed across prisons, worksites, rural cooperatives, and administrative centers. Initial purges targeted representatives of the former state apparatus and military. Subsequent phases extended to the clergy, the intelligentsia, ethnic minorities, and eventually internal party cadres deemed politically suspect by the leadership¹⁶.

Enforced disappearances formed an integral component of this repressive landscape¹⁷. Families frequently refrained from reporting missing relatives out of fear of state retaliation. Comprehensive efforts to locate human remains and document missing persons began only after the regime's collapse. Joint initiatives by the Red Cross and the Documentation Center of Cambodia revealed the vast scope of the issue; by 2000, the Red Cross had received over 20,000 inquiries from families seeking information regarding missing Cambodians. Compiling an exhaustive register of victims remains a complex and ongoing endeavor¹⁸.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Hinton, 2004, p. 270–275.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Dentyna, 2010, p. 81.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Margolin, 1999, p. 558.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Nijakowski, 2009, p. 236.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Fawthrop & Jarvis, 2005, p. 14–15.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Sim, n.d., Vietnamese prisoners at Tuol Sleng.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

Internal party purges constituted another significant dimension of state violence¹⁹. Cadres within the Khmer Rouge apparatus were routinely branded as traitors upon the slightest suspicion of disloyalty to the leadership²⁰. A prominent example is Hu Nim, Minister of Information and Propaganda and a long-standing member of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, who was arrested in 1977 and subsequently executed at S-21²¹. Such cases demonstrate that high status within the regime offered no immunity. On the contrary, a system reliant on uncovering perpetual conspiracies continuously produced internal enemies, driving successive waves of purges²².

Mass exterminations were further intensified by regional party purges²³. Severe purges swept the Northwestern Zone in 1977, followed by systematic destruction in the Eastern Zone in 1978. Victims were thus defined not only by ethnic, religious, or socio-economic markers, but also by geographic origin and perceived ties to local power factions²⁴.

3. DETENTION AND TORTURE:

The apparatus of repression relied on an expansive and fluid conceptualization of the "enemy"²⁵. Four principal target groups are identified: individuals affiliated with the Lon Nol regime, persons associated with urban life or administration, ethnic minorities, and Khmer Rouge cadres accused of subversion. Critical incriminations included prior state service, endorsement of Western values, non-Khmer heritage, or overt opposition to revolutionary doctrine. In practice, arrest was synonymous with guilt, and detainees were denied any right to legal defense²⁶.

The regime maintained a distinction between individuals slated for gradual attrition and high-value prisoners selected for immediate liquidation²⁷. Detention facilities frequently deviated from conventional prison architecture; schools, pagodas, former colonial prisons, and administrative structures were repurposed as "re-education centers" or regional security posts. Living conditions were catastrophic: starvation rations, absence of medical care, complete lack of sanitation, and extreme overcrowding. Malnutrition, disease, and physical exhaustion functioned as systematic instruments of attrition²⁸.

The central nexus of this system was S-21, or Tuol Sleng, which operated as a secret facility for detention, interrogation, torture, and execution²⁹. S-21 functioned with high administrative precision: prisoners were photographed, cataloged, subjected to structured interrogations, and meticulously documented. Interrogation units operated systematically to extract confessions regarding alleged espionage or treason. Forced confessions routinely implicated additional individuals, driving further waves of arrests³⁰.

S-21 operated under direct party oversight and was commanded by Kang Keck Ieu ("Duch")³¹. The facility maintained specialized administrative, technical, guard, and interrogation personnel. A large proportion of the staff consisted of young, poorly educated cadres subjected to intense political indoctrination. Operational secrecy was treated as a paramount security imperative. The extensive record-keeping fulfilled both functional and ideological purposes, serving as tangible proof of the "struggle" against internal subversion and enabling senior leadership to monitor prison operations³².

Interrogations were prolonged and systematic³³. Interrogators employed psychological intimidation, coercion, deceptions, and severe physical violence. Torture was primarily designed to extract signed confessions rather than to cause immediate death. Documented techniques included beatings, electrocution, asphyxiation, sleep deprivation, laceration, waterboarding, and other forms of physical abuse³⁴. Female detainees were additionally

¹⁹ Quigley, 2012, p. 3.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ *Confession of Hu Nim (n.d.)*

²² Quigley, 2012, p. 3.

²³ Ibidem..

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Skopiec, 2007, p. 231–242.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ De Nike et al., 2000, p. 535.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Chandler, 1999, p. 3

³⁰ Ibidem; International Commission on Missing Persons, n.d., Cambodia.

