

Blue Scarves and Yellow Stars:

Classification and Symbolization in the Cambodian Genocide

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April 17, 1975 was a day of hope and horror for the people of Cambodia. It was the day the Khmer Rouge Communists rolled into Phnom Penh and took control of the government. Cheering people lined the streets hoping for peace. What they got instead was horror--one of the worst genocides in human history.

Premeditated murder. Genocide as state policy. Intentional killing of all "class enemies," elimination of cities and city dwellers, destruction of every ethnic and religious minority, mass murder of the Eastern Zone of Democratic Kampuchea, execution of all teachers, doctors, lawyers, soldiers and government officials. If you wore glasses, or could speak a foreign language, or were educated, you were classified as an enemy; were arrested, tortured, then killed. From 1975 through 1978, according to censuses taken by the Cambodian Genocide Project in Cambodian villages, 1.7 million to 2.2 million people died out of a population of eight million. Half a million to a million were intentionally murdered. Another million were starved or worked to death in the forced labor communes the Khmer Rouge imposed at gunpoint in every region of the country.

The horror began even before April 17, 1975, in regions controlled by the Khmer Rouge. People who lived in Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, Takeo, and other provinces that fell in 1972 tell of the mass murders that began in those provinces even then.

The blue-print for the Khmer Rouge revolution, the *Mein Kampf* of Kampuchea, was written in 1956 by Khieu Samphan, in his Ph.D. dissertation in economics at a French university. Khieu Samphan and his close friends, Pol Pot (a.k.a. Saloth Sar) and Ieng Sary were all members of the French Communist party while they were students in France. It was and is a Marxist-Leninist party. It was also Stalinist. The Khmer Rouge leaders read the Marxist theorists of the day, people like Jean-Paul Sartre, Andre Gunder Frank, and Mao-Tse-tung. And they planned a Communist revolution to put their ideas into practice. Later, when the Maoist cultural revolution wreaked terror in China, they wholeheartedly added its radical equalitarianism to their own.

Marxism-Leninism (and its Maoist variant) teaches that revolutions must be violent, that class struggles are inevitable, and that class enemies must be crushed. In every Communist revolution so far, crushed means killed.

Apologists for Communist revolutions like to use euphemisms like purged, eliminated, or liquidated. Euphemisms allow people to avoid thinking; they are shields against consciousness; earplugs to shut out the screams of the murdered and the cries of the conscience. I will not use euphemisms here. In Democratic Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge murdered about two million people.

In this paper I will begin to explain why and how the Pol Pot regime committed this genocide. I have spent much of the past eight years working to bring the Khmer Rouge leaders to justice for their crimes. I will describe what interviews with survivors inside Cambodia have revealed about the first two operations in the genocidal process: classification and symbolization.

Classification and Symbolization

At the beginning of their planning for the Holocaust, the National Socialists in Germany passed detailed laws defining membership in the Jewish race, and then conducted inquiries to identify who were members of the race. Later, they decreed that each Jew had to wear a yellow star. It was a symbolic marker. It signified that this person was not to be seen as an individual person but as a member of a class, a classification determined by religion and "race." The yellow star marked a classification of people the Nazis had decided to kill. The ultimate depersonalization--murder, killing persons--was preceded by the depersonalization of classification and symbolization, the Nuremberg laws and the yellow star.

The Khmer Rouge classified, too. First, they classified people as "base people"--people under Khmer Rouge control before April 17, 1975 -- and new people -- mostly city people. They had read André Gunder Frank's Marxist theory that cities are parasitic on the countryside, that only labor value is true value, that cities extract surplus value from the rural areas. Therefore, immediately after they took power, the Khmer Rouge evacuated all the cities at gunpoint. Patients in hospitals in the middle of operations were forced to leave, and to die. Women in labor were made to get up and walk and their new babies died in the scorching sun. A whole infant ward at the Calmette Hospital was abandoned when the Khmer Rouge forced the staff to leave. The ward became a mass grave.

The new people were marked for heavier labor, less food, and much harsher treatment than the base people. Children were taken away from their parents and forced to work in children's brigades. If a new person complained of the food shortages and slave labor, he or she was taken away to the killing fields.

In 1976, people were reclassified as full rights (base) people, candidates, and depositees --so called because they included most of the new people who had been deposited from the cities into the communes. Depositees were marked for destruction. Their rations were reduced to two bowls of rice soup per day. Hundreds of thousands starved.

The Khmer Rouge leadership boasted over their radio station that only one or two million people out of the population were needed to build the new agrarian communist utopia. As for the others, as their proverb put it, "if they survive no gain, if they die, no loss. "

Hundreds of thousands of the new people, and later the depositees, were taken out, shackled, to dig their own mass graves. Then the Khmer Rouge soldiers beat them to death with iron bars and hoes or buried them alive. A Khmer Rouge extermination prison directive ordered, "Bullets are not to be wasted."

