

# Cambodia—Auschwitz of Asia

Leo Cherne

It appears to have taken six years to kill nine million human beings in Nazi Germany and in the countries it occupied. It appears to have taken one day to inflict catastrophic disaster on more than three million Cambodians.”

With these words Freedom House three years ago filed an appeal with the U.N. Commission on Human Rights for an inquiry into events in Cambodia. The U.N. High Commission for Human Rights took three months to respond to that appeal—negatively. During these three years, a few books and articles have focused our attention on Cambodia, but governments have, for the most part, remained silent.

In July, 1977, the House International Relations Subcommittee initiated a congressional inquiry into the events in Cambodia, and Richard Holbrooke, assistant secretary of state for East Asian affairs, eloquently denounced what was taking place in what is now called Democratic Kampuchea. In the spring of 1978 the Canadian Government denounced the killing and suffering in Cambodia. On April 20, 1978, President Carter, detailing reports of atrocities committed by Communist Cambodia, called the Cambodian Government “the worst violator of human rights in the world today.” And on April 21 an international inquiry initiated by Norway’s four political parties invited witnesses from many countries to testify in Oslo.

With these few and recent exceptions, no government leader or international body has sought to penetrate the silence. Only Chaim Herzog, Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, raised a voice on the floor of the United Nations in a futile effort to attract attention to the horror of Cambodia. The blunt fact, he declared, is that “three to four million people fell into a deep, black, echoless hole.” There is a morbid parallel to the international blindness regarding the camps of Nazi Germany in which the “Final Solution” was being pursued. But this is not the only similarity. There are deadly parallels

in the actions and purposes, however differently pursued, of Nazi Germany and the regime in Cambodia.

Such parallels include:

- The ruthlessness employed in the extermination of “the enemies of the state” is similar in its vast and wanton disregard of human life.

- The ruthlessness in each country was in the service of an ideal—racial purity in Nazi Germany, political purity in Democratic Kampuchea.

- Each nation set out to create a new man fit for such an “ideal” society. All who do not fit the mold were to be reshaped or eliminated.

- Both revolutionary regimes saw in the culture and the society that preceded their access to power the threat of corruption of the “ideal.” And each remorselessly set about to extirpate the old culture.

- Each identified the classes, the groups that by definition must be expunged.

- Each exalted the principle “*arbeit macht frei*.”

- Each took elaborate pains to veil the more brutal aspects of “the plan” in secrecy. Since the purpose in Cambodia was more total, all was veiled in secrecy, including the identity of the leaders of the Anka, as the leadership was called until the Communist party of Cambodia was established within the last year.

- Most ironic, though Germany was fascist and Cambodia Communist, each from the very beginning identified a neighboring Communist state as its ultimate enemy. To the Nazis the enemy was always Bolshevik Russia. To the secret leadership of the Anka the enemy had from the very beginning been Vietnam.

- For a time, while another enemy’s vanquishment was sought, both the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge made common cause with their true and ultimate enemy.

Whereas technology was the main instrument in Hitler’s destruction of the polluters of his Aryan ideal, brute force is the primary weapon in Cambodia’s cleansing. Democratic Kampuchea has been able to bring about the death of a high proportion of its population, perhaps greater than any other country in this century, with the simple and systematic reliance on starvation

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and disease, coupled with the discipline of death administered by a hoe, a wooden club, or an axe. Apparently only the fatigue of the executioners occasionally makes necessary the use of the rifle. This happens when the numbers to be killed are simply too wearying for the teenage Khmer who do the deadly beatings.

If the similarities between Nazi Germany and Cambodia are striking, there are also striking dissimilarities.

Hitler's vision was of a thousand-year Reich built on the steel of technology, science, and military might and an elaboration of the industrial state beyond challenge. The Kampuchean ideal appears to be a return to the agricultural model of the Khmer empire at its fourteenth-century peak. But this time it means to be strong enough to ward off the invasion and absorption by Vietnam, which had previously all but decimated the Khmer kingdom. Although the near destruction of the Khmer empire was as much a result of the erosion of its territory by the Thais, Thailand is today less clearly seen as the enemy.

