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FIRST THEY KILLED MY FATHER

SCREENPLAY BY LOUNG UNG & ANGELINA JOLIE DIRECTED BY ANGELINA JOLIE



DISCUSSION AND STUDY GUIDE



NETFLIX



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to assist screening organizers, teachers, and community leaders in facilitating a pre- and post-screening discussion for *First They Killed My Father*, a feature film directed by Angelina Jolie. The guide is intended for general audiences, and may also be used in high school or college courses, particularly (but not exclusively) in Asian American Studies, ethnic studies, history, literature, political science, and global studies.

The guide provides historical information about Cambodia and the contexts in which the film's narratives take place, details about the film's planning and production, and instructional tips and resources for teachers, presenters and facilitators. Perhaps most importantly, it outlines major themes and sample questions designed to stimulate discussion and reflection by audience members both in Cambodia and around the globe. A list of websites and other relevant resources is included at the end of the guide, for those who might want to further research the issues. It is our hope that the film will inspire viewers to analyze and reflect upon both the causes and consequences of war, and serve as a catalyst for discussion about how we might move away from conflict and toward peace.

This guide contains:

- Background on Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge regime
- Pre-screening and preparatory notes for facilitators
- Post-screening discussion questions
- Resources for the themes introduced in the film

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INTRODUCTION

In April 1975, communist guerillas known as the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, coercing Cambodians out of the capital city of Phnom Penh and provincial cities at gunpoint and into rural areas to undertake agricultural work. The Khmer Rouge implemented a radical Maoist and Marxist-Leninist policy with the ideological goal of transforming Cambodia into a classless society, abolishing money and private property, traditional education, religion, and cultural practices. Schools, pagodas, mosques, stores and government buildings were turned into stables, granaries, torture centers, and prisons used by the Khmer Rouge regime.

Under the Khmer Rouge's "four-year plan," Cambodians were expected to produce three tons of rice per hectare; as a result, they were forced to work 12 to 16 hours per day without adequate food or medical care, conditions under which even those accustomed to agricultural work suffered greatly. Additionally, they were subject to extreme psychological abuse, enduring forced marriages and witnessing deaths of family members. During this "transformation," nearly 2 million people died of starvation, disease, over-work, torture and execution in what became known as the "killing fields."



In 1945, following the end of World War II, an International Military Tribunal (IMT) was established by Allied leaders to bring Nazi officials to trial on charges of war crimes, crimes against peace, and crimes against humanity. During the Holocaust, an estimated 11 million people, primarily (but certainly not limited to) Jews, gypsies, political prisoners, homosexuals, and persons with disabilities were killed. The IMT cases, which came to be known as the Nuremberg Trials, set the precedent for the Genocide Convention (1948), which defined genocide as acts committed "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group." Also in 1948, the United Nations proclaimed and adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which outlined basic rights and freedoms to which all human beings are entitled. In the aftermath of WWII, "never again" became an unofficial rallying cry, with leaders of nations vowing that something like the Holocaust would not be permitted to happen again.

And yet, the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed many such horrors: in addition to Cambodia, conflicts and mass killings in China, North Korea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, East Timor, Sudan, Syria, and Myanmar comprise only part of the list of atrocities. How can individual leaders and nations - and the international community - continue to allow this to happen? Dr. Gregory H. Stanton has written that in order to prevent genocide, we must first understand it, and to understand genocide is to recognize that it does not happen overnight. Rather, it occurs in stages, and by learning how to identify key elements - warning signs - within various stages, we will be better equipped to stop it from escalating.

Loung's is but one story of life under the Khmer Rouge, one account of a child's struggle to survive given unthinkable circumstances. It is a story of pain and trauma, but also, a narrative of resilience. By continuing to share stories like that of Loung, perhaps by using films like *First They Killed My Father* as a catalyst, others will be encouraged and empowered to break their silence, to tell their stories, and in doing so, to begin to heal.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT*

The Cambodian experience is relevant to the understanding of conflict today. It reminds us of the dehumanizing impact of extreme political ideology, the train of events that makes genocide possible, and the true human cost of violence. At the same time, it gives us hope, by showing the survival and resilience of a family, a people and a culture.

Millions of Cambodians today are survivors, or children of survivors or the genocide. Almost anyone in their forties has direct memories of the war. For Cambodians, recreating this past is personal and painful. Yet they made this film possible: from the cast and crew members, to the men and women who built the sets and made the costumes, and the thousands of people who took part as background actors, or who

worked with us as translators, therapists and teachers. I was humbled by their courage, their talent and their dignity: by the extraordinary grace and sensitivity of the young Cambodian actors, and the bravery of the people who came forward every day on set and shared their memories.

Making this film deepened forever my understanding of how children experience war and are affected by the emotional memory of it. Millions of children are still affected by conflict worldwide. They are the Loung Ungs of today. I hope that learning the lessons of Cambodia's experience can help us to be part of finding solutions to conflicts that affect children today, and to the building of a more peaceful and hopeful future.

-- Angelina Jolie, Director, Producer, Screenwriter, *First They Killed My Father*



About Angelina Jolie

In 2011, Academy Award® and three-time Golden Globe Award winner ANGELINA JOLIE (Director, Producer, Screenwriter) made her feature-film directorial debut with *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, and in 2014 directed and produced the Oscar®-nominated *Unbroken*. She also directed, produced and wrote *By the Sea*, and is executive producer on the animated feature film *The Breadwinner*, set in Afghanistan.

