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ABSTRACT

Maximilien Robespierre and the French Revolution and Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge offer a deeper insight into the nature of the relationship between human psychology, ideology, society, and violence. The two revolutionary leaders, Robespierre and Pol Pot, shared similar upbringings. They were made to look and consider the problems their societies were facing while they were born in privilege and received elite educations. Coming to power, these men sought to cure the ills, or perceived ills, of their societies; they possessed grand visions of what their societies should look like. To realize their societies, violence was their tool of choice, though the violence in France took a different tone than that in Cambodia. The tones of violence reflected the particularities and circumstances of either regime. In France, disorder and anti-revolutionary activity required the French regime to fight violently for its grip on power; therefore, no small effort was put into maintaining law and order. On the other hand, in Cambodia, no such issue was present. The Khmer Regime faced no similar threat to its power, and therefore could focus its efforts on violently creating their ideal society.

Anatomy of a Revolutionary: A Comparative Analysis of Maximilien Robespierre and Pol Pot

Maximilien Robespierre and the French Revolution and Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge help us search for common patterns between two events, ideologies, and individuals in order to ultimately better understand the human capacity for cruelty. The points of comparison will be simplified into: the event, the individual, the ideology. If we can uncover the human motivations behind the violence of revolutions and explore how and why the two leaders, and leaders like them, chose to use the methods they did to enforce their ideals, we may get better insight into the human capacity for evil. The first topics are the backgrounds of the two periods in question – the French Revolution and the Khmer Rouge. Then, the main points of analysis will be the comparison of the human atrocities committed by these regimes - the French Reign of Terror and the Cambodian Genocide - and how the ideologically-driven leaderships of Robespierre and Pol Pot played a role. This narrative will then be followed by a comparative analysis of both men's ideologies, an explanation of how these ideologies developed, and finally a closer look at the ways the Revolutionary France and the Khmer Rouge wielded terror and violence to oppress their citizenry. Through the progressively general comparative analyses of the two men, ideologies, and societies, we will be able to identify patterns behind the violence.

During the French Reign of Terror, between 1793 to 1794, approximately 30,000 people were executed, primarily by guillotine. In “The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens of 1789, the Reign of Terror, and the Revolutionary Tribunal of Paris,” Vincent R. Johnson, professor of law at St. Mary's University, Texas, claimed, “Beginning in 1793, the French government commenced a systematic ‘Reign of Terror’ for the alleged purpose of purging society of those corrupt and wicked influences which purportedly constituted an obstacle to true constitutional government.” The theme here was equality, and the predictability of the contraption's falling blade ensured equality in death, regardless of one's wealth or social class. Many of these arrests were on flimsy grounds and, once

imprisoned, were accompanied with beatings, starvation, rape, or execution without trial, “‘Streetlamp lynchings and destruction of property ... were ... daily [occurrences,]’ which accompanied ‘a nightmarish scene of house-to-house visits by roving search parties, armed with batches of freshly printed warrants’” (Johnson). While it is true that, thematically, execution by guillotine reflected the type of democratic equality the citizens of France sought, the crackdown and suppression by the French proto-police state was first and foremost an attempt to secure their hold on power. It is fear, the regime saw, that was the best tool for obedience.

In that light, the Reign of Terror, then, bears a striking resemblance to the Khmer Rouge regime, which brutally massacred millions of its own citizens as, partially, a means to maintain its one-party rule. Compared with the 30,000 deaths between 1793-1794 during the Reign of Terror, the Cambodian Genocide, between 1974-179, saw between 1.5-3 million deaths – a quarter of the country’s population (Cambodia). The University of Minnesota’s College of Liberal Arts’ Holocaust and Genocide research guide writes, “The Cambodian Genocide was the result of a social engineering project by the Khmer Rouge, attempting to create a classless agrarian society ... Because the Khmer Rouge placed a heavy emphasis on the rural peasant population, anyone considered an intellectual was targeted for special treatment. This meant teachers, lawyers, doctors, and clergy were the targets of the regime” (Cambodia). Considering this, both regimes are alike in that class conflict played a leading role and that an idealized society was pursued by means of violent suppression.

