

# Noam Chomsky on Cambodia “West Midlands Anarchists”

From April 1975 until their overthrow by the Vietnamese in early 1979, the Khmer Rouge (under Pol Pot) ruled Cambodia and attempted one of the bloodiest and most bizarre experiments in utopianism ever known. Their ideology combined the anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and strict authoritarianism of revolutionary Marxist-Leninism, together with a Maoist-inspired concept of the virtuous peasantry, as well as virulent nationalism and atheism. Their desire was to create a pure peasant society. Marie-Alexandre Martin describes how their time with the hill tribes in the 1960's influenced their thinking:

They considered the hill tribes to be pure elements and, fascinated by their social organisation, decided to apply the tribal social model to all Cambodia. They sought to develop among Cambodians the spirit of mutual aid, to abolish the instinct for capitalist private property, to bring them to accept Spartan conditions and semi-nomadism, to teach them to live from day to day, to scorn all forms of education, and to swear an unconditional loyalty to leaders. [1]

Obviously not everybody in Cambodia was likely to agree to this. City dwellers, supporters of the previous (pro-US) regime, the better off peasants, minority groups (e.g. the Muslim Chams), and intellectuals. There was also deep distrust among the Khmer Rouge for anyone from the regions to fall last to them, and especially for the “New People” who had fled to the cities to avoid the effects of the civil war and the US bombing of the countryside. There were various ways in which hated or distrusted people met their deaths. Some were executed, some died in prison, and others died when people (including the old and the sick) were marched long distances from the cities to set up new communes in the countryside. There was also widespread famine and disease, which was not intended by the Khmer Rouge, but may have been a result of their policies. The numbers who died are hard to fix with any accuracy. Jean-Louis Margolin offers the following estimates:

The forced ruralization of city dwellers (including deaths in transit, exhaustion at work, and the like) led to 400,000 deaths at most, and quite possibly fewer. Executions are the hardest to calculate; the average hovers around 500,000. Henri Locard, by a process of extrapolation, calculates that between 400,000 and 600,000 died in prison. That figure excludes executions carried out on the spot, which were also extremely numerous. Sliwinski arrives at a total of 1 million executions. Hunger and disease were undoubtedly the biggest killers, accounting for at least 700,000 deaths. Sliwinski mentions 900,000 in that context, including lives lost as a direct result of ruralization. [2]

One of the lowest estimate for deaths over the period are 740,000 estimated by Mike Vickery (but based on a very low estimate for the 1975 population), up to over 3 million according to the Vietnamese (who wished to justify their invasion as much as possible). [3] Ben Kiernan (originally quite skeptical about reports of widespread killings) now estimates around 1.7 million deaths. [4]

Reports of what was going on in Cambodia began to reach the West in the summer of 1975. Refugees reaching Thailand told of numerous atrocities. One of the first books to be published was that of Francios Ponchaud, who wrote *Cambodia Year Zero* first in French in 1977, which was the translated into English in 1978. It is here that Noam Chomsky makes his appearance. In the preface to the English edition, Ponchaud has this to say:

Even before this book was translated it was sharply criticized by Mr Noam Chomsky and Mr Gareth Porter. These two “experts” on Asia claim that I am mistakenly trying to convince people that Cambodia is drowning in a sea of blood after the departure of the

last American diplomats. They say there have been no massacres, and they lay the blame for the tragedy of the Khmer people on the American bombings. They accuse me of being insufficiently critical in my approach to the refugees' accounts. [5]

Ponchaud goes on to say that he only opposed the revolution once its harshness became apparent, and that he was very careful in gathering evidence from refugees. He adds this about the "experts" who criticised him:

it is surprising to see that "experts" who have spoken to few if any of the Khmer refugees should reject their very significant place in any study of modern Cambodia. These experts would rather base their arguments on reasoning: if something seems impossible to their personal logic, then it doesn't exist. [6]

The only one of the three articles Ponchaud refers to that I have been able to find is "Distortions at Fourth Hand" which appeared in the Nation in June 1977. [7] This was written by Chomsky and Edward S. Herman (henceforth C & H). They describe Ponchaud's work as "serious and worth reading," but go on to say that he plays "fast and loose with quotes and with numbers," and also that he relies overwhelmingly on refugee reports. Thus his account is at best second-hand with many of the refugees reporting what they claim to have heard from others.

They add finally that the book has an "anti-communist bias and message."

C & H are much more positive about a book by George Hildebrand and Gareth Porter, Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution. They say the authors present a carefully documented study of the destructive American impact on Cambodia and the success of the Cambodian revolutionaries in overcoming it, giving a very favourable picture of their programs and policies, based on a wide range of sources.

