

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/10/16/the-cambodian-genocide-operationalizing-violence-through-ideology/>

WEI AZIM HUNG, OCT 16 2023

The conclusion of the Cambodian Civil War in 1975 marked the onset of a significantly darker episode for the people of Cambodia, Southeast Asia, and the world. The victorious Khmer Rouge (KR) sought to transform the newly established Democratic Kampuchea (DK) into a self-sufficient agrarian socialist society. Upon capturing the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge emptied the capital and relocated nearly all inhabitants to the countryside. All institutions, such as universities and hospitals, along with public spaces like markets, were shut down. The state effectively took over private property. Freedom of movement was severely limited, family units were dismantled, and communication, as well as 'private thought', were subject to strict censorship.<sup>[1]</sup>

Between 1975 and 1979, the country saw an explosion of indiscriminate mass violence lasting four years. To engineer an agrarian socialist society based on communist principles of collectivization and self-reliance as well as maintain social control, the Khmer Rouge practiced thought reform, forced labor, starvation, coerced resettlement, land collectivization, and state terror. This led to an excessively centralized and brutal state apparatus, with violence normalized and discreetly disseminated throughout Cambodia. These tactics eventually culminated in the infamous Cambodian Genocide, resulting in the death of at least 1.5 million people under the leadership of Pol Pot.<sup>[2]</sup>

Apart from irregular counter-guerrilla operations, mass indiscriminate violence is commonly attributed to leader ideology or viewed as isolated occurrences.<sup>[3]</sup> Nonetheless, leader ideology struggles to explain mass indiscriminate violence between ingroup elites. The Cambodian Genocide, as well as events that transpired in the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China, and Rwanda, fall into this category where instances of mass violence against outgroup targets corresponded with purges of ingroup elites.<sup>[4]</sup> Following this observation, it remains theoretically muddled why political leaders would choose to endorse violence to achieve an ideological end, even if such an end threatens their own existence due to potential reprisals. Problematizing this idea one step further, what role do ideologies serve behind the deployment of violence? Are there alternative motivations for resorting to such large-scale acts of violence? More importantly, why do incidents of violence against outgroup civilians coincide with the persecution of ingroup elites?

To answer these questions, this paper extends a rationalist approach examining the Cambodian Genocide (1975-1979). In line with this approach, this paper conducts a focused investigation surveying the underlying *causes* that precipitated the Cambodian Genocide. In particular, I provide a complementary explanation underscoring leaders' material interest in initiating mass violence by highlighting contextual circumstances and motivations that lead powerful groups to consider genocide as a viable option.

Case studies of genocide with rationalist explanations are instructive because scholars studying political violence have almost come to a unanimous consensus that ideology certainly plays a role in mass killings, with some placing more emphasis than others. However, the extent of ideology is also questioned by some.<sup>[5]</sup> Certainly, ideology does not translate into mass violence by itself. For example, the case of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, a communist state, contrasts with Cambodia's experience, as it did not undergo a comparable level of mass killings. As such, relying exclusively on ideology as the sole indicator for the evaluation and prediction of mass violence remains insufficient.

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

A comprehensive examination of genocide or mass violence necessitates a nuanced approach to communicate subtleties to the readers effectively. Such nuances involve differentiating between various forms of violence (e.g., indiscriminate versus discriminatory) or conflicts (e.g., counter-guerilla, civil war, interstate wars) to achieve analytical precision and yield productive findings. While this paper acknowledges the importance of these nuances, it is constrained in its scope and thus focuses on unpacking essential terms—ideology and elite rivalry—and their relevance to the article. The paper's argument is presented in two parts: the first section provides a concise overview of existing literature concerning explanations for genocide. It classifies the literature on mass indiscriminate violence into two overarching yet interconnected categories: rationalist (functionalist) and idealist (intentionalist). I examine outstanding arguments and shortcomings from both sides and explore their applicability to the case study of Cambodia. My second section will discuss my design and case study analysis of the Cambodian Genocide. The primary aim of this case study is to bridge the gap between idealist and rationalist explanations of genocide by seeking an in-depth understanding of the potential causes contributing to the mass killings in Cambodia.

