



# Intellectuals Under Revolution

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## Abstract

*This paper argues that revolutionary regimes often persecute intellectuals because these educated individuals are perceived as threats to ideological purity and political control. To demonstrate this thesis, the study compares three historical revolutions: France's Reign of Terror, China's Cultural Revolution, and Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. In each case, intellectuals were scapegoated as enemies of the revolution and blamed for the nation's problems. Revolutionary leaders fueled anti-elitism by rallying the masses against scholars and professionals. These intellectuals were portrayed as symbols of the old order and privileged classes. The regimes also displayed ideological extremism, enforcing strict conformity and punishing any independent thought as subversive. Overall, despite differing contexts, all three revolutions followed a similar pattern of vilifying and suppressing intellectuals to maintain ideological purity and political control.*

**Keywords:** Revolution; Intellectual Persecution; French Revolution; Cultural Revolution; Khmer Rouge.

## INTRODUCTION

For a revolution that claimed to champion reason and equality, the sight of one of France's greatest scientists, Antoine Lavoisier, being led to the guillotine in 1794 was a grim paradox. The judge's chilling retort to Lavoisier's plea for mercy—"The Republic has no need for scientists"—crystallized a pattern seen in many radical upheavals.<sup>1</sup> Revolutionary movements, from the French Revolution to Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, have frequently turned against intellectuals and educated elites. This raises the central question of this paper: why do revolutions persecute scholars and intellectuals, often the bearers of the very Enlightenment ideas that have inspired revolutionary change? The thesis advanced here is that revolutionary regimes commonly target scholars as perceived threats to ideological purity and political control. In the throes of radical change, intellectuals become suspect as potential critics or dissidents whose independent ideas, elite status might undermine the revolution's utopian vision. From the Jacobins of 1793 to the Red Guards of 1966 to the Khmer Rouge of 1975, revolutionaries have demonized *les élites pensantes* as obstacles to the uniformity of belief and social leveling that their ideological programs demand.

## CONTEXT

In the context of revolutionary upheaval, scholars and intellectuals are those individuals whose social role is to produce, curate, or disseminate knowledge, including philosophers, writers, professors, scientists, teachers, and other educated professionals. This "thinking class"

is often associated with urban, bourgeois, or elite circles of society. As such, intellectuals occupy a paradoxical position in revolutions. On the one hand, men and women of ideas often help inspire revolutions. The philosophes of the Enlightenment, for example, furnished the French revolutionaries with ideals of liberty and reason. On the other hand, once a revolutionary movement seizes power, intellectuals often become objects of mistrust. Their education sets them apart from the common people in whose name the revolution claims to act. Revolutionary leaders from the Jacobins to the Khmer Rouge have portrayed intellectuals as "aristocrats of the mind," a privileged caste whose alleged attachment to abstract theories, foreign influences, or past regimes makes them politically unreliable.<sup>2</sup> During the Russian upheaval, Vladimir Lenin articulated this contempt: "the bourgeoisie and its henchmen, the intellectual lackeys of capital, who imagine they are the brains of the nation. Actually, they are not the brains, but sh—[it]."<sup>3</sup>

This venomous remark, lumping educated people the ousted bourgeoisie together, typifies a broader revolutionary tendency to regard traditional intellectuals as part of the old exploitative order, to see them as class enemies in need of neutralization or reform.

## EGALITARIANISM AND ANTI-ELITISM

Revolutions are typically driven by powerful egalitarian and anti-elite impulses. In revolts against oppression—be it the feudal privileges of French nobles, the "four olds" of pre-communist China, or Cambodia's urban elite—the rallying cry of revolution is to level hierarchies and empower common folk. Intellectuals, however, are by definition elite.

