

"Barbaric crimes of a mystical communism seen through its own eyes,"

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Title: Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare

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Now that Pol Pot is dead and his last comrades have surrendered, Philip Short seeks to explain the nightmare to which their Khmer Rouge regime subjected Cambodia. Short, a French-based British writer, follows the Khmer Rouge leaders from their student days in colonial Phnom Penh and metropolitan Paris to their armed insurgency and victory in 1975. He recounts their four bloody years in power and closes with Pol Pot's death in the jungle in 1998. Pol Pot's surviving colleagues may soon face a joint Cambodian/United Nations tribunal. Short has argued against that. His book's strength - and weakness - lies in its presentation of recent reminiscences, mostly in French, by Khmer Rouge leaders and associates, and of "confessions" of prisoners whom their regime tortured and murdered.

Short finds the Khmer Rouge guilty of barbaric crimes against humanity but "innocent" of genocide, since they "did not set out to exterminate a 'national, ethnic, racial or religious group'". Though he cites Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention, Short misstates its definition of genocide: acts committed "with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group". He dismisses evidence that Pol Pot's regime perpetrated genocide against large parts of Cambodia's majority Buddhist community and of its ethnic minorities such as the Vietnamese, Chinese and Muslims. Short doubts that racism was involved and compares Pol Pot's violent "dispersal" of all Cambodian Muslim communities to "school bussing in the US to achieve desegregation".

Such assertions help prolong international denial of the victims' rights. Short ignores the 1999 legal report of the UN Group of Experts, who recommended that Khmer Rouge leaders face charges of genocide, having "subjected the people of Cambodia to almost all the acts enumerated in the Convention". Despite calling the Cambodian revolution a "holocaust" in which its ideology found "lebensraum", Short labels the Nazi parallel "facile" and "unhelpful". He says the Khmer Rouge ran a slave state, inflicting a death toll "due primarily to a combination of overwork, lack of food and lack of medical treatment". That relegates mass murder to a secondary feature of the killing fields. Short rejects the UN figure of 1.7 million dead, suspects that the toll was below 1.5 million but offers no evidence. Ignoring substantive estimates that 15 to 20 per cent of the peasantry perished, he terms 10 per cent "almost certainly an overestimate". As he says, that is "horrific enough".

Short's accounting of the disaster suggests an ambition to write its history not by weighing the facts but by offering a novel interpretation. Obliviousness to 25 years of genocide documentation seems to come easiest to those employing racial categories for analysis. Short sees Cambodians and Vietnamese as "two incompatible peoples". Vietnam is domineering, China more benign, Cambodia "medieval". He finds a "core of truth" in the colonialist gibe that "the Vietnamese grow the rice; the Khmers watch it grow; the Laotians listen to it grow". Short racialises individuals, too. Pol Pot's father, he insists against family denials, had "enough Chinese ancestry" to know "that education was important". Short contests what he calls the Cambodian "equation of race with behaviour rather than with blood", implying that he sees "blood" as a significant trait.

Thinking in racial categories, Short misses the ethnic discrimination in Khmer Rouge policies, even in Pol Pot's 1952 self-description as the "Original Khmer". He concedes the point only at Pol Pot's call in 1978 to "kill... the 50 million Vietnamese". But Short spreads the blame across Cambodian society, insisting that such "anti-Vietnamese racism... resonated in the Khmer psyche" and "touched a chord of national pride". Pol Pot took it up only when he had "little else to

fall back on" but "the ancient, immutable views of his people's culture". In Short's view, Pol Pot combined communist ideology not with genocidal racism, but with his "irrational... cultural heritage", including Buddhism, with its idealism and "demolition of the individual". He writes: "In Khmer thought, the fundamental dichotomy is not between good and evil, as in Judaeo-Christian societies", but between "village and forest". Short distributes responsibility among "millions of Cambodians, including Buddhist clergy" who "worked with" the Khmer Rouge. Rashly, he even denies that Cambodians mounted any major rebellion.

Taking exotic essentialism as analysis, this approach implicates broad social groups in secret Khmer Rouge decisions of which they became victims and risks normalising the Pol Pot leadership's actions within a category of "parallel" crimes that includes those of previous and subsequent Cambodian regimes. For instance, Short magnifies Khmer Rouge complaints of the Sihanouk regime's violence in the 1960s. He is partly right that the Khmer Rouge's "mystical approach to communism" had no Chinese or European precedent, but it had no Cambodian one, either. Like many of his Francophone informants, Short contrasts "the emancipated Westernised values transmitted by the French and the immovable, inward-looking conservatism of Cambodian tradition". He repeats the colonial assessment of Vietnamese communist resistance: "one colonialism... chasing out another". Short's account of the early Khmer communist movement is based on the memories of French-speaking former students, and on French and Vietnamese archives, but not on accounts of rural Khmer participants, nor the local documentation in Cambodia's National Archives. Had he consulted the last, he would not have denied the Khmer Rouge export of rice to China, including a 5,000-ton shipment documented in a Commerce Ministry invoice of August 14, 1978. Instead, Short claims that reports of rice exports amid starvation emanated from "Vietnamese propagandists". Yet they also came from Cambodian dock workers, Khmer Rouge cadres and peasants.

Short is unable to read Khmer and keeps a distance from Cambodian victims. From his faulty pronunciation advice to his reliance on Khmer Rouge sources, Short's use of evidence at a remove does not stand up to scrutiny. There are too many factual errors to list, but more often he ignores existing documentation to privilege the unprovable. For example, he reports Pol Pot's first experience with an anti-French Cambodian communist unit in 1954, a 300-strong force commanded by Cambodians. Short says Pol Pot "noted with disgust that more than 80 per cent of the other ranks were from Vietnam". The apparent source is Pol Pot, speaking 30 years later. But contemporary reports covered the unit's growth from a platoon of twenty-two Khmers and eight Vietnamese in 1949. The Khmers in such units kept increasing. A French general reported that by 1954, Cambodia's communist-led forces were "mostly Khmer". A unit that was four fifths Vietnamese would have been exceptional. There is no reason now to take at face value a contrary assertion by Pol Pot, even to indicate his view at the time. Without testing it against prior evidence, Short presents it as fact. He then fails to ask why, if Pol Pot's nationalism rather than racism was at work, Khmer command of Vietnamese troops would have provoked his "disgust".

Short set out to tell "the story of the Cambodian nightmare... from the vantage point of those who created it, rather than solely from that of the victims". He fails to balance the two. There is a case for uncovering a tragedy's causes by looking through the eyes of its perpetrators. Short stretches that case by adopting much of their rewriting of history, dismissing evidence of their genocide and understating its human toll.

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