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What the Soviet Union and Khmer Rouge Share

By Marilyn Murray

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I toured the Nazi death camps of Dachau in Germany and Terezin in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and have stood in front of the Lubyanka in Moscow, where thousands were annihilated by the KGB. I also learned of the horrors of Soviet gulags from members of my own family and many of my Russian students. But the reality of inhuman torture never impacted me as deeply as walking through the Killing Fields and S21 prison of the infamous Communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

Two weeks ago, I presented an all-day session in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, regarding the treatment of trauma to more than 100 health professionals from 21 countries. In preparation, I twice watched the award-winning movie, "The Killing Fields" and two documentaries regarding the period from 1975 to 1979, when the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, and read more than 1,000 pages written by survivors of this reign of terror.

As I walked though Cambodia's bloody history, I was struck by the similarities of the Soviet

and Cambodian Communist regimes. But I also was intrigued by the things that were different: Why did one last more than 70 years and the other only four?

Their similarities were:

• Citizens were required to pledge their highest loyalty to the Communist parties in both countries.

• Religion was not allowed. Places of worship were destroyed, and clergy were killed or imprisoned. The Party, called Angka in Cambodia, replaced God.

• The Party was never wrong. It was infallible and had to be obeyed without question. Violators faced imprisonment or death.

• The individual had no rights or value.

• If millions died to fulfill the goals of the party, their deaths were justified.

• Leadership was extremely paranoid and saw "enemies" everywhere, destroying anyone deemed to be a threat or disloyal.

• They confiscated all property and imprisoned or killed persons declared to be "enemies of the state": noble families, anyone connected with prior government, clergy, owners and management of business and industry, intellectuals and artisans who did not follow the Party line, and industrious peasant farmers.

• Collective farms were created where peasants were forced to turn over all private property and work only for the collective.

• Food shortages were widespread.

• Families were separated. Parents were told their priority was to work, and the Party would take care of their children.

• Everyone was declared equal, but the lives of Party leaders were radically different from the common citizen. They had better living conditions and food along with other special privileges. Meanwhile, they told the average person he must work harder and sacrifice more for the Party.

• Bribery and corruption were endemic.

But at the same time, there were many differences. Russia had a long history of education and culture. The Soviets saw education as one of their top priorities and had a literacy rate nationwide of about 98 percent. By demanding that every citizen had a good command of Russian, it guaranteed the absorption of nonstop Communist propaganda. Education was free, and many citizens had university degrees.

Music, literature, theater, art and the cinema were encouraged by the Party but were often heavily censored as was all the media.

Soviet leadership realized Russia was far behind Europe and the U.S. in industrialization. They

determined not only to catch up but to exceed them. Urban industrial growth became the primary focus. New cities were established throughout the entire Soviet Union. Dams, electrification, water canals and railroads were primary projects.

They created a strong Communist youth movement starting in preschool to prepare children to be faithful Party members. Many Russians today have warm youthful memories of parades and patriotic events. Russians in general had strong national pride in the great accomplishments of their country.

In Cambodia, however, the Khmer Rouge was very different. Their major leaders came from landowner or civil servant families. They were intellectual urbanites largely educated in Paris, where they were introduced to orthodox Marxism-Leninism. Yet they initiated a paradoxical political program in the name of communism that made the destruction of all cities a primary goal and created a forced evacuation of every city dweller to the countryside. A primitive, rural agrarian culture devoted to Angka was declared to be the only path acceptable to the Khmer Rouge.

They closed all schools, hospitals, government offices, businesses, factories, the media and cultural activities. They executed anyone who worked for the previous government, police or military. Professionals, teachers, doctors and business owners were killed. Any connections with a foreign country or knowledge of a foreign language meant being accused of being a CIA agent and certain arrest and likely death. Anyone who wore glasses was labeled a member of the "intelligentsia" and subject to arrest and execution.

The majority of the Khmer Rouge soldiers were illiterate peasants armed with weapons from Russia and China. Their AK-47s gave them rank and authority. They seemed to enjoy shooting innocents at random. They were boys and girls starting from age 10. The average age was 15.

Men, women and children from the cities became "war slaves" who were forced to work from 12- to 20-hour days at hard labor in the fields, building roads and clearing jungle. They were overworked and starving. Each day, the sadistic Khmer Rouge picked people at random to torture and beat to death with shovels and axes. They did not want to waste bullets.

S21 prison, a former high school in the middle of Phnom Penh, had 17,000 prisoners, including children and babies. Only seven people survived. All the rest were savagely tortured then slaughtered and buried in the Killing Fields a few miles from the city.

Cambodia had a population of 7.3 million before the Khmer Rouge enslaved the country. It is estimated they created a genocide that annihilated about 2 million people, more than one-quarter of the entire population in four years. Those who survived suffered post-traumatic stress from their great loss of family, health, home, culture and country.

The Soviets enslaved and killed innocents, but they also built a country of educated people, many of whom were loyal Party members. The system, however, was flawed and thus eventually imploded. In Cambodia, the atrocities were so vicious, extreme, and widespread they gained no public support except within the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. Foreign invasion finally drove them from power after four years.

A person or entity that is obviously evil often is disarmed early on. But others who are able to hide their malevolence by appearing healthy and strong enjoy power and longevity.

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