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Their specialized education and often urbane lifestyle distinguishes them from peasants and workers. Thus, even when intellectuals support a revolution, their status can provoke popular resentment and suspicions of hypocrisy. Revolutionary propaganda often paints intellectuals as selfish pedants or decadents disconnected from the struggles of ordinary people.<sup>4</sup> During China's Cultural Revolution, for instance, Maoist Red Guards denounced teachers, professors, and writers as "stinking ninth category," placing them at the bottom of the social hierarchy, below even exploitative landlords and capitalists.<sup>5</sup> In a mass ideological campaign, students turned on their instructors, dragging them into streets in dunce caps to confess their "crimes" of elitism.<sup>6</sup> Universities were shuttered or handed over to politically "pure" student factions.<sup>7</sup> Admissions and hiring came to depend not on academic merit but on loyalty to Mao Zedong—the slogan "Better red than expert" encapsulates how political correctness was prioritized over expertise.<sup>8</sup> The underlying message was clear: technical knowledge or intellectual refinement was worthless, even dangerous, unless one's class loyalties were correct. A similar ethos prevailed in Cambodia under Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge exalted the uneducated peasant as the ideal revolutionary and deemed anyone with higher education suspect.<sup>9</sup> Shutting down schools and hospitals, they ruthlessly eliminated professionals (doctors, teachers, engineers) as threats to the peasant utopia.<sup>10</sup> According to survivors' testimonies, wearing eyeglasses or possessing soft hands, signs that signaled cultivation or avoidance of manual labor, could mark someone for execution in the killing fields.<sup>11</sup> Historian Henri Locard has described these Maoist-inspired revolutions as "the revenge of the ignorant over the educated, the triumph of obscurantism" that yielded meritocracy "turned on its head: the fewer degrees you had, the more power you attained."<sup>12</sup> In short, extreme egalitarian ideology often metastasizes into anti-intellectualism, where eliminating class difference means attacking those with intellectual distinction.

### TABULA RASA IDEOLOGY – YEAR ZERO AND THE WAR ON THE PAST

Revolutionary movements often carry an impulse to tear down the existing social order and build a new society from scratch. They wish to create a *tabula rasa*.<sup>13</sup> This utopian enthusiasm for total renewal tends to put intellectuals in the crosshairs, since they are the bearers of the old culture, history, and knowledge that radicals wish to obliterate. The French revolutionaries exemplified this with their audacious reforms in 1793–94: they introduced a new republican calendar (dating Year I from the revolution), renamed months and even streets, and pursued a campaign of déchristianisation to erase the Catholic heritage.<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup> In this anti-traditionalists spirit, the National Convention on 8 August 1793 abolished all the old royal academies, including the pride of French Enlightenment learning: the Académie Française and the Academy of Sciences.<sup>16</sup> By shuttering these, the revolutionaries aimed to undermine independent

centers of thought that might challenge the sovereignty of the people or of the Convention. In 1975, a little over a century and a half later, the Khmer Rouge coined the phrase "Year Zero" for their own radical reboot of society. Pol Pot's regime declared that Cambodia's entire history would be reset; cities were emptied, books destroyed, and all institutions of higher learning were demolished.<sup>17</sup> As retrospective analysis notes, the Khmer Rouge sought to return to an imagined "golden age" of self-sufficient peasant life, "eliminating all social classes except for the 'old people,' —poor peasants who worked the land."<sup>18</sup> To achieve this, they had to wipe out the intelligentsia and cosmopolitan culture. Factories, schools and universities were closed, and "lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers and qualified professionals in all fields were thought to be a threat to the new regime."<sup>19</sup> In both the French and Cambodian cases—different as they were in scale and context—revolutionary leaders equated cultural and intellectual continuity with counter-revolution. The past had to be completely denied. Intellectuals, as carriers of memory, tradition, and critical thought, became enemies of the future.

### POPULIST MOBILIZATION

The volatility of mass mobilization in revolutions often encourages scapegoating of intellectuals. To galvanize broad support, revolutionary regimes identify internal enemies upon whom popular anger can be focused. Frequently, intellectuals serve as convenient scapegoats: they are few in number, easily demonized, and, compared to workers and peasants, lack a natural base of mass support. During the Reign of Terror in France, Jacques Hébert's populist press railed against "aristocrats" in every guise, including those of the mind.<sup>20</sup> The Law of Suspects (September 1793) ordered the arrest of anyone who "by their conduct, associations, comments, or writings have shown themselves partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of liberty."<sup>21</sup> This sweeping definition made words a potential crime and cast a wide net of suspicion over writers and intellectuals whose loyalty was not unquestionable. In practice, a wrong word in a pamphlet or a philosophical argument critical of revolutionary policy could send a person to the guillotine for "subverting the general will." Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety encouraged the sans-culottes to police ideological purity ruthlessly, which often meant rounding up journalists, scholars, and even former revolutionary leaders who were accused of insufficient zeal.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Mao's Cultural Revolution harnessed youthful fervor in enormous mass rallies where figures of authority, many of them intellectuals, were held publicly liable.<sup>23</sup> Complex social ills or political failures were simplistically blamed on "bad elements" or intellectual "bourgeois" influences, rather than on the revolution's own excesses.<sup>24</sup> From one revolution to another, this populist logic deflects blame and reinforces revolutionary narratives: if the promised utopia does not arrive, it must be because educated saboteurs are poisoning the people's minds or clinging to privilege. In a climate of

fear and craze, attacking unarmed professors or writers is politically easier than overcoming structural economic problems. Thus, demonizing intellectuals serves a dual purpose: it unites the masses against a common internal foe and it removes independent voices that might critique the regime's direction.