## Rationalist and Idealist Explanations of Genocide

Except for guerilla conflicts, where rationalist explanations are more favorable than idealist explanations, scholars analyzing violence on a mass scale have attributed ideology or similar notions, such as adopting a particular worldview, to a central role in their studies.<sup>[6]</sup> Benjamin Valentino suggested that few scholars have discussed mass killings that occurred in the 20th century without referencing the role of ideology.<sup>[7]</sup> Likewise, historians and sociologists such as Helen Fein have also asserted that revolutionary ideologies have led to catastrophic genocide and mass-scale killings in the 20th century.<sup>[8]</sup> Ben Kiernan, too, has argued that the KR regime was simply racist and totalitarian. The regime's end goal was to uphold a racialist ideology and consolidate power, which unpacked itself throughout the Cambodian Genocide.<sup>[9]</sup>

Unsurprisingly, idealist and intentionalist explanations have gained traction in explaining mass indiscriminate violence. Extant research has probed and described the mechanisms of how ideology is operationalized through violence—such as through different avenues of discourse dissemination and justification (for example, specifying who it targets), suggesting a positive linkage between dangerous speeches and the escalation of mass atrocities.<sup>[10]</sup> Ideological factors (such as ethnic tensions and religion) could serve as catalysts for public mass mobilization, exacerbating violence at an unprecedented scale. Similarly, Valentino's analysis of leader behavior argues that leaders may possess an ideological preference towards eliminating groups they view as challenging their vision of society, whether it is communist or centered around ethnic supremacy.

There is also an implicit assumption that genocide or mass killings require the collective effort of the public. Therefore, academics have focused on social structures or psychology (influenced by ideology) of society. But as Valentino himself pointed out, social structures are not reliable indicators for assessing the causality of mass killings because, contrarily, the event itself does not require as much societal support.<sup>[11]</sup> For example, Pol Pot's communist ideology was complex and ill-comprehended by the general populace in 1975, yet indiscriminate mass killings ensued. Cambodians supported the KR regime not because of its ideological fervor. Instead, it was their collective distaste for the American-backed Lon Nol regime, and more importantly, the KR was Cambodia's only organized lethal organization in 1975.<sup>[12]</sup> This observation effectively weakens the claim that ideology serves as the primary cause of mass killings from a macro perspective. It could only explain the social and psychological process of socializing perpetrators into mass killings but not explain what induces the occurrence of genocide. Nonetheless, recent research confirms that ideology unquestionably *plays a role* in the occurrence of widespread violence.<sup>[13]</sup> In the subsequent section, I will discuss elite rivalry, a rationalist explanation that complements the role of ideology in the occurrence of genocide.

Scholars continue to regard ideology as a crucial component influencing the occurrence of mass killings. Researchers have investigated psychological aspects, such as selection effects and situational pressure, that contribute to the involvement of ordinary civilians in genocidal acts. Specifically, they seek to explain how the indoctrination of ideology and the exercise of disciplinary power can prompt individuals to adopt behaviors or roles unbeknownst to them.<sup>[14]</sup> In this context, Path and Kanasavou's textual analysis of the notebooks kept by the Khmer Rouge party cadre proves instructive in comprehending the facilitation of mass indiscriminate violence in Cambodia.

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

Their study elucidates how KR thought reform employs cultural mechanisms, invoking notions of Buddhist Kingship to establish legitimacy and power while simultaneously making these concepts accessible to ordinary citizens.<sup>[15]</sup> Their research provides valuable insights into the processes of radicalization and conversion at a mass level. Furthermore, the textual analysis enables a sophisticated examination of how lower-level cadres comprehend the regime's ideological discourse and thought reform practices, thereby shedding light on the factors influencing public participation at a micro-level.

However, attributing a central role to ideology in the analysis of orchestrated (indiscriminate) mass-scale violence fails to address several issues that extend beyond the micro-level adequately. Firstly, the current understanding of ideology in the context of violent conflict is marred by "theoretical clumsiness," leading to a diminishment of its analytical value.<sup>[16]</sup> For example, works by Barbara Harff and James Waller use descriptors preceding "ideology" to indicate their particular interpretations (e.g., extraordinary ideology and exclusionary ideology).<sup>[17]</sup> These studies have faced criticism for their lack of substantive engagement with the concept itself, as they often fail to provide proper definitions and explanations of how ideology is incorporated in their assessments or justifications for their usage.

