

# Maoism and Pol Pot myths: Getting the record on Pol Pot straight

by MC5

\*Pol Pot did not execute 2 or 3 million people.

\*The U.S. Indochina war did kill 600,000 Cambodians and left millions more homeless and starving.

Occasionally critics of Mao Zedong or today's Sendero Luminoso say that Pol Pot, the political leader frequently accused of genocide in Cambodia/Kampuchea, was a Maoist. Bourgeois mouthpieces like the New Republic also say that the Senderos are admirers of Pol Pot.

Since most of the public does not know anything about Mao or Pol Pot, the effect is to equate Maoism with genocide. It's just another means that bourgeois propagandists simplify communism as all that is evil. Pol Pot was the leader of the Khmer Rouge, a revolutionary group that considered itself communist. The Khmer Rouge seized power in what was previously called Cambodia in 1975.

Naturally since the Khmer Rouge seized power from a U.S.-backed right-wing regime, it has suffered abuse from U.S. imperialist circles ever since, whether the Khmer Rouge were Maoist or not. Hence, it is necessary to sort out how much is just anti-communist and pro-imperialist propaganda from how much is truth in the charge of genocide against Pol Pot.

By 1975, already an estimated 10% of the Kampuchean population-- 600,000 had died as a result of the Vietnam War. (1) Those 600,000 deaths were caused by U.S. efforts to track down Vietnamese communists into Cambodia.

Nixon's ordering of the bombing of Cambodia and U.S. troop forays into Cambodia were a turning point in the movement against the Vietnam War in the United States. Today, however, many people who never opposed the U.S. role in Indochina are complaining about Pol Pot's violence. That's just hypocrisy that is increasingly easy to get away with as people forget about the U.S. war in Indochina.

The U.S.-instigated war-- bombing in particular-- also caused the creation of 2 million refugees, who flooded the cities. The cities then came to depend on U.S. food aid to live because of the war and the inefficiency of the right-wing Lon Nol regime. (2)

Hence, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge seized power from Lon Nol in 1975 in the worst possible situation: The people were starving; Kampuchea was the poorest country in the world and one-third were refugees.

The next charge frequently heard from the imperialist critics is that Pol Pot oppressed the people by forcing them out of the cities. It is true that Pol Pot had Phnom Penh emptied; however, given that these people were starving and that the economy was a shambles, it was not a bad move economically. (3) It seems likely to have saved lives, something not usually considered by Khmer Rouge critics. Even so, on the negative side, the Khmer Rouge admitted that 2 or 3,000 people died in the process of migration out of Phnom Penh. (4)

The next charge is that to carry out supposedly crazy communist policies, Pol Pot simply executed people for little or no reason. However, as with propaganda against Stalin, the bourgeois propagandists overlook certain subtleties. (5)

Pol Pot did not execute 2 or 3 million people as the press often leaves the impression without explaining. Pol Pot executed between 75,000 and 150,000 people, who were disproportionately urban dwellers, upper class or intellectual, between 1975 and 1979. Vietnam invaded in December 1978 and threw the Khmer Rouge out of power in January 1979.

The 2 or 3 million figure comes from counting all deaths in the 1975 to 1979 period based on estimates of population. A Finnish inquiry commission concludes that 1 million or fewer people died in the Pol Pot period. (6) At least several thousand of those were caused by repeated military clashes with Vietnam.

Serious famine followed again after the final Vietnamese invasion of December 1978 and by the time international aid started it was too late for many. 2 million or 30% of the population died in the 1970s total from the U.S. war, the Pol Pot period and the Vietnamese invasions. (7)

Pol Pot is not a Maoist \*Pol Pot never called himself a Maoist while Mao was alive.

\*Mao never called Pol Pot a Maoist. \*Pol Pot never supported the Gang of Four, Mao's successors, and in fact called them "counterrevolutionary."

\*MIM does not consider Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge a model.

While it is necessary to sort out truth from imperialist fiction, it is not possible to defend Pol Pot completely for the simple fact that he is an opportunist and not a Maoist.

That is not to say there was no relationship between the Khmer Rouge and China. At various times, the Maoist press praised the efforts of the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Korean peoples to struggle for self-determination and rebuild their countries, but never called their communist parties Maoist. China also gave aid to these countries and others like Tanzania in Africa which did not even claim to be communist.