Jolie's numerous film credits include Walt Disney Pictures' *Maleficent*, Clint Eastwood's *Changeling*, Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*, the action-adventure *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, and Martin Campbell's *Beyond Borders*, in which she played a United Nations relief worker. In 1999, Jolie won an Academy Award®, a Golden Globe Award, a Broadcast Film Critics' Award and a SAG Award for Best Supporting Actress, among many other honors, for her performance in James Mangold's *Girl, Interrupted*. Jolie won a Golden Globe and SAG award for her performance in Michael Cristofer's HBO film *Gia*, and received a Golden Globe Award for her role in John Frankenheimer's made-for-television film *George Wallace*.

Jolie serves as Special Envoy to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and is co-founder of the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative and an Honorary Dame Commander of the Order of St. Michael and St. George. She is also a Visiting Professor in Practice at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Jolie is the mother of six children: Maddox, Pax, Zahara, Shiloh, Knox, and Vivienne.

*Information, statements, and quotations contained in pages 4 through 9 excerpted from the *First They Killed My Father* Production Information notes (provided courtesy of Netflix). Photos throughout the guide provided courtesy of Netflix. All rights reserved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LOUNG UNG (Author, Screenwriter, Executive Producer) was 5 years old when the Khmer Rouge soldiers stormed into her native city of Phnom Penh. Four years later, in one of the bloodiest genocides of the 20th century, an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from starvation, hard labor, diseases and executions under the regime. Among the victims were both of Loung's parents, two sisters, and 20 other relatives. In 1980, Loung, her older brother Meng and his wife, Eang, escaped to the United States as refugees and resettled in Vermont.

In 1995, Loung returned to Cambodia to reunite with her family, and since then has made over thirty trips back to the country. As an activist and writer, Loung has devoted herself to empowering survivors and reconciliation in her homeland and internationally. She began her career in 1993 as an advocate at an abused women's shelter in Maine where she worked to end violence against women, and in 1997, moved to Washington DC to serve as the Spokesperson for the Campaign for a Landmine Free World, a position she held until 2005.



Loung expanded her activism in 2013, this time as one of the writers of *Girl Rising*, a groundbreaking film that tells the stories of nine extraordinary girls in nine developing countries and their fights for their rights to be educated. Loung's memoir, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, published in 2000 by HarperCollins Publishers, is a national bestseller and recipient of the 2001 Asian/Pacific American Librarians' Association award for "Excellence in Adult Non-fiction Literature." *First They Killed My Father* has been published in fourteen countries and translated into Spanish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Khmer and other languages. She is also the author of *Lucky Child* and *Lulu in the Sky*, and her books have been selected for numerous community and freshmen read programs, and are frequently taught in high schools and universities in the U.S. and overseas.

Loung has spoken widely to schools, universities, corporations, and conferences in the U.S. and internationally. Additionally, she has also been a featured speaker at the Mexico 1 Million Youth Summit, U.S. Coast Guard Academy, UN Conference Against Racism and Discriminations in Durban, South Africa, and Child Soldiers Summit in Kathmandu, Nepal. In recognition of her work, The World Economic Forum selected Loung as one of the "100 Global Youth Leaders of Tomorrow." She has been the subject of an hour-long documentary for the German ARTE, Japanese NHK, and NECN. Additionally, Loung is also a founding partner of the Belgian Bier Markt, Bar Cento, and Market Garden Brewery in Cleveland, Ohio.



PRODUCER RITHY PANH

RITHY PANH (Producer) is Cambodia's best-known filmmaker whose films focus on the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime. Panh was born in Phnom Penh, the son of a schoolteacher father. In 1975, Panh and his family along with millions of other residents were evacuated from the city; his parents, sibling and other relatives lost their lives during the genocide. In 1979, Panh made his way to Thailand and then to France where he attended the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques.

Panh returned to Cambodia in 1990, while still using Paris as a home base. His first documentary feature, *Site 2*, about a family of Cambodian refugees in a camp on the Thai-Cambodian border, won an award at the Festival of Amiens. In 1994, his film *Rice People* played in competition in the 1994 Cannes Film Festival and was the first Cambodian film ever submitted for an Academy Award. Panh's other documentary features include *Bophana: une tragédie Cambodgienne*, *The Land of Wandering Souls*, *S:21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, *The Burnt Theater*, *Paper Cannot Wrap up Embers*, and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*. He also

directed the dramatic feature *One Evening After War*. Panh's 2013 documentary *The Missing Picture* was screened in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival, and was later nominated for an Academy Award. Panh co-founded the Bophana Center in Phnom Penh, devoted to preserving Cambodia's film, photographic and audio history in an effort to develop a thriving film industry in the country.



Producer Rithy Panh with Angelina Jolie.

"Loung's story shows that we as a people were not destroyed by this unimaginable genocide, which has happened again and again around the world - Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur. We here found a way to move on, beyond the suffering, the hell. It is in the end a story of family and hope."

—Rithy Panh



THE CAST



Sareum Srey Moch (Loung)

Sareum Srey Moch lives with her parents in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where she is a student at one of six Empowering Youth in Cambodia (EYC) schools. Srey Moch was granted the "Rising Star Award" for her performance in *First They Killed My Father* at the 3rd Annual Asian World Film Festival in held in Culver City, California on October 30, 2017.



Phoeung Kompheak (Pa Ung)

Phoeung Kompheak is a multi-talented writer and actor who appeared in the French film *The Gate*, directed by Régis Wargnier. Kompheak earned a master's degree from University Stendhal in France. He is the author of several short stories, and has acted on stage in numerous plays.