The Khmer Rouge also classified by religion and ethnic group. They abolished all religion and dispersed minority groups, forbidding them to speak their languages or to practice their customs.

The Cham Muslims were especially singled out for murder. A Central Committee directive ordered, "The Cham nation no longer exists on Kampuchean soil belonging to the Khmer. Accordingly, the Cham nationality, language, customs and religious beliefs must be immediately abolished. Those who fail to obey this order will suffer all the consequences for their acts of opposition to Angkar," the Khmer Rouge high command.

Whole Cham villages were murdered. Cham children were taken away from their parents and raised as Khmers. Chams were not permitted to speak their language. Though Muslims, they were forced to eat pork. Their leaders were killed. "We drank tears," said a Cham to me.

Most Chams were classified as "new people" because they were Cham. Censuses I have taken in Cham villages show that a quarter to a third, over a hundred thousand of them, died out of a pre-Khmer Rouge population of about 200,000. There is evidence that the Khmer Rouge planned to kill the rest of the Cham and were only stopped by the Vietnamese invasion on Christmas Day of 1978.

The Khmer Rouge also disrobed all Buddhist monks, subjected them to brutal forced labor and wiped out the practice of Buddhism. They did the same to Christianity, leaving only one Khmer pastor, who survived only because he hid his identity. Chinese and Vietnamese minorities were also marked for murder.

Perhaps the most massive murder of all was committed on the population of the Eastern zone of Democratic Kampuchea in 1978, in the provinces of Svay Rieng, Prey Veng and parts of Kandal and Kompong Cham near the Vietnamese border. The Khmer Rouge leaders declared the entire population of this region to have "Khmer bodies, but Vietnamese heads." In 1978 most of the Eastern zone people were evacuated to other provinces where they were placed in forced labor communes, then systematically underfed and overworked, often to death. Many were murdered outright.

In December, 1986, while interviewing witnesses in that region with Australian historian Ben Kiernan, we made a dramatic discovery of the symbolic means the Khmer Rouge leaders used to mark Eastern zone people for extermination. It is the clinching proof that the Eastern zone genocide was ordered by the Khmer Rouge leadership in Phnom Penh.

The people of the Eastern zone were evacuated up the rivers and roads to Phnom Penh, then sent onward to other provinces. At Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge issued every man, woman and child from the Eastern zone a new blue and white checked scarf, a "kroma."

The Khmer Rouge then required them to wear the scarf at all times. "Other people wore red and white or yellow and white scarves, but weren't allowed to wear blue and white scarves," Huy Rady, an eye-witness explained. "People from the Eastern zone would be known by their scarf. If you were wearing a blue scarf, they would kill you.

There was a plan to kill all the Eastern zone people. They were not going to spare any of them."

The blue scarf was the yellow star. It was a symbol of a classification made by the Khmer Rouge Central Committee and imposed by its own cadres in Phnom Penh. It is the clearest

evidence we have yet gathered of the genocidal intent of the Khmer Rouge. As a witness told me, "I have seen the Khmer Rouge come to a place and take away the people with blue scarves. Every day was a killing day. They put on a killing sign."

Chhun Vun of lower Neak Leung village explained, "They could tell who was an Eastern zone person. No one else wore blue scarves. The blue scarves were distributed to us directly by Pol Pot's Standing Group, the Permanent Committee of the Party. They distributed them to everyone of the Eastern Zone. The scarves were distributed as a sign in Phnom Penh city at Chbar Ampeou."

I asked Chhun Vun, "If a Pursat base person wanted to wear a blue scarf would the Khmer Rouge permit it?" He answered, "They were absolutely not allowed to wear the clothes of the Eastern Zone people. They planned to kill us all."

Genocide

It is human to classify. Indeed, structural linguists who follow Roman Jakobson believe that classification and combination are the two fundamental operations of the human mind. We classify whenever we name something or describe someone. Human beings are the symbol-using animal; in symbolizing, we classify. But our symbols and our classifications are made, are invented, by us. They are our product. They are abstractions away from the concrete reality of the world of persons.

The problem is not that we humans classify. It is that we treat the classifications as if they had ultimate reality. We forget that it is we who made the classifications and we treat our abstractions as if they were concrete. To use Whitehead's term, we misplace concreteness. We human beings overvalue our abstractions and turn them against other persons and even against ourselves. Like the nuclear weapons and guns we have invented because of our extraordinary ability to symbolize, we turn our own creations, our own symbolic classifications, against ourselves. And we kill with them.

Classifications and symbolizations that define group boundaries and that exclude people who are enemies are by nature depersonalizing. Totalitarian regimes like the Khmer Rouge are regimes of ultimate depersonalization. Even the leaders referred to themselves as Brother Number One and Brother Number Two in their orders to the Director of the Tuol Sleng extermination prison.