**W**hat do we know without doubt about the Cambodia of the last three years? We know that during the first few hours after the Khmer Rouge victory and the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea, every citizen, every Cambodian, whatever age or sex, who inhabited any of the towns and cities in that country was compelled to evacuate those cities. They took with them only what they could physically carry on their lemming-like march into the jungle countryside. We know that they traveled many miles and that there were no provisions for their sustenance along the route. We know that many of them died in the course of this forced march. We know that the pregnant women in the last days of their pregnancy gave birth along the roadside, and that few of these children survived. We know that every patient in every hospital in Phnom Penh, whatever his condition, was compelled to leave.

There were roughly twenty international journalists in that largest city of Cambodia at the time of the victory of the Khmer Rouge. They were interned in the French embassy for the next couple of weeks, but they were not blindfolded. Diplomats from other embassies were added to their company in the compound, as were the foreign doctors who had been serving in the hospitals of that war-swollen city with a population of somewhere between three and four million, nearly half of the population of the entire country. We know from the reports filed by these journalists in the United States and in Europe, when they were finally released and taken by truck convoy to Thailand, some of the gruesome details of that initial phase of the Khmer Rouge revolution. We know that doctors who were in the midst of surgery were in some instances compelled to leave their work unfinished. We know that where patients were unable to leave their rooms, some were dropped to the pavement from the windows. We know that others were wheeled in their hospital beds by fellow patients or by members of the family who rushed to the hospitals to assist in the evacuation of sick relatives.

We know that, from that day to this, Phnom Penh and every other city and town in Cambodia has remained deserted and crumbling. We know that soldiers of the Khmer Rouge emptied and looted the stores in each of the towns, some of them tiny indeed, along the road the journalists traveled when they were evacuated on May 11. We know from a handful of Scandinavian diplomats who were permitted to visit Phnom Penh in 1978 that an estimated thirty thousand people are trucked in and out of the city daily to perform certain tasks still regarded as essential, particularly in the manufacture of certain basic materials—cement, weapons, fabric—the state continues to require. They report total desolation. Even the paper currency of the former Cambodia still blows in the wind in the remaining debris along the deserted streets of that city.

The few diplomatic missions allowed in Phnom Penh (though they largely represent Communist nations) are under virtual house arrest, confined to their compounds with meals delivered daily by soldiers who speak only Khmer. Messages are communicated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by a single functionary who visits the missions daily, barring a stint in the rice fields. Only the Chinese embassy has radio communications with its home offices. The sole significant foreign presence tolerated by the Communists are the thousand-odd advisors from China who are helping to keep a few factories functioning and providing other forms of technical advice. Phnom Penh has no shops, telephones, or postal service. Because the authorities have eliminated currency, goods must be bartered.

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Sydney Schanberg reported the evacuation of Phnom Penh for the *New York Times*. In conversations and writing since then Schanberg goes out of his way to assert that the United States is not without responsibility for these events. His thesis, and it is not without merit, is that the Khmer Rouge was a small secret rag-tag Communist army until the American bombing of the Parrot's Beak and the U.S. incursion into Cambodia in 1970 helped convert this small force into an army of nearly a hundred thousand intent on the overthrow of the Lon Nol government and the creation of the first pure Communist society anywhere in the world. Here too one can point out parallels to Hitler's Germany. The mass murder launched by Adolf Hitler did not, as many

historians have pointed out, occur in a vacuum. The draconian peace of Versailles, the imposed postwar economic chaos, the devastating inflation—all played their part in producing a vision. That vision was *Mein Kampf*, and its ultimate expression was the “Final Solution.”

Hitler’s vision was the “ideal” of racial purity. The new Cambodia is committed to an equally ruthless and equally clear-cut ideal—pure communism—and to the creation of a new human being so sharply attuned to the needs of such a state that there will be no risk that he will contaminate, or corrupt, or undermine that ideal community. Any association with either the Lon Nol or the Sihanouk governments must be stamped out. So too must the Buddhist monks, the irretrievably religious among the population, the commercial classes, the teachers and scholars, except the handful who had previously identified themselves with the Khmer Rouge. Anyone suspected of the slightest political independence represents danger that must be removed. In a country that has been Buddhist for centuries, there is not one temple that is functioning or has not been pillaged, and many are used as government warehouses.

**T**he vast and total nature of the reordering of all of Cambodian life toward the accomplishment of these ends can be seen from a few details:

The traditional family unit is one victim of the massive restructuring of Cambodian society. While a certain amount of separation was an unavoidable consequence of the enormous population relocation that followed the Communist victory, the new regime apparently has deliberately tried to expunge family loyalties in order to forcibly substitute new loyalty patterns—to the commune and to the state.

