

RHETORIC AND REALITY IN KAMPUCHEA

Reviewed by
Darryl Bullen

RED BROTHERHOOD AT WAR: Indochina since the Fall of Saigon, by Grant Evans & Kelvin Rowley. Pluto Press, 1985. \$14.95,

The laziness or incompetence of journalists relying upon "briefings" from the Thai military or "sources" in the US government has resulted in an almost continuous stream of blatantly anti-Vietnamese propaganda in the Western press since 1975. *Red Brotherhood at War*, by Australian authors Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley, looks instead at the facts behind the continuing conflicts in South East Asia and provides a counter to the unsubstantiated assertions of Vietnamese expansionism and puppet governments in Laos and Kampuchea.

The book, released in early 1985 and launched in Australia by Foreign Minister Bill Hayden, is timely as this year marks the tenth anniversary of the US defeat in Indochina.

The victories won in 1975, following years of bitter struggle and ending over a century of foreign domination, sadly turned sour very shortly after the end of the war. The "fraternal people" of the new Democratic Kampuchea (DK), led by the now notorious Pol Pot, began deliberate armed aggression against Viet Nam, culminating in the Vietnamese army entering Kampuchea in December 1978. The relations between Viet Nam and China gradually deteriorated to the point where China invaded Viet Nam from the north without provocation in early 1979 to "teach Viet Nam a lesson", as a result of the Vietnamese action against Pol Pot's government in Kampuchea. Socialist countries

in the Asian region, presumably working from a similar ideological framework, were in conflict, leaving the left confused and an opening for the right to exploit.

Evans and Rowley believe that "a major stumbling block to an understanding of events in Indochina is the influence of nationalism". They argue that modern nationalism, a product of colonialist notions being imposed upon traditional societies, is an overriding factor in both communist and non-communist states. They could also argue, but for some reason don't, that Pol Pot's leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and Democratic Kampuchea seems not to have been inspired by any conventional marxist thought.

Certainly, Pol Pot's deliberate use of anti-Vietnamese racism was in no spirit of socialist international

solidarity. (This tactic of inciting racism was also used by Pol Pot's predecessor, the rightwing military dictator Lon Nol.)

Evans and Rowley carefully document the events in the Kampuchea-Viet Nam conflict from May 1975 onwards. The brutal attacks on border towns in Viet Nam by DK forces were followed by continued Kampuchean belligerence at the negotiating table.

In 1977-78, DK forces inflicted immense damage in Viet Nam, destroying 25 towns, 96 villages and making over 250,000 people homeless. Then, when dissident Khmers (tens of thousands of Khmers had been executed or died of hunger under the DK regime), along with Vietnamese forces, overthrew the Pol Pot government in January 1979. Pol Pot announced that this justified his propaganda that Viet Nam had always wanted to take over Kampuchea.

This is an argument taken up, not only by Pol Pot and his partners Son Sann and Sihanouk in the so-called coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea, but also by China and a number of governments in the west, notably the USA and the ASEAN countries. Evans and Rowley carefully dissect the myth of post-war Vietnamese expansionism and present valuable evidence of how Viet Nam worked strenuously after 1975 to establish firm economic and political links with the west. Viet Nam was continually rebuffed.

The question of the current level of Vietnamese involvement in the day-to-day affairs of Laos and Kampuchea is an important one. The popular western notion of quisling or puppet governments in Vientiane and Phnom Penh, answerable only to the Hanoi leadership, is not accepted by the authors. They agree that Viet Nam is by far the stronger partner in an



important alliance but it has, on the other hand, generously extended its own limited resources to help Lao and Kampuchean reconstruction. The "Indochina Federation", so often referred to by Pol Pot as evidence of Vietnamese designs for "swallowing up" Laos and Kampuchea, does not exist and has not existed as a viable notion for some thirty years now.