Kompheak has served as an interpreter in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), more commonly known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

Sveng Socheata (Ma Ung)

Sveng Socheata is one of Cambodia's best-known actors, having appeared in scores of Cambodian films. Her most notable work includes the films (titles loosely translated into English) *Mother's Death*, *The Flower Grows on the Rock* and *Trick on Trick*.

Regarding *First They Killed My Father*, she states:

"For an actor, reliving the experience of my country's great tragedy, was supremely emotional for many of us. But to personally participate in this story, as the mother of many children, including two who did not survive, was particularly difficult, and made me feel that our purpose was all the more important, that is, bringing this story to light. As an actor, there is nothing better than to be involved in something important, which this film is."

In 2013 Socheata was honored with the prestigious Khmer Apsara Award for her many film performances.



MAKING THE FILM

Making *First They Killed My Father*

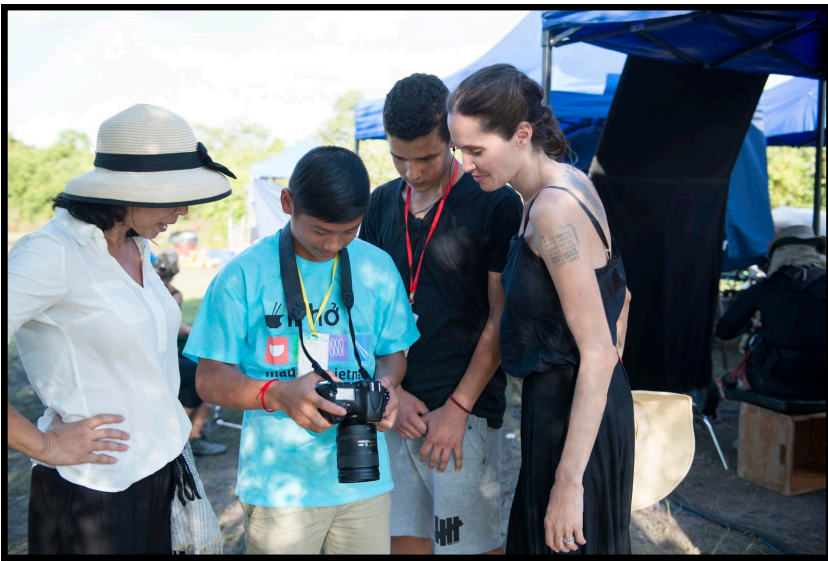


Director Angelina Jolie with Sareum Srey Moch (Loung).

Cambodian author and human rights activist Loung Ung's gripping memoir of her experiences from 1975 to 1978 serves as the basis for this screen adaptation of *First They Killed My Father*, directed, co-written, and produced by Academy Award winner Angelina Jolie - her fourth feature as a director. The acclaimed Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh also serves as producer.

Jolie first read Loung Ung's memoir, entitled *First They Killed My Father; A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, soon after its publication in 2000, while she was in Cambodia filming *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. Jolie and Ung later met and became friends, and discussed the possibility of one day turning the book into a film.

In 2014, Jolie and Ung co-wrote the screenplay, and approached Netflix to produce and release it. The largest-scale motion picture ever made in Cambodia, the epic Khmer language drama was shot on location throughout the country and features a cast comprised entirely of Cambodian actors and players, many appearing in a film for the first time. Jolie and her casting team, led by casting director Pauline Chan, traveled the length and breadth of Cambodia searching for young actors in disadvantaged neighborhoods, orphanages, and schools, working closely with NGOs. Sareum Srey Moch, who plays the central role of Loung from the ages of five to nine, and from whose point of view the story unfolds, was discovered in a local school.



Pax Jolie-Pitt served as one of two on-set stills photographers.

States Jolie:

"I was stunned by the performances of the children we cast in the film. I never in my wildest dreams imagined I could sit down with a 9-year-old child to explain a scene, and that she would understand it and act it with such depth and accuracy. The children we cast have not had the privilege of a sheltered life – they could connect with a scene very quickly on an emotional level. They were very self-aware, and very emotionally generous. They understood from the adults around them the importance of the story and took it to heart. It was moving to see the way they took it seriously for their understanding of their own country."

Since the action of the film plays out through the eyes of a child, Jolie believed it was appropriate for the stills to be shot from the point of view of a young person. As such, her son Pax Jolie-Pitt provided that service as one of two on-set stills photographers. The French photojournalist Roland Neveu, who covered the fall of Phnom Penh, Cambodia in April 1975, also served as a stills photographer for the film.

MAKING THE FILM (CON'T.)

Maddox Jolie-Pitt, Jolie's eldest son, whom she adopted from Cambodia in 2002, was involved in the day to day production duties. Says Jolie, "Maddox worked hard on the film since the beginning. At the end of the day, he went through notes with me, watched dailies and we talked about them, which was important to me, not only because this is his country's story and he's my son, but because most importantly, again, this film is presented through the prism of a young person."

Moreover, Cambodian technicians, artisans and craftspeople comprised the largest portion of the crew. Bophana Productions employed more than 500 Cambodians in the making of the film, along with more than 3,500 Cambodian background actors, recruited from villages, cities, farms, schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the provinces of Siem Reap and Battambang.



Maddox Jolie-Pitt, pictured above with Angelina Jolie and Loung Ung, is one of the film's executive producers.

Jolie began shooting in November 2015 on location in the Kok Trach Village outside the Cambodian city of Siem Reap. Production finished in February 2016. *First They Killed My Father* was released by Netflix on September 15, 2017.