Cadres reportedly enjoy special privileges, and avoid many of the hardships of the common peasants. Refugees claim that their traditional songs, folk ways, and even their religion have been stripped away by the new regime.

Typically, everyone is organized in groups of ten, with one supervisor and three cells of three persons. Each member of a cell is responsible for the behavior of the other two. People who make too many “mistakes” are led away and never seen again. The constant fear of death keeps everyone working long hours, the more able-bodied far from their homes and the more frail closer to home.

It was at first explained by those like Gareth Porter of the Indochina Resource Center that the purpose of the evacuation of the cities was to assure that the rice fields destroyed by the war would be quickly restored to avert mass starvation. The logic of this claim was reinforced by the herding of the survivors of the evacuation into units working from dawn to dusk clearing forests, digging irrigation canals, preparing for the planting of rice. But if that was the motivating purpose, there was a fatal flaw. A greater supply of vegetables and a few other staples was stored in or near Phnom Penh than in the countryside. And not for eight months, with the

monsoon already past, was there the possibility of even the first rice crop in the countryside.

There is, however, a stronger refutation of this asserted compassionate purpose. It was provided by Pol Pot, secretary-general of the reborn Communist party, in the course of his recent visit to Peking. He spoke explicitly of the urgency of the evacuation of Cambodia’s towns and cities. Not once was the necessity of food production mentioned. He was quite explicit in his marathon four-and-a-half-hour address about the purpose of the evacuation of the cities: the need to break up any threat to Cambodia’s security. “In our Cambodian society,” he declared, “there also exist life-and-death contradictions, because enemies in the shape of various spy rings working for imperialism and international reactionaries are still planted among us to carry out subversive activities against our revolution.”

With the Americans long gone and Lon Nol’s forces destroyed, his strictures about security quite clearly were aimed at Hanoi: “There is also another handful of reactionary elements who continue to carry out activities against us and attempt to subvert our Kampuchean revolution.” “These counterrevolutionary elements, which betray and try to sabotage the revolution, are not regarded as of our people. They are regarded as enemies of Democratic Kampuchea, and we must deal with them the way we would deal with any enemy.”

Pol Pot’s concern was not without warrant. It is clear that there was an abortive revolt inside Cambodia in April, 1976, in which hundreds and perhaps thousands of the “old Khmer Rouge” were eliminated. “Old Khmer Rouge” is the Aesopian name for the Hanoi-trained Khmer forces who apparently joined in rebellion against the Anka across the entire north and northeast, which most closely borders North Vietnam. A coup that apparently failed took place in northwestern Cambodia in the spring of 1977. There were mass arrests of party and military leaders in March and April. Many officials, accused of being Thai or American agents, were apparently executed. New efforts may have been undertaken in northwestern Cambodia last fall to identify and execute those who are in any way a threat to the reinforced control.

Edward Shawcross, the gifted foreign affairs writer for the *London Times*, writing in *The New York Review* two years ago, still maintained that “rice” was the major factor for evacuation of the cities, even as he agreed that “the barbarous cruelty of the Khmer Rouge can be compared with the extermination of the Kulaks or the Gulag Archipelago.” But by April, 1978, Shawcross, reviewing the full text of Pol Pot’s address in China and a massive body of new evidence, offered a different analysis entitled “The Third Indochina War.” It is now clear to Shawcross that either feared or desired war with Vietnam is the only satisfactory explanation of much that has occurred. He now finds evidence that the war between Cambodia and Vietnam, which has only recently become visible to us, actually began within weeks of the withdrawal of the U.S. from Vietnam in 1975. Not only was the hatred between the two people a repetitive fact of centuries of history but, as Shawcross observes, the fuel for the new fire was poured as early as 1954,

“when Peking and Hanoi agreed that the Khmer Rouge should be disbanded and its cadres withdrawn to Hanoi.” “The Cambodians,” Shawcross adds, “never forgave or forgot this betrayal.” There and then, Pol Pot asserted in Peking, “the revolutionary struggle of our people dissolved into thin air.”