Secondly, an often overlooked aspect pertains to how ideology motivates and influences the behavior of its adherents, particularly at the level of leaders (macro-level). The leader's ideology plays an instrumental role in shaping the course of violence, such as how their understanding of a conflict is shaped and the position they would adopt as a consequence.<sup>[18]</sup> However, it is essential to recognize that ideology can manifest in diverse ways, leading to varied considerations and approaches to the same policy. The selection of these choices is not incidental; rather, it is strategic in nature. For example, Eelco van der Maat discusses how Pol Pot's decision to single out the Northwestern region of Cambodia for rice extraction was not an arbitrary choice but a calculated decision, aligning with other material or strategic objectives.<sup>[19]</sup> In this particular example, leadership ideology cannot be reduced to a purely ideological explanation devoid of context. Instead, prospective explanations remain for the leader's strategic goals, which extends beyond ideological motives.

In addition, while ideology certainly proves insightful when analyzing the micro-level factors influencing individuals to engage in acts of violence, intentionalist and idealist explanations encounter difficulties explaining the persecution of in-group elites. For example, violence emerged within different factions of the KR following the downfall of Lon Nol's government.<sup>[20]</sup> These explanations also fail to account for the rationale behind implementing a society based on the leader's ideological vision, even at the expense of jeopardizing their own safety. But even rationalist explanations for indiscriminate mass violence are not without their limitations either. For example, the studies of Strauss and Licklider suggest that mass indiscriminate violence is likely to ensue after a civil war. And the underlying rationale for doing so is to eliminate outgroup threats, specifically the civilian bases of outgroup rebels.<sup>[21]</sup> However, this explanation falls short in instances where the government or the dominant group has secure control over its territories. As previously mentioned, after the collapse of Lon Nol's government, the KR gained control over the government's former territories, and there were no indications of counter-guerrilla activities. This raises the question of the motivations behind initiating indiscriminate mass violence in the absence of external rebel groups.

In contrast to the scholars mentioned, van der Maat has attempted to bridge part of these puzzles through a macro-level rationalist explanation of indiscriminate mass-scale violence, which he terms "genocidal consolidation." He begs the question, asking why leaders do not prioritize consolidating power first.<sup>[22]</sup> Do leaders not have an incentive to guarantee their safety before embarking on an ideological project that requires monopoly over violence? Instead of attributing the escalation of mass-scale violence solely to ideological motivations, van der Maat argues that in 40% of the documented cases of mass indiscriminate violence, leaders adopt a rational choice approach to outmaneuver elite rivals and centralize power.<sup>[23]</sup> The reason for this is that leaders cannot always openly target elite rivals. By employing mass indiscriminate violence, they effectively resolve the issue of elite rivalry by compelling both internal and external groups to either support or oppose the violence, hence choosing a side. It is important to note that genocidal consolidation does not apply to all instances of genocide. However, it holds merit in filling the gaps in existing literature by prioritizing the interests of leaders and material factors that are often overlooked in contemporary explanations of genocide.

Having reviewed the limitations in the current literature and offering two possible explanations regarding the cause of

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

genocide, I conclude by returning to a methodological contrast between the rationalist and idealist explanations. Throughout the history of genocide studies, scholars have predominantly adopted a bottom-up or micro-level approach, emphasizing sociological factors and the socialization processes driving individuals to perpetrate genocide. However, with the emergence of new literature, especially theoretically parsimonious rationalist explanations, scholars in the field need to re-appraise or even challenge the dominant assumption of how ideology plays a role in genocide.

Indeed, it is undeniable that ideology may contribute to the facilitation of violence, playing a role in recruiting combatants and justifying killings. However, when considering the aforementioned issues (elite rivalry, leader ideology, and the abstractness of 'ideology' as an analytical concept), ideology falls short in explaining why leaders endorse and promote indiscriminate mass killings. Consequently, I argue that a more comprehensive approach to studying mass violence would have to involve synthesizing elite rivalry and ideology to comprehend how the process of violence is initiated and facilitated. If war can be perceived as a strategic instrument for achieving certain objectives (as posited in rationalist explanations), it should not be controversial to regard genocide in a similar light. Therefore, to systematically study genocide, one must begin by understanding the specific goals and strategies employed by political leaders before delving into examining how social, political, or psychological factors contribute to the execution of that process.

