

# The History of Cambodia: Pol Pot Revisited

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*Now, in the monsoon season, Cambodia is verdant, cool and relaxed. The rice paddies on the low hill slopes are flooded, forests that hide old temples are almost impassable, rough seas deter swimmers. It's a pleasant time to re-visit this modest country: Cambodia is not crowded, and Cambodians are not greedy, but rather peaceful and relaxed. They fish for shrimp, calamari and sea brim. They grow rice, unspoiled by herbicides, manually planted, cultivated and gathered. They produce enough for themselves and for export, too — definitely no paradise, but the country soldiers on.*

Socialism is being dismantled fast: Chinese-owned factories keep churning tee-shirts for the European and American market employing tens of thousands of young Cambodian girls earning \$80 per month. They are being sacked at the first sign of unionising. Nouveau-riches live in palaces; there are plenty of Lexus cars, and an occasional Rolls-Royce. Huge black and red, hard and precious tree trunks are constantly ferried to the harbour for timber export, destroying forests but enriching traders. There are many new French restaurateurs in the capital; NGO reps earn in one minute the equivalent of a worker's monthly salary.

Not much remains from the turbulent period when the Cambodians tried to radically change the order of things in the course of their unique traditionalist conservative peasant revolution under communist banner. That was the glorious time of Jean Luc Godard and his *La Chinoise*, of the Cultural Revolution in China sending party bonzes for re-education to remote farms, of Khmer Rouge marching on the corrupt capital. Socialist movement reached a bifurcation point: whether to advance to more socialism Mao-style, or retreat to less socialism the Moscow way. The Khmer Rouge experiment lasted only three years, from 1975 to 1978.

Surprisingly, Cambodians have no bad memories of that period. This is quite an amazing discovery for an infrequent visitor. I did not come to reconstruct "the truth", whatever it is, but rather to find out what is the collective memory of the Cambodians, how do they perceive the events of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, what narrative has been filtered down by time gone by. The omnipotent narrative-making machinery of the West has embedded in our conscience the image of bloody Khmer Rouge commies cannibalising their own people over the Killing Fields and ruled over by a nightmarish Pol Pot, anybody's notion of ruthless despot.

A much quoted American professor, RJ Rummel, [wrote](#) that "out of a 1970 population of probably near 7,100,000 ...almost 3,300,000 men, women, and children were murdered ...most of these... were murdered by the communist Khmer Rouge". Every second person was killed, according to his estimate.

However, Cambodia's population was not halved but more than doubled since 1970, despite

alleged multiple genocides. Apparently, the genocidaires were inept, or their achievements have been greatly exaggerated.

The Pol Pot the Cambodians remember was not a tyrant, but a great patriot and nationalist, a lover of native culture and native way of life. He was brought up in royal palace circles; his aunt was a concubine of the previous king. He studied in Paris, but instead of making money and a career, he returned home, and spent a few years dwelling with forest tribes to learn from the peasants. He felt compassion for the ordinary village people who were ripped off on a daily basis by the city folk, the comprador parasites. He built an army to defend the countryside from these power-wielding robbers. Pol Pot, a monkish man of simple needs, did not seek wealth, fame or power for himself. He had one great ambition: to terminate the failing colonial capitalism in Cambodia, return to village tradition, and from there, to build a new country from scratch.

His vision was very different from the Soviet one. The Soviets built their industry by bleeding the peasantry; Pol Pot wanted to rebuild the village first, and only *afterwards* build industry to meet the villagers' needs. He held city dwellers in contempt; they did nothing useful, in his view. Many of them were connected with loan sharks, a distinct feature of post-colonial Cambodia; others assisted the foreign companies in robbing people off their wealth. Being a strong nationalist, Pol Pot was suspicious of the Vietnamese and Chinese minorities. But what he hated most was acquisitiveness, greed, the desire to own things. St Francis and Leo Tolstoy would have understood him.

The Cambodians I spoke to pooh-poohed the dreadful stories of Communist Holocaust as a western invention. They reminded me of what went on: their brief history of troubles began in 1970, when the Americans chased away their legitimate ruler, Prince Sihanouk, and replaced him with their proxy military dictator Lon Nol. Lon Nol's middle name was Corruption, and his followers stole everything they could, transferred their ill-gotten gains abroad then moved to the US. On top of this came US bombing raids. The peasants ran to the forest guerrillas of Khmer Rouge, which was led by a few Sorbonne graduates, and eventually succeeded in kicking out Lon Nol and his American supporters.

In 1975, Pol Pot took over the country, devastated by a US bombing campaign of Dresden ferocity, and saved it, they say. Indeed, the US planes (do you remember [Ride of the Valkyries](#) in the *Apocalypse is Now?*) dropped more bombs on this poor country than they had on the Nazi Germany, and spread their mines all over the rest of it. If the Cambodians are pressed to name their great destroyer (and they are not keen about burrowing back into the past), it is Professor Henry Kissinger they name, not Comrade Pol Pot.