About making *First They Killed My Father*, Jolie states:

"I've done films depicting the horrors of war before, and when you recreate war you think very respectfully, you feel like you're carrying the ghosts of the past. You're recreating steps taken by real people, so it can become very emotional, very powerful. When you're telling a true story you can create very profound reactions. Cambodians are a very spiritual people, they have a connection to nature and to spirits and the past. So when you recreate history, to them you're calling up the past, you're calling up ghosts. When you shoot guns, blow things up, dig mass graves in the ground and recreate killing, you're bringing all that back. When you see people playing the Khmer Rouge you know they are recalling a very painful history, bringing back painful memories. It's not inconsequential when they say, we need a blessing before filming, you need to pray to the spirits before you touch that scene. I felt the ghosts of a million people who died. It's their story and their skulls are in the ground. And that is a great responsibility."



PRE-SCREENING DISCUSSION

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

The amount and type of pre-screening discussion you have will depend upon who is in the audience, how much audience members know about Cambodian history and culture, how much information they already have about the film, and how much time you have. For all audiences, provide general information about the film, including by whom it was produced and directed, and when it first premiered. You may mention some of the awards the film has received, and be sure to introduce any of the film's crew members who may be in attendance. Thank the organizers and those who contributed to making the screening possible (venue owner, those who provided refreshments, etc.).

OPENING REMARKS

Before the screening, highlight the following key points:

- Directed, written and produced by award-winning actor and filmmaker, Angelina Jolie
- Based on the book, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, written by Loung Ung (published in 2000)
- Filmed in Cambodia from November 2015 through February 2016
- World premiered in Siem Reap, Cambodia on February 18, 2017 in front of survivors, Khmer Rouge Tribunal judges, monks, villagers, His Majesty the King NORODOM Sihamoni and Her Majesty the Queen Mother NORODOM Monineath
- Free public screenings held twice in Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and Battambang to full houses of Khmer audiences, most notably at the ancient ruins of the Elephant Terrace at Angkor Wat and the historic Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh
- Released worldwide through Netflix on September 15, 2017
- Opened the Cambodia Town Film Festival on 9/16/17 and screened at both the Telluride Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival in 2017. Community screenings part of Asian World Film Festival and Boston Asian American Film Festival
- A three-month nationwide Cambodian Community Screening Campaign (September 2017 - December 2017) brought the film to cities across the United States and Canada, including Long Beach, CA (home to largest Khmer community outside of Cambodia); Lowell, MA; and Seattle-Tacoma, WA.
- Chosen as the country's Best Foreign Language Film (BFLF) submission to the Academy Awards by the Cambodian Oscar Selection Committee. Won BFLF at the Hollywood Film Awards and nominated for BFLF for the Golden Globes
- The historic Cambodian Community Screening Campaign ends December 2017 at George Mason University, hosted by the School of Conflict Analysis & Resolution, having screened 25 times in 16 host cities.

Ask the audience to consider the following while viewing the film:

- The historical events that led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia
- The Khmer Rouge regime from the perspective of a child
- The prevalence of children forced to become child soldiers in times of conflict and war
- The circumstances that led to the exodus of tens of thousands refugees from Cambodia in the 1980s
- The prevalence of genocide throughout the world, and our responsibility (as individuals, as communities, as nations) to work to prevent it
- The role of storytelling as part of the healing process for trauma survivors and their families

ABOUT CAMBODIA

FULL NAME:	Kingdom of Cambodia
HEAD OF STATE:	H.M. King Norodom Sihamoni
PRIME MINISTER:	H.E. Hun Sen
AREA:	181,035 km ² (Land: 176,515 km ² ; Water: 4,520 km ²)
CAPITAL:	Phnom Penh
LANGUAGES:	Khmer (official), French, English
POPULATION:	15.96 million (July 2016 estimate) (65.3% of the population is under 30 yrs. of age)
LIFE EXPECTANCY:	Male: 62 years; Female: 67 years
MAJOR INDUSTRIES:	Garment manufacturing, tourism, agriculture
GDP PER CAPITA:	USD \$1,218 (2015)
MAJOR RELIGIONS:	Theravada Buddhism (official), 93%; Islam, 3.5%; other, 3.5%



Sources: U.S. Department of State; National Institute of Statistics, Royal Government of Cambodia; United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Cambodia