In sum, across disparate revolutions we find recurring ideological and social patterns that prime revolutionary regimes to purge or persecute intellectuals. Egalitarian rhetoric breeds resentment of any elite; utopian projects demand obliteration of old ideas; and mass mobilization in crisis often turns violent against convenient internal enemies. An embattled revolutionary government, claiming a monopoly on truth, cannot easily tolerate the pluralism and skepticism that intellectual life entails.

### THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution (1789–1799) vividly illustrates how revolutionary zeal can turn against intellectuals. Although early revolutionaries were inspired by Enlightenment ideals, by the radical phase, revolutionaries targeted many of the thinkers and institutions that had fostered those ideals. In August 1793, the revolutionary National Convention decreed the suppression of all royal academies and learned societies, including the prestigious Academy of Sciences. Leaders like Abbé Grégoire saw these institutions as bastions of the old regime's elitism, incompatible with the new egalitarian order.<sup>25</sup> Scientists and scholars who had been celebrated under the monarchy suddenly found themselves under suspicion for lacking *vertu* (republican virtue) or for ties to the aristocracy.<sup>26</sup> Antoine Lavoisier, the famed “father of modern chemistry,” was a prominent victim. Lavoisier had been a tax farmer and an Academy member, which made him a symbol of elitist privilege to the radical Jacobins. In 1794, during the Reign of Terror, he was prosecuted and guillotined. Popular legend maintains that when a petition was made to spare Lavoisier for the sake of his scientific genius, the result was still: The Republic needs neither scholars nor chemists.<sup>27</sup> This chilling pronouncement epitomized the prevailing attitude that no individual intellect was above the general will of the people.

Under Maximilien Robespierre and the Jacobin government, revolutionary ideology held that political and ideological unity was paramount, even at the cost of Enlightenment principles of toleration. Robespierre, deeply influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the general will, believed the Revolution had a moral right to silence or eliminate those deemed counter-revolutionary.<sup>28</sup> In his speech “On Political Morality” (February 1794), Robespierre famously argued that terror was a legitimate tool of republican virtue: “If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, amid revolution it is at the same time virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent... Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue.”<sup>29</sup>

By casting state violence as “justice” and a fulfillment of democratic principle, Robespierre provided ideological justification for persecuting anyone who opposed or even hesitated to support the Revolution. Those who fell outside the bounds of the accepted ideology, including independent-minded intellectuals, could be branded as enemies of the people. Enlightenment notions of free expression were thus overridden by Rousseauian notions of enforcing the general will (even Rousseau's dictum that recalcitrant individuals could be “forced to be free”)<sup>30</sup>. In practice, this meant voices of dissent or moderation were harshly punished.

During the Reign of Terror (1793–94), many intellectuals met grim fates. The mathematician and philosopher Condorcet, who had championed liberal human rights, was outlawed and died in prison. The political theorist Thomas Paine, a hero of the American Revolution, was jailed in Paris for moderatism and narrowly escaped execution. Salons and scholarly gatherings dissipated under suspicion, and press freedom was replaced by propaganda. The very revolution that had been nurtured by Enlightenment intellectuals like Voltaire and Rousseau turned aggressively anti-intellectual. By 1793, the revolutionaries' constant invocation of “Reason” had become ironic décor;<sup>31</sup> in reality the regime grew oppressive, dogmatic, and anti-intellectual, eliminating free discourse and inquiry. In the name of ideological purity and public virtue, the Jacobin government silenced thinkers who did not fully subscribe to its program.<sup>32</sup> The persecution of intellectuals in the French Revolution thus stemmed from a mix of ideological motives (the belief that only uncompromising republican orthodoxy was permissible) and populist resentment of elite institutions. Revolutionary populism painted intellectuals associated with the old order as treasonous or decadent, making them convenient scapegoats for the nation's crises. The tragic paradox is that a movement grounded in Enlightenment ideas ultimately devoured many of its own intellectual progenitors. The Terror subsided after Robespierre's fall in 1794, and France moved to reopen academies and universities in Napoleon's era, but the episode left a lasting impression of how revolutionary ideology, carried to extremes, can imperil the very intellectual freedom it once championed.