³¹ Korstjens, 2016, p. 133–135.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Margolin, 1999, p. 575–577.

³⁴ Ibidem.

subjected to sexual violence and systematic humiliation. Should a prisoner die prior to signing the requisite confession, the interrogators themselves faced disciplinary measures or execution³⁵.

Following confession extraction, the vast majority of detainees were marked for liquidation³⁶. Executions were initially conducted near S-21; subsequently, prisoners were transferred to the Choeung Ek killing fields. By 1977, the dramatic influx of detainees necessitated large-scale executions beyond Tuol Sleng. Archival data indicates that a total of 12,273 prisoners passed through S-21, a substantial majority of whom were cadres from the Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea or Democratic Kampuchea administration. This underscores how the security apparatus ultimately consumed its own ranks³⁷.

S-21 remains central to historiographical research on Democratic Kampuchea primarily due to the preservation of its archives³⁸. Photographs, confessions, and prisoner rosters demonstrate that violence was not merely spontaneous brutality by local actors, but a highly bureaucratic, supervised, and procedural policy³⁹.

The operational framework of S-21 was inherently self-perpetuating⁴⁰. Because extracted confessions were treated as verified proof of guilt—and routinely contained lists of alleged co-conspirators—a single arrest generated exponential numbers of subsequent detentions. Interrogators did not seek objective truth or evidence of innocence; their sole function was to compile documentation confirming pre-determined guilt. Torture thus operated as a mechanism for manufacturing "evidence," which was then institutionalized within state archives as official historical record⁴¹.

While S-21 was a crucial facility, the broader system of state violence extended far beyond a single location⁴². Regional security centers operated across the country, and extrajudicial killings occurred frequently outside formal detention sites. Facilities such as Kraing Tachan illustrate this broader network; survivor testimonies document systematic torture, executions, and forced burial details. These accounts complement the findings from S-21, confirming that the machinery of terror operated as a decentralized network⁴³.

Although admissions to S-21 declined toward late 1978, this shift reflected geopolitical realignments rather than systemic reform⁴⁴. The reduction in detentions coincided with preparations for war with Vietnam and attempts to rally popular support. However, the system left behind a vast physical infrastructure of repression and a population severely depleted by purges and forced labor⁴⁵.

4. FORCED MIGRANTS:

Forced migrations in Democratic Kampuchea encompassed both internal population transfers and international refugee flows⁴⁶. The most radical manifestation of internal displacement was the complete evacuation of urban centers and the forcible relocation of their inhabitants to agrarian communes—a process defined in scholarly literature as urbicide. In the case of Phnom Penh, approximately 80% of the population was expelled within days, displacing millions. While officially justified as a defensive measure against potential military bombardment, the operation effectively dismantled urban social structures and subjugated "new people" to forced agricultural labor⁴⁷.

Following displacement, urban evacuees were subjected to extreme agricultural labor regimes, accompanied by severe malnutrition, malaria, untreated diseases, and physical exhaustion⁴⁸. Forced migration was thus not merely physical relocation, but a deliberate instrument of social engineering intended to boost agricultural yields and construct an autarkic economy. Concurrently, urban origin, formal education, and prior socio-economic status marked these populations for ongoing state surveillance and persecution⁴⁹.

³⁵ Ibidem,

³⁶ Hinton, 2004, p. 151.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Madra, 2009, Khmer Rouge torture survivor.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Brewer, 2015, How two men survived a prison.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Sothanarith, 2015, Survivor describes torture methods.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Chandler, 1999, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Heuveline, 2001, *The Demographic Analysis of Mortality Crises: The Case of Cambodia, 1970-1979*,

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Skopiec, 2007, p. 247.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

The second dimension involved cross-border flight. Thousands of Cambodians sought refuge in Thailand and Vietnam⁵⁰. Approximately 50,000 individuals fled to Thailand during Pol Pot's rule, while an estimated 150,000 escaped to Vietnam⁵¹. Following the outbreak of full-scale military conflict between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam in late 1978, refugee movements escalated dramatically. Between 1979 and 1981, hundreds of thousands departed the country, leading to subsequent third-country resettlement in the United States, France, Australia, and Canada⁵².

The refugee crisis carried significant geopolitical ramifications⁵³. Border camps along the Thai-Cambodian frontier became sites of competition for international humanitarian assistance and proxy political struggles. The eventual repatriation and reintegration of displaced populations did not fully resolve the enduring trauma of forced migration. The loss of family members, property, ancestral homes, and social status profoundly complicated post-conflict reconstruction and societal reconciliation⁵⁴.