TIMELINE OF MODERN CAMBODIAN HISTORY

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1941: The French declare Norodom Sihanouk (b. 1922) King of Cambodia, then a French protectorate.</p> <p>1940s: Anti-colonial sentiment leads to the development of a communist party in Cambodia</p> <p>1953: Cambodia declares its independence as a sovereign nation, no longer under French rule.</p> <p>1954: The Geneva Accords divide Vietnam into northern/ southern regions along the 17th parallel.</p> <p>1950s: U.S. becomes involved in Vietnam, hoping to build a separate, non-communist Southern Vietnam.</p> <p>1960s: A group of young Cambodians educated in France returns and begins to radicalize the communist party.</p> <p>1969: U.S. President Richard Nixon begins secret bombing of Cambodia, killing or displacing hundreds of thousands of Cambodian villagers.</p> <p>1970: General Lon Nol stages a coup against Prince Sihanouk, then in exile.</p> <p>1975: Cambodia falls under the control of the communist Khmer Rouge regime. Millions of Cambodians die from overwork, disease, starvation, torture, or execution between 1975 and 1979.</p> <p>1979: Vietnamese soldiers overthrow the Khmer Rouge. But civil war and unrest continue.</p> <p>1980: The U.S. passes the Refugee Act, allowing tens of thousands of Southeast Asia Refugees to resettle throughout the country.</p> <p>1985: Hun Sen is named Prime Minister of Cambodia.</p> | <p>1991: A peace agreement is signed in Paris. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) facilitates national elections.</p> <p>1994: The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) is established through a grant to Yale Univ. to collect and archive documents, photos, etc. detailing the atrocities of the KR regime.</p> <p>1998: Pol Pot dies in northwestern Cambodia.</p> <p>1999: Cambodian authorities arrest Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, for his role as head of the Khmer Rouge S-21 interrogation center.</p> <p>2003: After years of negotiations, the United Nations and Cambodia agree to an international tribunal for former Khmer Rouge leaders.</p> <p>2006: The Extraordinary Courts in the Chambers of Cambodia (ECCC) is convened.</p> <p>2012: Duch is sentenced to life in prison.</p> <p>2012: Former King Norodom Sihanouk dies at age 89.</p> <p>2014: Khmer Rouge leaders Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan are sentenced to life in prison.</p> <p>2017: The ECCC announces that the trials for Meas Muth, Ao An, and Yim Tith will not proceed due to budget constraints.</p> <p>2017: Closing arguments are heard for the case against Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan.</p> |
|---|--|
- Sources: Cambodian Information Center; BBC News Asia; *Phnom Penh Post*; *Cambodian Tribunal Monitor*; U.S. Dept. of State; Documentation Center of Cambodia

THE KHMER ROUGE

Who Were the Khmer Rouge?

While the pre-Khmer Rouge era is often looked upon nostalgically as a “golden age,” in truth Cambodia had been plagued by civil war and internal displacement for some time. Cambodia had gained its independence from the French in 1953, under then-King Norodom Sihanouk (crowned in 1941), and by the 1960s Cambodian arts, music, and cinema were indeed flourishing. Yet there was substantial unrest. While many Cambodians regarded Sihanouk as a modern-day *devaraja* (god-king), some were growing increasingly disillusioned. In particular, in the 1950s a group of Khmer scholars had traveled to France, where they began to study Marxism and Leninism, and began to question social and economic inequalities they saw in Cambodian society. One of these individuals, Saloth Sar, who would eventually take the name Pol Pot, returned to Cambodia and became one of the leaders of an underground communist movement, the 'Khmer Rouge.' In 1963, the Khmer Rouge began to set up guerrilla bases in remote regions of Cambodia.



Khmer Rouge ideology questioned the social and economic inequalities of Cambodian society. Photo by Pax Jolie-Pitt.

How the Khmer Rouge Came to Power

In 1970, a Cambodian general and former defense minister named Lon Nol staged a *coup d'état* to overthrow Prince Sihanouk while the monarch was out of the country. While Sihanouk had declared Cambodia neutral in the Vietnam conflict, the United States believed that he had allowed North Vietnamese forces to occupy areas across the border and receive supplies.

The U.S. subsequently launched a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia, killing tens of thousands and displacing more. Many fled to the cities - and especially to the capital city of Phnom Penh - in search of refuge between 1970 and 1975.

In what would become a sardonic turn of events, in response to Lon Nol's takeover and the bombing of Cambodia, Sihanouk established a government in exile, and sought the support of the Khmer Rouge. While to that point the Khmer Rouge had remained small and relatively concealed in remote jungles, with the nominal support of Sihanouk, whom many still revered as *Samdech Eav* (Father King), the Khmer Rouge was able to recruit hundreds of members, primarily in rural areas. The result was a civil war between the Lon Nol regime and the Khmer Rouge. The brutality of Lon Nol's forces, combined with the continuous U.S. bombing during this time, severe food shortages, and propaganda further drove the peasant class to join the Khmer Rouge. When they entered Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, they did so as victors, with wide popular support and an increase in territorial control.

Reign of Terror

It should be noted that even those who supported the Khmer Rouge were unaware of its intentions. Most were unschooled in the Marxist-Leninist ideology purportedly followed by the Khmer Rouge, but rather, were tired of the violence and corruption that had plagued Cambodia throughout the 1960s and 70s. The Khmer Rouge, they thought, would finally bring peace.

Tragically, the Khmer Rouge turned Cambodia into a huge prison (sometimes referred to by refugees as “a prison without walls”), which later became a graveyard for nearly two million people. Mass graves were created and continue to be found throughout the country, turning much of the landscape into what has been called the killing fields. While estimates vary, most scholars or experts agree that at least 1.7 million people died as a result of the Khmer Rouge regime.

FAMILY AND SOCIETY UNDER THE KHMER ROUGE

"When I ask Kim what a capitalist is, he tells me it is someone who is from the city. He says the Khmer Rouge government views science, technology, and anything mechanical as evil and therefore must be destroyed."

—Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, p. 58

Eliminating the Past: Year Zero

The Khmer Rouge divided people into two groups—the *base people*, peasants who had lived in areas controlled by the Khmer Rouge prior to 1975, and *new people*, who had been evacuated from the cities and ostensibly educated and therefore otherwise suspect.

Because they wanted to transform Cambodia into a classless society, the Khmer Rouge abolished money, private property, and free markets. The Khmer Rouge claimed that they were creating "Year Zero"—a time for Cambodia to start over—through their extreme social engineering. Claiming that Cambodia should be self-sufficient and uncorrupted by foreign influences, the Khmer Rouge isolated Cambodia from the rest of the world. All forms of communication—phones, radios, televisions, magazines, and newspapers (except for Khmer Rouge publications)—were banned under the Khmer Rouge. Traditional forms of schooling were forbidden, including teachings by Buddhist monks.

