

MODERN HISTORY

International Studies in Peace and Conflict

Analyse the nature, aims and methods of Pol Pot.

Saloth Sar, born in 1928, would grow up to adopt the political pseudonym “Pol Pot”¹ and shock the world with his aims, methods and overall nature. Whilst managing to achieve stability and prolonged the Khmer Rouge through his racist, pervasive and brutal nature, which he did in the name of producing a new communal society with cultural and racial purity. Pol Pot’s methods were extremely secretive, thorough, efficient and savage as he sought to preserve his power.

The nature of Pol Pot was that of a ruthless, brutal man who lacked basic compassion towards fellow man; be it through his intense pragmatism or xenophobic views. Pol Pot allowed his own paranoia to govern his actions, but in the end he was also highly manipulative and swayed an entire country to commit to his ideas. Pol Pot’s brutalism and compassionless nature can be clearly demonstrated through the fact that 1.67-3 million of his people were murdered² as it shows how driven he was in the pursuit of his aims and how little consideration he held for those human beings he deemed to be obstacles. His merciless personality is again shown through his orders regarding the treatment of pregnant, old or sick people during the mass evacuation of Phnom Penh to be the same as for younger, healthy people³. Thus it is easy to see how little concern he held for people in need, that he didn’t even allow them to bring belongings or even food⁴. This lack of basic human consideration is what has given rise to Pol Pot’s infamous legacy.

However dangerous his compassionless nature was, it was only worsened when combined with his paranoia and racist outlook. Historian David Chandler states in *Brother Number One* that Pol Pot had an unlimited capacity for distrust that led directly to him believing in being surrounded by enemies.⁵ This intense paranoia combined with his fanatical hatred of the Vietnamese⁶ led to the slaughter of 100,000 of Pol Pot’s own people which he justified by claiming they were “Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds.”⁷ However Pol Pot, by nature, was very thorough about the annihilation of his opponents or dissenters, therefore whilst the country’s intellectuals and officials and soldiers of the old regime were killed⁸, so were religions targeted as they preached their people to give their loyalty to a God that wasn’t Angkor⁹. Therefore Pol Pot is achieving a long term aim of obedience in these children, as the new generation of adults would willingly follow the aging (and therefore more vulnerable) Pol Pot, had the Vietnamese not invaded.

Pol Pot was also a man who could be seen to be a traditionalist, as he forced his country to return to the ‘old, purer way’ through the implemented communal life aims.¹⁰ However this would mean Pol Pot was also a hypocrite as he allowed no modernity to enter Kampuchea except for the Khmer Rouge’s modern weaponry¹¹ which Pol Pot directly benefitted from. Thus his fraudulent nature helped him to maintain his position as the technological advanced weaponry would be more effective and efficient than any Kampuchean homemade arms.

¹ Wood, J: Vietnam and the Indochina conflict p.73

² Webb, K: Conflict in Indochina 1954-1979 p.142

³ Ibid. p.141

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. p.150

⁶ Ibid. p.152

⁷ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J; Cambridge Senior History, Conflict in Indochina 1954-1979 p.198

⁸ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J. op.cit. p.197

⁹ Webb, K. op.cit. p.142

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. p.145

He also had a very direct and pervasive character which led to idealistic yet unrealistic demands to triple the annual rice output to 26.7 million tons¹² which resulted in thousands of people dying from being overworked, and supplements his compassionless nature. Unfortunately he was also practical about the workload and organised for children to be cared for by the cooperatives, thus allowing women to be free to work.¹³ Thus his exploitive nature allowed for both his economic aims to be achieved, whilst also effectively indoctrinating the young minds of the children. Therefore the multi-faceted nature of Pol Pot allowed for his regime to remain stable as he implemented his aims.

Pol Pot's entire nature greatly influenced his aims for Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge. Whilst there is no official record¹⁴ as to his exact ideological aims, his policies generally fell under his plight for a new society of communal life in which there was both racial and cultural purity. In order to achieve his new society, Pol Pot instigated that there must be a return to an agricultural lifestyle devoid of urbanisation.¹⁵ Thus the 17th of April 1975, when the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh to evacuate the city was the beginning of the Year Zero.¹⁶ Even the naming of the new calendar reflected Pol Pot's aim to begin a new communist civilisation. In addition, it also revealed the fierce rejection of any Western influence.

This trend was continued with the rebuff of modern transport, economic institutions (including banks, currency) and Western medicine¹⁷. However it also extended to intangible influences such as foreign languages, ideas and education¹⁸ (hence the purging of doctors as they had received their education from outside Kampuchea)¹⁹. All this was in attempt to become "self-reliant"²⁰ and moreover to return to the purer Khmer past. Thus Pol Pot's aims were attempting to appeal to the strong nationalism already prevalent in society. Furthermore by not allowing access to Western influences, the predominantly peasant population would not feel they are being disadvantaged as they would simply not be aware of the existence of outside innovations.

However this new society was riddled with xenophobic and racist values. "New Arrivals" such as the Chinese or Vietnamese, for which the Kampuchean had a fanatical hatred towards, were driven out or slaughtered.²¹ However minorities that had lived in Cambodia for generations, for instance the Muslim Cham and Montagnards were also suddenly targeted.²² Although this is contrary to communist ideals, the Khmer Rouge tailored communism towards their deeply nationalistic people to maintain popularity and obedience. Thus its aims were in reality to maintain power and lessen the likelihood of revolts.

