

4.6.4 - Cambodian Refugees in the United States

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Levels	9-12
Lesson Overview	As part of the Vietnam War (1955-1975), civil war erupted in Cambodia in 1967 between communist and democratic forces. On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, and declared victory. This resulted in the deaths of 1.5 to 2 million people and became known as the Cambodian Genocide. In addition, it led to a mass exodus as an estimated 150,000 Cambodians fled to the United States as refugees between 1975 and 1994. In this lesson, students will learn about the history of the Khmer Rouge regime and how it led to three waves of Cambodian refugees in the United States. Students will study challenges faced by Cambodian refugees and examine ways they have formed resilient communities in the United States.
Lesson Objectives	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Describe the history of the Khmer Rouge regime and how it led to waves of Cambodian refugees in the United States ● Identify challenges faced by Cambodian refugees in the United States ● Examine ways in which Cambodian Americans have formed resilient communities and preserved their culture in the United States
Standards	<p>National Standards for History, United States History Content Standards for Grades 5 -12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Era 10, Standard 1C: The student understands major foreign policy initiatives. Therefore, the student is able to: Examine the U.S. role in political struggles in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. (Grades 9-12) ● Era 10, Standard 2B: The student understands the new immigration and demographic shifts. Therefore, the student is able to: Analyze the new immigration policies after 1965 and the push-pull factors that prompted a new wave of immigrants. (Grades 5-12) ● Era 10, Standard 2B: The student understands the new immigration and demographic shifts. Therefore, the student is able to: Identify the major issues that affected immigrants and explain the conflicts these issues engendered. (Grades 9-12) <p>Common Core State Standards: Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text. ● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Cambodian Refugees in the United States Essay

Much of Southeast Asia was engulfed in war from the 1950's to 1980's. The Vietnam War raged from 1955-1975. The United States, fearful that Vietnam would come under the **communist** control of North Vietnam, entered this war in 1965, siding with South Vietnam. The United States was guided by the "domino theory" which posits that if one country fell to communism then the other countries in the area would also succumb. The United States sent troops to Vietnam and the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia.

In 1967, a civil war erupted in Cambodia. On one side was the Khmer Republic led by Lon Nol (1913-1985) which was backed by the United States and South Vietnam. On the other side was the communist Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot (1925-1928) (previously known as Saloth Sar) which was backed by North Vietnam.

Years of fighting ensued, including intense bombing of Cambodia by the United States. Because Cambodia was officially a **neutral** country, the United States kept these bombings a secret from Congress and the public. The U.S. military dropped 540,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia, killing somewhere between 150,000 to 500,000 civilians. Some scholars believe that these bombings played a significant role in the rise of the Khmer Rouge by driving Vietnamese communist forces deeper into Cambodia and allowing them to provide military support to the Khmer Rouge. In addition, the Khmer Rouge gained support among rural Cambodians by pointing to the death and devastation caused by the bombings.

By early April 1975, the North Vietnamese victory in Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge victory in Cambodia seemed likely. About 4,600 Cambodians fled to the United States. Most of them were evacuated via helicopters. This first wave of **refugees** were primarily well-educated **diplomats** and high-level officials who faced potential **persecution** for supporting the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments.

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, and declared victory. They set up a new government that ultimately ruled Cambodia from April 1975 to January 1979. This regime was characterized by **totalitarianism** and brutality. Not long after declaring victory, they executed former military and government officials. They got rid of institutions such as markets, banks, schools, Western medicine, and Buddhism. They also abolished money and private property.

About 2 million residents of Phnom Penh were forcibly **evacuated**, leaving many to die of hunger and disease. The Khmer Rouge turned Cambodia into a forced labor camp, seeking to create a rural agricultural society isolated from the rest of the world. People were forced to work on the farms for long hours under brutal conditions. Many died from exhaustion, starvation, and/or disease.

Many people within the Khmer Rouge regime were killed as well. Pol Pot arrested and killed at least 100,000 people suspected of disloyalty. In late 1978, a **dissident** Khmer Rouge group fled to Vietnam and brought back a Vietnamese troop that drove Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge officials into remote parts of the country. Vietnam took control of Cambodia for much of the 1980s.