While the exact nuances of the two regimes’ ideals are beyond the scope of this paper, they can be simplified into a type of republicanism and communism for France and Cambodia, respectively. In “The Fundamental Ideas of Robespierre,” Alfred Cobban, historian and Professor of French History at University College, London, claimed that, in France, the revolutionaries sought to actualize democratic ideals, such as popular sovereignty and constitutionalism, and to curtail the power of the kings and

nobility. In Cambodia, on the other hand, the revolutionaries sought to implement their own version of a communist society. In “Pol Pot in Retrospect,” Arch Puddington, journalist and research director, wrote, “The Khmer Rouge ... took ideology with the utmost seriousness. In the hands of Pol Pot, Communist dogma had become a lethal weapon, supplying justification for monstrous crimes committed in the name of economic development, independence, and national sovereignty.” With regards to the targets of suppression, the regimes differ in that it was the nobility for the French and the intellectuals for the Khmer - but this distinction is not so strong when both targets could be reduced to essentially “enemies of the revolution.”

The political ideas both men had possessed during their revolutionary journeys were influenced in no small part by their individual upbringings. In “Robespierre and the Popular Movement of 1793-4,” Albert Soboul, French Revolutionary historian, described Robespierre’s upbringing. Born in Arras in northeastern France in 1758, Robespierre came from a circle of lower middle class attorneys and was exposed early on to ideas of the Classics and the philosophy of the enlightenment – notably, he was inspired by Rousseau (Soboul). In “The Life Course of Pol Pot: How His Early Life Influenced the Crimes He Committed,” on the other hand, Vries described Pol Pot’s background. The young Cambodian, whose birth name Saloth Sar, was born in 1928 in Prek Sbauly, a village about 90 miles north of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, and was brought up in a relatively affluent ethnic Khmer family with eight siblings (Vries). According to an article by Ramses Amer from the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Pol Pot, like Robespierre, was born into a position of privilege, “Pol Pot spent his childhood with elder siblings and relatives working at the Royal Court and received a privileged schooling, albeit with a marked mediocrity in performance.” Similarly, Robespierre’s father was a lawyer, and, with a scholarship, the young Frenchman attended the prestigious College Louis-le-Grand in Paris (Soboul), “In 1781, [finished with school,] at the age of 23, Robespierre returned to Arras to

earn an honorable living as a lawyer” (Soboul). He ascended socially – joining the ranks of the middle bourgeoisie - but remained poor financially.

Both men, then, originated from better-off-than-average families a fair distance from their respective country’s capital cities and had both been granted elite educations. Pol Pot, mirroring the fortune of Robespierre’s upbringing, “spent his childhood with elder siblings and relatives working at the Royal Court and received a privileged schooling” (Amer). Unlike Robespierre, however, Pol Pot did not have as linear a career path to follow as adopting his father’s profession. Instead, at the age of nine, the young revolutionary was sent to live with his family in Phnom Penh, spending his first year at a Buddhist monastery (Vries). Life as at the monastery was generally an unpleasant experience for him and his fellow students; “The children were not seen as individuals but were treated as objects” (Vries). If Robespierre’s early developments ingrained in him the ideas of the enlightenment, then Pol Pot’s upbringing etched into him a faithful adherence to Buddhist principles. After the monastery, Pol Pot transferred to a regular secondary school run by French catholic nuns, and then, most significantly, went on to study in Paris on a scholarship (Vries). During this period, Cambodia was a part of French Indochina, France’s colonial holdings in southeast Asia. It was here in France where he developed the foundation of his revolutionary ideas. After spending time with progressively-minded students, he formed a political group, the Marxist Circle, in 1951, whose members studied Marxist texts, and he then eventually joined the French Communist Party (Vries). It was overseas in France, at the university level, where Pol Pot first adopted his revolutionary outlook.

The manner in which the two men attempted to realize their beliefs owed in part to the manner in which the men were brought up and the types of stimuli they encountered. For Robespierre, this referred to his enlightenment worldview, ubiquitous at the time, but with a particular penchant for Rousseau, paired with a humble career in law he essentially inherited. In many ways, Robespierre’s

path to revolution was unnoteworthy, at least when compared with his contemporaries. Pol Pot's revolutionary path, on the other hand, in terms of both developing his political views and applying them, was made possible by his own proactivity. This action meant not only his study abroad in France and his mingling with Parisian radicals but also his personal trips to various communist regimes. Ramses Amer, reviewing David P. Chandler's biography on Pol Pot, *Brother Number One*, wrote of the Cambodian, "His visits to Yugoslavia in 1948, and to East Berlin in 1951, to attend an International Youth Congress sponsored by the Soviet Union, might have had an influence on his political perceptions" (Amer). Pol Pot also drew inspiration from Mao's regime and, notably, the works of Robespierre himself, "The three core principles of the Great Revolution by Robespierre would always stick with Pol Pot: 'Revolution requires an alliance between the intellectuals and the peasantry; it must be carried through the end, without compromise or hesitation and egalitarianism is the basis of communism'" (Vries).

