

First They Killed My Father

A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers

By Loung Ung

History

Discussion Questions:

1. Define the terms politicide and genocide. Are these terms interchangeable? Of the two, which most closely describes the events in Cambodia from 1975-1978? Are such terms synonymous with 'ethnic cleansing'? Explain your opinion.
2. What internal and external influences and factors led to the war in Cambodia?
3. How did this book increase your appreciation of civil rights and personal freedoms? Has this book changed your respect for the rule of law and due process? Explain how?
4. How has this book increased your understanding of the importance of effective governing? Explain why or why not?
5. What ideological rhetoric or process of indoctrination was used by the Khmer Rouge to try and give Cambodians a new sense of national identity? How did they blend Maoist Communism and Cambodian culture? Why did this regime detest Western influence and fear/loathe the outside interlopers? Why was there such a fear of infiltration by the CIA, KGB or Vietnamese operatives?
6. Are there any similarities to be drawn between Andrew Jackson's Cherokee Removal, Adolf Hitler's Final Solution and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime? Explain.
7. Do you think Americans were oblivious or naive concerning the problems in Southeast Asia from 1975-1978? Research this question.
8. How did the war differ for families living in urban areas versus rural areas? Educated versus uneducated? Explain the different experiences during the war because of gender?
9. Explain the term 'assimilation'. Is this term often used in association with genocide and ethnic cleansing? Think of different periods in U.S./World History when the same practice was applied. Was resistance futile for the Ung family?
10. Explain the statement, "war turns men into ghastly agents of terror." Does this statement apply to both the Khmer Rouge and the author? Explain your opinion.
11. Ultimately, Cambodia was liberated with the help and assistance of what nation? Explain using specific detail. Does this fact change your views on U.S. intervention or interference? Explain why?
12. What role, if any, do citizens of humanity and their governments have in trying to end violent regimes who commit acts of racial cleansing and genocide?

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13. Over the course of history, are civilians ever 'fair game' during a time of war? Explain.

14. Did the Khmer Rouge employ the same interrogation tactics as other rogue regimes or legitimate global powers? Did their method of division and terror mirror any of activities undertaken during the interrogations at Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay? Is this methodology ever acceptable? Explain your opinion?

Political Science

Discussion Questions:

What is ethnic cleansing and genocide? Why does ethnic cleansing and genocide happen? How might genocide be prevented?

The concept of ethnic cleansing is not new. Do you believe that it is becoming more common, or do you believe that the media has enabled us to simply become more aware? Why?

Who are the Khmer Rouge? What fundamental problems existed in the Khmer Rouge's plan that caused the destruction of so many lives? Were there any values that the Khmer Rouge claimed to hold that you share?

Who was Pol Pot? How did he gain his political power?

Khmer Rouge, previously a weak guerrilla force run by disenfranchised leftist politicians, grew in the wake of the bombings, as each attack on Cambodian land legitimized their virulent hatred of Sihanouk. What country was responsible for the bombings? And what were the justifications for the action?

How much did the American presence (or lack thereof) influence key events in this book? What was the political/foreign policy role of the United States regarding Cambodia?

What are the challenges of justice related to convicting war criminals?

What does Ung's chapter "The Execution" tell us about the importance of justice? Was the execution just - why or why not, in your opinion?

What does Cousin Cheung's encounter with the soldiers who suspect her of being Khmer Rouge reveal about the political situation in Cambodia after the end of the war?

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With armed struggle a reality of life for people all over the world both past and present, how does one draw the line as to which means are ethical and unethical for coping with it, such as the author's current campaign against the use of landmines? Are there other tools of war that you believe should be broadly banned?

How has the legacy of the Khmer Rouge shaped the country; its people and the political and economic institutions that govern Cambodia today?

List four examples of ethnic cleansing that have occurred in the 19th-21st Centuries.

What influence or the lack thereof has the U.S. Government had regarding ethnic cleaning in Bosnia? Rwanda? Darfur?

Sociology

Discussion Questions:

1. Identify cultural elements throughout the book such as norms (folkways), values, beliefs, and symbols.
2. Define social institutions. What social institutions were altered or destroyed by the Khmer Rouge? For what purpose?
3. What do we learn about deviance as a social construct from the book? What types of behavior were defined as deviant by the Angkar? Why? What forms of social control did the Angkar use?
4. Give examples from the book of forced assimilation, expulsion, cultural genocide, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination.
5. Describe the "ideal" society the Khmer Rouge claimed it wanted to create. Are there any values that the Khmer Rouge claimed to hold that you share?
6. In the new "classless" society, a system of stratification still existed. Explain and describe the structure of this stratification system. Include discussions of status value, base people, new people, how labor was divided, and how goods and resources were distributed.
7. Why did the Khmer Rouge consider people from the countryside to be model citizens? How did they see urban people?

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8. What changes were made to the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols in order to remove rank and status divisions? Give examples of language and dress norms.
9. Do you believe it is possible to have a classless society? Why or why not?
10. What was the significance of race/ethnicity throughout Ung's story?
11. How are gender roles depicted in the book before and during the war? How did the experiences of the male and female Ung family members differ?
12. How does Ung's perception of herself change throughout the story? How does her cultural/ethnic identity develop?
13. Explain how Ung attempted to assimilate into American culture. How would you explain Ung's desire to assimilate into American culture and her disconnect from her family in Cambodia?
14. Using the sociological imagination, reflect on the similarities and differences in your childhood and that of Ung. How would your life, personality, choices, and beliefs be different if you were raised in a similar social situation as Ung?
15. Discuss how the Khmer Rouge trained children as soldiers. What methods were used to socialize the children as soldiers? Research other examples of the use of child soldiers in other parts of the world.
16. Research if the United States had any role in the Khmer Rouge's rise to power. What kinds of action did the U.S. government take before and during the Khmer Rouge Killing Fields campaign?
17. Research the Ottawa Treaty (also referred to as the Mine Ban Treaty or the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction.) Explain the purpose of the treaty. What countries have signed the treaty? What is the U.S. position on the treaty?
18. Research the legal definition of "genocide." Did the Khmer Rouge commit genocide in Cambodia? What is "auto-genocide?" Have other Twentieth Century countries committed genocide? Which ones, when, and against whom?
19. Research recent news accounts to learn of the current situation regarding trials and punishment for those who took part in the Killing Fields. Should they be brought to trial? Why or why not?
20. Research the International Criminal Court (ICC). What is the United States position on ICC? Do you agree with this position? Why or why not?