

Bernard Levin

The evil that men do and the men who call it good

I have written a great deal here about the horrors in Cambodia since it finally succumbed to Communist conquest in 1975, but since the horrors have not abated, I expect to go on writing on the subject. As it happens, my intention today is not simply to present the details of the latest crimes of a regime which has so far caused the death, either by direct extermination or by inhuman treatment that has led inevitably to the same end, of a number of men, women and children that may amount by now to ten per cent of the population. (This genocide is described by the country's rulers as "the elimination of contradictions", and the leader of the Cambodian regime, Pol Pot, has recently said that there are still more "enemies of democratic Cambodia" to be accounted for, amounting in his estimate to another two per cent.)

However, I have today a purpose wider than merely to rehearse the crimes committed by the Cambodian communists again that country's people, crimes which perhaps have no true parallel in history. But before I get on to my principal themes, I have to say a little more about the crimes themselves. I have previously recorded the eye-witness accounts of the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh, in which the entire population of the city, including dying patients in hospitals, were simply driven like cattle into the jungle; I have also given accounts of the concentration-camps and forced labour, the hideous fate that awaits those who try to escape from the country but fail, the murders and beatings, the atrocities equalled only by Stalin and surpassed only by the Nazis.

The victorious Khmer Rouge have turned Cambodia not just into a prison, but into a charnel-house, and their blood-lust is not yet satiated. Indeed, it actually appears to have got worse. In 1977, a Stalinesque purge among the rulers

took place; many former members of the new ruling class were killed, and others managed to flee; reports suggest that the victorious faction have made the rigours of Cambodian life even more terrible. In the serfdom that is now the rule throughout the country, labour is compulsory for everyone more than six years old (that is not a misprint for sixteen); they work for at least ten hours a day. There are no schools, there is no private life, no postal system, naturally no possibility of movement from the place of residence assigned and no choice of work; sexual relations outside marriage are punishable by death; while thousands starve, the country's rulers are exporting rice, the staple food; doctors and the possessors of other desperately-needed skills are indiscriminately sent as agricultural serfs, while the people die for lack of treatment.

And still the horror intensifies. The practice of Buddhism, for instance, is now in itself forbidden on pain of death, and many Buddhist monks have been exterminated by the Khmer Rouge. Individual atrocities, described by refugee eye-witnesses, are as dreadful as anything the world has ever seen; one of the Khmer Rouge's favourite methods of murder, for instance, is to bury the offenders up to the neck in the ground and then beat them to death with clubs. And this account, based on reports by a group of refugees who managed to escape into Thailand, is in no way exceptional.

... at the appointed hour, 268 men, women and children set off on the long and dangerous trek. . . . But the villagers had only walked a few yards . . . when machine guns opened up on them from the darkened hamlet. Apparently, one of the villagers who had remained behind had betrayed them. The Khmer Rouge

made no attempt to capture the fleeing peasants or give them a chance to surrender . . . the shooting continued for half an hour. . . . By morning, the survivors had regrouped. . . . Less than 12 hours later, one group was attacked again when it stopped to scavenge for food. Exhausted by the pace and famished, Lanout Chhuon's 15-year-old daughter had climbed a tree to pluck some hanging fruit. As she reached for it, a Khmer Rouge sniper's bullet cut her down, and a hail of automatic rifle fire and M-79 grenades tore into those who gathered round her fallen body . . . of the 268 peasants who had set out . . . only 50 survived the attempt to escape from Communist Cambodia.

The next passage is not for the squeamish; but for those who can face it, here are two still more recent accounts of the behaviour of the Cambodian forces, this time in raids across the Thai and Vietnamese borders respectively:

Thirty-one Thai villagers, including babies and women, were hacked to death by Khmer Rouge troops. . . .

Women and children, including small babies, had been decapitated. Many had been tortured. Men had been castrated and poles were protruding from the bodies of women.

So much by way of an account of conditions in Cambodia. But there is a general conclusion now to be drawn. It is often said that there is no cruelty, no oppression, that is without its defenders or condoners. Brezhnev's Russia and Vorster's South Africa, Chile and Cuba, Burundi and East Germany—all have their attendant sycophants in free countries, and

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James Fenton
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propaganda machines, run by those in a position to tell the truth, daily pour out lies. But surely, you may say, Cambodia must be the exception to this terrible truth; though Amin's Uganda regularly escapes discussion in the United Nations General Assembly (fierce lobbying was carried out, last time the question arose, by representatives of the "Third World" to ensure that the proposed debate did not take place), surely none can be found to speak well of present-day Cambodia, to deny the truth about what has happened and is happening there, to claim that it is anything but a crime against humanity?