Wars require two participants. Hanoi is not unaccommodating. The following letter was published in the Vietnamese paper *Nhan Dan* and considered important enough to be broadcast on Radio Hanoi. It describes a midnight Khmer Rouge attack on a Vietnamese village six months ago:

All of the houses were surrounded by Cambodian soldiers who immediately opened fire and used machetes, axes, sabers and sharpened sticks to slay the villagers....A fleeing child was caught by a soldier who cut off his leg and threw him into the flames. All seven members of Mrs. Truong Thi Rot's family were beheaded. Rot was disemboweled and had a seven-month fetus placed on her chest....All the eight members of Nguyen Van Tam's family were beheaded and the heads were put on a table for amusement. All eight persons in Nguyen Thi Nganh's house were disemboweled, the intestines [piled] in one shocking heap. Mr. Quang's wife was also disemboweled. The killers took out her five-month fetus, then cut off her breast and chopped her body in three parts. Her two-year-old boy...was torn in two and dumped into a well....The Cambodians have continually raided across the border and have perpetrated utterly inhuman crimes, raping, tearing fetuses from mothers' wombs, disemboweling adults, burning children alive.

Shawcross adds his own commentary:

Such an account is fairly characteristic of the way in which totalitarian governments speak of their enemies in wartime and it might easily be dismissed as mere hyperbole. If it seems more credible than other propaganda this is because it matches refugee accounts of Khmer Rouge behavior in Cambodia itself and the way in which the Khmer Rouge soldiers are known to have performed in the border villages where they have been fighting the Thais. With a few exceptions the stories which have emerged from Cambodia in the past two years have confirmed the impression, given by the early refugees, of a vast and somber camp where toil is unending, rewards are nonexistent, families are separated, and murder is a constantly used tool of social discipline. Well before Hanoi published similar assessments, Democratic Kampuchea seemed to many in the West a uniquely atrocious experiment in human engineering conducted, in Hanoi's words, by “infantile communists” who pursued “a consistent policy of national hatred” and were “deliberately turning young Kampuchians into medieval butchers” to indulge in “savage repressions” and “bloody massacres.”

Radio Phnom Penh has joined the battle of the airwaves, accusing Hanoi of seeking to “stage coups

d'état to topple Democratic Cambodia through a handful of traitorous forces who were Vietnam's agents.” North Korea's Kim Il Sung has congratulated the Cambodian leaders on their success in eliminating traitors in their midst. That Pol Pot chose Peking to deliver his 288-minute tirade against the reactionaries in the Communist camp is not without additional significance. Mr. Pot has not forgotten China's role in the 1954 betrayal of the Khmer Rouge to the Hanoi faction.

What has happened inside Cambodia since 1975 has caused a hundred thousand to flee to the doubtful safety of Vietnam and nearly fifty thousand toward the ancient antagonism and doubtful safety of Thailand. Even desperation has its levels of comparative intolerability. If one is to understand the sheer terror that has driven tens of thousands of Cambodians into the arms of the traditionally hated Vietnamese, we must first refresh our sense of the desperation that presently exists in Vietnam. To this day, thousands of Vietnamese crowd into anything that will float, knowing they risk their lives if their plans to escape are discovered or frustrated. An estimated 50 per cent of those who seek to navigate the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand drown at sea. Despite these unbearable odds, the flight from Vietnam continues, even as the flight of Cambodians into Vietnam in some unavailable number is surely going on. There is a pecking order even in Hell—and at the bottom of this one stand the Cambodian people.

*Murder of a Gentle Land* by John Barron and Anthony Paul required several hundred pages to record the essence of several hundred interviews conducted in the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. It was at first fashionable to dismiss that book because it was published by the *Reader's Digest*. But here is what a skeptic like Shawcross says of the interviews Anthony Paul conducted for that book:

They seemed carefully done. Paul recorded a great many horror stories—about the forced march from Phnom Penh; the appalling rigors of life in the new work camps; the destruction of all traditional social relationships, including the family; the use of murder, and the threat of murder, as a means of control. He considers these stories have a consistency that—even allowing for the natural tendencies of refugees to exaggerate—confirms their basic truth. Father François Ponchaud, the author of *Cambodge Année Zéro* and probably the man who has made the most thorough study of the refugees from Democratic Kampuchea, agrees with him. So do I.”

Shawcross describes François Ponchaud's background and conclusions:

Ponchaud, after long experience in Cambodia, originally welcomed the prospect of a revolutionary change. After leaving in 1975 and talking to refugees in Thailand, he was forced to conclude that a horrifying system was being imposed on the Khmers. The English edition of his book will make it clear, as his French text does not, that his research was based not only on Cambodian government radio broadcasts and

on ninety-four written statements by refugees but also on his own careful questioning of most of these refugees as well as hundreds of others.