The evacuation of Phnom Penh also carried deep symbolic weight⁵⁵. Urban populations were categorized as remnants of the "old society," their professional skills and lifestyle designated as existential threats to the revolution. Survivor testimonies detail how individuals died along evacuation routes, families were forcibly separated, and armed guards maintained continuous displacement. Upon arrival at rural destinations, "new people" remained under strict surveillance and were assigned to the most hazardous physical labor⁵⁶.

External flight did not guarantee security⁵⁷. Border camps depended entirely on international aid while remaining embedded in active military conflict zones. While some refugees resided in camps temporarily prior to repatriation, others spent years awaiting third-country resettlement. The long-term consequences of forced exile required individuals to rebuild familial, economic, and social lives in foreign environments while processing deep-seated psychological trauma⁵⁸.

5. TARGETED POPULATIONS

Ethnic and religious minorities occupied a distinct position within the regime's machinery of repression⁵⁹. The Cham, one of Cambodia's largest ethnic minorities, were initially viewed as potential allies due to their reputation as fierce fighters. However, state policy toward them became aggressively hostile⁶⁰. Cham villages were systematically dismantled, traditional names were replaced with Khmer alternatives, the use of the Cham language and traditional attire was outlawed, and Cham individuals were purged from administrative roles. In 1978, these repressions provoked armed Cham uprisings against the regime⁶¹.

Repression similarly extended to the Khmer Loeu, the indigenous highland populations that had historically served as a critical support base for the early Khmer Rouge movement⁶². By late 1976, the regime began destroying highland settlements and forcibly moving residents to lowland valleys to standardize rice production. This demonstrates that prior political loyalty provided no safeguard against state violence once a community conflicted with evolving economic policies⁶³.

Religious groups faced total suppression⁶⁴. The destruction of mosques, prohibition of religious rites, burning of the Quran, and execution of Islamic leaders aimed to eradicate independent religious structures. Catholic and Protestant communities were similarly targeted under accusations of harboring foreign ties and engaging in espionage. In the case of Theravada Buddhism, the regime systematically targeted monks, monasteries, and institutional networks. Monks were forcibly defrocked and assigned to manual labor, religious practices were criminalized, and sacred sites were desecrated or repurposed into storage facilities and detention centers⁶⁵.

⁵⁰ Story: *Cambodians, Page 1. Immigration: refugees and resettlement*, (n.d.); *Cambodia. Migration and Refugees* (n.d.)

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² *Cambodia. Migration and Refugees* (n.d.); L. Melnick, 1990, *Cambodians in the Bronx and Amherst*,

⁵³ Skopiec, 2007, pp. 243–248.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Heuveline, 2001, *The Demographic Analysis of Mortality Crises: The Case of Cambodia, 1970-1979*,

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Tyner et al., 2018, pp. 163–165.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ J.-L. Margolin, 1999, p. 559.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ Peou, 2013, p. 141; Migration Heritage Centre NSW, n.d., Phiny Ung.

⁶² Margolin, 1999, p. 558.

⁶³ Ibidem; Yoon, n.d., *The long-run impact of forced migration*.

⁶⁴ Margolin, 1999, p. 559.

⁶⁵ Te Ara, n.d., *Cambodians: Immigration, refugees and resettlement*; Nijakowski, 2009, p. 237, A. Jelonek, 2008, p. 168-169.

State control extended aggressively into the private sphere, notably through regulated family structures⁶⁶. Seeking to rapidly expand the national population, the administration instituted forced mass marriages. Spouses were selected by state cadres, and refusal to comply resulted in assigned "re-education" or execution. This level of intervention demonstrated that regime control encompassed not only labor and residence, but the most intimate dimensions of personal life⁶⁷.

The Cham experience highlights that state violence operated on both physical and cultural levels⁶⁸. Prohibitions on language, name alterations, and dress restrictions represented an effort to assimilate minority identity into a standardized Khmer archetype. Similarly, actions against religious institutions sought to eliminate autonomous social organizations capable of competing with the authority of *Angkar*. Physical extermination and cultural destruction functioned as complementary policies⁶⁹.

6. VICTIMS OR PERPETRATORS?

Following the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, assigning accountability proved exceptionally complex due to the ambiguous wartime trajectories of many citizens⁷⁰. Numerous former Khmer Rouge cadres defected to opposing factions, while others integrated into local communities and gradually assumed leadership positions⁷¹. A prominent example is Hun Sen, who served as a lower-level Khmer Rouge commander before defecting to Vietnam in 1977 and subsequently participating in the overthrow of the regime⁷². His subsequent political ascendancy significantly restricted public scrutiny of his early military career⁷³.