The chance of revolts was always greatly hampered by Pol Pot's aims regarding communal life. The regime decried the nucleus family²³ as this would have meant a conflict in loyalties between blood relations and Angkor, the central organisation. To further remedy this, children were taught from an early age to be loyal only to Angkor and not their parents²⁴ and were forced to call them 'uncle' and 'aunt'²⁵ (as they would address any elder). Thus the Khmer Rouge is seen to be actively trying to

¹² Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J. op.cit. p.196

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Webb, K. op.cit. p.142

¹⁵ Ibid. p.143

¹⁶ Wood, J. op.cit. p.74

¹⁷ Webb, K. op.cit. p.142

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.144

²⁰ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J. op.cit. p.194

²¹ Webb, K. op.cit. p.142

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Webb, K: Get Smart Study Guide; HSC Modern History p.184

break down prerevolutionary social relationships, and replaced it with a communal structure²⁶ which, in turn, made organising a revolution exceedingly difficult. Hence this aim significantly helped extend the duration of the Khmer Rouge.

However to achieve his aims, Pol Pot's methods were essential, as the Khmer Rouge leader's schemes were simultaneously through, secretive, manipulative, pervasive and most of all savage. Pol Pot's infamous purges were relentless in rooting out the 'microbes' within the party²⁷ which he did through a number of manipulative ways. A prime example of this is in 1976 when Pol Pot publicly resigned due to health problems,²⁸ so he could see which party members revealed themselves as his rivals. This is just one of his many devious methods he used to extract the 'truth' about his country and its government.

However many of Pol Pot's methods were instinctively secretive. From the establishment of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot and many of the other key members kept their party membership a secret²⁹ to such an extreme degree that when the Khmer Rouge was in power, Pol Pot's leadership was not common knowledge.³⁰ Furthermore, some of Pol Pot's own siblings were not even aware that their brother was also their leader.³¹ This secrecy helped to make the Khmer Rouge appear more omnipotent³² but also served to cover up Pol Pot's rich landowning background³³ which contradicted communist values, and undermined Khmer Rouge policy. Therefore the purpose of Pol Pot's secrecy was simply to evade potential revolts by keeping the masses unaware of key information.

Pol Pot's methods were also incredibly efficient in a region previously plagued by a lack of organisation. The Centre effectively split the country into zones to make administration easier. Despite the practical nature of this method, it only failed when Commanders, fearing retribution, failed to report back to the Centre.³⁴ This shows a failure in the Khmer Rouge fearful tactics as they inhibited the efficiency of the country and contributed to the Khmer Rouge's downfall as the Kampuchians actually rejoiced when the Vietnamese finally invaded in 1978.³⁵ However the Khmer Rouge's technique of creating a communist society without wasting time on intermediate steps³⁶ can be viewed as incredible efficient. Conversely, this action could be viewed as an attempt to consolidate power before a potential revolution movement has time to organise itself and stage a coup.

However with efficiency, a horrible pervasiveness swept the country as Pol Pot's regime consolidated its power. People were punished for laughing and crying³⁷ as this was regarded as a sign of treachery. Despair and compassion were also treated harshly as they were seen as evidence of dissatisfaction and opposition to the regime.³⁸ These methods attributed to the exponential increase in fear as Angkor was seen to have "more eyes than a pineapple" [Stuart Fox]³⁹ and ensued that no one criticised the regime in public. However, even the most minor of criticisms could result in death⁴⁰ as people were taken to the dreaded Tuol Sleng, and forced to

²⁶ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J. op.cit. p.194

²⁷ Webb, K. Op.cit. p.146

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Harpur, J: War Without End: Conflict in Indochina, 2nd Edition, p.138

³⁰ Webb, K. op.cit. p.146

³¹ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J. op.cit. p.193

³² Harpur, J. op.cit. p.143

³³ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J.op.cit p.193

³⁴ Harpur, J.op.cit. p.194

³⁵ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J.op.cit. p.210-211

³⁶ Brawley, S, Dixon, C & Green, J.op.cit. p.138

³⁷ Webb, K. op.cit. p.144

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Harpur, J.op.cit p.143

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.144

admit to treason before their executions.⁴¹ This efficient repression adding to the government's stability and thus could be said that Pol Pot's methods were effective, as the entire population was terrified of being overheard and denounced as a traitor, hence a very small minority of dissenters voiced their opinions. Likewise, the population would not protest the executions as they were given legal justifications, such as treason, which the predominantly peasant society wouldn't have the means to refute or even argue. Therefore this added further contributed to the Khmer Rouge's stability.

Nonetheless, it is evident that Pol Pot's savage methods were a predominant factor in the duration of the Khmer Rouge. As Hem Samin, a Vietnamese dissident (who later returned to Vietnam) stated Pol Pot "approached battle as with all other matters, devoted to achieving the objective no matter the cost."⁴² The Khmer Rouge leader's mindset that people could be as expendable commodities⁴³ further reveals the driving force behind his savage methods and their subsequent legacy. Similarly, this also indicates an increase in stability as the Kampuchean society would feel pressured to not object to the horrors occurring around them as they knew their leader was swift and brutal in response.

Therefore the nature, aims and methods of Pol Pot can be said to be grossly effective as they achieved stability and prolonged the Khmer Rouge. However his racist, pervasive and brutal nature has become infamous for the cruelty inflicted upon the Kampuchea people. In the name of producing a new communal society with cultural and racial purity, Pol Pot's methods were extremely secretive, thorough, efficient and savage as he sought to preserve his power.

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Additionally, this one website was very helpful in developing my footnoting skills.

<http://www.solent.ac.uk/library/informe/law/referencing/solution2how2ibid.stm>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. p.140

⁴³ Ibid.