Under the Khmer Rouge regime, an estimated 1.5 to 2 million people, roughly a quarter of the country's population, were killed in what came to be called the Cambodian Genocide. Those who survived fled to other countries. Most tried to enter neighboring Thailand, which already had a refugee crisis due to Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian refugees fleeing in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and other neighboring conflicts. An estimated 9,000 people escaped first to Thailand and then the United States in 1978, comprising the second wave of Cambodian refugees.

The United States was reluctant to accept Cambodian refugees as it was still managing the **resettlement** of Vietnamese, Hmong, and Lao refugees. But as international attention to the atrocities in Cambodia grew, the United States began to admit more Cambodians into the country. Ultimately, a third wave of refugees, most of whom were taking refuge in Thai refugee camps, arrived following the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act. This legislation raised the annual **ceiling** for refugees from 17,400 to 50,000. It also changed the definition of “refugee” to a person with “well-founded fear of persecution.”

The U.S. Cambodian Refugee program ended in 1994, at which point a total of about 150,000 refugees had been admitted. Refugees were dispersed into different cities across the country in an attempt to spread out the costs and to facilitate **assimilation**. However, people eventually migrated to places where they knew other people or heard of opportunities. In this way, sizable Cambodian communities formed.

For example, Cambodian Americans have built communities in cities like Long Beach, California and Lowell, Massachusetts. These **ethnic enclaves** have Cambodian-owned businesses, shops, restaurants, temples, and more. Communities have also formed in Stockton and Fresno in California, Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, Chicago in Illinois, Minneapolis in Minnesota, and Seattle in Washington. By 2020, the states with the largest populations of Cambodians are California, Massachusetts, Washington, Texas, and Pennsylvania. These communities have provided Cambodia Americans with support and protection.

Rebuilding in the United States has not been easy. Many Cambodian refugees live with deep **trauma** from the devastation of their homeland, loss of family members, multiple **displacements**, and poor conditions in refugee camps. Simultaneously, they faced economic hardships in the United States. Other challenges include low levels of education, difficulty finding work, limited English proficiency, gangs and violence, threats of deportation, and anti-Asian racism.

Despite high rates of unemployment during their early years of resettlement, Cambodian Americans have increased their rates of employment in recent years. They are represented across all types of jobs. Cambodian Americans have also been entrepreneurs. For example, Cambodian Americans have been opening donut shops throughout California and the country since Ted Ngoy (born 1942), a Cambodian refugee, opened his first shop in 1977 in La Habra, California. In Southern California, 80% of donut shops are Cambodian owned.

Cambodian Americans have also created cultural, professional, and religious organizations to gather together, share resources, seek support, and preserve culture. For example, there is an annual Cambodian Town Parade and Cultural Festival in Long Beach to celebrate the community’s traditions, food, music, and dance. Through community-building, resourcefulness, and resilience, Cambodian Americans have persevered and established strong communities in the United States.

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Vocabulary:¹

- **Assimilation:** the act or process of absorbing into the cultural tradition of a population or group
- **Ceiling:** an upper limit, usually prescribed
- **Communism:** a system in which goods are owned in common and are available to all as needed
- **Diplomat:** person employed or skilled in the practicing of conducting negotiations between nations
- **Displace:** expel or force to flee from home or homeland
- **Dissident:** person who disagrees, especially with an established religious or political system, organization, or belief
- **Ethnic enclave:** a distinct geographic area with a large population of a particular ethnic group
- **Evacuate:** to leave or remove; to withdraw from a place in an organized way especially for protection
- **Neutral:** not engaged on either side
- **Refugee:** a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution
- **Resettle:** to move to a new place to live after a disturbance or upheaval
- **Persecution:** the act or practice of punishing those who differ in origin, religion, or social outlook
- **Totalitarianism:** the political concept that the citizen should be totally subject to an absolute state authority
- **Trauma:** a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury

¹ Definition adapted from Merriam-Webster

Discussion Questions:

1. What parties/groups were involved in the Vietnam War? What were their goals?
2. What parties/groups were involved in the Cambodian Civil War?
3. What was the role of the United States in Cambodia from the 1950s-1980s? How did the U.S. contribute to the rise of the Khmer Rouge?
4. What were the three waves of Cambodian refugees fleeing to the United States?
5. What actions did the Khmer Rouge take when it gained control over Cambodia?
6. Why was the United States reluctant to accept Cambodian refugees?
7. What were the experiences of Cambodian refugees in the United States?
8. What challenges did they face? How did they persevere?