Parallel complexities emerged at the community level⁷⁴. Research documents the case of Ta Kim, a former Khmer Rouge official responsible for local military units. Following the regime's collapse, he returned to his home village; while older residents were aware of his past, younger generations came to view him primarily as a respected village elder active in local temple life⁷⁵. Former commanders and low-level operatives frequently transitioned into roles as Buddhist monks, temple lay custodians, traditional healers, or community leaders⁷⁶.

The case of "Grandfather Khan," documented by Alex Hinton, illustrates the further blurring of accountability⁷⁷. Khan had served with the Khmer Rouge and allegedly managed a local detention site. In the post-war period, he denied the existence of the camp and rejected allegations of murder, claiming he had merely followed orders. Simultaneously, he continued to reside alongside community members who had witnessed the local atrocities⁷⁸.

This dynamic generates friction between the demands of legal justice and the practical requirements of social cohesion. Emily Zucker observes that integrating former perpetrators into local life can lead to the deliberate suppression of personal memory regarding crimes, yet it may simultaneously stabilize daily social interactions⁷⁹. Within a Buddhist socio-cultural framework, active participation in community and religious life is often interpreted as a mechanism for accumulating merit and redeeming past actions⁸⁰.

These localized dynamics intersected directly with the work of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)⁸¹. While formal judicial proceedings marked an important step toward legal accountability, their scope remained strictly confined to senior leaders and those most responsible, leaving lower-level perpetrators unprosecuted. In a society where the boundaries between victim, bystander, subordinate, and perpetrator were frequently fluid, transitional justice mechanisms had to navigate complex evidentiary challenges alongside deep-seated local memories. Accountability was further complicated by the fact that after 1979, many former cadres were integrated into newly formed state and local administrative structures. While their administrative experience facilitated basic state reconstruction in the wake of demographic and institutional collapse, it severely constrained efforts to fully expose criminal

⁶⁶ Cook, 2014, p. 161.

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Eastmond & Ojendal, 1999, pp. 40–41.

⁶⁹ Peou, 2013, p. 141.

⁷⁰ Jelonek, 2008, p. 168–169.

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² Kortsjens, 2016, p. 142.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ Zucker, 2013, p. 794–795.

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ Nijakowski, 2009, p. 237.

⁷⁷ Hinton, 2004, p. 137.

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

⁷⁹ Zucker, 2013, p. 798.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Ratner et al., 2009, p. 355.

responsibility. In communities where former perpetrators lived as neighbors, relatives, civil servants, or religious leaders, formal accusations risked reigniting local conflicts⁸².

Local tolerance toward former cadres should not be interpreted solely as collective amnesia. It frequently stemmed from the pragmatic necessity of coexisting with fellow community members, alongside cultural frameworks that sought to render traumatic histories manageable within daily life. The persistent tension between historical memory and social normalization remains a central aspect of Cambodia's post-genocidal experience.

7. SUMMARY:

The legacy of Democratic Kampuchea continues to pose profound historiographical, sociological, and legal challenges⁸³. The mechanisms of Khmer Rouge terror encompassed direct violence and torture alongside deliberate starvation, forced labor, mass displacement, and totalitarian administrative control. S-21 stands as a primary example of bureaucratized state violence, its preserved archives providing clear evidence of how political enemies were systematically identified, interrogated, and eliminated⁸⁴.

The forced evacuation of urban centers, the targeted persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, and the mass flight of refugees resulted in the deep fragmentation of Cambodian society⁸⁵. Post-1979 reconstruction required not only rebuilding state institutions, but also navigating the social realities of a post-genocidal society in which former perpetrators continued to live alongside victims, often assuming roles of local authority⁸⁶.

Documenting victim experiences and preserving archival records remain essential prerequisites for historical reconciliation. The Cambodian experience demonstrates that transitional justice must balance formal legal accountability with complex local social structures, ambiguous individual biographies, and the imperative of community rebuilding. Ultimately, mass violence in Democratic Kampuchea succeeded not through physical force alone, but through the systematic control of information, physical movement, labor, family structure, and personal identity. While S-21 remains the most documented symbol of this system, identical mechanisms operated across a broad network of regional security centers. Understanding these structural dynamics is essential for comprehending both the scale of the atrocities and the enduring challenges of achieving post-conflict justice.

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⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ Zucker, 2013, p. 794–798.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

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