



CHOICES IN A GENOCIDE: Cambodia 1975 - 1979

“To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss.”[1]

Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge were responsible for the death of approximately 2 million people. The choice between who was targeted and who was not, seemed arbitrary – anyone from ‘intellectuals’ who were identified as such for wearing glasses, to children of middle-class families, from pregnant women to schoolteachers - anyone could be labeled as the *enemy*.

Other choices made during this time were equally blurred. The choices people made were not always black and white. Some are easier to categorise than others – and some remain in a perpetual state of grey.

If you did not fit into the ideal of *Old People/citizens*, you were targeted[2]. This took various forms including; forced evictions to rural areas, re-education, imprisonment, torture – and death in the so-called killing fields. Schools were repurposed into prisons – one of the most infamous was Tuol Sleng – known as S-21. The person responsible for this institution – and who, personally, oversaw the murder of at least 14 000 people - was Kain Guek Eav – or Comrade Duch. Previously a mathematics teacher, he became Pol Pot’s

premier executioner and security chief.[3] In his trial, Duch claimed that guards were instructed to “smash to bits” traitors and counter-revolutionaries – “everyone who was arrested and sent to S-21 was presumed dead already.”[4] Detainees were ordered to suppress cries of agony as Khmer Rouge guards, many of whom were child soldiers, sought to extract confessions for non-existent crimes.

Duch hid for two decades after the genocide. He was tracked down by a journalist in a remote region of Cambodia. Duch was the first perpetrator to be put on trial in 2010 – he was case 001. He stood in front of a U.N-backed tribunal and appeared tearful and

remorseful for his actions. He received a 35-year jail sentence through the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), which he appealed based on the idea that he was only “obeying orders”.[5] On the 3rd of February 2012, an upper court U.N War Crimes Tribunal rejected his appeal and extended his sentence to life



Kain Guek Eav, Comrade Duch, at the ECCC.(BBC)

“guards were instructed to ‘smash to bits’ traitors and counter-revolutionaries”



Tuol Sleng: most of the classrooms in the re-purposed school, were divided into small cells (Wikipedia)

1) USHMM. Cambodia. *Introduction: Cambodia 1975-1979*. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/cambodia-1975#:~:text=“To%20keep%20you%20is%20no%20gain,%20to%20lose%20you%20is%20no%20loss.”>

2) Holocaust Museum Houston. Library: *Genocide in Cambodia*. <https://hnh.org/library/research/genocide-in-cambodia-guide/>

3) Reuters World. *Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge executioner turned born-again Christian, Duch, dies* <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/cambodias-khmer-rouge-executioner-turned-born-again-christian-duch-dies-idUSKBN25T0FP/>

4) ABC News (2020). *Khmer Rouge prison commander Comrade Duch dies in Cambodia at 77*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-02/khmer-rouge-prison-commander-duch-dies-in-cambodia/12620486>

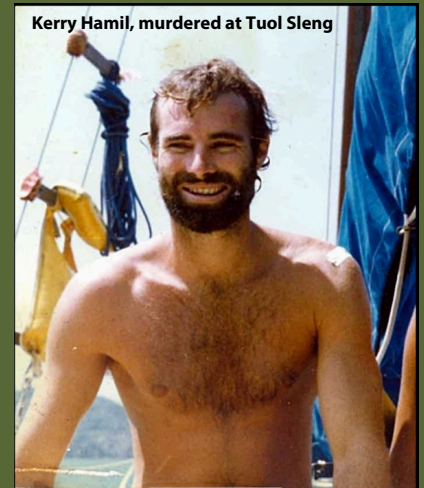
5) BBC (2020). *Cambodia genocide: Khmer Rouge prison chief Comrade Duch dies* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53994189>

imprisonment because of his “shocking and heinous crimes”. [6] The ruling was final with no other chance for appeal. After spending 10 years in jail, Comrade Duch died aged 77.

Interestingly, although Duch initially expressed remorse and offered an apology – he then appealed his sentence using the excuse that he was only obeying orders. This initial apology could allude to the belief that he was contrite, accepting of his actions, his choices – and the consequences thereof. The claim that he was simply obeying orders complicates this initial assumption and begs the question of whether an apology without accountability is still worth something?

Chanrithy Him, a child survivor of the genocide, and Kerry Hamill, a New Zealander captured by the Khmer Rouge, both resisted in their own ways. Him explains that many Cambodians engaged in emotional resistance – examples include calling loved ones by their real names instead of the obligatory ‘Comrade’. She also understood the importance of preserving memory:

“Emotionally resisting the Khmer Rouge meant I recognised evil. I mentally resisted its forces and became a human recorder... there would come a day to share my memories, giving voice to children who can’t speak for themselves... to my deceased family members and to those whose remains are in unmarked mass graves scattered throughout Cambodia.”[7]



“Chanrithy Him and Kerry Hamill, captured by the Khmer Rouge, both resisted in their own ways.”

Hamill left hidden messages to his family in his confessions at S-21. He confessed that *“Colonel Sanders (of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame) was one of his superiors.”* Hamill even referenced a public speaking instructor named *“S Tarr”* - a direct message to his adoring mother Esther[8].

