

Inside the Khmer Rouge's Killing Fields

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Amid the devastation of war, Pol Pot's genocidal regime came to power and led to the death of over a million Cambodians. Its roots didn't lie in its "utopianism," but in imperialist war and authoritarianism.

The Communist Party of Cambodia (CPK), better known as the Khmer Rouge, was the last self-declared Communist Party to seize power in the twentieth century. Ruling for less than four years, from April 1975 to early 1979, the party's reign became infamous for violence and cruelty, its name synonymous with murder and repression. Some scholars hold the Cambodian Communists and their leader, Pol Pot, responsible for the death of almost a quarter of the country's population.

But what really happened in Democratic Kampuchea (DK), as the Khmer Rouge renamed the country, is often shrouded in myths. *From Rice Fields to Killing Fields: Nature, Life, and Labor Under the Khmer Rouge* is geographer James A. Tyner's attempt to explain the roots of Pol Pot's genocidal regime.

While other writings on the Kampuchea period have blamed its violence on the supposed "totalitarian aspects" of attempts to create a more equal society — or on either the personalities of CPK leaders or Cambodian and Buddhist culture — Tyner situates the CPK regime in its social and economic context. *Rice Fields to Killings Fields* aims to critically apply Marxist concepts to a regime that claimed to be Marxist. Tyner focuses on the CPK's economic policy as providing the "base" for the DK regime, allowing him to dispel several myths about the Khmer Rouge. But in the end, the book is unable to fully explain the exceptional violence of the regime.

One especially popular myth is that the CPK sought to create "a peasant utopia." One historian of genocide [\[1\]](#), for example, writes that "the Khmer Rouge set out to destroy all signs of modern civilization" and "everything that embodied bureaucracy and western technology."

As Tyner shows, this is not true. The Khmer Rouge set up a complex bureaucracy that attempted to classify the entire Cambodian population in different categories. S-21, the interrogation center where almost fourteen thousand people were tortured and killed, gathered thousands of files on the victims and their supposed confessions. When he first saw the boxes of files, one researcher exclaimed: "You're kidding me. This stuff is written down?" [\[2\]](#)

The Beginning of the Disaster

The coming to power of the Khmer Rouge can only be understood as part of a longer history of war and revolution.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Cambodia was increasingly drawn into the storm of the Vietnam War. Before 1970, Cambodia's ruler was King Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk had tried to save his autocratic rule by remaining neutral in the war, but in the late sixties, on the initiative of President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the US air force destroyed large parts of the country attempting to hit Communist Vietnamese forces, which had taken refuge in supposedly neutral Cambodia.

From 1970 to 1973, the US dropped three times as many explosives on Cambodia as it had dropped on Japan during World War II. "Between 1969 and 1973," Craig Etcheson writes in *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea*, "539,129 tons of high explosives rained down on Cambodia ... This is equivalent to some 15,400 pounds of explosives for every square mile of Cambodian territory." The bombings concentrated on Cambodia's rural areas. There were hardly any identifiable military targets: US planes simply carpet-bombed whole areas. Survivors fled into the jungle, many of them joining the Cambodian insurgents. Between 1968 and 1970, the number of Khmer Rouge guerrillas doubled.

Sihanouk tried to keep up the charade that there were no North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia, while at the same time attacking their allies, the Cambodian Communists. But Lon Nol, Sihanouk's commander of armed forces, wanted to use US support to drive out the Vietnamese forces and destroy the Khmer Rouge. He saw the US bombings as a means to those ends.

On March 19, 1970, Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk. The deposed king fled to China, and Cambodian Communists entered into an alliance with their erstwhile enemy to form the "National United Front of Kampuchea." Officially, this front was led by Sihanouk, but the real leaders were those who would later helm Democratic Kampuchea, including Pol Pot.

Riddled with corruption and incompetence and lacking popular support, the Lon Nol regime disintegrated, and in April 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered the capital of Phnom Penh. After the destruction that the US had inflicted on Cambodia, any new government would have faced enormous difficulties. But the CPK's policies made an already existing disaster far worse.

A Developmentalist Dictatorship

Another myth Tyner dispels is that the Khmer Rouge wanted to abolish modern technology and industry. A CPK slogan sometimes quoted as proof for this claim is: "If we have rice, we have everything" — but this only meant that increasing rice production was a first step toward modernization. In a September 1978 interview, Pol Pot claimed all the major industries damaged by American bombing had been restored and more were being built. He was lying, of course, but there was no indication he wanted to return to a pre-modern, idyllic past. Throughout the book, Tyner draws on documents from top officials to show that CPK policies instead aimed to drive a forced march into modernity.