### CHINA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) offers a second case of a regime enforcing ideological conformity by attacking intellectuals. Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution to purge “bourgeois” influences and reassert communist purity.<sup>33</sup> In practice, this meant mobilizing radicalized youth—the Red Guards—to target teachers, professors, writers, and party officials accused of lacking sufficient revolutionary zeal.<sup>34</sup> Schools and universities were turned into arenas of class struggle: classes were disrupted as students denounced and even physically assaulted their instructors. As chaos spread, many campuses closed entirely. Mao encouraged this upheaval, seeing young ideologues as instruments to overthrow

entrenched bureaucrats and scholars who favored expertise or moderation over Maoist orthodoxy.<sup>35</sup> In Maoist theory, technical expertise was worthless—even dangerous—unless imbued with communist ideology. The Maoist view, encapsulated by sayings like “Politics in command” and “Better Red than Expert,” subordinated education and science to party doctrine.<sup>36</sup> Unquestioning fidelity to Mao’s thought was the supreme credential, whereas intellectuals who insisted on professionalism or independent thought were castigated as “bourgeois experts.”<sup>37</sup>

The persecution of intellectuals during this period was often brutal. As demonstrated in the previous section, scholars, writers, and teachers were paraded in mass “struggle sessions,” during which they were forced to confess to imaginary sins and endure public humiliation.<sup>38</sup> Many were beaten by Red Guards and suffered severe injuries; some, including renowned Chinese writer Lao She, were driven to suicide. Universities and libraries were ransacked, and priceless books and works of art were destroyed as “counter-revolutionary” relics of the old culture.<sup>39</sup> Mao encouraged the Red Guards to “smash the Four Olds” (old ideas, culture, customs, habits), which included traditional Confucian scholarship.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Confucius himself was posthumously made a political scapegoat. In the early 1970s, the regime launched a campaign to “Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius,” using the ancient philosopher as a symbol of backward feudal ideas opposed to communist progress.<sup>41</sup> Red Guard propaganda depicted Confucius as an arch-villain whose reverence for hierarchy had poisoned China.<sup>42</sup> This ideological assault on Confucius was so virulent that even familial ties were targeted; Mao’s followers exhorted children to turn against their parents’ authority in an effort to eradicate Confucian filial piety. By attacking Confucius and other cultural icons, Maoists aimed to eradicate any competing sources of values or knowledge outside Mao Zedong Thought.

Mao’s mistrust of intellectuals also had a distinctly Marxist-Leninist class dimension. He saw educated elites as part of a bourgeois stratum antagonistic to the proletariat, and accordingly he encouraged attacks on these supposed “class enemies” during the Cultural Revolution. For example, even one of China’s most esteemed scholars—architect Liang Sicheng—was denounced as a “counter-revolutionary” simply for having received a “capitalist education”. No one could even define what a “proletarian” alternative to Liang’s Western education in architecture would be, yet he was forced to endure years of brutal struggle sessions.<sup>43</sup> The result of this ideological fury was the near-collapse of China’s intellectual life. Research ground to a halt; professors, scientists, and engineers were sent to the countryside to perform manual labor and undergo “re-education” by peasants. Scholarly work was heavily censored or simply abandoned in favor of revolutionary propaganda.<sup>45</sup> As a U.S. government study later summarized, “Intellectuals, denounced as the ‘stinking ninth category,’ either were purged or had their work heavily edited

for political ‘purity,’ which severely hampered most serious research and scholarship.”<sup>46</sup> In short, the primacy of ideology dictated by politics has come to outweigh all other concerns. The human toll was immense: estimates suggest that tens of thousands of educators and professionals were persecuted, and many died from torture, execution, or suicide during the decade-long Cultural Revolution.<sup>47</sup> An entire generation of Chinese intellectuals was traumatized or silenced.<sup>48</sup> The nation’s scientific and cultural development also suffered grievously. One account notes that this period of retreat from expertise “decimated [China’s] intellectual and technological skill development.”<sup>49</sup> Yet as a result, Mao Zedong—the architect of the Cultural Revolution—consolidated his power, but left the “Gang of Four” as a chaotic political legacy for his successor. Only after Mao’s death in 1976 did the Chinese Communist Party repudiate the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Under Deng Xiaoping, the slogan was reversed to “Better Expert and Red,” and intellectuals were rehabilitated as essential contributors to modernization.<sup>50</sup> The Cultural Revolution thus starkly demonstrates how a radical regime, in pursuit of an ideological utopia, can turn an entire society against its teachers and thinkers, with devastating consequences.

