Genocide in Cambodia: Origins and Development

Dr. Ernest Ialongo
Intro

- Cambodian Genocide
  - Khmer Rouge
    - Cambodian Communist Party
  - 1975-79
    - 1.7 million out of 8 million Cambodians exterminated
Origins

• Revulsion against foreign domination
  – French colonialism
  – Thai and Vietnamese interference
  – Led to early support for Khmer Rouge

• Discrepancy between city and country
  – Labor and tax exploitation of peasantry
  – Peasants as base of Khmer Rouge

• Failed democratic development post independence
  – Khmer Rouge stepped into political vacuum

• Allure of communist ideology
  – Specific allure of China’s Cultural Revolution
French Colonialism

• Early presence
  – Missionaries in 18th century

• Growing French control
  – 1863 treaty with monarchy
    • France seeking partner vs. Vietnam
    • Cambodia seeking support against Vietnam and Thailand
      – Political/economic interference
  – 1860s, 1870s, 1880s popular uprisings against royal authoritarianism
    • French puts them down
    • Increase control over monarchy (taxations, customs, foreign policy, choosing king)
French Colonialism

• Growing oppressiveness of French rule in 20th c
  – Increased taxes to pay for French administration and Phnom Penh renewal
    • Salt, alcohol, opium, rice, taxes on imports, fees for government services
    • Required labor if too poor for tax payment
  – 1916 40,000 peasants march on capital in protest
French Colonialism

– April 1925 French résident Félix Louis Bardeh murdered in Krang Laav while collecting taxes
  • Trigger:
    – New taxes for king’s resort at Bokor
    – Loss of life in construction
French Colonialism

• Beginnings of nationalism
  – Growing awareness France a detriment to Cambodia
  – Nagara Vatta newspaper, 1936
    • First newspaper in Khmer
    • Condemned foreign exploitation of Cambodian markets (Chinese, supported by French)
    • Encouraged French to modernize education
    • Demanded more credit for Cambodian farmers, higher pay for Cambodian civil servants
    • Condemned Vietnamese influence in Cambodia, threat on border
French Colonialism

- **WWII**
  - Nationalism flourished as France weakened by war
  - Nagara Vatta took anti French, pro Japanese line
    - Censorship and increased tensions
  - July 1942 mass demonstration against French arrest of Buddhist monk on suspicion of treason
    - An offense to national religion
  - March 1945 Japan disarms French authorities
    - Cambodia declared independent
French Colonialism

• Post 1945
  – France returned to Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia)
  – Increasingly weakened by war with Vietnam
    • Cambodian gov’t gains more autonomy
  – 1954 France defeated in Vietnam, leaves Indochina
    • Cambodia now fully independent
Thailand and Vietnam Interference

• History of weak governments failing to protect Cambodia from neighboring interference
  – Monarch originally welcomed France to ward off Thai/Vietnamese domination
    • Monarch in 1860s dependent on Thai support
  – 1930s Cambodian nationalists rallied around excessive Vietnamese control of economy and border threats
  – 1940-41, Thailand seize Cambodian land as French weakened
  – 1950s, 1960s communist N. Vietnam seen as growing threat
    • Fear of being dragged into Vietnam War
    • Happens in 1970
Peasants always exploited in Cambodian history

- Before the French: lack of land ownership, high taxes, institutionalized slavery, forced labor for public works
- Under French rule
  - Slavery abolished, but labor requirements and taxes increased
  - Funded modernization of Phnom Penh, royal palace at Bokor
    - Little investment in countryside
- Under PM (dictator) Sihanouk
  - Import/export nationalized
  - Gov’t cannot pay market rate to peasants
  - 1967 peasant uprisings
Failed Democratic Development

• Under French rule
  – Rule through Cambodian elite, military force

• Independence (post 1945)
  – Little cooperation between Sihanouk and political parties, esp. Democrats
  – Post 1954: Sihanouk virtually rules without Assembly

• Violence increasingly seen as solution to growing economic problems
  – Communist uprisings launched in 1968
  – Sihanouk deposed in 1970, replaced by General Lon Nol
  – Cambodian Republic falls to Khmer Rouge in 1975
Allure of Communism

• Communists promised
  – End to French rule
  – And, end to traditional hierarchies based on wealth, land-ownership and exploitation rural peasantry
• 1930, Indochinese Communist Party formed
• 1945-47, Cambodian communists expand in party
• 1951, Cambodian Communist Party emerges, the Khmer Rouge
• By 1952 1/6 of country controlled by the communists
Allure of Communism

• Hunted down by Sihanouk, 1950s
• Saloth Sar, aka Pol Pot, emerges as leader, 1962
  – Disciple of Mao Zedong of China and ‘pure’ revolution of ‘Cultural Revolution’
    • Capitalism, westernization wiped out
• 1968, NW/NE under communist control
  – Teachers/students hoped for alternative to corrupt Sihanouk rule
Revolution in Cambodia

• April 1975, Phnom Penh falls to communists
  – Goal was to completely transform Cambodia

• First step, empty out cities
  – 3 million people force-marched into countryside
  – Goals:
    • Break urban/elite resistance to revolution
    • Increase labor for rice harvesting on collectivized farms
      – Needed for exports to pay for industrialization
  – Result:
    • Massive loss of life on the marches, long hours working the fields with no experience
    • Famine through export of rice
    • Deliberate weeding out of ‘new people’-urban elite
    • Most of the nearly two million deaths traced to these policies (1/3 of all urban, 15% of all rural residents)
Revolution in Cambodia

• Second Step: Purging enemies
  – January 1976, new constitution eliminated human rights, gave communists complete power, abolished private property
  – Mass arrests, torture, rape and execution to eliminate opponents
  – Thousands executed in S-21 prison, Phnom Penh
  – Thousands of Khmer Rouge purged of members insufficiently loyal or efficient
    • Because of the famine
    • Because of ties to Vietnam rival
Revolution in Cambodia

• Further targets
  – 97% of Buddhist monks (nearly 70,000)
    • Seen as potential organized opponents
  – Most of 20,000 Vietnamese, 1/2 of 218,000 Chinese
    • All tied to historic animosity against foreign influence in Cambodia
    • Which included 1/3 of 90,000 Cham, 8,000 Thai, 4,000 Laotians

• Nearly 2 million total dead, 25% of Cambodia
Revolution in Cambodia

- 1979 Vietnamese invasion finally ended the Genocide