Genocide is defined in the international convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, as "the intentional destruction in whole or in part of a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such."

The Khmer Rouge committed genocide when they classified the Cham Muslims, the Buddhist monks, Christians, and other groups as class enemies and then destroyed them. They may also have committed legal genocide, and certainly committed politicide, a crime against humanity, by classifying part of the Democratic Kampuchean national group, the people of the Eastern Zone, as enemies, marking them with blue scarves, and marching them to their deaths.

Classification and symbolization are the first two operations in the genocidal process. Later operations, which may be both concurrent and sequential, are vilification (dehumanization), organization, polarization, preparation, and extermination.

Vilification (dehumanization), the third stage of genocide, is the process by which members of a class are designated as enemies. The Nazis vilified Jews as subhuman rats and vermin. In the Tuol Sleng extermination prison, people -- persons -- were photographed with numbers and forced to "confess" they were animals, not persons, before being murdered by the guards. People of the Eastern Zone were vilified as possessing corrupt, enemy Vietnamese minds.

Organization, the fourth stage of genocide, is necessary because genocide is a group crime. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge literally referred to their "party center" as the Angkar, the "organization." Orders came from a shadowy authority, a supernatural force, not individuals.

Polarization is a tool of all genocidal regimes, used to target people they designate as "enemies of the people" "traitors," "collaborators", or "counter-revolutionaries." Genocidal regimes have a need to conduct internal purges of their own ranks to identify and blame members of their regime they suspect of causing the inevitable failures of totalitarian rule. That is why many of the victims at the infamous Tuol Sleng extermination prison in Phnom Penh, which killed at least 14,000 people, were cadres from the Khmer Rouge themselves.

Preparation, the penultimate stage of genocide, is the operation when extermination prisons are built and members of vilified groups (class enemies, the Cham, people from: the Eastern zone) are identified and are transported to them. It is the moment when Dr. Mengele, the Doctor of Death, beckons to those who are doomed.

One of the striking needs of the genocidal mind is the need for orderly determination of who will be included in the groups to be killed. The Nazis kept meticulous records of their crimes, including records of those classified and identified for murder, the lists of the damned. The Khmer Rouge, too, kept voluminous records in their extermination prisons, and tortured their victims to reveal names of others in the network of class enemies. They photographed each victim of the Tuol Sleng prison, including the children. Kinship identification was enough for condemnation to death, since it was Khmer Rouge policy to kill entire families. The stated purpose was to prevent later bitterness toward the Angkar by the children of enemies who had been executed.

The final criminal stage of genocide is extermination. The individuals identified as members of vilified groups are taken to the killing fields and murdered. At this stage a strange means rationality takes over, an ethic of efficiency. The most efficient, lowest cost method of mass murder is preferred and bureaucracies are organized to administer the murder in an orderly, "rational" way.

The SS chose an ordinary insecticide, Zyklon B, as the lowest cost, most efficient means of exterminating the Jewish "vermin". The Khmer Rouge murder weapons of choice were ordinary hoes and iron bars. The victims were tied together in a line, and forced to kneel at the edge of mass graves they had been forced to dig. Then the Khmer Rouge guards beat each victim to death by blows to the skull, severing the spinal cord.

In Kandal and Kompong Speu provinces, along with the many mass graves filled with thousands of bodies (Choeng Ek--8000, Tonle Bati--4000, etc.), there are unfilled mass graves prepared for thousands of additional victims. The planning necessary to efficiently dispose of bodies requires a pathological order, a bureaucracy of death. As Max Weber pointed out, even the most irrational end can be pursued by rational means.

The “ends- justifies- the- means” mentality of Marxism-Leninism and of all other totalitarian ideologies is what makes them so radically evil. Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical" is taken to its extreme. In the name of creating a perfect new world, all morality is suspended, all persons are merely means to the end. Class enemies are to be killed

Genocide is the pattern of human history, not its aberration. More people have died from genocides in this century than from all the wars combined.

There are many types of genocides. Many of them are national, ethnical, racial, or religious like those committed against the Jews, the Native Americans, the Armenians, the Bengalis in Bangladesh/East Pakistan, the Hutu in Burundi, and countless others.

But the most massive genocides of our century have been part of politicides committed by totalitarian regimes, by National Socialists and Marxist-Leninists. Two million murdered in Cambodia. Three million intentionally starved to death in the Ukraine. Sixty million murdered in the Soviet Union. Twenty-five million murdered under Mao. In those regimes the genocidal process has been glorified by ideology, by the Nazi doctrine of the master race and the Aryan nation, by the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of class enemies and communism.

For the future of mankind, anthropologists must make the study, the understanding, and the conquest of genocide a central goal of our vocation. Our understanding of the processes of classification and symbolization will be a key to attacking genocide yet to come, to preventing genocide, the scourge of humanity.

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