How little you know of the lengths—and the depths that human beings can go to. For in Britain itself there is a valiant and tireless Friend of Communist Cambodia, who calls it "democratic Kampuchea", speaks of the "liberation" of Phnom Penh by the Khmer

Rouge, and insists that "we should be careful not to jeer at the social experiment being conducted in Kampuchea". (Try reading that sentence aloud, replacing "Kampuchea" by "Auschwitz".)

He is called Malcolm Caldwell—Dr Caldwell, to give him his academic due—and he is a "Lecturer in South East Asian Economic History" at the School of Oriental and African Studies, which is part of the University of London. Dr Caldwell is tireless in his praise for Communist Cambodia, inexhaustible in his denials of the truth about it, unsparingly generous of his time in writing to magazines and newspapers which have promulgated that truth, to insist that Cambodia is a peaceful democracy and that the only people killed by its present rulers were justly condemned. Nor is Dr Caldwell the only defender of Cambodia. There is also Mr James Fenton, lately of the *New Statesman*, whose line is not, like Caldwell's, that everything the Cambodians do is splendid, but that, although much of it is not splendid at all, it is in the first place the fault of the Americans—"It was America that set the process going in Cambodia"—and in the second place must be seen in context. The Cambodians, you see, are frightened of the Vietnamese and the Thais; well, no wonder they therefore exterminate a tenth of their own population. And though you and I (and indeed Mr Fenton) deplore the methods they use, we must remember that, as he puts it, "The practice of beating people to death made sound sense in an economy where bullets were scarce".

Now I did not introduce this topic today merely to parade Dr Caldwell and Mr Fenton for your inspection. For the truth is that, as I suggested above, there is a Caldwell—or there are several Caldwells—for every tyrant, every murderer, every op-

pressor or torturer, who acts in the name of a political creed. Only last year there was a man called Butz—an American scientist—on the loose in London, insisting that the entire story of the Nazi extermination of the Jews was a fake, that no Jews were exterminated, and that only a handful died, more or less accidentally.

The lengths to which the defenders of the indefensible will go, and the techniques they employ in the defence, vary widely, of course. Not long ago, for instance, the Very Reverend Lord Macleod of Fuinary (a former Moderator of the Church of Scotland) observed in an article in *The Scotsman* that "East Germany is a democracy". Lord Macleod, of course, is not to be compared with the Caldwells and the Butzes; in truth, he is nothing worse than a fool (though when you consider the number of people who have been shot, drowned, electrocuted, blown to pieces by mines or savaged by dogs, trying to get out of "democratic" East Germany, you must also recognize the fact that between "fool" and "foul" there is only a single letter's difference). All I am saying is that there are different degrees of willingness to praise evil or to pretend that it is not happening, and some will go further in that praise or pretence than will others. (The latest and perhaps furthest concerns the forcible transporting of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children to the Soviet Union at the end of the war, there to die, either massacred immediately on arrival or in Stalin's concentration camps. That episode, too, has been enthusiastically defended.)

Or take Mr Frank Allaun, MP. A few months ago he made a formal complaint to the Press Council about an article in the *Daily Mirror* by Mr John Pilger. The article did not mention or refer to

Mr Allaun in any way, nor did he claim it did. But what it did do was to attack the Soviet Union, and that alone, it seems, was enough to make Mr Allaun spring into action with a complaint that an incident described in the article could not possibly be true.

What is it that drives men and women into claiming, like Dr Caldwell, that genocidal Cambodia is democratic Kampuchea, or, like Mr Butz, that the Nazis killed no Jews? What leads people for whom the truth is available, and who run no risk by espousing it, to espouse lies instead—and not merely espouse them, but in some cases even believe them?

I do not know. But I know that Tennyson should have made a few exceptions when he said "We needs must love the highest when we see it", for some of us, it seems, love only the lowest, and in the case of the Caldwells and the Butzes and their like the lowest they love is so terrible, so indefensibly and almost unimaginably terrible, that it seems impossible to explain their behaviour except by some semi-tautologous argument to the effect that they cannot be held responsible for their actions. But if we cannot understand what moves them, we can nonetheless learn from them. We can learn a necessary lesson about the frailty of human reason in the face of an assault from the dark forces that are somewhere within us all, mirroring the dark forces in the world. Something in Mr Butz needs to believe that the Nazis killed no Jews; something in Dr Caldwell needs to believe that Cambodia under the genocidal dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge is Kampuchea under democracy. Whatever that need is, it is stronger than the facts and more tenacious than the evidence.