Pol Pot himself never declared himself a Maoist until after Mao died. Even then, Pol Pot, acting as prime minister, denounced Mao's still living successors, the Gang of Four on October 22, 1976. (8)

After more than 20 years of organizing and insisting that he did not follow any particular revolutionary leader abroad, Pol Pot declared himself a Maoist to China's new leader, Hua Guofeng (who also claimed to be Mao's successor) in October, 1977, one month after Vietnam had sent troops 10 miles deep into Kampuchea across a 650-mile border. (9)

Even then Pol Pot's comrades in Kampuchea stressed to each other and the people that the Khmer Rouge is independent and follows no one. In any case, by October, 1977, Mao was not only dead but Hua had arrested Mao's supporters, the Gang of Four, which includes Mao's wife Jiang Qing.

Hua also rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping and in a reversal of fortune, works under Deng Xiaoping today. One of the last things Mao did before he died was to purge Deng Xiaoping from government posts and high party responsibilities.

In other words, Pol Pot was calling himself Maoist, but he was accepting the arrest of the Gang of Four. Hence, there was never a time when Pol Pot was a real Maoist by MIM standards.

In 1977, Pol Pot was criticizing Deng Xiaoping as a counterrevolutionary. Yet, by 1979, and after Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea, Pol Pot was praising Deng Xiaoping. The stuff about being Maoist went out the window because Deng Xiaoping had become China's top leader by replacing Hua Guofeng.

Pol Pot only called himself a Maoist to obtain military aid and sanctuary from China. He changed his line to flatter whoever was in power in Beijing and never supported the Gang of Four.

Taken literally, the charge that the Sendero Luminoso are admirers of Pol Pot is a lie. Like MIM, the Senderos support the Gang of Four.

To say that Pol Pot is a Maoist is also a lie. One shred of truth possible in the critics' charges is that some theories of Pol Pot's resembled Mao's. (10) But that would be true of many Third World revolutionaries' theories.

While it is an interesting question to what extent the Khmer Rouge picked and chose some policies that were Maoist or more extreme versions of Maoism and while it is interesting to evaluate the success or failure of these policies, it is simply inappropriate for a journalist to refer to the Khmer Rouge as Maoist. An appreciation of the issues requires much more study than possible in a Time or New Republic article.

(1) Kimmo Kiljunen, ed., *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide: Report of a Finnish Inquiry Commission* (London: Zed Books, 1984), 5.

(2) *Ibid.*, 5, 6.

(3) See for example, G. Hildebrand and G. Porter, *Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution*. New York: Monthly Review, 1976.

(4) Kiljunen, ed., *op. cit.*, 33.

(5) One book examining many inaccuracies and lies in the bourgeois media reporting is M. Vickery's *Cambodia: 1975-1982* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

(6) Kiljunen, ed., *op. cit.*, 33. Karl Jackson, who edited *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) estimates over one million dead under Pol Pot but forgets to count several hundred thousand refugees who left the country as people who should not be counted as dead. (p. 3)

(7) *Ibid.*, 33, 98.

(8) Craig Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 176.

(9) *Ibid.*, 246.

(10) Scholars disagree on the influence of Mao on Pol Pot. Kenneth Quinn ("Explaining the Terror," *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) sees

Pol Pot declaring himself Maoist just as Craig Etcheson sees the Maoist faction of the Khmer Rouge losing out.

## **Remember the Vietnam War**

\*Vietnam Laos and Cambodia (now called Kampuchea) are countries in Southeast Asia.

\*At the peak of the war the United States sent 500,000 troops to this area called Indochina to fight communist insurgents.

\*The United States dropped bombs totaling twice the explosive power of all those dropped in World War II. The economic devastation, including famine caused by disruption of agriculture is incalculable.

\*According to the United States Army, it killed 1 million Vietnamese directly in combat. That does not count the effects of bombing.

\*According to the Finnish Inquiry Commission, the United States' war also killed 600,000 in Cambodia.

\*The total U.S.-caused deaths in Indochina run into the millions, which is why people around the world called it a war of genocide.

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If you had been reading MIM Notes, the newspaper of the Maoist Internationalist Movement, you would know all this already.