

The death of Pol Pot

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The death of former Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot on April 15 in the Thai-Cambodian border area brings to an end one of the most chilling and bloody chapters of the twentieth century. During Pol Pot's three and a half years of rule over Cambodia, from 1975 to 1978, the Khmer Rouge killed as many as two million people through mass executions, starvation and slave labor.

The genocide in Cambodia was the outcome of a complex historical development in which the pernicious ideological influence of Stalinism came together with the military bloodbath carried out by American imperialism against the people of Indochina. Little of this history can be gleaned from the commentaries in the corporate-controlled media, which used the occasion to rehash old anticommunist myths and whitewash the US role in the Cambodian tragedy.

The political activity of Pol Pot (Saloth Sar) began in post-World War II France, which ruled Cambodia as part of its Indochina colony. The son of a relatively well-off peasant family, he received a government scholarship in 1949 to study in Paris, where he gravitated with a number of his friends to the Stalinist circles around the French Communist Party.

He returned to Phnom Penh in 1953, worked as a teacher and was involved in the establishment of the embryonic Communist Party in Cambodia. Faced with police repression under the government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the country's first post-colonial ruler, the party leaders fled the capital in 1963, seeking sanctuary in the remote rural areas of the country.

It was here that Pol Pot, heavily influenced by the Chinese Stalinists, devised the political perspective of what was to become the Khmer Rouge--an extreme form of Mao Zedong's eclectic mixture of Stalinism, nationalism and peasant radicalism.

It is characteristic of the ideological falsification produced by Stalinism that the label of Marxism has been placed upon social and political phenomena which have nothing whatsoever to do with the ideas of Marx, Engels or Lenin.

Classical Marxism envisioned a new society, democratically controlled by the working class, which would take as its point of departure the highest level of the productive forces developed under capitalism. This presupposed the widest possible scope for the development of industry, science and technique, all of them bound up with the growth of cities, the urban proletariat and the cultural life of the population as a whole.

No more grotesque distortion can be imagined than to categorize as 'Marxist' the ideas of Pol Pot and his cohorts. As early as the 1950s Khieu Samphan, Pol Pot's closest aide, had outlined a perspective of creating a primitive peasant-based society in which money, culture and all other facets of urban life would be abolished.

Like the Maoists, the Khmer Rouge appealed not to the working class but to the peasantry, and especially to the most backward and

impoverished layers of the peasantry, who became the backbone of its guerrilla army units. In its parochialism and nationalism, its anti-intellectualism, and its hostility to urban life, the Khmer Rouge reflected the outlook of this social stratum.

The American role

The responsibility for the rising popularity of the Khmer Rouge rested with the successive US administrations which prosecuted a protracted and brutal imperialist war throughout Indochina in the 1960s and 1970s, destroying millions of lives and devastating industry and agriculture.

Prince Sihanouk had sought to maintain his country's distance from the war in Vietnam through a policy of neutralism. He refused to act against Vietnamese supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh trail, which ran through eastern Cambodia. At the same time he kept silent about US military actions against Vietnamese forces operating on Cambodian soil.

The Nixon administration finally broke with Sihanouk in April 1970, backing a CIA-directed military coup that installed General Lon Nol and sent Sihanouk into exile in Beijing. One month later Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia by 20,000 US and Vietnamese troops.

Cambodia was transformed into a battlefield with Lon Nol's troops fighting the Khmer Rouge and American and Saigon troops in combat with NLF and regular North Vietnamese forces. The country's population experienced the most intensive saturation bombing in world history. During nearly five years of bombing raids, from 1969 to 1973, some 532,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia, more than three times the tonnage dropped on Japan in all of World War II.

Under the impact of the bombing and widening warfare, Cambodian society disintegrated. By 1974, 95 percent of Cambodia's national income came from US aid, much of it siphoned off into the pockets of corrupt military officers. Two million out of the seven million people were homeless. Annual rice production had plunged from 3.8 million tons to only 655,000 tons. Much of Cambodia's farmland remains even today untillable because of bomb craters and unexploded ordnance.

The major responsibility for this social catastrophe lay with Nixon and his principal foreign policy aide, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. The bombing of Cambodia was carried out as a secret and illegal operation--secret, at least, from the American people, if not from the victims in Cambodia, or the thousands of American military personnel who participated in the attacks, or the American reporters in Vietnam who knew of the bombing raids but kept silent.

There was no constitutional authority for the Nixon administration to wage war against a peaceful and neutral country. The White House

did not even notify Congress of the bombing until April 1973, after the last American ground troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam and the war had been all but lost.