China's role in the Indochina conflict is vitally important, particularly to the future of Kampuchea. China has been arming and funding Pol Pot/DK activities from the Thai border since 1979. Evans and Rowley leave no doubt that China has a lot to answer for in the area of foreign policy. Chinese intransigence has been significant in blocking a peaceful solution to the Kampuchea situation. Since publication of *Red Brotherhood*, this has amounted, in one instance, to Chinese officials preventing Sihanouk meeting in Paris with a representative of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the current effective government of Kampuchea. China's premeditated and unprovoked attacks on the north of Viet Nam in 1979 were an unmitigated failure for China, and Evans and Rowley point out that Chinese policy towards Indochina has been counter-productive.

Similarly, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has failed to present a successful policy for peace and stability in the region. Thailand, the ASEAN partner closest geographically to Kampuchea, has, as detailed in the book, been crucial in effecting the policies of China and the USA. It provides the practical means of supplying arms to the Pol Pot/DK group. Having supported the DK in order to force Viet Nam out of Kampuchea, ASEAN was "saddled with the task of sustaining DK as a credible alternative government to the PRK". The authors go on to note that "whereas the ASEAN countries, Thailand above all, genuinely wanted to see the Vietnamese withdraw from Kampuchea, the Chinese preferred to see them bogged down in a protracted war" (in Kampuchea). As with the chapter on China, the reader is left with the conclusion that ASEAN policy towards Indochina has also been counter-productive, although at least one partner, Indonesia, has been working hard on

improving relations with Hanoi.

Finally, conclude Evans and Rowley, the peoples of Viet Nam, Laos and Kampuchea have yet to achieve peace. The authors believe big power politics holds the key to a solution for the problems in the region and optimistically put forward a view that China is unlikely to directly attack Viet Nam while it (China) is seeking to normalise relations with the Soviet Union.

Red Brotherhood at War is an extremely important and well-documented contribution towards understanding the real issues behind the conflict in South East Asia.

The book takes on the perplexing problem of why it is socialist countries have been at war and closely examines some of the mistaken views which have clouded the thinking of the left in this area. The authors seriously challenge whether or not international co-operation between communist governments is even possible, given the overriding influence of nationalism in individual states. In this respect, *Red Brotherhood* is essential reading, not only for accurate information on the South East Asian conflicts, but also for the continuing debate on East-West and Socialist Community relations.

Evans and Rowley write in a style which is easily readable and their book should be read by all concerned about, or involved in, the future of the peoples of Indochina.

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Reviewed by Phil Shannon

***CAMBODIA 1975-1982* by Michael Vickery. George Allen & Unwin/South End Press, 1984. \$14.95, paperback, 361 pages.**

CAMBODIA: 1975-1982

Michael Vickery

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The colour red of the left was the red of embarrassment as the facts of "Democratic Kampuchea" (DK) under Pol Pot from 1975 to 1979 were revealed with increasing credibility. Michael Vickery's *Cambodia 1975-1982* recalls how sceptical western marxists, properly suspicious of the capitalist media, initially dismissed the mass media's portrayal of DK as a "chamber of horrors" as being typical anti-communist words of hate from the mouth of ignorance. Even the more critical marxists tended to rationalise Pol Pot's regime as a "popular, if violent, peasant revolution which was possibly doing the right things in other than the best way" and where large death tolls were probably unavoidable in a country ruined by five years of vicious US war from 1970 to 1975.

When socialist Viet Nam, however, revealed the reality of Pol Pot's terror, a sobered left admitted the worst — that Pol Pot's policies were mostly to blame — and supported the Vietnamese-backed popular uprising against Pol Pot in 1979.

Vickery, an Australian scholar fluent in the Khmer language of Kampuchea, visited that country often from the 'sixties to the 'eighties. His book presents a picture of Kampuchean society built, brick by factual brick, from a vast and varied range of personal interviews conducted by Vickery with refugees and other individuals

Whereas the "refugee rumour mill" was worked uncritically by western journalists to present a distorted, often false, image of both Pol Pot's Kampuchea and the current Heng Samrin government, Vickery subjects the refugees' stories to "close reading", untangling the propaganda from the factual content.