William Shawcross agrees, but from a different perspective, describing the book as "in effect an apology for Khmer Rouge behaviour." He also says that Hildebrand and Porter were directors of the Indochina Resource Center which wrote to him as late as May 1977 to ask if he had information on CIA-operated radio stations designed to spread "disinformation" – especially with regard to Cambodia. CIA operatives in Thailand and their debriefing of Cambodian refugees... Possible contacts the CIA might have with reporters... in Thailand or other reporters who were in Cambodia. [8]

Even later than this, in February 1979, C & H wrote *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology*. This was when the Vietnamese were close to completing their overthrow of the Khmer Rouge. The general attitude of the chapter on Cambodia is perhaps best summed up by this quote from the volume's preface:

it became virtually a matter of dogma in the West that the regime was the very incarnation of evil with no redeeming qualities, and that the handful of demonic creatures who had somehow taken over the country were systematically massacring and starving the population. How the "nine men at the center" were able to achieve this feat or why they chose to pursue the strange course of "autogenocide" were questions that were rarely pursued. [9]

Here C & H exaggerate to ridicule, but there is no denying their utterly cynical attitude towards Western reporting. The reason for this is a fear of the motives behind such reports

allegations of genocide are being used to whitewash Western imperialism, to distract attention from the "institutionalized violence" of the expanding system of subfascism and to lay the ideological basis for further intervention and oppression. We have seen how the Western propaganda system creates, embroiders, plays up, distorts, and suppresses evidence according to imperial needs. [10]

Early on C & H say "the record of atrocities in Cambodia is substantial and often gruesome," but soon after talk about "alleged genocide" and that Gareth Porter had exposed "earlier bloodbath lies," meaning that Cambodia was another such case. [11]

They go on to criticise Senator George McGovern for believing that up to 2.5 million Cambodian had died and recommending international intervention to prevent further deaths.

We presume that he would not have made this proposal if the figure of those killed were, say, less by a factor of 100 – that is 25,000 people – though this would be bad enough. Nor would he have been likely to propose this extreme measure if the deaths in Cambodia were not the result of systematic slaughter and starvation organized by the state but rather attributable in large measure to peasant revenge, undisciplined military units out of government control, starvation and disease that are direct consequences of the US war, or other such factors. [12]

C & H use various methods throughout the chapter to create as much belief as possible in the reader's mind that atrocities were not numerous, and that happened were not the responsibility of Pol Pot's government. Some of these can be listed as follows:

Pages 141-147; questioning of the reliability of refugee testimony, claiming it was gathered under the supervision of anti-communist Thai authorities, and that the media was biased in its reporting.

Pages 153-158; questioning whether the Khmer authorities maintained control through force, and that they were really enjoyed a lot of popular support.

Page 159; doubts expressed over centrally controlled mass executions.

Pages 161-162; equating figures for deaths under the Khmer Rouge with predictions made before they took over that a million Cambodians may starve, essentially absolving them from any blame.

Pages 166-177; Discussion of faked photographs and unreliable reporting of head of Khmer state who supposedly said they had killed a million people.

Pages 187-218; positive descriptions of Cambodia by invited visitors (ambassadors mostly) given a great deal of credence and seen as balancing out the refugee reports.

Pages 218-221; earlier US bombing in Cambodia seen as the cause of any brutal behavior by Cambodians.

Similar themes are discussed up until page 253, when Ponchaud's book is discussed, and a lot more doubts are cast upon its overall credibility, for example on page 274 they say Ponchaud's own conclusions, it is by now clear, cannot be taken very seriously because he is simply too careless and untrustworthy.

And also:

Even the examples he cites do not substantiate his firm conviction that central direction rather than localized cruelty or revenge has been clearly established.

It is obvious when reading the chapter that C & H are desperate to prove their case, but have failed to come up with anything solid. They typically extrapolate from the particular to the general in order to build their theory, and gather no first hand evidence themselves. Thus a few examples of refugee selection by the Thai authorities mean that all evidence is to be disbelieved. Some faking of reports or photographs means the whole things a lie. The worst error, though, is the attempt to present the guided tour visits to Cambodia as some sort of counter to the refugee testimony, as they say

It is obvious that visitors on guided tours, like refugees selected on guided tours to refugee camps, can only present a partial and perhaps misleading picture, but their reports certainly offer a view of the social reality that would have been carefully

investigated by anyone seriously concerned with the truth. [13]

It might seem that C & H are being objective here, but they are not. Everyone knows that such invited, guided tours are a complete sham and are the lot of totalitarian regimes with something to hide. Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany arranged similar guided tours while mass murder was being done.

During the 1980's Noam Chomsky only slowly and reluctantly changed his position regarding the events in Cambodia. In a book review of 1985 he says that the death toll in the civil war period in Cambodia (which lasted from 1970 to 1975) was roughly the same as the death toll during the period of Khmer Rouge rule, i.e. 500,000 to a million in each case (he uses Vickery's figure for the latter period). [14] Such a position is only possible if the highest estimates for the earlier period are compared with the lowest estimates for the later period. Estimates range from 156,000 to 500,000 dead in the civil war, but the figures for those who died under the Khmer Rouge are at least five times that amount, and cover a shorter period of time. [15] Chomsky also says that Herman and he had recommended Ponchaud in their 1977 article, which was not really the case. [16]