## THE KHMER ROUGE

Perhaps the most extreme campaign against intellectuals occurred in Cambodia under Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979). The Khmer Rouge’s rise was driven by a radical blend of Marxist-Leninist revolution and Khmer nationalism. Educated in Paris, Pol Pot absorbed Maoist and Stalinist ideals, believing that a classless peasant utopia could only be achieved by erasing Cambodia’s existing society.<sup>51</sup> In 1976, the regime declared that “two thousand years of Cambodian history have virtually ended,” inaugurating “Year Zero.” The goal was a purified, self-reliant nation without markets, religion, or private ties—only loyalty to Angkar, the revolutionary organization. Intellectuals were seen not merely as elites but as agents of colonial and feudal contamination. A 1976 party directive spoke of the need to “expel treacherous elements” described as “microbes” in the body politic, to be eliminated—“smashed” and “swept aside”—in order to protect the revolution’s purity.<sup>52</sup> This extreme ideological vision—combining Maoist ultra-egalitarianism with an idealized vision of an authentically Khmer, peasant-led society—underpinned the Khmer Rouge’s rise and justified its brutal social engineering against intellectuals and other perceived agents of the old order.

The persecution of intellectuals by the Khmer Rouge was lethal and systematic. Pol Pot’s security forces targeted anyone with higher education or specialized skills—doctors, professors, engineers, teachers, writers, technicians—under the premise that such people posed a threat to the new egalitarian order. Many who had been part of the former government or simply spoke French or English were summarily executed.<sup>53</sup> One of the regime’s slogans directed at those deemed bourgeois or educated encapsulated

its contempt for intellect: “No gain in keeping, no loss in weeding out.”<sup>54</sup> Survivors recounted this chilling maxim as a literal death sentence for the educated. The sentence conveyed that the Khmer Rouge saw no value in preserving the lives of intellectuals; on the contrary, their elimination was considered a positive step toward revolutionary society. Unlike Mao’s approach of “re-educating” intellectuals, Pol Pot’s regime largely chose outright annihilation. Intellectuals were not to be redeemed; they were to be removed. At the notorious S-21 prison (Tuol Sleng) in Phnom Penh, where the Khmer Rouge interrogated and tortured perceived enemies, the vast majority of the roughly 14,000 prisoners were educated people (including many former teachers, students, and officials).<sup>55</sup> By the time Vietnamese troops liberated Cambodia in 1979, only seven S-21 prisoners were found alive.<sup>56</sup> The rest had been murdered. Across the country, in only four years, the regime’s pursuit of Year Zero led to the deaths of an estimated 1.5 to 2 million people (approximately one-quarter of Cambodia’s population).<sup>57</sup> This included hundreds of thousands of intellectuals and skilled professionals who were either executed or worked to death through forced labor, starvation, and disease.

The ideological motives behind this genocide of intellectuals were rooted in a fanatical drive for ideological uniformity and agrarian purity. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership, though themselves educated (ironically, several had studied in Paris and were versed in Marxist theory), had come to view Western-educated urban elites as agents of capitalism and colonialism, inherently treacherous to the Khmer peasantry.<sup>58</sup> They drew inspiration from Mao’s Cultural Revolution and the idea of continuous class struggle, but they pushed this ideology to an even more violent extreme. Whereas Mao still needed engineers and scientists after purging them, Pol Pot imagined a society that could simply do without intellectuals altogether. Khmer Rouge ideology glorified the illiterate peasant as the ideal revolutionary and demonized intellect as synonymous with elitism. The campaign was both politically motivated and maintained a strong element of scapegoating: Pol Pot’s regime blamed Cambodia’s troubles on “corrupt” influences of intellect and modernity, essentially using intellectuals as a scapegoat for all social ills.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, the killing of intellectuals was presented as a cleansing necessary to return to a mythic golden age of the Khmer people. The Khmer Rouge even targeted elements of Cambodian culture linked to intellect or religion; books were burned, monks and teachers killed, and the national identity was to be rebuilt from scratch.<sup>60</sup> The result was one of history’s deadliest assaults on intellectual life. The few Cambodian intellectuals who survived did so by concealing their education (pretending, for instance, to be unskilled farmers) or by sheer luck.<sup>61</sup> In the aftermath, Cambodia had to begin virtually from zero, rebuilding its professional classes and educational institutions. The terror wrought by the Khmer Rouge stands as an extreme warning of how anti-intellectual revolutionary fervor can descend into genocide.