Those known, revealed, or assumed to be educated (sometimes simply because they wore glasses), such as teachers, doctors, or lawyers, were treated especially harshly, severely tortured and/or executed. Individuals associated with the former government, such as police officers and other civil servants were often killed outright. Dancers, musicians, actors, and other artists—



Children in the same family were sent to different work camps.

anyone believed to be associated with the "golden age"—were also targeted and killed.

For many months, no one outside of high-ranking members knew who the Khmer Rouge leaders were. While Pol Pot was later revealed to be the principal leader of the Khmer Rouge ("Brother Number One"), initially people only knew of *angkar* (the organization). Absolute loyalty to *angkar* was paramount.

Dismantling Khmer Society

The language of the Khmer people uses various pronouns that indicate not only familial relationships (such as mother and father), but also reflect one's social status. Under the Khmer Rouge, these terms were abandoned. People were encouraged to call each other "friend," or "comrade" (in Khmer, *mit*). The traditional *sampeah*, in which one presses one's hands together and bows in greeting someone, was also discouraged.

As seen in the film, family members were often separated from each other. Husbands were separated from wives, and children were separated from their parents. Depending upon their age, children could be put in distinct work brigades or sent to live in different work camps. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge set out to destroy Khmer traditions, teaching children that they no longer had to respect and obey their parents or follow Buddhist customs—their loyalty was now to *angkar*. Special spy units called *kang chhlop* were created, composed primarily of children used to spy on adults. In many cases, individuals who were already or had been previously married were forced to marry Khmer Rouge cadres, further destroying the established family unit. For all family members, disloyalty (albeit real or perceived) to *angkar* meant torture and/or death.

Finally, as was the case with young Loung, thousands of children were forced to become child soldiers during the regime.

CHILD SOLDIERS

"When instead of like other kids in different parts of the world at age nine, when they were given baseball bats to hit balls, I was given a stick to hit people. When instead of running in the fields, playing soccer, I was taught to run in a zigzag line in the fields, so if people were trying to shoot me, I'd be harder for them to hit me. Instead of learning about compassion and joy and kindness, I was taught to hate. I was taught to kill."

—Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, p. 3

"Receptive to Revolution"

In the film *First They Killed My Father*, viewers follow young Loung on her journey from playful child in Phnom Penh, to forced agricultural laborer, to child soldier. The Khmer Rouge recruited thousands of children to fill their ranks, both leading up to the 1975 takeover, and throughout the Khmer Rouge regime of 1975-1979. Indeed, many survivors who had been living in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge entered the city noted the youth of the soldiers they encountered. Bun Yom, a Khmer Rouge survivor, writes in his memoir:

"As I walked, I saw 13 and 14-year-old children wearing green uniforms. I asked someone, 'Who are these kids wearing green uniforms?'

'They are Communists called the Khmer Rouge,' the man answered." (Yom, Ch. 3, "Angry Kids with Guns")

Because the Khmer Rouge wished to establish "Year Zero" – that is, to destroy Cambodian society they believed corrupted by foreign influences, urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism, and to begin anew by creating a classless society founded upon rural collectives – they recruited heavily among poor Khmer youth, those likely willing to destroy the old society, out of resentment for having little stake in it. Young minds, they believed, could be easily indoctrinated to Khmer Rouge ideology and policy, and trained to follow orders. In a 1977 speech, Pol Pot declared, "It is the youth of today who will take up the revolutionary tasks of tomorrow," as they are "most receptive to revolution."

The Power to Destroy and to Kill

Furthermore, once the Khmer Rouge took power, thousands of children of all socioeconomic classes were forced to join their ranks. Separated from their parents and other family members, children like Loung were subjected to extensive training sessions and meetings after long days of working in rice or vegetable fields. Isolated, exhausted, and threatened with violence, they had no choice but to obey *Angkar*.

Children under the Khmer Rouge were both subjected to and witness to extreme brutality, forced to watch torture and killings. Children were instructed in combat and also cruelty, sometimes forced to beat animals – and other people. They were taught how to fire weapons and lay landmines, to hurt and to kill. Loung writes:

"There is such hate and rage inside me now. The Angkar has taught me to hate so deeply that I now know I have the power to destroy and kill." (Ung, 105)

The destructive effects of the Khmer Rouge regime on young children are impossible to adequately describe. After the Khmer Rouge were overthrown, many, having known nothing but life as child soldiers, remained in their ranks – or became soldiers for different factions. Others attempted to leave that life behind – but even today, both continue to be haunted by memories and plagued by nightmares about events no child should ever have to witness, and actions no child should ever have to take.

While exact numbers are impossible to determine, it is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands of child soldiers in combat-stricken areas throughout the world, even today. According to Child Soldiers International, while military recruitment of children is gradually being outlawed, at least 50 countries still allow it; in these and many more, hundreds of armed groups forcibly conscript children into their ranks illegally.

Indeed, "throughout the world hundreds of children go to sleep each night, not with their favourite teddybear or doll beside them, but with a gun. When they close their eyes, they do not replay the happy and innocent memories of their day, but instead fight to keep from their minds the horrors they have seen [. . .] This is the experience of child soldiers around the world."¹ Clearly, greater national and international cooperation is needed to protect children affected by armed conflict.

¹ *Ending the Use of Child Soldiers*. Joint statement by Margot Wallström, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden and Leila Zerrougui, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/press-release/ending-the-use-of-child-soldiers/>

THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in 1979, thousands of refugees fled the country. Approximately 145,000 refugees relocated to the United States between 1979 and 2002, with the majority arriving between 1980 and 1986.