The Khmer Rouge in power

It was only after the American intervention in Cambodia that Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge began to win wider support. From a badly organized and poorly equipped force of less than 5,000 men in 1970, it grew to be an army of around 70,000 when, in April 1975, the Lon Nol dictatorship finally collapsed.

The shattering, not only of urban economic life but even of traditional peasant agriculture, led the Khmer Rouge to rely more heavily on the most culturally and socially primitive layers of the peasantry, those living an essentially tribal existence, with little or no connection to the money economy and urban life. In this they resemble such contemporary groups as the Sendero Luminoso in Peru and the JVP in Sri Lanka, originating as movements led by radicalized middle class intellectuals, which have evolved in the direction of fascism.

Certainly once it came to power at the head of a peasant-based army, the Khmer Rouge leaders carried out policies of a profoundly anti-working-class character, which had far more in common with fascism than socialism. Faced with an economy in shambles, unable and unwilling to organize the feeding of the cities, they ordered the evacuation of Pnomh Penh and other towns. The entire urban population--workers, intellectuals, civil servants, small shopkeepers and others--were driven into the countryside to labor under very harsh conditions on irrigation schemes and other grandiose projects aimed at elevating agricultural production to unattainable levels.

Hundreds of thousands died of overwork, hunger and disease. Many more were executed in the course of the pogroms launched against all forms of culture and intellectual life. Others died in the vicious factional disputes that erupted within the Khmer Rouge as its economic plans fell to pieces, and its grip on political power became more tenuous.

The nationalist xenophobia of the Cambodian leadership led to a series of clashes with Vietnam, as Khmer Rouge forces staged bloody attacks on ethnic Vietnamese living along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. After nearly a year of such raids, the Hanoi government ordered a full-scale Vietnamese invasion in December 1978, which rapidly overwhelmed the Khmer Rouge forces and led to the installation of the current ruler in Phnom Penh, Prime Minister Hun Sen.

A mass murderer under US protection

If the Khmer Rouge did not disintegrate completely after this debacle, it was largely because it had the support of powerful backers. China launched a military assault on Vietnam in retaliation for its invasion of Cambodia, with the tacit backing of the Carter administration in the United States.

Deng Xiaoping visited Washington in January 1979, in the midst of the Vietnamese offensive in Cambodia, which both China and the US condemned. Less than two months later, nearly a million Chinese troops carried out attacks along Vietnam's northern border, where they suffered a bloody repulse.

The most critical role was played by the United States government,

which saw Pol Pot as a useful Cold War ally, since he was at war with Vietnam, which was allied to the Soviet Union. With US backing, China supplied the Khmer Rouge with military equipment and the right-wing military regime in Thailand, a US client state, allowed free flow of supplies to Pol Pot's guerrillas in their base camps along the Thai-Cambodian border.

As Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, later admitted, 'I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot. The question was how to help the Cambodian people. Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him, but China could.'

Equally important was the diplomatic support from the United States and other imperialist powers, which recognized the Khmer Rouge as the legitimate government of Cambodia and backed the seating of Pol Pot's representative as the Cambodian delegate to the United Nations for more than a decade. Throughout the 1980s the Reagan administration blocked international efforts to characterize the events of 1975-78 in Cambodia as genocide or to hold the Khmer Rouge leadership responsible for mass murder, since it would undercut the American alliance with Pol Pot.

The final collapse of the Khmer Rouge and its disintegration into rival factions was bound up with the imposition of a new imperialist settlement on Cambodia under the UN's auspices in 1993. The aim of this UN intervention was to open up the country as a source of cheap labor for international investors. Since then, key Khmer Rouge groupings have formally surrendered and been integrated into the army and official political life in Cambodia. The remnants are fighting a rearguard action on the Thai-Cambodian border.

Only last year, after an internal split in the remnants of the Khmer Rouge led to Pol Pot's arrest, did the United States withdraw its objections to his trial as a war criminal. But there was no mistaking the sigh of relief in Washington after the Khmer Rouge leader died, apparently of natural causes.

As one Cambodia scholar, Stephen Heder, a lecturer at London's School of oriental and African Studies, told the *New York Times*: 'There's certainly a major American responsibility for this whole situation. A war-crimes trial could have posed a problem for the US because it could have raised questions about US bombing from 1969 through 1973.'

With its typical indifference to history, the American media carried interviews with Henry Kissinger after the death of Pol Pot in which there was no mention of the US contribution to the tragedy of Cambodia. The principal architect of Nixon's Cambodia policy pontificated about Pol Pot's bloody crimes and discussed the prospects of a war crimes trial for the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders. If the truth be told, Kissinger would deserve his own place in the dock at any such tribunal.

See Also:

Deng Xiaoping and Fate of the Chinese Revolution
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