He rigorously tries to cross-check and verify the refugees' accounts, rather than simply accept them at face value. A sensitivity to the bias of refugees also demands care in evaluating their claims. Many of the post-'79 refugees favoured by the mass media are the better-off "who refuse to live with socialism" rather than the poor peasants, of whom there are fewer, and who, after experiencing life in Thailand's camps under the control of an emboldened US-back Pol Pot, often return to Kampuchea. Also selectively favoured by the capitalist media were those post-'75 refugees of the urban middle class. Although this class was a special object of attack by Pol Pot, the media fed on the propaganda "news" value of the refugee section of this class, who were "spoiled, pretentious, contentious, status-conscious at worst, or at best simply soft, intriguing, addicted to city comforts and despising peasant life".

Vickery's analysis of refugee testimony shows that there was much variation in time, place and extent concerning the deaths, the atrocities, the rigid egalitarianism of communal eating and sleeping, the strict sexual code, the destruction of education, currency, industry, culture and religion, the persecution of doctors and other intellectuals, the forced rural collectivisation, etc. There was a large element of journalistic beat-up for anti-socialist propaganda.

Nevertheless, there were many genuine horror stories; terror and a climate of fear did exist; and, although the death toll (excess, "policy" deaths beyond those that were the "inevitable results" of the US war legacy) of 400,000 was a lot less than the 2-3 million alleged by the anti-Kampuchea propagandists, Vickery rightly stresses that 400,000 murdered people is 400,000 murdered people and this further condemns the Pol Pot regime. The general failure of the DK regime is both evident and huge.

Contrary to the gleeful claims of the enemies of socialism, however, the failure of DK was not the failure of marxism. Although the Pol Pot regime called itself communist, its actions are no judgment on that ideology, just as Thailand, South Korea and many Central and Latin American dictatorships calling themselves "democratic" doesn't make them so. In Eastern Europe, too, the "people's democracies" aren't. The "affective value of labels such as "communist" and "democratic", says Vickery, has little "analytic value" for assessing the substance of such societies.

DK's failure lay, rather, "in the very essence of a peasant revolution". Pol Pot's policy was guided by a "romantic peasantism", an ideology involving excesses of town-hatred, arbitrary justice and sudden, violent death born out of the economic and social frustration of the 90 percent rural population of Cambodia. This ideology existed long before Pol Pot based his policies on it to achieve a class-free society by social levelling, by reducing everyone to the poorest of "poor-peasant level", by attacking and dismantling the middle class, secondary industry, the proletariat, economic diversification, etc.

Vickery contrasts this approach (based on "poor-peasant utopian ideology rather than marxism-leninism") with the success of other revolutions in largely peasant-dominated countries. In Yugoslavia, Viet Nam, the USSR (before Stalin Pol-Potted *that* revolution) the contradictions of country/town, agriculture/industry, peasant class/middle class, etc. were handled by a marxist leadership with policies that were "humane, pragmatic and unoppressive". These communists "argued and practised unity to control their revolution". The Pol Pot faction within the Kampuchean party had eliminated the majority faction of pro-Viet Nam communists and leftist intellectuals within that party who would have followed such successful models.

The mass of personal detail (the refugee stories, the factional cavortings in the party, etc.) can overwhelm the casual reader but does amply demonstrate the solid basis of Vickery's sympathetic but

critical and rigorous analysis — a quality politically incompatible with the plastic superficialities of mainstream journalism and soggy liberal scholarship.

As Vickery's study of Kampuchea under the current Heng Samrin government shows, a clear and honest view of Kampuchea is more vital than ever because the US now finds Pol Pot good for more anti-communist ends. US policy-makers and their media toadies are washing Pol Pot's hands clean and rewriting DK's history with the aim of further blackening and isolating an independent socialist Viet Nam for its "invasion" and "occupation" of Kampuchea. Having only recently identified Pol Pot with Hitler is no obstacle to the US Establishment in revising Pol Pot's history — having out-Orwelled Orwell's conceptions of rewriting history (from the days when leading Nazis were sanitised and made acceptable by the US because a reactionary capitalist Germany would prove useful against a European socialism and the USSR), Pol Pot poses no problems. If even Hitler has his uses for the US

The US' transforming of Pol Pot from communist enemy to anti-communist friend demonstrates that capitalism's love of failed revolutions (Pol Pot's DK) is outmatched only by its fear of successful revolutions (Viet Nam).

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