Later, in 1989, Chomsky still maintained that the death rate was about equal in the two periods, and that the civil war was "the American war" – as if nobody else was involved. [17] Of course the US did (often in secret) bomb Cambodia, particularly in 1973, in an effort to destroy North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge bases, and did kill, as David P. Chandler says "thousands of people not at war with the United States." [18] But this was probably not the major cause of deaths in the civil war. Chomsky also blames America for many of the deaths in the later period, as the bombings had caused many to flee to the cities, where they ended up being dependant on US food aid. This was discontinued once the pro-US government fell, and there was a prediction that a million would starve. The Khmer Rouge could easily have averted this by asking for international aid (they were offered aid straight away by Thailand), [19] but instead they closed their country off, and began their utopian experiment regardless of the prevailing conditions. Though Chomsky does at least acknowledge, at last, that the Khmer Rouge did carry out large scale massacres, he sees them almost as victims of the US, reacting like Pavlovian dogs, with no real will of their own.

## Final Remarks

Have I missed the point? Were Chomsky and Herman saying something different from what an ordinary person would think when reading *After the Cataclysm*? Not at all. Anyone who reads the chapter on Cambodia would be led to believe that the Khmer Rouge had done little wrong and quite a lot of good in Cambodia, and had been maliciously slandered by the Western media. The simple fact is C & H got it wrong and did so because they demanded absolute standards of proof from those like Ponchaud who had evidence of massacres by the Khmer Rouge, while their own notion that the media was being used for "imperialist" ends required no firm evidence at all. The evidence was made to fit preconceived ideas.

It is, of course, exceedingly important to be skeptical about media and other reports as there can be a great deal of bias, as well as a need to make any story as sensational as possible. But this does not mean it is all a conspiracy of lies designed to serve malevolent forces. The danger of following someone like Chomsky is that you can begin to believe you have superior insight and knowledge as regards the workings of the state, media and capitalism without feeling the need to put any assumptions to the test. Chomsky has a captive audience of like-minded anti-American followers, and so there is never any need to subject his theories to the rule of falsifiability, as he is followed regardless of how

utterly and obviously wrong his views sometimes are.

Chomsky and Herman's views on international affairs are not anarchist at all, they are Trotskyite style anti-Westernism, which can often result in what can seem like efforts to defend inhuman, irrational regimes. A hatred for your own ruling class can easily lead to a completely inaccurate perspective when applied to international, rather than domestic, issues. Anarchists know that Western imperialism is one form of oppression, and Marxist-inspired totalitarian regimes are another. The crimes of one side should not blind you to those of the other.

Finally I would like to show how dishonesty can lead to the wrong conclusions. On page 45-46 of his book *Cambodia 1975-1982*, Michael Vickery says that Francis Ponchaud had based his idea of a large scale massacre by the Khmer Rouge solely on 94 written reports by the mostly urban elite of Cambodia, and this had prejudiced his case as these were just the sort of people hated by the new regime. The Standard Total View (i.e. the view that well over a million had died under Pol Pot's regime) was largely based on Ponchaud's reports. More evidence of the biased nature of Western reporting? No, not at all. What Vickery (almost certainly deliberately) fails to mention is that in the very same note on the very same page (page 10) of Ponchaud's book the author says he also carried out oral interviews of hundreds of Cambodian peasants, labourers and fishermen. The facts show that he was an honest witness who reported the words of honest people. I think Vickery's low estimate of deaths based on what seem like solid statistical methods is wrong, as he wished to conclude that as few people as possible died and chose his figures accordingly.

## NOTES

[1] Marie-Alexandre Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (trans. Mark W. McLeod), 1994, p. 209-10.

[2] *The Black Book of Communism* (Courtois et al.), 1999, p. 591.

[3] Michael Vickery, *Cambodia 1975-1982*, 1984, p. 85-187.

[4] Introduction to *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields* by Dith Pran p. xvi. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *After the Calaclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology*, 1979, p. 226-229.

[5] Francis Ponchaud, *Cambodia Year Zero*, 1978, p. 13.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 15-16.

[7] Available on [www.chomsky.info/articles/19770625.htm](http://www.chomsky.info/articles/19770625.htm)

[8] William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 1984, p. 56.

[9] Chomsky and Herman, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 150.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 136-137.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 139.

[13] *Ibid*, p. 187.

[14] *The Chomsky Reader* (ed. James Peck), 1987, p. 291.

[15] The 2002 Chart of Armed Conflict of the Institute of Strategic Studies put the figures at 156,000 for the civil war, and 1,000,000 for the Pol Pot massacre. David Chandler mentions half a million for the civil war (David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 1991, p. 250, and Sliwinski (according to Margolin) 240,000 for the civil war (including 40,000 by the US bombing, plus perhaps 70,000 Vietnamese killed in 1970 by the pro-US Lon Nol government (*The Black Book of Communism*, p. 590).

[16] *The Chomsky Reader*, p. 295.

[17] *The Indispensable Chomsky*, p. 92-93.

[18] Chandler, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

[19] Shawcross, *op. cit.*, p. 58.