## Research Design

Idealist and rationalist explanations should complement each other in explaining the occurrence of genocide. The reason is that the independent variables (idealist and rationalist factors), which make up the mechanisms contributing to the dependent variable (i.e., the act of indiscriminate mass killings or genocide), work simultaneously. My theory explaining the occurrence of the Cambodian Genocide argues that ideologies enable the possibility of wide-scale violence, potentially leading to genocide. However, it is not the determining factor resulting in genocide. I contend that the presence of other rationalist factors (e.g., perpetrator participation, materialist ambition, national security), when enabled in an ideologically-grounded setting, could better explain the plausibility of violent outcomes. For example, one way to interpret the KR's violence is to see it as a mechanism for protecting the strategic and materialist interests of the party. However, violence is more likely to be justified when legitimized and rationalized through an ideological framework (i.e., Marxist-Leninism). Building on this idea, I weave in rationalist explanations, which have been scarce in the extant literature, providing a more complete process of explaining indiscriminate mass violence.

In this paper, I modify Jonathan Maynard's functions of ideology. He argues that ideology motivates, legitimizes, and rationalizes killings.<sup>[24]</sup> I agree ideology legitimizes and rationalizes killings, which is consistent with my theory. What I disagree with Maynard is that linking ideology as a direct catalyst for motivation to kill seems empirically tenuous. Instead, as my paper will demonstrate, behaviors and policies observed at both the micro and macro levels are frequently influenced by rationalist factors, yet they are facilitated and justified through the veneer of ideology.

The research is conducted in two phases, progressing from the micro-level to the macro-level. The design aims to unravel the occurrence of genocide in a reverse manner, tracing from the observable effect (the act of killing) back to the underlying contributing causes (policies and environmental factors that facilitated its unfolding). This design makes it possible to accommodate various contributing factors, avoiding the limitations of commencing the analysis with a predetermined answer. In the first phase, process tracing is employed, focusing on the mechanisms of idealist and rationalist factors on the micro-level. Understanding the micro-level is essential to understanding the process of genocide because at least half of the deaths from 1975-1979 were a result of executions by cadres, which I categorize in the micro-level.<sup>[25]</sup> Conceptually speaking, what is happening at the micro-level is influenced by a cause tied to the macro-level, which I will discuss in the second section. Based on the available textual analysis and other secondary sources, I explore whether idealist factors, such as lethal rhetoric, were the prime motivation in the killings or whether other variables (i.e., rationalist and materialist) motivated people to kill.

For my second phase, I trace the contextual circumstances that guide or make possible the adoption of macro-level policies by the KR, such as the forced deportation of two million urban residents to rural areas. While Kiernan views

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

this as an ideologically driven act, labeling it as anti-bourgeois, racist, or sadistic, I explore alternative perspectives when evaluating this macro-level policy. Are there other potential mechanisms to consider apart from ideological motivations? Additionally, do these policies align with other rationalist or strategic concerns, such as the need for legitimation, population control, or elite rivalry? Similarly, the same process could be applied to other policies, such as self-reliance and radical collectivization. I highlight what mechanisms might be overlooked when explaining the rationale behind these decisions. To gain a comprehensive understanding of genocide or indiscriminate mass killings, it is crucial to differentiate between the motivations behind these decisions and the ways in which their implementation contributes to the occurrence of genocide.

## Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

The type of propaganda disseminated by the KR would qualify what Williams and Neilsen consider a Toxified agenda.<sup>[26]</sup> The primary function of a toxifying ideology is so that when perpetrators kill their victims, they genuinely believe they are serving a good purpose that is right and legitimate. A close reading of the KR discourse during this period reflects Kiernan's assessment of it being racist and totalitarian.<sup>[27]</sup> For instance, Pol Pot and the party frequently invoked medical and local metaphors in describing the 'reactionaries.' That is, anyone who is or could become a threat to the communist society he envisions building (more realistically speaking, the party). For example, Pol Pot would encourage people to be aware of the enemies within. He would use terms such as "ugly microbes," which are "rotting us from within" that must be "entirely cut and uprooted."<sup>[28]</sup>

More specifically, the Vietnamese were framed as a national security threat that planned to annex Cambodia into an Indochinese Federation. Similarly, ethnic Chinese who predominantly lived in the cities became symbols of urbanism and capitalism that were antithetical to the KR's class struggle. The Cham Muslims, too, were portrayed as a threat by the state propaganda. They were considered a hindrance to social production due to their religiosity, therefore anti-revolutionary. Not to mention, all three ethnic groups (and others) are depicted as ethnically impure, a "disease of consciousness." And it is only through the destruction of such impurity that it is possible to reclaim the glory and the achievement of a peasant utopia.<sup>[29]</sup>

In this sense, Kiernan is correct that the rhetoric of KR is racist and totalitarian. The atmosphere created by the KR made it easy to frame anyone as anti-revolutionary, effectively enabling a setting where witch-hunts (even amongst cadres) became frequent, and violence became permissible and even normalized.<sup>[30]</sup> However, he makes a slippery slope in attributing the ideology of the KR as the reason for explaining the cause of the Cambodian Genocide. This raises an essential question: despite the regime's lethal rhetoric, was this rhetoric the primary motivation driving individuals to carry out the killings? Did the perpetrators internalize the regime's toxic ideology as the main impetus for their actions?