Border Camps

Prior to arriving in the United States, Cambodians resettled in refugee camps, primarily along the Thai border. Some of the camps remained under Khmer Rouge control, while others were under the control of other political factions. Finally, several were under the control of the United Nations, including the large camp called “Khao I Dang.” In the film, the final scenes show Loung and several of her siblings reconnecting in one of the border camps.

While Cambodians were happy to have escaped the Khmer Rouge, life in the refugee camps was far from idyllic. Conflict continued; at times the border areas became a battleground between the Khmer Rouge and other factions, and the refugees were caught in the middle. They lived with primitive sanitation, limited food, and insufficient medical care, as well as the fears and anxieties resulting from their earlier trauma. Theft and violence were prevalent in many of the camps. Corruption was rife along the border, and a “black market” trade in food and other essential items sprung up. Many lingered for years in the camps before they either left for relocation in third countries, or were repatriated to Cambodia. Indeed, the last refugee camp did not close until 1999.

FIGURE 3.5
LOCATION OF UNBRO ASSISTED BORDER CAMPS
1985 - PRESENT



RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY

“Cambodia will never escape its history, but it does not need to be enslaved by it.”

- Youk Chhang, Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)

Resettlement in the United States

In the 1970s, most Americans knew little about Cambodia, and even less about the Khmer Rouge regime and the terror and trauma inflicted upon those who were forced to endure life under it. As a result, initially the resettlement of Cambodians in the U.S. was strongly resisted and overcome only after extensive lobbying of Congress by the Citizens' Commission on Indochinese Refugees in 1978. Finally, in 1980, the U.S. passed the Refugee Act, which allowed 50,000 Southeast Asian refugees to enter the United States per year. The 50,000 ceiling could be raised by the sitting president, and indeed, during the first year after the passage of the Act, President Jimmy Carter agreed to accept more than 150,000 Southeast Asian refugees for resettlement.

Challenges of Adjustment

Cambodian refugees have faced many challenges with regard to adjustment and resettlement. First, in an attempt to distribute the thousands of refugees so as not to “burden” any one city or state, Cambodians were relocated in different cities and states, and many found themselves isolated. Accustomed to tropical climates, Cambodians relocated to the Midwest or east coast found it difficult to adjust to cold weather. Second, as a result of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime, refugees came with memories of trauma inconceivable to many Americans, yet many were directed to areas with few resources or professionals with the knowledge and experience to assist them. Third, most came with no money or possessions, with no or little knowledge of English, and many lacked skills necessary to obtain employment. Unable to secure jobs, many refugees lived in poverty or became reliant upon government assistance. Cambodians continue to struggle, even decades after their arrival in the U.S. Some have been subject to discrimination and harassment directed toward immigrants and refugees, racial profiling by law enforcement, and lack of understanding of Khmer culture by the broader American society. Many remain in poverty, and continue to struggle with physical and mental health problems, even in subsequent generations. Younger Cambodians have found themselves caught in-between their Khmer heritage and their contemporary lives in the U.S., and grapple with their identities.

Legacy of Loss and the Promise of Hope for the Future

The deep losses endured by the victims and survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime continue to torment them, and the psycho-emotional impact of the trauma has been shown to be transmitted to subsequent generations.

One way to begin to heal the trauma is to provide settings in which individuals and communities can not only discuss the events of the past, but also, hear how these events have impacted each person differently. Reading about the Khmer Rouge in a history book may inform, but the spoken word brings people into each other's presence. Furthermore, eyewitnesses to events contribute perspectives and fill in the gaps in documented history, sometimes correcting or even contradicting the written records. Having the opportunity to tell their stories can help to heal emotional and social scars.

The use of media, albeit poetry, music, arts, or films such as *First They Killed My Father* that encourage dialogue can be a first step in empowering members of all generations to break their silence, to tell their stories, and to *begin* to heal. These discussions can promote understanding and facilitate connections between individuals and communities, both within the Cambodian diaspora and wider social networks, and offer the promise of hope for the future.

POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION

GUIDELINES

First They Killed My Father is likely to engender a range of thoughts and feelings. It may be helpful to open the post-screening discussion simply by asking audience members whether or not they liked the film, and why or why not. If no one speaks up right away, wait 15 seconds or so. If no one responds after the short pause, you as the moderator can start the discussion by briefly sharing something about your own experience with the film.

Topics might include your reaction to the film when you first saw it, or what people have shared with you from other screenings, or the latest news about the film. Generally speaking, people become less shy about asking questions or making comments once the discussion is underway.

A GENTLE REMINDER: *The moderator should foster an atmosphere in which individuals feel free to present their opinions. However, it never hurts to remind the audience that each person's point of view is valid, and that during the discussion session, you wish to encourage dialogue, but not necessarily debate, and a respectful tone is appreciated.*



GENERAL QUESTIONS

- What do you feel is the key message of *First They Killed My Father* ?
- If you could ask the filmmaker a single question, what would you ask?
- What emotions did you feel during the film? What scenes made you feel each of those emotions?
- Prior to viewing the film, what did you know or believe about Cambodia or Cambodians? In what ways did the film challenge or affirm your ideas?
- Why do you think the stories in *First They Killed My Father* are important to tell now?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What factors, both internal and external, led to civil war in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge rise to power?
2. The Khmer Rouge claimed its goal was to create a rural, classless society in which there were no rich people, no poor people, and no exploitation. Do you think this is possible? Why or why not?
3. Do you see similarities between what happened under the Khmer Rouge regime and other mass killings in the world? How pervasive is genocide in human history?
4. What do you think have been the biggest challenges for Cambodia in recovering from war and life under the Khmer Rouge?
5. Some have suggested that Cambodians should “dig a hole and bury the past” rather than speak about it. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

