

Imperialism and the Khmer Rouge trials

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A historic whitewash lies at the heart of the trials of former leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime currently underway in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

Convened three decades after the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge reign of terror and mass murder, the UN-orchestrated proceedings are designed to bury the underlying responsibility for the Cambodian catastrophe—above all, that of United States imperialism. Washington laid waste to Cambodia during the Vietnam War, in which three million Vietnamese were killed.

Standing trial before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) are four Khmer Rouge leaders charged with genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. In the absence of Pol Pot, the top Khmer Rouge leader who died in 1998, the prosecution is intended to make them exclusively culpable for one of the most chilling chapters of the twentieth century.

In the first phase of the trial, they are charged with the forced movement of people from urban areas to the countryside during which an estimated one million Cambodians were executed and a similar number died from starvation, disease and overwork.

To this day, Pol Pot's regime is routinely labelled by the mass media as "communist." There could be no more grotesque distortion. The Khmer Rouge was a product of the suppression of Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition in the late 1920s and the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union. Pol Pot and his followers emerged out of the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party, which pursued Stalinism's reactionary nationalist program of "socialism in one country."

Faced with police repression under the post-colonial government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the party leaders fled into the countryside in 1963, turned to backward layers of the peasantry, and adopted a perspective of creating a primitive peasant-based

society in which money, culture and other facets of urban life would be eliminated.

Such a movement could seize power in 1975 only as a result of the barbarism that the US military unleashed on Cambodia's people from the late 1960s as part of the Vietnam War. Between 1969 and 1973, US forces dropped some 532,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia—more than three times the tonnage dropped on Japan throughout World War II.

Secretly launched by US President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger without congressional approval, it was the most intensive saturation bombing in world history. The death toll is estimated as high as 600,000.

In 1970, the White House and the CIA organised a coup that ousted Sihanouk, who had sought to maintain neutrality and manoeuvre between Washington and Hanoi, and installed a military dictatorship headed by General Lon Nol. A month later, Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia by 20,000 US and Vietnamese troops.

Cambodian society disintegrated under the impact of the US bombing, compounded by the brutal civil war waged by Lon Nol's junta. Two million of the country's seven million people were rendered homeless, rice production plunged by more than 80 percent, and economic life was shattered.

These were the conditions in which Pol Pot's forces—less than 5,000 men in 1970—grew to an army of about 70,000. They captured Phnom Penh in April 1975 when Lon Nol's US puppet regime finally disintegrated, just before the ultimate defeat of the US-backed dictatorship in South Vietnam.

Faced with a country in ruins, and unwilling to feed the cities, the Khmer Rouge ordered the evacuation of the entire urban population to undertake virtual slave labour in the countryside. This was a profoundly anti-working class regime.

As the “killing fields” terror unfolded, Washington shifted its support behind the Khmer Rouge as a means of combating Vietnamese influence. Attacks on ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia triggered a Vietnamese invasion in December 1978, which installed a breakaway Khmer Rouge faction commanded by Hun Sen, who remains the prime minister of Cambodia.

In response, US President Jimmy Carter’s administration tacitly backed a massive Chinese military assault on Vietnam and worked with China to supply Pol Pot’s insurgents with arms. Washington regarded Pol Pot as a valuable Cold War ally against Vietnam. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s national security adviser, later admitted: “I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot... Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him, but China could.”

Throughout the 1980s, the US, the European powers and China continued to recognise the Khmer Rouge as the legitimate government of Cambodia. Until 1997, successive United States governments blocked moves to place Pol Pot and his colleagues on trial.

Washington’s preoccupation, shared by Beijing and Hun Sen, was that any trials prevent an examination of their respective roles in the Cambodian tragedy. Years of negotiations ensued before the ECCC was established in 2006, with strict instructions to focus solely on the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders.

Those in the dock in Phnom Penh should include all those responsible for the terrible events of the 1970s, including Kissinger, Carter and Brzezinski. Above all, what happened to the people of Cambodia must stand as a warning of the readiness of the major powers, cynically invoking the banners of freedom and democracy, to subject millions of people to bloody wars and barbarism in the pursuit of their strategic and commercial interests.

Today, amid the worsening global economic crisis and the aggressive drive by the Obama administration to confront China and reassert hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region, these dangers are greater than ever. In the early twenty-first century, the historic war crimes perpetrated by the US in Vietnam and Cambodia already have been replicated in the bombardment and devastation of Iraqi society, the ongoing bloody occupation of Afghanistan, the extension of that war into Pakistan and the military installation of a puppet

regime in oil-rich Libya.

As the criminal character of American foreign policy has become more blatant, the middle-class ex-radicals who once protested against the Vietnam war and its expansion into Cambodia have embraced the Obama administration and made their peace with imperialism, backing the wars in Libya and Afghanistan and remaining silent on the continuing US presence in Iraq. Noticeably, these layers have also kept quiet about the travesty of the Khmer Rouge trials.

The indelible lesson of the Cambodian tragedy is the necessity for a united struggle of the Indochinese, Asian and international working class, the only force that can end war and capitalist exploitation. That requires the building of sections of the world Trotskyist party, the International Committee of the Fourth International, which alone seeks to expose and clarify the monumental crimes of imperialism and Stalinism.

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