Pol Pot and his friends inherited a devastated country. The villages had been depopulated; millions of refugees gathered in the capital to escape American bombs and American mines. Destitute and hungry, they had to be fed. But because of the bombing campaign, nobody planted rice in 1974. Pol Pot commanded everybody away from the city and to the rice paddies, to plant rice. This was a harsh, but a necessary step, and in a year Cambodia had plenty of rice, enough to feed all and even to sell some surplus to buy necessary commodities.

New Cambodia (or Kampuchea, as it was called) under Pol Pot and his comrades was a nightmare for the privileged, for the wealthy and for their retainers; but poor people had enough food and were taught to read and write. As for the mass killings, these are just

horror stories, averred my Cambodian interlocutors. Surely the victorious peasants shot marauders and spies, but many more died of American-planted mines and during the subsequent Vietnamese takeover, they said.

In order to listen to the other side, I travelled to the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek, the memorial where the alleged victims were killed and buried. This is a place some 30 km away from Phnom Penh, a neat green park with a small museum, much visited by tourists, the Cambodian *Yad va-Shem*. A plaque says that the Khmer Rouge guards would bring some 20 to thirty detainees twice or thrice a month, and kill many of them. For three years, it would amount less than two thousand dead, but another plaque said indeed that they dug up about eight thousand bodies. However, another plaque said there was over a million killed. Noam Chomsky assessed that the death toll in Cambodia may have been inflated “by a factor of a thousand.”

There are no photos of the killings; instead, the humble museum holds a couple of naïve paintings showing a big, strong man killing a small, weak one, in a rather traditional style. Other plaques read: “Here the murderous tools were kept, but nothing remains now” and similar inscriptions. To me, this recalled other CIA-sponsored stories of Red atrocities, be it Stalin’s Terror or the Ukrainian Holodomor. The people now in charge of the US, Europe and Russia want to present every alternative to their rule as inept or bloody or both. They especially hate incorruptible leaders, be it Robespierre or Lenin, Stalin or Mao – and Pol Pot. They prefer leaders keen on graft, and eventually install them. The Americans have an additional good reason: Pol Pot killings serve to hide their own atrocities, the millions of Indochinese they napalmed and strafed.

Cambodians do say that many more people were killed by the invading Vietnamese in 1978; while the Vietnamese prefer to shift the guilt to the Khmer Rouge. But the present government does not encourage this or any other digging into the past, and for good reason: practically all important officials above a certain age were members of the Khmer Rouge, and often leading members. Beside, almost all of them collaborated with the Vietnamese. The present PM, Hun Sen, was a Khmer Rouge commander, and later supported the Vietnamese occupation. When the Vietnamese went home, he remained in power.

Prince Sihanouk, who was exiled by the Americans, also supported the Khmer Rouge. He returned home to his neat royal palace and to its adjacent silver temple with Emerald Buddha after departure of the Vietnamese. Unbelievably, he is still alive, though he transferred the crown to his son, a monk who had to leave monastery and assume the throne. So the royal family is not keen on digging up the past, either. Nobody wants to discuss it openly; the official story of Khmer Rouge alleged atrocities is entrenched in Western conscience, though attempts to try the perpetrators bore scant results.

Looking back, it appears that the Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot failed in their foreign policy rather than in their internal one. It is fine that they canceled money, dynamited banks and sent bankers to plant rice. It is fine that they dried up the great blood-sucking leech, the big-city compradors and money-lenders. Their failure was that they did not calculate their position vis-à-vis Vietnam, and tried to push beyond their own weight. Vietnam was very powerful – it had just defeated the US – and would brook no nonsense from their junior brothers in Phnom Penh. The Vietnamese planned to create an Indochinese Federation including Laos and Cambodia under their own leadership. They invaded and overthrew the stubborn Khmer Rouge who were too keen on their independence. They also supported the black legend of

genocide to justify their own bloody intervention.

We talk too much about evils committed under futurist regimes, and too little about the evils of the greedy rulers. It is not often we remember Bengal famine, Hiroshima holocaust, Vietnam tragedy, or even Sabra and Shatila. Introduction of capitalism in Russia killed more people than introduction of socialism, but who knows that?

Now we may cautiously reassess the brave attempts to reach for socialism in various countries. They were done under harsh, adverse conditions, under threat of intervention, facing hostile propaganda. But let us remember: if socialism failed, so did capitalism. If communism was accompanied by loss of life, so was and is capitalism. But with capitalism, we have no future worth living, while socialism still offers hope to us and our children.

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