The goal was to build a developmentalist dictatorship that would exploit a predominately agricultural labor force and sell agricultural products, mainly rice, on the international market. Profits from these exports would then fund the purchase of technology and machines and the building of factories. Eventually, the country would develop heavy industry and become "self-reliant." The broad outlines of this model, Tyner points out, were shared by a large, politically heterogeneous group of states in the Third World.

By taking seriously what the CPK declared to be their goals, Tyner can dispel the myth that Pol Pot and his followers were peasant-utopians who wanted to return to a preindustrial past isolated from the rest of the world. The documents Tyner cites cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda. They were often not meant to be seen publicly—rather, they were written to lay down guidelines for the CPK leadership.

The cruelty of the regime therefore flowed not from its anti-modern romanticism but from its brutal modernization program. And brutal it was. Most of the population was compelled to work as peasants and produce rice. Those evacuated from Phnom Penh and other cities faced some of the harshest conditions since they had been under CPK control for the shortest period of time and were

seen as privileged compared to peasants. Also considered politically unreliable, they were often killed for the slightest transgression. Many were made to do extraordinarily hard labor, such as creating new rice fields in the wilderness, or constructing irrigation projects. The CPK planned to use the fruits of their labor to fund not only the purchase of industrial machinery, but for the creation of a strong army to claim parts of Thailand and Vietnam it considered Cambodian territory.

Tyner argues the regime implementing these policies was “state capitalist” — the economy was state-controlled and aimed at exploiting the labor force to produce commodities for sale on the world market. But it’s difficult to classify the DK regime, a very brief and unstable social formation.

The book does not provide a class analysis of Cambodian society, but instead deduces the existence of classes from its thesis that the regime was state-capitalist. The Khmer Rouge famously abolished money (a move opposed by its more moderate, and quickly extinguished, wing). Tyner, however, argues that in “state capitalist” Democratic Kampuchea, rice was the equivalent of money. Supervised by Khmer Rouge commanders, who had been granted the authority to execute people as they saw fit, people were given individual work targets and paid in rice. Markets were abolished, but people engaged in clandestine barter.

But what is a “bourgeoisie” that tries to abolish money and markets? If the DK was “state capitalist,” it was of a very peculiar variety — so peculiar that it is doubtful that labelling it as such has much use.

Murderous Idealism

Yet the main weakness of the book’s focus on “official policy” is that a movement’s self-description is not always the most reliable guide to what it thinks, let alone what it does. Tyner does not give much attention to this problem.

The most important question remains: what made the CPK’s rule so different from other developmentalist dictatorships? The Khmer Rouge were characterized by brutality. But rather than preserving their rule, it led them to lose their initial support and antagonize the Vietnamese state that would destroy their regime.

Tyner describes the chilling instrumentalism of the CPK, which held that people only had worth to the degree that they could produce rice. Their slogans also revealed a murderous disdain for humans: “To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss” (directed at the politically unreliable); “Better to kill an innocent by mistake than spare an enemy by mistake.”

The neglect and killing of the sick and elderly were “rational” in CPK terms. But what was not “rational,” not even in their own warped terms, was the unrealistic speed with which rice production was supposed to increase, or the escalation of hostilities with the much stronger Vietnamese state, or the self-destructive fighting and purges within the CPK, which went far beyond a struggle over power. The book does not explain these aspects of the DK regime, instead ending rather abruptly.

Throughout the book, Tyner criticizes the so-called Standard Total View or STV, which in his words presents the Communist Party of Kampuchea as “a totalitarian, communist, autarkic regime seeking to reorganize Cambodian society around a primitive, agrarian political economy.”

Tyner adopts the term STV from Cambodia expert Michael Vickery, who in his book *Cambodia, 1975–1982* uses a somewhat different, broader definition:

“In addition to direct extermination of ... class enemies, the STV holds that the regime deliberately abolished schooling, medical care, and religion; sought to destroy the family, in particular by tearing

children from parents; and through deliberate efforts to deprive the population of an adequate diet, caused the deaths of large numbers of those people who escaped the extermination dragnet. Ethnic minorities, in particular the Muslim Chams, are supposed to have been special extermination targets.”

The “policies imputed to the [CPK], according to the STV were perverse and had no rational basis in either economic or political necessity” and “were invariant as to time or place.”

But not all the elements of the STV are incorrect. Ben Kiernan has shown that the Khmer Rouge did in fact target ethnic minorities. [3] Almost the entire Vietnamese minority was either driven out of the country or massacred. Last November, a UN-backed tribunal ruled that Khmer Rouge leaders were guilty of genocide for massacring the country’s Cham Muslim and ethnic Vietnamese communities. [4]

“The People Can Master the Plant.”

Were the Khmer Rouge Marxists? In his book on the DK, Craig Etcheson makes a distinction between “declatory” and “operational” ideology — “what the CPK said” and “what it did.” Tyner takes the CPK’s “declatory ideology” more seriously than it deserves, writing that we can assume their cadres had “internalized” Lenin’s *State and Revolution* and other texts.