Activity 1: Examining Prior Knowledge about the Vietnam War and about Cambodian Americans

- A. Have students locate Cambodia on a map (or use [Google map](#)). Have students identify neighboring countries and share what they know about those countries (i.e., Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand). [A note on terminology: Cambodia is the English name of the country. Khmer are the ethnic majority group native to Cambodia; they comprise over 95% of the Cambodian population. Khmer is also the official language of Cambodia. The terms Cambodian and Khmer can both be used to describe the people, culture, and history of Cambodia; that stated, individuals and communities may express a preference for how they want to be identified.]
- B. Have students complete the worksheet entitled, “[Examining Prior Knowledge](#).” For Part 1, ask students what they know about the Vietnam War by having them complete the chart (as a whole group, in small groups, or independently).
- C. Have students complete the second chart on the worksheet entitled, “[Examining Prior Knowledge](#)” by asking them what they know about the Cambodian Genocide and about Cambodian Americans in general by having them complete the chart (as a whole group, in small groups, and/or independently).
- D. Facilitate a whole-group discussion by asking the following questions:
- How would you rate your overall knowledge about the Vietnam War, the Cambodian Genocide, and Cambodian Americans?
 - In examining the sources of your preconceptions, what limitations do you face? What role does media play in your knowledge-building?
 - How can you actively seek to overcome your gaps in knowledge?
- E. Show the video and/or implement activities (as needed in order to build more prior knowledge) from The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled “[Southeast Asian Refugees](#).”

Activity 2: Describing Three Waves of Cambodian Refugees

- A. Have students read the essay. Consider the following options:
1. OPTION 1: Have students read the essay independently either for homework or during class time.
 2. OPTION 2: Read aloud the essay and model annotating.
 3. OPTION 3: Have students read aloud in pairs or small groups.
- B. Facilitate a class discussion by asking students the Discussion Questions.
- C. Divide students into three groups, and assign each group to: (1) The First Wave (1975) (2) The Second Wave (1976-1978) (3) The Third Wave (1979-1990).
- D. Have each group research the following questions pertaining to their assigned wave::
1. What was the historical context in Cambodia during this wave?
 2. What was the historical context in the United States during this wave?
 3. What legislation related to refugees was passed at this time?
 4. What were the occupations, educational levels, and other demographics of the refugees during this wave?
 5. What were the unique challenges or opportunities for this wave?

- E. Encourage students to use the essay, the webpage entitled, “[Timeline: Cambodian Refugee in the U.S.](#),” and other resources to conduct their research.
- F. Have students present their findings to the whole class. Encourage students to create a visual representation such as an infographic, poster, etc.

Activity 3: Preserving Cambodian Culture in the United States

- A. Have students write a Quickwrite in response to the following prompt: “How might refugees preserve their culture when living in a new country? Why might this be important to them? What challenges might they encounter in seeking to preserve their culture?” Follow up by discussing responses as a whole group.
- B. Tell students the following: “Memory work is a process of engaging with the past which has both an ethical and historical dimension. Cambodian American scholar Cathy J. Schlund-Vials used the term ‘Cambodian American memory work’ to describe how Cambodians remember their history and set the terms for remembering the genocide. Thus, memory work empowers individuals to negotiate their own relationships with the past in order to make sense of it. People can engage in memory in many ways, including through food, religion, dance, music, and art.”
1. Ask students, “What challenges might Cambodian Americans face in engaging in memory work? What might be uniquely challenging for Cambodian Americans in preserving their culture relative to other immigrant communities?”
 2. Tell students the following: “The Khmer Rouge wanted Cambodia to be an agrarian society with minimal foreign influence. In creating such a society, they sought to exterminate much of Cambodian culture that they saw as incompatible with their vision.”
- C. Have students examine different ways in which Cambodian Americans have worked to heal from the trauma inflicted by the Cambodian genocide and preserve their culture while living in the United States. Below is a list of topics students can choose from and possible resources they can explore. Invite students to research other forms of “memory work” beyond this list:
1. Food
 - a. Video: [Cambodian refugee's restaurant provides space to heal and celebrate culture](#)
 - b. Video: [Why So Many Cambodians Own Donut Shops](#)
 2. Religion
 - a. Video: [Sacred Minnesota: Cambodians Build a Temple to Heal Trauma](#)
 3. Dance
 - a. Video: [Preserving Cambodian Classical Dance in Long Beach](#)
 4. Music:
 - a. Video: [Cambodian American Hip Hop Artist Sings of Personal Struggles](#)
 - b. Article: [The Death And Uneasy Rebirth Of Cambodia's Psychedelic Rock](#)
 - c. Article: [Cambodian-American Singer Fuses Khmer Classics with Oakland Beats](#)
 5. Art
 - a. Video: [Artist and podcaster describe the Cambodian-American refugee experience](#)
 - b. Museum website: [National Cambodian Heritage Museum and Killing Fields Memorial](#)
 - c. Article: [‘Khmeraspora’: A Celebration of Cambodian Culture and Arts](#)
- E. Distribute the worksheet entitled, “[Preserving Cambodian Culture in the United States](#)” and have students complete the worksheet by recording responses to the following questions: What is being preserved? How is it being preserved? How has it been adapted to life in the United States? Why