Indeed, Father Ponchaud says he has by now talked to well over a thousand Cambodian refugees, seeing them not only in Thailand but also in France, where some 10,000 of them now live. He describes in detail how he checks their stories against one another, discounting those which seem exaggerated or false. His research appears more thorough than any yet undertaken, and he contradicts those who argue that "executions have numbered at most in the thousands; that these were localized in areas of limited Khmer Rouge influence and unusual peasant discontent...." On the contrary, Ponchaud estimated last autumn that the number executed was "certainly more than one hundred thousand"—including not only a large proportion of the old regime's military personnel, civil servants, and teachers but also many of the educated class and of those who dared to express their aversion to the regime's brutal methods. These killings, his interviews showed, took place in many parts of Cambodia.

At the end of February, Ponchaud gave the following summary of his most recent research:

The estimate that more than 100,000 Khmers have been executed must now be taken as an absolute minimum. It is possible that two or three times as many people have been executed. The number who have died because of the lack of food and of medical and sanitary facilities, and from the frantic pace of work, may well be more than two million. I have had reports of villages in which a third, a half, or even nine-tenths of the population have died....

It is said that refugee accounts are by definition one-sided. Refugees do tend to be one-sided. The memorial at Dachau contains only such one-sided accounts. The repository at Vad Yashem is "flawed" by a similar bias. Yevtushenko, in writing "Babi Yar"—since he wasn't there and those who were are almost all dead—must have yielded to a similar temptation while listening to the one-sided reports of the survivors.

(Every source I have cited was either critical of U.S. policy during the Indochina war or actively opposed the U.S. intervention. In some cases they are explicit enemies of the U.S.—Cambodian, Vietnamese, or North Korean. The reference to *Murder of a Gentle Land* may be an exception, since I do not know the earlier views of Barron or Paul.)

The International Rescue Committee has been intimately involved in working with the tens of thousands of refugees. Our own findings over the last three years more than confirm the details of life in Cambodia reported by Barron, Paul, Shawcross, and Ponchaud. The following facts emerge time and again.

The refugees say there are no "people's courts"; it is left to the local Communist squads to decide who lives or dies. In most areas all former civil servants and their families have apparently been executed. All former offi-

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cers and noncommissioned officers have been killed and in many areas even privates of the defeated army are being sought out and killed. Anyone showing any signs of education, including teachers, students, technicians, and businessmen, is suspect and likely to die. Those who were in authority before the Communists took over, such as village headmen, are killed with their families. In most cases the executions are not public, the regime being satisfied to quietly eliminate potential problems.

The widespread executions have deprived Cambodia of the bulk of irreplaceable special skills. Doctors have either been killed or sent to the rice paddies and have been replaced by youths who are given three months' training. Primitive methods are used, such as injections of coconut milk into patients as a kind of cure-all (a technique used by Viet Cong doctors when plasma is in short supply). This loss of talent inevitably makes the regime more dependent on Chinese advisors.

Conversations with diplomats in several Southeast Asian countries conclude there is no way even for the Communists to make a serious estimate as to how many have died, but the diplomats have guessed that the population may be down by from 15 to 20 per cent. With so many potential troublemakers already executed and the population utterly cowed, executions are becoming less common. That is one small consolation; the numbers who remain to be executed appear to be declining.

The Scandinavian diplomats who recently visited Cambodia noted what so many of the refugees have also reported, the almost total absence of older people. The young are the "new men" best suited for this society in pursuit of purity. The diplomats refused to draw any conclusions about what happened to the old people, but one of them, experienced in the ways of a curious world, did say this of the Kampuchea he saw: "It was like an absurd film. It was like a nightmare. It is difficult to believe it is true."

What foreigners passing through may find difficult to believe, Cambodians are required to express quite explicitly—as in the words of their new national anthem:

The red, red blood splatters the cities and  
plains of the Cambodian fatherland,  
The sublime blood of the workers and peasants,  
The blood of revolutionary combatants of both sexes.  
That blood spills out into great indignation and a  
resolute urge to fight.  
17 April, that day under the revolutionary flag  
The blood certainly liberates us from slavery.