

**Museums and Memorials**  
**Commemorating the Victims**  
**of Communist Dictatorships**

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A stupa on public display with the skulls of the victims of the Khmer Rouge in Siem Reap





PHNOM PENH  
CHOEUNG EK

 **Cambodia**

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until 1954, Cambodia belonged to the French colonial area and sphere of influence in Southeast Asia, which was known as "Indochina" or "Union indochinoise". Following independence in 1953, civil war broke out throughout the country. The Cambodian government attempted to maintain neutrality in its foreign policy. Although the country tried to stay out of the wars raging in the neighbouring countries, Cambodia eventually became one of the battlegrounds of the Vietnam War.

Vietnamese communist units moved their transport and supply routes (Ho Chi Minh trail) to Cambodian territory to escape the US bombing of Vietnam. This resulted in heavy bombing by the US Air Force. In 1970, officers supported by the USA under General Lon Nol took power and proclaimed the Khmer Republic. Together with South Vietnamese and American troops, Lon Nol fought against North Vietnamese troops and Khmer Rouge units. The US bombardments spread from the border regions with Vietnam to the whole country. In 1975, units of the Khmer Rouge occupied the capital Phnom Penh. Within a few days, the entire population, which at the time counted 2.5 million people, was evacuated from the city to the countryside on the pretext of imminent American air raids. Anyone who tried to escape deportation was shot.

In order to build the so-called "new society" according to the Maoist model, all existing social structures were destroyed, and thousands of people, predominantly intellectuals, who were deemed resistant to "re-education" were systematically murdered. Often, even being it was enough to be able to read and write or speak a foreign language or even just to wear glasses.

The entire population of the cities was deported and settled in huge labour colonies and camps in the countryside. All private property was banned; children were separated from their parents for induction into the Khmer Rouge's educational programmes, to prevent family influences and to wipe out traditions and identities. The rural population was glorified as the "old people", and the inhabitants of the cities were defamed as decadent "new people" who had to be re-educated and returned to their roots. Forced labour was compulsory for all. In order to destroy all links to the decadent past, archives, cadastres and property deeds were destroyed. Even private documents and photos fell victim to the Khmer Rouge's destructive frenzy.

The devastation of the existing economic structures caused the economy to collapse entirely. Millions of people starved to death, died of abuse or were murdered. All those who were considered "enemies" or members of the "bourgeoisie" were sent to extermination camps and executed in the "Killing Fields". It is estimated that more than 2.2 million people lost their lives in this way, amounting to about half of the population.

Following border disputes with Vietnam, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia in 1979, occupying the country and liberating it from Khmer Rouge rule. Even after the takeover of the capital Phnom Penh and the establishment of a new Cambodian government, the country remained under Vietnamese control. The Khmer Rouge and their supporters—including China and the USA—fled to border regions with Thailand in the north-east of the country and plunged the country into a new civil war that ended in 1998 with a ceasefire and numerous concessions to the Khmer Rouge leaders.

The Vietnamese occupiers sentenced Pol Pot and Ieng Sary to death in absentia in 1979 as the main perpetrators of the genocide in Cambodia. However, a true historical reckoning did not take place, and the perpetrators were never convicted. Pol Pot was considered "Brother No.1" until 1997 and, in the wake of internal disputes, was sentenced to life imprisonment by a Khmer Rouge tribunal in 1997, which did not, however, address the crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979. He died in 1998.



◀ A map of Cambodia made from the bones of the victims of the Khmer Rouge in the Tuol-Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh

To this day, it has proved extremely difficult to come to terms with the crimes. Many of those responsible and involved in the Khmer Rouge regime at the time are at large and have no fear of prosecution. Some of them are now members of the government and parliament. In a few cases, the perpetrators and victims live next door to one another in the same towns. Although an international criminal court consisting of Cambodian and international judges which operates in accordance with the Cambodian Criminal Procedure Code was set up in 2004, only two cases have thus far gone to trial.

In the first trial, “Comrade Duch”, the director of the torture prison Tuol Sleng where over 20,000 people died, was sentenced to life imprisonment. In the second trial, a total of four Khmer Rouge leaders—Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and his wife Ieng Thirith, and Khieu Samphan—were indicted. Only two of the accused—Khieu and Nuon—received life sentences for crimes against humanity. Ieng Sary died in prison; his wife Ieng Thirith was ruled mentally unfit to stand trial due to dementia and was released from prison. The two who were convicted did not accept the verdict and described the proceedings as a “show trial”.

The last commander of the Khmer Rouge, Ta Mok, who succeeded Pol Pot as “Brother No. 1” in 1997, was detained and charged with crimes against humanity. However, he died in 2006 before the case went to trial. The Cambodian government under Hun Sen, also a former Khmer Rouge official who fled to Vietnam in 1977, rejects further trials.

After the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops in 1979 and the discovery of the “Killing Fields” and the torture prisons, the Vietnamese had bones and skulls exhibited publicly in so-called “stupas” to publicly document the crimes committed. Many of the mass graves have not yet been located. With the support of international organisations, in particular Yale University, a documentation centre was set up in Phnom Penh in 1995 to collect the names and biographies of the victims and to implement reconciliation and healing projects. A memorial was set up in the Tuol Sleng torture prison and in Choeung Ek, one of the “Killing Fields”. In view of the increasingly repressive climate in Cambodia, civil society initiatives and actors find it difficult to initiate processes of reckoning with the crimes of communist rule and their consequences.

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