is it important to preserve?

- F. Have students create a poster, social media post, or presentation to share what they learned. Allow students to share their learning through a gallery walk or presentation.
- G. Facilitate a whole class discussion by asking the following questions: “What challenges do Cambodian Americans face in preserving their culture? What successes have Cambodian Americans seen in preserving their culture? How have Cambodian Americans navigated their histories and identities as Cambodian Americans?”
- H. Have students write a reflection on the gallery walk/presentations in response to the prompt: “How are Cambodian Americans engaging in memory work through food, religion, dance, music, and art? How are they using these forms to remember their histories? How are they using these forms to heal?” Allow students to share their reflection with a partner or with the whole class.

Activity 4: Experiences of Cambodian Americans

- A. Option 1: Have students write an informative/explanatory essay in response to the following prompt: “What were the experiences of Cambodian refugees in the United States?” Be sure students address the following questions in their essay:
 - 1. What challenges did Cambodian refugees face?
 - 2. What supports did they have?
 - 3. How did they form resilient communities?
- B. Option 2: Have students identify a problem Cambodian Americans face. Have students write a speech explaining the problem and connecting it to the Cambodian Genocide. Have them identify possible solutions and issue a call to action. Have students decide on a target audience for the speech (ie. city council, school board, community organization, philanthropists, etc.) Have students address the following questions:
 - 1. What is the problem facing Cambodian American refugees?
 - 2. What are the historical roots of this problem?
 - 3. How have U.S. resettlement policies and/or U.S. assimilation affected the problem?
 - 4. What are possible solutions to this problem?
 - 5. What can your audience do to address this problem?

Extension Activities

- A. Have students research notable Cambodian Americans and their contributions to the United States. Have students create a poster profiling the individual, which should include (1) biographical information on the individual, (2) most widely-recognized contributions, and (3) impact of contributions.
 - 1. Have students research and choose an individual to study such as Ted Ngoy, Sokhary Chau, SreyRam Kuy, Haing Ngor, PraCh Ly, Anthony Veasna So, Phillip Lim, etc.
 - 2. Display the profiles around the room and host a Gallery Walk, allowing students an opportunity to view each profile. Facilitate a discussion by asking students the following questions:
 - a. What are the similarities between all the individuals?
 - b. What are the differences between the individuals? What accounts for these differences?



- c. What barriers did they face?
 - d. How did they contribute to American society?
- B. Secure the rights to screen “The Donut King” and facilitate a discussion by asking students the following questions: In what ways was Ngoy’s family impacted by the Cambodian genocide? How did being a refugee both hinder and facilitate the Ngoy’s family success?
- C. Have students research one of the “Cambodia Towns” in the United States. Have students create a mural that best represents the historical and cultural significance of the neighborhood. Have students write a report explaining their mural design. (Encourage students to study murals in ethnic enclaves as a form of place-making, which is a participatory process for shaping public space that harnesses the culture and history of the people who use it.)

Further Information

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Southeast Asian Refugees”:

<https://asianamericanedu.org/southeast-asian-refugees.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees in Southern California”:

<https://asianamericanedu.org/vietnamese-refugees-in-socal.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Asian Americans Serving and Fighting in the Vietnam War”:

<https://asianamericanedu.org/asian-americans-serving-and-fighting-in-vietnam-war.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Asian American Veterans and the Anti-War Movement”:

<https://asianamericanedu.org/asian-american-veterans-and-anti-war-movement.html>

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