

Why the Khmer Rouge Murdered Two Million People By Gregory Stanton¹

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In 1980, when I was still a student at Yale Law School, my wife, Mary Ellen Stanton, and I were asked to direct the Church World Service/CARE relief program in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. What I hadn't expected was to be called to witness the horrors of one of the worst crimes against humanity of the twentieth century--the mass murder committed by the Khmer Rouge everywhere in Cambodia; the anguish of the survivors; the trauma of a whole nation still in shock. I was among the first non-Cambodians to walk among the newly opened, ghastly graveyards left by the Khmer Rouge culture of death.

From 1975 through 1978, the Khmer Rouge Communists murdered at least 1.7 million Cambodians. Most former soldiers, government officials, doctors, teachers, and educated people were forced to dig pits and were then clubbed to death. As the Tuol Sleng extermination prison rules stated, "Bullets are not to be wasted."

Was it "genocide?" The selective mass murder of the Muslim Cham, Vietnamese and Thai minorities, Buddhist priests, and Christians clearly fits the legal definition of genocide: "the intentional destruction, in whole or in part, of a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such." But the vast majority of the mass murders were simply crimes against humanity, because they were murders committed by Khmers against other Khmers. The Cambodian mass murder was among the worst cases of politicide in history. The predictions of a bloodbath following the Communist takeover proved all too true.

In a review of Henry Kamm's Cambodia: Report from a Stricken Land, Craig Etcheson notes that Henry Kamm suggests that the motivations for the Khmer Rouge genocide will "remain forever an enigma" (p. 135) and confesses that the ultimate secrets of Cambodia "continue to resist my understanding" (p. xi).² He is not alone. All of Cambodia continues along with him to ask, "Why?" Answering that question is one of the main purposes of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. I worked my whole professional life to help create it and bring the Khmer Rouge leaders to justice.

Cambodia and Cambodians are beautiful and gentle, so it has seemed a paradox to many that such people could have wrought such carnage upon each other. Theorists on the left would like to blame it all on the war and the American bombing -- the "violence breeds violence" theory. The problem with that theory is that it ignores the

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² Book Review, *Journal of Genocide Research* 2, No.1 (March 2000): 155.

pattern of cruelty, corruption, and despotism in Cambodia from the Angkor empire (built on slave labor) down to the present. Violence in Cambodia was not introduced by Americans. The American carpet-bombing of areas of Cambodia known to be inhabited by civilians was not only tactically stupid. It was also a war crime. But blaming the American bombing of Cambodia for Communist mass murder is like blaming the Allied fire-bombings of Nazi Germany (Dresden was also a war crime) for the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

I do not think the Khmer Rouge motivations were so mysterious or enigmatic. The Khmer Rouge leaders were Stalinist, Maoist Communists--Communist fundamentalists. Their ideology gave them both the motivation and the justification for mass murder. They were in the bloody tradition of Communism, the most murderous ideology in history, even outranking National Socialism in the number of deaths it caused in the twentieth century.

To understand "why," we should let the Khmer Rouge and their acts speak for themselves.

Hundreds of thousands of pages of documents have now been discovered detailing the inner records of the Khmer Rouge Central Committee. But, in fact, those seeking to explain the course of the Khmer Rouge revolution can look further into the past. Khieu Samphan published the plans for the revolution in his French doctoral dissertation many years before, when he, Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and their wives were students in Paris and members of the devoutly Stalinist French Communist Party. Khieu Samphan's dissertation is the Marxist-Leninist *Mein Kampf* of Cambodia.

Ideas matter. Ideas have consequences. The lesson of Khieu Samphan's dissertation and of the records of the Khmer Rouge Central Committee is the danger of abstract ideas taken to seemingly logical but irrational and inhumane conclusions. The Cambodian genocide and politicide resulted from the same "ends justifies the means" mentality that Kierkegaard called the "teleological suspension of the ethical."

Marxist-Leninist doctrine teaches that the rulers of the old society--the landowners, capitalists, government leaders, and military commanders--are "class enemies." For that collective sin, scores of millions of people were murdered in Lenin and Stalin's Soviet Union and in Mao's China. In Cambodia, there was a belief that rendered this already vicious doctrine even more murderous. Cambodians had long distinguished city people from rural people, considering the city people more corrupt. The Khmer Rouge designated city people as "new people," not purified by the revolution, less moral, and more corrupted by foreigners than rural people. All city people were considered *ipso facto* traitors and class enemies.

Modern French Marxists, following André Gunder Frank, wrote that cities are parasitic on rural peasants. Khieu Samphan stated the "logical" conclusion: Abolish cities! So within days of the Khmer Rouge takeover, millions of city dwellers were forced at gunpoint to march into the countryside without food. Thousands of cripples and hospital

patients were forced to crawl out of Phnom Penh to their deaths. Cambodia, now renamed "Democratic Kampuchea" was to become a nation of rural communes, without cities. (NB: There are two Orwellian rules for national names: Whenever a country has "democratic" in its name, you can be sure it is not a democracy. And whenever it is called a "peoples republic," you may be sure it is run by a tyrannical oligarchy, not by the people.)

Marx taught that money permits capitalists to alienate the labor of workers and peasants by underpaying them and creating "surplus value." The Khmer Rouge were the first Communists to take this idea to its logical conclusion: Abolish money! So they did. One of their first acts in Phnom Penh was to blow up the National Bank. The abolition of money left peasants with no way to sell or buy their products, and placed them totally under the control of the communist cadres who ran the communes.

The communes were organized into two classes--the Khmer Rouge base people who ran them lived with their families and got regular rations from the "Angkar" ("the organization-the state"), and the "new" people who had been evacuated from the cities or were otherwise suspect, lived separately and got rations inadequate to sustain life and health. At least a million people starved under the slave labor imposed at gunpoint by the base people. Anything not doled out by the Angkar could be obtained only by primitive barter and at mortal risk. It became a capital crime for commune members to harvest food for their own sustenance in order to supplement the paltry rations dispensed communally. Meanwhile the Cambodian state confiscated hundreds of thousands of tons of rice from the people to export to China to buy guns and other armaments for the Khmer Rouge war with Vietnam.

Maoist theory taught that the family is a bourgeois institution. So children were separated from their parents and sent to work in children's communes. The youngest, who stayed with their parents, were expected to report on their parents at daily meetings in the communal dining halls. Among the "crimes" they were to report were their own parents' efforts to hunt frogs and collect other food for their children. Child spies lurked beneath the houses at night to overhear complaints. Complainers were soon led away and killed.

Lenin taught that colonialism was part of the capitalist need to dominate the world. Khieu Samphan saw the influence of French colonialism all over Cambodia, especially in buildings constructed out of concrete. The "logical" conclusion? Blow up concrete buildings, especially schools and churches! So the entire provincial capital of Kompong Speu was blown up and bulldozed under. The Catholic cathedral in Phnom Penh was turned into a flat field. Concrete Buddhist pagodas were blown up or turned into jails. The few school buildings left standing were turned into extermination prisons. At the most famous former-school-turned-into-a-deathcamp, Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh, over fourteen thousand people were murdered. Only seven prisoners and a few guards survived.

The reason why the Khmer Rouge committed the mass murders they did in Cambodia was that they were (and remain) Maoist Marxist-Leninists, Communist fundamentalists. Mass murder in Cambodia was systematic, pre-meditated government policy. The Khmer Rouge started it in "liberated" zones even before they took over Phnom Penh in 1975. The blame for the Cambodian genocide rests squarely in the bloody hands of the Khmer Rouge.