## COMPARISON

For all their differences in context and scale, the French Revolution, China’s Cultural Revolution, and Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge regime exhibit striking similarities in their persecution of intellectuals. Each revolutionary movement demanded strict ideological conformity and cast independent thinkers as subversive threats to the new order. A single official orthodoxy—whether Rousseauist republican virtue in France, Mao Zedong Thought in China, or Pol Pot’s vision of agrarian communism in Cambodia—justified branding unorthodox ideas and those who voiced them as dangerous “enemies of the people”. In all three cases, a monolithic ideology fueled the scapegoating of intellectuals as alleged agents of past oppression or saboteurs of the revolution’s ideals. Revolutionary leaders also tapped into radical egalitarianism and anti-elitist populism: they rallied the “common” people (the French Third Estate, the Chinese masses, or the Cambodian peasantry) against entrenched elites, painting intellectuals as aloof, privileged, and not truly “of the people.” Mao’s Red Guards and Pol Pot’s young cadres—much like the *sans-culottes* in Jacobin France—were incited to denounce, publicly humiliate, or even kill teachers, professionals and other “bourgeois” figures in the name of revolutionary purity. Through such campaigns, dissenting scholars and experts in each country were vilified and neutralized as internal enemies. In short, despite unfolding in very different societies, all three revolutions followed a disturbingly similar script of ideologically driven, populist attacks on the intellectual class.

Despite these overarching parallels, the three revolutions differed in the intensity and outcomes of their anti-intellectual campaigns. The French Terror of 1793–94, though bloody, was relatively brief and less absolute in its impact: after Robespierre’s fall, France quickly restored much of its intellectual life (for example, establishing a new National Institute in 1795 to revive the academies that had been shuttered during the Terror). Mao’s Cultural Revolution raged for a decade (1966–1976), disrupting China’s universities and sending countless academics to rural labor camps, yet it was less genocidal than the Khmer Rouge’s assault; unlike Pol Pot’s regime, Mao’s government mostly sought to “remold” or indoctrinate intellectuals rather than exterminate them outright, and by the late 1970s many persecuted Chinese scholars were allowed to return to their posts. Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979) represents the most extreme end of the spectrum: it attempted the near-total eradication of intellectuals, killing perhaps a million people (virtually anyone with an education or technical skill) and completely uprooting modern society in Cambodia. Differences in ideological orientation also underpinned these varied outcomes. Revolutionary France and Maoist China, even at their most radical, professed a continued respect for science and technical knowledge in principle—Jacobin leaders introduced innovations like the metric system and a state “Cult of Reason,” and Mao’s regime (especially in its later

years) ultimately pivoted toward economic modernization and expertise in the “Four Modernizations” campaign. The Khmer Rouge, by contrast, repudiated modern education entirely: its ideology idealized an illiterate peasant utopia and treated even basic scholarly or technical knowledge as a corrupting influence, leading to the wholesale destruction of Cambodia’s schools, universities, and cultural institutions. Moreover, the pre-existing strength of intellectual institutions differed greatly. France and China possessed deeper educational and bureaucratic infrastructures that survived or could be rebuilt after the purges, whereas Cambodia’s nascent intelligentsia and institutions were so completely decimated that the nation had to begin virtually from “Year Zero” in rebuilding its intellectual capital. In sum, while all three revolutions ultimately “devoured” their intellectuals to some extent, the French and Chinese cases were markedly less all-consuming – and more reversible – than the almost total cultural annihilation witnessed in Cambodia.