As there are similarities in the backgrounds of the two revolutionaries, there are also similarities in the way their societies attempted to shape the political makeup of their citizenry. In the article, "Cultural Homogenization, Ethnic Cleansing, and Genocide," from the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, Daniele Conversi, a research professor from UPV whose specializations include socio-political theory and nationalism, defined "cultural homogenization" as "a state-led policy aimed at cultural standardization and the overlap between state and culture. As the goal is frequently to impose the culture of dominant elites on the rest of the citizenry, it consists basically of a top-down process where the state seeks to nationalize 'the masses'" (Conversi). With this definition in mind, both the Khmer Rouge's and the Revolutionary French government's policies towards cultural-political unity appear to fit the description. Conversi, furthermore, claimed the French Revolution to be an ideal starting point for the history of this type of systemic homogenization, "Most historians (i.e. Hobsbawm

1990) and political scientists (i.e. Connor 2004) agree that a popular sense of national self-abnegation and sacrifice could only be harnessed by political elites in a post-1789 scenario. Although it may be arduous to single out a precise inception for the homogenizing process, various forms of social, human, and cultural engineering were brought together for the first time under Jacobin rule. The revolutionary use of terror to suppress entire collectivities represents a ‘paradigm shift.’” The French revolutionary government’s use of terror to, as Conversi described, suppress “entire collectivities” is parallel to the Khmer Rouge regime’s use of terror to suppress their own Cambodian collectivities. As Puddington claimed in his article, “Pol Pot in Retrospect,” “The Khmer Rouge may not have set out to cause the deaths of between one and two million Cambodians, but their plans for the drastic reshaping of Khmer society preordained such an outcome.” The main similarity to observe here is that both regimes used terror and violence as a means to achieve their political ends. That is to say, state-sanctioned or state-utilized violence served as a primary mechanism or tool for government.

However, this usage of violence was not always the case. While both regimes enacted policies that targeted portions of society that posed a threat to the legitimacy or authority of their revolutionary leadership, not all of the violence was directly called for by the leadership. In France, for example, “As revenge and paranoia decimated the revolutionary leadership, waves of massacres followed, accompanied by hunts for ideological opponents” (Conversi). Ideological killings often intertwined with or devolved into primal fear-based killings. An example of this would be the September Massacres of 1792, where French citizens overran Parisian prisons and summarily executed upwards of 1,000 prisoners in fear they would revolt – this was in the context of the incoming Prussian invasion and Brunswick Manifesto, the latter of which promised reprisal in case of harm done to the French royal family. In “The Origins of the Brunswick Manifesto,” H. A. Barton, American historian, wrote, “The purpose of such declarations was to attribute blame for the hostilities to the opposing side, hoping

thereby to gain diplomatic or military support from other powers. ... Sorel [French historian] has shown how readily eighteenth-century cabinets sought to turn internal unrest and insurrections in other countries to their own diplomatic advantage.” Furthermore, in “The Case of the September Massacres,” Timothy Tackett, an American historian who specializes in the French Revolution, wrote of the event, “The historical problem is even more puzzling, however, when we discover the wide support for, or at least acquiescence in, the killings, not only among the popular classes but among the Revolutionary elites as well.” He continues, “Pierre Caron, the most important historian of the Massacres, also provides substantial evidence of the number of newspapers –including both radical and moderate, Montagnard and Girondin – that either praised the murders or accepted them as regrettable but necessary.” While all strata of Revolutionary elites looked not unfondly upon the killings, a distinction must be made between acceptance and implementation. Essentially, while this event began out of the control of the Revolutionary leadership, it was only with the preexisting conditions – which only existed due to their actions – where such killings could occur. The nature of these killings – contingent on circumstances made possible by the revolution, partly driven by ideology, and partly driven by fear and paranoia – are not anomalies but features of a turbulent time.