The Khmer Rouge certainly saw themselves as exemplary Marxists and communists — but why should we take their word for it? There is little reason to assume many of them seriously studied Marxist theory. And when they did, they gave their own, very peculiar twist to those ideas.

Theoretical texts produced by Pol Pot or other CPK leaders are rare. The few examples are turgid collections of standardized “Marxist-Leninist” phrases that have little to do with reality. Similarly, public statements from party leaders and interviews of CPK leaders with foreign visitors were remarkably vapid. And amidst all the clichés, they made claims that contradict what are usually considered to be fundamental aspects of Marxism. In one long speech, for instance, Pol Pot claimed pre-modern feudal revolts failed because the peasants did not have a “correct political line” — no word about the limits imposed by the level of socioeconomic development, as one would expect in a supposedly Marxist text.

Tyner links such ideas to Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, which argued that under socialism “every cook can govern” since modern societies have dispersed the necessary knowledge across the population. But the Khmer Rouge thought something very different: they assumed their rule would give people extraordinary new abilities. A Vietnamese delegation was told that after only three months of practice, Cambodian textile workers could simultaneously operate seven machines. In a pharmaceutical factory, they were told there was no need for engineers or technicians since “the people can master the plant.” The “correct political line” would make most education superfluous. In order to become a pilot, “political consciousness,” not training was considered key.

Khmer Rouge slogans implied that even being ill meant one was an enemy of the people, since disease could be cured by “dose of Lenin.” Tyner describes the disastrous state of health care in DK, writing, “the Khmer Rouge believed that anyone, regardless of training, could work as a doctor, nurse or other profession.” Compare that to Lenin’s repeated emphasis on the need for specialized training, education, and long-term experience.

The CPK’s extreme denigration of expertise and philosophical idealism had lethal consequences. A person’s inability to meet their rice production goals, for instance, was treated as proof they hadn’t fully internalized the “correct line” and hence were politically unreliable. Often, that was enough to

mark them as an enemy to be killed.

The Khmer Rouge's Racism

Another aspect of the CPK's "declaratory" and "operational" ideology was their murderous violence against Cambodia's minorities. Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge faction in particular, which gained complete control over the party and the country, was not only intensely nationalist — it was intensely racist.

Here, again, Tyner's analysis reveals its limits. He briefly refers to Kiernan's work on the racist aspects of the DK period, but chooses to focus on "a critique of the political economy of Democratic Kampuachea." His commitment to the metaphor of base-superstructure, and his prioritizing of socioeconomic policies as comprising the "base," means crucial "superstructural" social dynamics are neglected and part of the answer to what made CPK so violent and (self)-destructive is left out.

In a 1982 article, the French Marxist Pierre Rousset argued that the DK experience should cause us to reflect on the "ambivalent role of nationalism in national liberation movements"; "at one and the same time the irreplaceable motor of mass mobilisation, and ferment of chauvinism in revolutionary organizations."

The CPK was one of the most extreme outcomes of such fermentation. In its public statements, it betrayed an obsession with national greatness, foreign enemies, and "cleansing" the nation. Consider Pol Pot's remarks on the moment they took Phnom Penh:

"The brother and sister combatants of the revolutionary army ... sons and daughters of our workers and peasants...were taken aback by the overwhelming, unspeakable sight of long-haired men and youngsters wearing bizarre clothing making themselves indistinguishable from the fair sex Our traditional mentality, mores, traditions and literature and arts and culture and tradition were totally destroyed by U.S. imperialism and its stooges.... Our people's traditionally, clean, sound characteristics and essence were completely absent and abandoned, replaced by imperialistic, pornographic, shameless, perverted and fanatic traits."

Vickery located the source of such ideas in the "peasant romanticism" of the CPK leadership, which idealized a mythical, "purely Cambodian" peasantry (an idealization that didn't translate into much empathy for actually existing Cambodian peasants). Kiernan has suggested the explanation for the Khmer Rouge's hostility towards minorities and Vietnam lies in Cambodia's short existence as a nation-state and its geographical location between much stronger states. But neither explanation can fully account for the escalation of violence during the DK period.

In deciding who was an enemy, the CPK used ethnic criteria. At a meeting in May 1975, the CPK leadership had already decided to expel the entire Vietnamese population from Cambodia. One survivor recalled a CPK cadre addressing a crowd shortly after their victory:

"As you all know, during the Lon Nol regime the Chinese were parasites on our nation The population of each village will be divided into a Chinese, a Vietnamese and a Cambodian section. Some of you are not Cambodian, stand up and leave the group. Remember that Chinese and Vietnamese look completely different from Cambodians."

The witness described what happened next:

"About ten people stood up and walked to the place reserved for them; "Are there any more?" No one stood ... then the four guards were told to go through the crowd. Anyone whose face looked foreign was different was dragged out."