In interviews conducted with 58 former low-level cadres, the regime's rhetoric was sometimes quoted. However, when asked about the motivation for the killings, the importance of citing the regime's ideology fades in comparison. On the micro-level, at least two types of motivation can be identified concerning individuals' participation in violence, linked to rationalist or materialist incentives. From a rationalist perspective, cadres highlighted concerns about jeopardizing their personal or familial security if they refused to comply. Joining the KR offered a sense of security and conformity. Additionally, some mentioned the risk of being charged with treason and facing execution if they were to defy orders.<sup>[31]</sup>

In the materialist dimension, interviewees cited opportunistic reasons for participating in the killings. For example, taking revenge against adversaries they knew before the war. Moreover, displaying excessive violent tendencies increases the possibility of promotion.<sup>[32]</sup> The responses indicate that although the toxic 'ideology' of the KR had some influence at the micro-level, it was not frequently embraced or internalized by the cadres. Instead, the cadres cited rationalist or materialistic reasons as the primary motivation for their actions while using the regime's racist ideology as a justifying mechanism to support their killings. In this context, it appears that ideology at the micro-level serves more as a facilitative mechanism rather than a motivating one.

## Total Revolution: Macro-level Policies

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

Academics exclusively supporting idealist explanations might argue that even if ideology on the micro-level is a facilitative and not motivating mechanism, ideology on the macro-level has affected policies that either directly or inadvertently killed hundreds of thousands. Despite this statement being partially true, there remains room to accommodate rationalist considerations. Taking into account DK's strained relations with other communist states at the time, namely, Vietnam, ideology per se appears even weaker in explaining why the KR insists on launching a 'Total Revolution' immediately after the civil war when it is unsafe to do so.

A 'Total Revolution' would, however, make sense in terms of addressing security and logistical gaps within the KR (e.g., population control and lack of cadres). This potentially explains the role of ideology while not attributing it to the outcome it facilitates. Besides the genocide, one of the more symbolic acts of the KR was deporting people from all cities, destroying the nuclear family, and abolishing currency, which exponentially increased the number of deaths (starvation, exhaustion, etc.). In this regard, parallels between KR ideology (self-reliance and radical egalitarian collectivism) vis-à-vis Stalinism, Maoism, and Marxism are drawn in extant literature.<sup>[33]</sup> However, this should not be mistaken as an ideologically driven action. The crucial detail often left unacknowledged in this narrative is the ever-becoming hostile relationship between DK and its former communist allies, the Northern Vietnamese. Post-1975, the DK and Vietnam have had multiple border skirmishes, including fighting over the Wai and Thổ Chu Islands.<sup>[34]</sup> The KR leadership was suspicious of Vietnam's attempt to annex its territories, asserting its sovereignty over DK. One of Vietnam's strategies was infiltrating communist parties in Laos and DK through Vietnamese-trained cadres. Unsurprisingly, the first group of trainees returning from Vietnam was purged by the KR leadership, reflecting the leadership's paranoia. Moreover, these signs point to the later episodes of internal purges in the eastern zone massacre.<sup>[35]</sup>

Therefore, in addition to ideology, breaking down the macro-policies implemented under this context is important. The radical ideological measures of abolishing currency, family units, and deporting people to rural areas were not purely ideology-driven but rather rooted in furthering strategic military interests. Specifically, these policies aimed to establish control over the populace, including factionalized elements, and to prevent potential Vietnamese influence within the Khmer Rouge regime.