CLOSING

- Close the event by thanking the audience for their time and participation. Thank the owner of the venue, and any other sponsors of the event.
- Collect the sign-in list, making sure those who may have come in late have signed in.
- Request that attendees fill out a survey with feedback about the event.
- Be prepared to talk about ways in which those interested in assisting with the various issues introduced in the film can get involved.
- Point out additional resources listed in the guide, and mention any local resources.
- Be available to answer questions that attendees may not have been comfortable asking during the open session.
- Encourage audience members to spread the word about the film and generate awareness among their families, friends, and colleagues.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Below are suggestions for those who might want to delve more deeply into the issues raised in the film. They might serve as the basis for a written assignment for a class, such as an essay or article, or may inspire individuals to take action in their own communities.

- Research the role of the U.S. in the Vietnam War, and how it affected Cambodia. Do you think the actions of the U.S. during the Vietnam War facilitated the rise of the Khmer Rouge, directly or indirectly?
- Research the history of other genocides throughout the world, and the international response to those genocides. What role, if any, do we as individuals, as communities, and as nations have in trying to end violent regimes that commit mass killings and genocide?
- Explore the prevalence of child soldiers in conflicts throughout the world. What are the circumstances that lead to children younger than 18 being used in armed conflict? What are the six grave violations against children, according to the United Nations? What can be done to stop the abuses of children in combat?
- There are several memorials, both in Cambodia and in the United States, that acknowledge the trauma of the Khmer Rouge and share the experiences of the survivors. Research one or more of these memorials and explore how they came about, and how they have been received in their respective communities.
- Long Beach, California has the largest concentration of Cambodians outside of Cambodia, and an area within Long Beach has been officially recognized as “Cambodia Town.” Research the distinguishing characteristics of Cambodia Town, and if possible, interview a resident of Cambodia Town for his or her perspective.
- The trauma of the Cambodian refugee experience did not end with arrival on U.S. shores, and it can be passed down from generation to generation. Research the history and experiences of second generation Cambodian Americans, and discuss the challenges they have faced, and the successes they have achieved.
- Read the stories of other Khmer Rouge genocide survivors (see suggestions in the "Resources" section). What are the similarities in their stories? What are the differences? How can telling stories serve as a vehicle for self-expression, education, and public dialogue?

RESOURCES

The following are but a few of the many resources available on Cambodia and Cambodians in diaspora. The list is intended as a starting point for those who wish to conduct further research.

Cambodian History (general)

A History of Cambodia. (Fourth Edition). Written by David Chandler. Westview Press, 2009.

The Khmers. Written by Ian Mabbett and David Chandler. Silkworm Books, 1986.

The Khmer Rouge Regime/Genocide in Cambodia

A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979). Written by Kamboly Dy. Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007.

After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide. Written by Craig Etcheson. Praeger Publishers, 2005.

Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot. Written by David Chandler. Westview Press, 1999.

Cambodia 1975-1982. Written by Michael Vickery. South End Press, 1984.

From the Land of Shadows: Remembering Violence and the Violence of Remembering. Written by Khatarya Um. University of California Press, 2017.

How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975. (Second Edition). Written by Ben Kiernan. Yale University Press, 2004.

The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79. (Third Edition). Written by Ben Kiernan. Yale University Press, 2008.

Voices from S-21: Terror and History I Pol Pot's Secret Prison. Written by David Chandler. Univ. of California Press, 2000).

When the War Was Over: Cambodia's Revolution and the Voices of its People (2nd edition). Written by Elizabeth Becker. Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide. Written by Alexander L. Hinton. Univ. of California Press, 2005.

Online Resources:

Bophana Center Khmer Rouge history learning applications for smart devices:

Android: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.bophana.krhistory>

Apple/iPhone: <http://itunes.apple.com/kh/app/kjhmer-rouge-history/id1262423973?mt=8>

Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University: <http://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/cambodian-genocide-program>

Documentation Center of Cambodia: www.dccam.org

The Sleuk Rith Institute: www.cambodiasri.org

Memoirs by Khmer Rouge Survivors

A Cambodian Prison Portrait. One Year in the Khmer Rouge's S-21. Written by Vann Nath. White Lotus 1998.

Children of the Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors. Compiled by Dith Pran. Yale University Press, 1994.

First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers. Written by Loung Ung. Harper Collins, 2000.

Haing Ngor: A Cambodian Odyssey. Written by Haing S. Ngor with Roger Warner. MacMillan, 1987.

Stay Alive, My Son. Written by Pin Yathay with John Man. Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Survival in the Killing Fields. (Original Title: *A Cambodian Odyssey*). Written by Haing Ngor with Roger Warner. Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003.

The Khmer Generations Project. www.khmergenerations.org

Tomorrow, I'm Dead. Written by Bun Yom. Andate Publishing, 2010. (Third Edition).

When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge. Written by Chanrithy Him. W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Cambodians in the United States

Cambodian American Experiences: Histories, Communities, Cultures and Identities. Ed. by Jonathan H.X. Lee. Kendall Hunt, 2010.

Grace After Genocide: Cambodians in the United States. Written by Carol Mortland. Berghan Books, 2017.

Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community. Written by Nancy J. Smith-Hefner. University of California Press, 1999.

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