“He was sending a message to our mother, a message of love and hope, and it was as if, whatever the final outcome, he would have the last say.”[9]

Victims – like Him and Hamill, may not have had any choice in what happened to them – but they made a choice in how they chose to resist.

Child soldiers played a particularly troubling role. Kampuchea discouraged and repressed any form of family life. Everyone was forced to live in communal work camps, but at the age of 8, most children were sent away to live with other children under 2 or 3 senior

Khmer Rouge officials. Traditional norms of respect for elders were repressed and the Comrade Child was praised as one who was pure and unsullied by the corrupt past of the adults. Special spy units, *Kang Chhlop*, [10] were composed of children and were used to spy on adults.

“In the Pol Pot times children could catch an adult if they thought they had done wrong. They could beat the adult. For example, if an adult was caught stealing fruit a child could tell the soldiers: ‘look they are our enemies.’ Then the soldiers would set a chair for the child to stand on so that they could beat the adult’s head.”[11]

Children rose quickly up the ranks of the Khmer Rouge and it was not unusual for children to oversee workcamps by the age of 12. Camps run by youths became notorious for the extreme and arbitrary violence inflicted on the inmates. Even after Cambodia was liberated, there remained a residual fear of children in the

6) DW (Deutsche Welle) News. Former Khmer Rouge's prison chief found guilty of war crimes <https://www.dw.com/en/former-khmer-rouges-prison-chief-found-guilty-of-war-crimes/>

7) Chanrithy Him, 2006. *When Broken Glass Floats – Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge*. 2006

8) Brother Number One - Documentary Blog <https://bno-documentary.blogspot.com/2009/08/robs-victim-testimony-to-extraordinary.html>

9) Brother Number One - Documentary Blog <https://bno-documentary.blogspot.com/2009/08/robs-victim-testimony-to-extraordinary.html>

10) The Open University, Open Learn: *Children in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge* <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/children-and-violence-introductory-international-and-interdisciplinary-approach/content-section-4.3.2>

11) Boyden and Gibbs, 1997, p.44 The Open University, Open Learn: *Children in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge* <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/children-and-violence-introductory-international-and-interdisciplinary-approach/content-section-4.3.2>

country[12]. Children were groomed to be perpetrators – they were taught that this was the right thing to do. Should the same accountability we face as adults be expected of children?

Reports of the atrocities occurring within Cambodia started to trickle out into the international community. In Washington US officials publicly denounced the crimes.

A memo from a National Security Advisor – Brent Scowcroft – to President Ford, illustrates detailed knowledge of the regime’s brutal efforts to remake the country. Gradually, the United States took a stronger stance against the Khmer Rouge – at least in public statements. In April 1978, President Carter declared them to be “*the worst violator of human rights in the world today*”.[13] Despite this strong statement, no affirmative steps were made by the United States to end the crimes.

The role Vietnam played during this genocide is an interesting one to unpack:



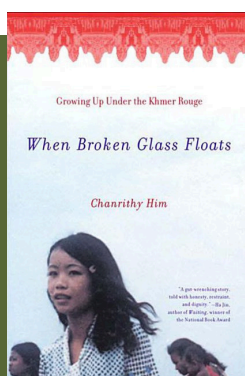
Vietnamese tanks moving into Cambodia to confront the Khmer Rouge. (vietnamtheartofwar.com)

“On the morning of January 7, 1979, a small unit of the Vietnamese army swept into Phnom Penh virtually without firing a shot and ended the violent reign of the Khmer Rouge.”[14]

Within two weeks the genocidal government had fled Phnom Penh for Thailand, and the Vietnamese installed a puppet regime called The People’s Republic of Kampuchea – this effectively ended the genocide. Over the next decade, Cambodia struggled back to its feet - private property was restored; schools reopened, and some Buddhist practices were reintroduced; cities were repopulated; and, with freedom of movement, internal trade flourished. At the same time, at least 500,000 Cambodians, including some 100,000 associated with the communists, fled to Thailand in the aftermath of Democratic Kampuchea’s fall due to the hardship, uncertainty, and disorder that accompanied the installation of the new regime.[15]

Vietnamese presence in Cambodia was initially seen as liberation for those who had been oppressed during the Khmer Rouge rule. However – the fact that Vietnam kept troops stationed in Cambodia for over a decade - leads one to question this assumption.

Ultimately, choices during the genocide in Cambodia reveal the complexities of human behavior and the challenges of categorizing individuals as perpetrators, victims, bystanders, or upstanders. History is made by the choices people make. It is important to find the nuances within the seemingly ‘black and white,’ as choices are often not what they seem. It behooves us to investigate the choices made as it is through this that the complete story unfolds. The choices we make – whether they are active or inactive - like America’s choice not to act – have enormous ripple effects through history.



READ *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer* by Chanrithy Him

12) Boyden and Gibbs, 1997, p.98 The Open University, Open Learn: Children in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/children-and-violence-introductory-international-and-interdisciplinary-approach/content-section-4.3.2>

13) USHMM. Cambodia. *The International Response to the Khmer Rouge*. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/international-response>

14) The Diplomat (2018). Magazine. *Vietnam’s Invasion of Cambodia, Revisited*. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/vietnams-invasion-of-cambodia-revisited/>

15) Britannica. *Cambodia: Vietnamese Intervention*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cambodia/Vietnamese-intervention>