Upon the defeat of Lon Nol's regime, the Khmer Rouge (KR) and the United Front encountered several challenges, including a shortage of cadres and legitimacy. Additionally, there was an ongoing rift with pro-Sihanouk factions, making it logistically impractical to control populated centers.<sup>[36]</sup> To tackle this predicament, the KR's policies were compelled to address the issue. One of the key architects of the Cambodian Genocide, Ieng Sary, who served as the KR's Minister of Foreign Affairs, later confirmed that the forced expulsion of people to rural areas was a strategic move aimed at vetting and uprooting agents and spies.<sup>[37]</sup>

In other words, the eviction of the city populace was the first mechanism for establishing spatial and territorial control over the population. Furthermore, the second mechanism was to physically and psychologically discipline, molding people into 'socialist' subjects that would submit to the rule of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). For example, people worked in tough conditions harvesting rice or building dams under the supervision of cadres. But they were also psychologically subjected to the imaginative supervision of the CPK, best illustrated in the phrase "Angkar (CPK) has the eyes of a pineapple." The effect of this psychological domination helped subjects internalize control as if they were constantly monitored by an authority, resembling Michel Foucault's panopticism<sup>[38]</sup>. As a result, they not only become their own guard but are perpetually self-aware and doubtful of their surroundings – fostering an environment of mistrust. Mutual distrust is instrumental in dividing the population to thwart rebellions and expediting the process of breaking up the individual psychologically. This strategy facilitated the Khmer Rouge's control over the limited workforce at their disposal.

However, this feature turned out to be a problem that extended to the KR cadres. Although party members were subjected to thought reform programs involving criticism sessions aimed at shaping them into obedient revolutionaries acting on behalf of the CPK, it is possible that the cadres became ideologically indoctrinated, suggesting ideology as a potential motivation. However, textual evidence indicates that lower-level cadres, who were less familiar with Marxist-Leninist ideology, had some room for personal interpretation. This suggests that the regime's ideology was not the principal guiding factor for the cadres' actions.

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

Instead, other rationalist factors, such as the rapidly changing environment leading up to the war with Vietnam (1977-78), resource scarcity, and power struggles, contributed to criticism sessions devolving into a cycle of accusations, counter-accusations, and purges among the cadres themselves.<sup>[39]</sup> In a life-threatening context where mistrust prevails, violence becomes permissible as individuals act in their perceived best interest, aligning with the reasons mentioned in section one. Tracing these events backward from the killings to the macro-level decision-making process illustrates that the motivation for adopting such policies is not inherently ideological but rather rooted in material or rationalist interests.

Apart from maintaining internal security through population and cadre control, the KR was also cautious about foreign threats, particularly Vietnam. In fact, Pol Pot's speeches have underscored this by emphasizing self-reliance, independence, and sovereignty.<sup>[40]</sup> The DK's refusal of external medical aid and food (except China's assistance) is one way that reflects its fear of foreign influence. Not to mention, rejecting orthodox economic and political development models also reflects this concern.

Besides needing to exert control over people, the decision to relocate citizens from major cities like Phnom Penh holds symbolic significance in severing the connection between capital cities and their representation of power, which embodies the essence of the state. The eviction of people from cities also aligns with the ideological narrative emphasizing the peasantry's role in mounting a revolution from the countryside, reinforcing the perception of power emanating from rural areas.<sup>[41]</sup> However, it is essential to acknowledge that the abolition of family units, currency, and various pre-existing social systems rendered it difficult for Vietnam to conquer and govern the region effectively. This approach parallels a scorched-earth policy, albeit without any physical burning. Even if Vietnam were to annex cities, it would not achieve the intended impact due to the deliberate dismantling of existing social and economic structures.

The underlying theme of hostility against a foreign 'Other' also potentially underpins the KR's objective of eliminating Chinese, Vietnamese, Chams, and all people considered 'foreign' within the borders of DK. This may appear to be ideologically driven. However, this hostility is not limited to external groups alone but also extends to ethnic Khmers and even cadres of the CPK. For instance, the most significant massacre occurred in the eastern zone area (bordering Vietnam), where 250,000 people died. The purging of cadres there was driven by the party's suspicion that local leaders were too moderate and too close to Vietnam.<sup>[42]</sup> The CPK used lethal, often ideological rhetoric, branding the eastern zone cadres as counter-revolutionaries providing a justification for their killings. Yet, the motivation behind this purge was rooted in the fear of collusion and a perceived threat to the party, which aligns with a rationalist explanation.

