



Communism's Nuremberg

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The four surviving leaders of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime, including the former head of state, Khieu Samphan, have been imprisoned in Phnom Penh since 2007 and will be brought to justice in their own country. On September 16, a United Nations-backed Cambodian tribunal indicted them for genocide, crimes against humanity, and other crimes. The tribunal has already established its credibility with its first trial: this past July 26, it sentenced Kaing Guek Eav (better known as Duch), a cog in the Khmer Rouge's extermination machine, to 35 years in prison. Duch ran a torture center from 1975 to 1979 that produced 15,000 victims. Unlike the Nuremberg tribunal that judged Nazi leaders in 1945, the Phnom Penh tribunal is not run by the victorious powers; it functions within the Cambodian justice system, sustained by Cambodian public opinion, though the U.N. provides financing. The tribunal's legitimacy and objectivity are beyond reproach. Still, the Cambodian public did not see Duch's sentence as sufficient in view of his crimes. The defendant apparently persuaded the court that he was obeying his superior's orders—the same excuse Nazi leaders made at Nuremberg.

In the Western and Asian press, as well as in statements by various governments, a distinct effort has been made to reduce the crimes of Duch and of Khieu Samphan to matters of local circumstance. It is as if an unfortunate catastrophe had fallen on Cambodia in 1975 called the "Khmer Rouge," killing 1.5 million Khmers. But who or what was behind what the tribunal has called the genocide of Khmers by other Khmers? Might this be the fault of the United States? Was it not the Americans who, by setting up a regime in Cambodia to their liking, brought about a nationalist reaction? Or, might this genocide not be a cultural legacy, distinctive of Khmer civilization? Archeologists are digging through the past in vain to find a historical precedent. The true explanation, the meaning of the crime, can be found in the declarations of the Khmer Rouge themselves: just as Hitler described his crimes in advance, Pol Pot (who died in 1998) had explained early on that he would destroy his people, so as to create a new one. Pol Pot called himself a Communist; he became one in the 1960s as a student in Paris, then a cradle of Marxism. Since Pol Pot and leaders of the regime that he forced on his people referred to themselves as Communists—and in no way claimed to be heirs of some Cambodian dynasty—we must acknowledge that they were, in fact, Communists.

What the Khmer Rouge brought to Cambodia was in fact real Communism. There was no radical distinction, either conceptually or concretely, between the rule of the Khmer Rouge and that of Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism, or the North Korean regime. All Communist regimes follow strangely similar trajectories, barely colored by local traditions. In every case, these regimes seek to make a blank slate of the past and to forge a new humanity. In every case, the “rich,” intellectuals, and skeptics wind up exterminated. The Khmer Rouge rounded up urban and rural populations in agricultural communities based on precedents both Russian (the Kolkhozy) and Chinese (the popular communes), and they acted for the same ideological reasons and with the same result: famine. There is no such thing as real Communism without massacre, torture, concentration camps, gulags, or laogai. And if there has never been any such thing, then we must conclude that there could be no other outcome: Communist ideology leads necessarily to mass violence, because the masses do not want real Communism. This is as true in the rice fields of Cambodia as in the plains of Ukraine or under Cuban palms.

The trial of Duch and the eventual trial of the Band of Four are thus the first trials, on human rights grounds, of responsible Marxist officials from an officially Marxist, Leninist, or Maoist regime. Nazism’s trial took place in Nuremberg beginning in late 1945, and Japanese fascism’s in Tokyo the following year. But until now, we have had no trial for Communism, though real Communism killed or mutilated more victims than Nazism and Fascism combined. Communism’s trial has never taken place, outside the intellectual sphere, for two reasons. First, Communism enjoys a kind of ideological immunity because it claims to be on the side of progress. Second, Communists remain in power in Beijing, Pyongyang, Hanoi, and Havana. And in areas where they’ve lost power—as in the former Soviet Union—the Communists arranged their own immunity by converting themselves into social democrats, businessmen, or nationalist leaders.

The only currently possible and effective trial of Communism must therefore take place in Cambodia. But make no mistake: this is no mere trial of Cambodians by other Cambodians. In the Phnom Penh trial, real Communism is confronted with its victims. The trial reveals not only how useful Marxism is for claiming, seizing, and exercising power in absolute fashion, but also a strange characteristic of real Communism. No one seems willing to claim the mantle of Marxism, not even former leaders. The Khmer Rouge killed in Marx’s, Lenin’s, and Mao’s names, but they prefer to die as traitors to their own cause or to run away. This cowardice shows Marxism in a new light: Marxism is real, but it isn’t true, since no one believes in it.

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