The CPK's haste in increasing rice production was inspired by their chauvinism. The CPK wanted the Cambodian revolution to be unique: "The organization excels Lenin and is outstripping Mao." The party center claimed:

"We have leaped over the neocolonial, semi-feudalist society of the American imperialists, the feudalists and capitalists of every nation, and have achieved a socialist society straight away ... [In China] a long period of time was required ... [North Korea] needed fourteen years to make the transition. North Vietnam did the same. As for us, we have a different character from them. We are faster than they are."

In addition to this Khmer-supremacist pride, fear was a driving factor behind the CPK's forced march of development; the CPK leaders were convinced that the Vietnamese Communists wanted to destroy Cambodia. "Vietnam," Pol Pot claimed, "aims to exterminate Kampuchea and eliminate the people of Kampuchea." And while the CPK paid lip service to "proletarian internationalism" in statements intended for international audiences, their anti-Vietnamese convictions were more important in shaping their policies.

The Collapse of the Khmer Rouge

Before 1975, and in some areas after that, the Khmer Rouge enjoyed substantial peasant support. As the CPK under Pol Pot became increasingly violent and exploitative, it lost their favor as well. But in a period where the social fabric of Cambodia was being torn apart, Pot's regime — rich in both weapons and resources — was able to impose its will on society without representing any major social classes.

In its last phase, the regime relied on naked violence, often exerted by very young cadres, to control the population. When the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia following numerous attacks by the Khmer Rouge, the regime quickly collapsed. In some places, Vietnamese forces advanced so rapidly that they had difficulty maintaining contact with the rearguard. In many villages, once the Cambodians heard the Vietnamese were coming, they rose up and chased away, captured, or killed the Khmer Rouge cadres themselves, allowing the invading troops to simply drive along the main roads.

Not everyone was as thrilled. The Khmer Rouge were useful to governments that wanted to undermine the Soviet Union's ally, Vietnam. These included China, DK's most significant ally, but also the US. Discussing the Khmer Rouge regime with Thailand's foreign minister on November 26, 1975, Kissinger informed him: "You should tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won't let that stand in our way." [5]

After being driven from power, the remnants of the Khmer Rouge regrouped in the jungle along the Thai border and launched a guerrilla war against the new, Vietnam-backed regime. The supposed "fanatic communists" quickly adapted to the new situation and the tastes of their allies. Khieu Samphan, the official head of state of Democratic Kampuchea, declared in 1980 that Cambodia "could not afford communism." Pol Pot claimed they had only "used Communism for the good of the nation" — now they would "use capitalism" instead.

Well into the early nineties, the US, as well as China, supported the Khmer Rouge's claim to Cambodia's seat in the United Nations. Material support from Western nations also reached forces aligned with Pol Pot. [6] To make the new alliances less awkward, the Khmer Rouge adopted an old trick: it formed a supposedly broad front that was in reality controlled by the old guard. Between 1985 and 1989, British special forces provided training to such allies of the Khmer Rouge.

Negotiations in the late 1980s and 1990s finally led to a peace agreement and the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces. Today, the country is still ruled by Hun Sen — a former Khmer Rouge commander who fled to Vietnam to escape the purges and was originally installed by Vietnamese forces as the de facto leader of the country.

Tyner's focus on socioeconomic policies and his criticism of persistent myths about the Khmer Rouge make *From Rice-Fields to Killing Fields* a valuable contribution. But it fails to develop the links between such policies and other aspects of the government, leaving unsolved the roots of the regime's violence.

From Rice Fields to Killing Fields: Nature, Life and Labor under the Khmer Rouge, by James Tyner (Syracuse University Press, 2017).

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• Jacobinmag.com. 04.27.2019:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/04/khmer-rouge-james-tyner-cambodia-violence>

Footnotes

[1] https://books.google.nl/books/about/Purify_and_Destroy.html?id=HIS-AwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=embodied%20bureacracy&f=false

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/20/weekinreview/cambodia-s-bureaucracy-of-death-reams-of-evidence-in-search-of-a-trial.html>

[3] <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300144345/pol-pot-regime>

[4] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46217896>

[5] https://books.google.nl/books?id=LiIxDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT34&dq=You+should+tell+the+Cambodians+that+we+will+be+friends+with+them.+They+are+murderous+thugs+but+we+won%27t+let+that+stand+in+our+way&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjY3K7HyZ_fAhXH2KQKHeTPDfEQ6AEIKjAA#v=onepage&q=You%20should%20tell%20the%20Cambodians%20that%20we%20will%20be%20friends%20with%20them.%20They%20are%20murderous%20thugs%20but%20we%20won't%20let%20that%20stand%20in%20our%20way&f=false

[6] <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2014/04/how-thatcher-gave-pol-pot-hand>