### CONCLUSION

Across the French Revolution, China’s Cultural Revolution, and the Khmer Rouge’s Year Zero, we find a sobering truth: revolutions tend to devour their intellectuals when those intellectuals are seen as a threat to the new order’s authority or ideology. In each case, the revolutionary leadership concluded that controlling the narrative and values of society required silencing, purging, or even killing the bearers of independent ideas. This pattern validates the thesis that intellectuals are persecuted in revolutions not because they are inherently counter-revolutionary, but because they represent an alternative source of authority (the authority of ideas, expertise, and critical thought) that radical regimes find dangerous. Intellectuals question premises, invoke universal principles, or appeal to facts that may contradict the revolutionary dogma; thus, extremists in power feel compelled to either co-opt or eliminate them. As Immanuel Kant presciently observed in 1784, a revolution may overthrow a tyrant, but without enlightenment it can end up substituting one dogma for another: “A revolution may bring about the end of a personal despotism... but never a true reform of modes of thought. New prejudices will serve, in place of the old, as guide lines for the unthinking multitude.”<sup>62</sup> Tragically, the “new prejudices” of revolutionary orthodoxy often cast critical thinkers as enemies.

The implications for modern and future revolutions are clear. True social transformation cannot succeed in the long run by murdering the bearers of knowledge or by suppressing freedom of thought. The violent purges of intellectuals in our case studies ultimately provoked regret and reversal: France recoiled from the Terror and restored intellectual life; China denounced the Cultural Revolution and rehabilitated persecuted scholars; Cambodia, after the Khmer Rouge, was left in ruins and has spent decades trying to rebuild its educated workforce. The destruction of intellectual capital impoverishes a nation and sows lasting trauma. Moreover, persecuting intellectuals often signals the transformation

of a revolution into a dictatorship. As the revolutionary fervor cools, societies often recognize that the elimination of scholars and scientists was a grievous error contrary to the revolution’s original emancipatory promises. Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Voltaire (and later, modern scholars of revolution) remind us that the legitimacy of any revolution rests on advancing human reason and freedom, not extinguishing them.<sup>63</sup> A revolution that cannot tolerate teachers, writers, or scientists is one that has betrayed its enlightenment ideals and is likely motivated more by power than by true progress.

In reflecting on these historical episodes, we see a cautionary tale: ideals of justice and equality are not secured by silencing intellect. On the contrary, a healthy post-revolutionary order requires the critical engagement of intellectuals to rebuild and guide society. The challenge for any revolutionary movement is whether it can incorporate dissenting intelligence without viewing it as a mortal threat. The lesson of history is that revolutions driven by fear of free thought ultimately consume themselves. Only those revolutions which embrace a plurality of ideas—or which quickly restore protections for intellectual discourse—avoid repeating the darkest cycles of terror. In our modern world, where political upheavals and populist surges continue to arise, the stories of 1793, 1966, and 1975 serve as a stark reminder: silencing the intelligentsia might momentarily solidify power, but it inevitably impoverishes the revolution’s soul and jeopardizes its long-term success. As Rousseau taught, the general will aims at the common good, but it loses its way when it tramples the very voices capable of discerning that good. The enduring task for revolutions is to heed the warnings of the past and find ways to pursue radical change without annihilating the intellectual foundations upon which humane progress is built.

### Notes

1. According to the research of J. Guillaume, the famous phrase “The Republic has no need for scientists” (*La République n’a pas besoin de savants*), often attributed to the Revolutionary Tribunal at the execution of Antoine Lavoisier, has been shown to be apocryphal. See James Guillaume, “Un mot légendaire: ‘La République n’a pas besoin de savants,’” *Révolution française* 38 (1900): 385–99; idem, *Études révolutionnaires*, 1st ser. (Paris, 1908), 136–55. Nevertheless, the legend’s widespread circulation reflects the intensity of revolutionary hostility toward intellectuals during the French Revolution.
2. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 39–40.
3. Vladimir I. Lenin, “To Maxim Gorky, 15 September 1919,” *Lenin: Collected Works*, vol. 44 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 284.
4. Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 48.

5. Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1999), 382.
6. Michael Schoenhals, ed., *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969: Not a Dinner Party* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 40.
7. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 90.
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14. William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 260.
15. Ibid., 261.
16. Académie des Sciences, "History of the Academy", *Académie des Sciences*, accessed July 30, 2025, <https://www.academie-sciences.fr/en/history-academy#:~:text=to%20the%20expansion%20of%20scientific,the%20Convention%20abolished%20all%20academies>.
17. Vickery, 140.
18. Ibid., 253.
19. Ibid., 254.
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