Thus, another point can be made in that the regimes attempts to realize their ideologies propagated are responsible for unintended acts of violence in addition to intended violence. An example of this in France was the September Massacres, where suspicion and the air of revolution led to French citizens killing in fear for their own safety. Before a parallel can be drawn to the Khmer Rouge regime, however, it is important to note the asynchronous timing of revolution and totalitarian leadership in France. While the Cambodian Genocide occurred nearly concurrently with the totalitarian leadership of Pol Pot’s Communist Party, the revolution in France took years, owing in part to their attempts to realize republican ideals, before the Committee of Public Safety was established in 1793 to restore

order. Thus it is reasonable to expect fewer types of killings akin to the September Massacres during the Khmer Rouge regime. In fact, it is difficult to find evidence concretely indicating the occurrence of such killings during the genocide. It seems that, for the most part, Cambodian citizens, for one reason or another, could not, were not able, or did not wish to take violent action in the way that French citizens did during the September Massacres.

While both the French and Cambodian regimes killed in the name of ideology, a distinction must be made between explicitly ideological killings, such as that of Louis XVI, and killings done for the sole purpose of retaining power. In France, “The function of revolutionary justice, in stark but accurate terms, was not to provide equal treatment, nor to fairly enforce the rule of law, but to enable the government to remain in power by efficiently and expeditiously eliminating its enemies or filling them with terror” (Johnson). Johnson continues, “political defendants, those most in need of invoking the guarantees of the Declaration of Rights, were deprived of any real opportunity to be judged according to those principles by being routed to tribunals expressly dedicated to contrary objectives.” At the height of the terror, the nature of these tribunal executions shifted more and more towards the achievement of political agendas, “the excesses of the Tribunal were the result of the abandonment by the Convention and its committees of considered principles in favor of a political agenda” (Johnson).

While much of the responsibility for the violence lies in the decisions made by their leaders, many other segments of society had a hand in the bloodshed. In France, those responsible for the violence ranged from judges and politicians to civilians and peasants. For the middle-class bureaucrats, the nature of their killings was often personal and political, only feigning revolutionary justice while ultimately being self-serving (Johnson). In Cambodia, swift totalitarian rule restricted the application of violence to the loyal arms of the party. In “A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide,” Alexander Hinton, Director of the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights and Professor

in the Anthropology and Global Affairs Department at Rutgers University, Newark, wrote of the beginning of Pol Pot's regime, "The Khmer Rouge quickly reorganized Democratic Kampuchea (KP) along strict communist lines that glorified peasant life. The cities were emptied and their inhabitants sent to live and work in the countryside as 'new' people ... who constituted the bottom social strata below cadre, soldiers, and 'old' people who had lived under the Khmer Rouge rule during the war." While both regimes were brutally led by revolutionary ideologues, the Cambodian regime exercised greater control over its populace - as evidenced by its large-scale social reorganization programs. This difference in state control is also supported by the existence of various civilian uprisings occurring throughout the French Revolution, such as the Vendee uprising – a counter-revolution occurring in the Vendee region of western France during the height of the Reign of Terror and concurrently with the rule of the Committee of Public Safety (Conversi). The chaos and disorder in Revolutionary France had a strong effect on the nature of the regime's killings in that effective ideological consistency was sacrificed for the security of an ideologically-aligned government. The Khmer Rouge regime, on the other hand, was more securely in power and, thus, was better able to carry out its mass killings for their intended ideological purpose.

In conclusion, the common factor contributing to these two revolutionaries' capacity for violence was their strong desire to implement their ideas of restructuring society, albeit through the lens of their particular versions of Republican and Communist values. While both Robespierre and Pol Pot were born into privilege, and they probably would not have been able to have become as influential had they not, privileged birth on its own cannot solely explain their capacity for murder. The primary factors, instead, were the ideas they had adopted and the zealotry with which they wished to realize them. With that in mind, their privileged births are relevant insofar as they are influential in both men acquiring their revolutionary ideas. Furthermore, part of what spurred these men on to apply these ideas was their

dissatisfaction regarding the severe income inequality and class division affecting their respective societies – societies altered and brutalized in ways specific to the conditions of either revolution. In France, the necessity to restore order to an out-of-control Revolution led to the preference of practicality over ideology with regards to the nature of their killing. In Cambodia, there was comparatively less issue with retaining power, and therefore killing in pursuit of their original ideology was all the more possible. To summarize, Maximilien Robespierre and Pol Pot were both born into privilege and pursued elite educations, which enabled them to adopt the radical ideas with which they sought to remedy their countries' ills. While both pursued ideological utopias with brazen violence, the nature of this violence depended on the circumstances particular to either period.

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