## Conclusion

Killings in Cambodia suggest that ideology alone is not the determining mechanism; instead, it is possible that ideology supplements rational motives in operationalizing wide-scale violence, with the potential outcome of culminating in genocide. That being said, the initial part of my investigation examined the impact of ideology on individual levels and its influence on the actions of cadres. Despite the prevalence of regime slogans in the responses of cadres, it is noteworthy that deeper exploration often reveals rational motives driving their engagement in violent activities. This perspective aligns with Steve Heder's functionalist critiques of Kiernan's emphasis on ideology as the primary factor in explaining the occurrence of genocide.<sup>[43]</sup>

In the latter half, I expanded my examination to a broader scale, scrutinizing DK's relationship with Vietnam at the time and how this correlates with policies such as city expulsions, currency elimination, and the dismantling of family structures. While the inclination might be to interpret these policies through an ideological lens, I underscored the pragmatic and logical aspects behind these actions, primarily driven by security concerns. The Khmer Rouge, entangled in an internal split with the pro-Sihanouk faction and dealing with cadre shortages, saw it as reasonable to relocate urban inhabitants to rural regions for supervision and control. Furthermore, the systematic removal of cadres from the eastern zone can be interpreted as a preemptive strategy to quell opposition within the party. Unfortunately, the absence of direct primary evidence pertaining to the party leadership's decision-making process is lacking due to the CPK's obsession with secrecy. However, this gap could potentially be addressed in the future through archival research focused on internal party documents, which could shed light on the decision-making dynamics at the

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

highest echelons of leadership and further reinforce the framework presented in this paper. By breaking down the contextual circumstances of the Cambodian Genocide, participants and perpetrators are motivated by concerns of security, opportunism, and other rationalist factors to signal popular support, undermine rival coalitions, and ultimately carry out purges to achieve intra-group consolidation. It becomes evident that a key type of machinery of violence is a strategic choice that necessitates ideology to play a facilitative role.

## Notes

[1] Henri Locard, "State Violence in Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979) and Retribution (1979–2004)," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 12, no. 1 (2005): 121–126.

[2] Timothy Williams and Rhiannon Neilsen, "'They Will Rot the Society, Rot the Party, and Rot the Army': Toxification as an Ideology and Motivation for Perpetrating Violence in the Khmer Rouge Genocide?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 3 (2016): pp. 494.

[3] See Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 3 (2009): 331–62 and Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[4] Eelco van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation: Final Solutions to Elite Rivalry," *International Organization* 74, no. 4 (2020): pp. 773–774.

[5] van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation", 804–805.

[6] Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): pp. 814; Kai M. Thaler, "Ideology and Violence in Civil Wars: Theory and Evidence from Mozambique and Angola," *Civil Wars* 14, no. 4 (2012): pp. 547.

[7] Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 71–72.

[8] Helen Fein, "Revolutionary and Antirevolutionary Genocides: A Comparison of State Murders in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975 to 1979, and in Indonesia, 1965 to 1966," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 4 (1993): pp. 796.

[9] Steve Heder, "Racism, Marxism, Labelling, and Genocide in Ben Kiernan's *the Pol Pot Regime*," *South East Asia Research* 5, no. 2 (1997): pp. 101–102.

[10] Jonathan Leader Maynard and Susan Benesch, "Dangerous Speech and Dangerous Ideology: An Integrated Model for Monitoring and Prevention," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 9, no. 3 (2016): pp. 70.

[11] Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 2.

[12] *Ibid*, 34.

[13] See Walter, Barbara F. 2017. The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars. *International security* 42 (2):7–39; Leader Maynard, Jonathan. "Ideology and Armed Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 5 (2019): 635–49; 1. Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[14] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008).



# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

[15] Kosal Path and Angeliki Kanavou, "Converts, Not Ideologues? The Khmer Rouge Practice of Thought Reform in Cambodia, 1975-1978," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, no. 3 (February 2015): pp. 308-312.

[16] Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology", 822-824.

[17] Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 01 (2003): pp. 61; James Waller, *Becoming Evil How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[18] van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation", pp. 776.

[19] *Ibid.*, 777.

[20] Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 93.

[21] van der Maat, "Genocidal Consolidation", pp. 778-779.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*, 773-779.

[24] Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology", 825.

[25] Taylor B. Seybolt, Jay D. Aronson, and Baruch Fischhoff, *Counting Civilian Casualties: An Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 238.

[26] Williams, "'They Will Rot'", 497-498.

[27] Heder, "Racism, Marxism", 101.

[28] Williams, "'They Will Rot'", 502.

[29] Hinton, "A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide," *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 3 (1998): pp. 352.

[30] Path, "Converts, Not Ideologues?", 315-324.

[31] Williams, "'They Will Rot'", 506.

[32] *Ibid.*, 507.

[33] Path, "Converts, Not Ideologues?", 305.

[34] Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 97.

[35] Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded*, 98.

[36] Kenneth M. Quinn, "POLITICAL CHANGE IN WARTIME: THE KHMER KRAHOM REVOLUTION SOUTHERN CAMBODIA, 1970-1974." *Naval War College Review* 28, no. 4 (1976): 6.

[37] Daniel Bultmann, "Irrigating a Socialist Utopia. Disciplinary Space and Population Control under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979." *Transcience*, no.3 (2012): 43.

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

[38] Bultmann, "Irrigating a Socialist Utopia", 44-45.

[39] Path, "Converts, Not Ideologues?", 318-328.

[40] Karl D. Jackson, "Cambodia 1978: War, Pillage, and Purge in Democratic Kampuchea," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 1 (January 1979): 81.

[41] Jackson, "Cambodia 1978", 82.

[42] Kiernan, *The Pol Pot*, 32-34.

[43] Heder, "Racism, Marxism", 101-112.

## Bibliography

Bultmann, Daniel. "Irrigating a Socialist Utopia. Disciplinary Space and Population Control under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979." *Transcience*, no.3 (2012): 40-52.

Fein, Helen. "Revolutionary and Antirevolutionary Genocides: A Comparison of State Murders in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975 to 1979, and in Indonesia, 1965 to 1966." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 4 (1993): 796-823. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0010417500018715>.

Harff, Barbara. "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955." *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 01 (2003): 57-73. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055403000522>.

Hinton, Alexander Laban. "Why Did You Kill?: The Cambodian Genocide and the Dark Side of Face and Honor." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 93-122. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2659025>.

Hinton, Alexander Laban. "A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide." *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 3 (1998): 352-77. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1998.25.3.352>.

Heder, Steve. "Racism, Marxism, Labelling, and Genocide in Ben Kiernan's *the Pol Pot Regime*." *South East Asia Research* 5, no. 2 (1997): 101-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828x9700500202>.

Jackson, Karl D. "Cambodia 1978: War, Pillage, and Purge in Democratic Kampuchea." *Asian Survey* 19, no. 1 (1979): 72-84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643657>.

Kiernan, Ben. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

Leader Maynard, Jonathan. "Ideology and Armed Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 5 (2019): 635-49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319826629>.

Leader Maynard, Jonathan, and Susan Benesch. "Dangerous Speech and Dangerous Ideology: An Integrated Model for Monitoring and Prevention." *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 9, no. 3 (2016): 70-95. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.9.3.1317>.

Leader Maynard, Jonathan. "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 821-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.796934>.

Locard, Henri. "State Violence in Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979) and Retribution (1979-2004)." *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 12, no. 1 (2005): 121-43.

# The Cambodian Genocide: Operationalizing Violence Through Ideology

Written by Wei Azim Hung

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480500047811>.

Lyll, Jason. "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 3 (2009): 331–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708330881>.

Milgram, Stanley. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

Morris, Stephen J. *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Path, Kosal, and Angeliki Kanavou. "Converts, Not Ideologues? The Khmer Rouge Practice of Thought Reform in Cambodia, 1975–1978." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, no. 3 (2015): 304–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2015.1075266>.

Quinn, Kenneth M. "POLITICAL CHANGE IN WARTIME: THE KHMER KRAHOM REVOLUTION SOUTHERN CAMBODIA, 1970–1974." *Naval War College Review* 28, no. 4 (1976): 3–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44641659>.

Seybolt, Taylor B., Jay D. Aronson, and Baruch Fischhoff. *Counting Civilian Casualties: An Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Straus, Scott. *Making and unmaking nations: War, leadership, and genocide in modern Africa*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.

Thaler, Kai M. "Ideology and Violence in Civil Wars: Theory and Evidence from Mozambique and Angola." *Civil Wars* 14, no. 4 (2012): 546–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2012.740203>.

Valentino, Benjamin A. *Final solutions: Mass killing and genocide in the twentieth century*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004.

van der Maat, Eelco. "Genocidal Consolidation: Final Solutions to Elite Rivalry." *International Organization* 74, no. 4 (2020): 773–809. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818320000259>.

Waller, James. *Becoming Evil How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Walter, Barbara F. "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars." *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 7–39. [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00292](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00292).

Williams, Timothy, and Rhiannon Neilsen. "'They Will Rot the Society, Rot the Party, and Rot the Army': Toxification as an Ideology and Motivation for Perpetrating Violence in the Khmer Rouge Genocide?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 3 (2016): 494–515. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1233873>.

Zimbardo, Philip G. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008.