

BOOK REVIEWS

***Famine in Cambodia: Geopolitics, Biopolitics, Necropolitics.* By James A. Tyner. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2023. Softcover: 219pp.**

Conventional wisdom and some scholarly literature place the events of April 1975—when the Khmer Rouge stormed into Phnom Penh and “evacuated” the capital—as the beginning of what has been dubbed “Year Zero” for Cambodia. The genocidal regime’s four-year rule was so extreme and murderous that nothing that came before bears comparison. However, James A. Tyner seeks to extend the arc of Cambodian history to reveal the deeper roots of the deadly famines that occurred from 1970 until the late 1980s. Tyner takes issue with the “overdetermined role of the Khmer Rouge” (p. 3) and argues that the famines during its rule (August 1975 to January 1979) were not simply caused by the Maoist regime’s brutal policies. He points to the capitalist changes to the rural economy brought about by French colonists in the late nineteenth century and during the rule of King Norodom Sihanouk (1953–70) as contributing factors to the famines. Tyner also places much blame on the United States, citing its illegal bombing of Cambodia in the early 1970s and its withholding of humanitarian aid solely for geopolitical reasons in the 1980s.

On the eve of the Lon Nol coup in March 1970, which created the Khmer Republic, there might have been the notion that “no one starves in Cambodia” (p. 16), but this was far from the truth. In Chapter One, Tyner documents important changes to the rural economy, as well as a lack of investment in and development of the sector, from the late nineteenth century onwards that made rice

production ever more precarious. Even during the “golden age” of Sihanouk’s rule, irrigated rice cultivation expanded modestly, from 34,762 to 79,926 hectares (p. 34). Things only got worse under the Khmer Republic, which is the focus of Chapter Two. Paddy production, for instance, fell from 3.8 million tons to just 493,000 tons within five years (p. 62). While government incompetence and corruption were a factor, the civil war between the government and various guerrilla outfits, especially the Khmer Rouge, was another. But Tyner’s primary focus is on the United States’ illegal war in Cambodia: the carpet-bombing of vast sweeps of arable lands resulted in millions of refugees flooding into the ill-equipped cities, which were almost entirely dependent on food assistance from overseas by 1974. Yet, little food relief was sent by Washington, although Tyner does note that the “vast majority” of the aid that was sent was sold off by corrupt Khmer Republic officials (p. 69). The next famine that subsequently took place during the Khmer Rouge era, he writes, “was not an aberration but instead a continuation of a famine facilitated by America’s expansion of war in Cambodia” (p. 77).

Chapter Three examines the Khmer Rouge era, providing a detailed (albeit somewhat counterintuitive) explanation of the communist regime’s economic policies. Its primary goal was to increase rice exports in order to generate foreign currency for industrialization, rather than completely isolating Cambodia from the global economy. According to Tyner, the Khmer Rouge actually sought to “participate in the global economy on terms of their own choosing” (p. 81) and “inserted farmers more fully into the global economy” than its predecessors (p. 91).

However, that policy generated famine because of a woefully poor economy the Khmer Rouge inherited and the ruthlessness with which it carried out its objectives. According to Tyner, “every spoonful of rice consumed by workers [...] represented loss in potential earnings, a grim demonstration of the fatal contradictions inherent in Khmer Rouge bio(necro)politics” (p. 98). He agrees with economist Amartya Sen’s view that famines are not caused by a lack of food but a result of the politics and economics of food distribution. However, he goes even further, arguing that famine, as was the case during the Khmer Republic and Khmer Rouge eras, can also be a “*product* of the social and economic system rather than its failures” (p. 5).

Tyner documents famines post-1979, after the Khmer Rouge was overthrown in Chapter Four, before offering an extended epilogue. If his depiction of history makes for difficult reading for those who still want to view the Khmer Rouge era as an anomaly, they would be even more depressed by Tyner's warnings in the final chapter. Ongoing biodiversity destruction, especially of Cambodia's lakes and rivers, climate change and further capital accumulation by the elite could create conditions worse than before. Tyner notes that Cambodia's rural population "is increasingly caught in the vises of parallel threats that—if left unchecked—foreshadows a catastrophic future that would dwarf the country's famines of the 1970s" (p. 152).

In many ways, this book sets out to challenge commonly held notions about Cambodian history, such as that the country had a healthy economy before 1975 and the Khmer Rouge simply destroyed it (along with perhaps a quarter of the population). Tyner is at pains to stress that his epochal comparisons are not meant to downplay the Khmer Rouge's atrocities. That is clear. One problem, though, is that he succumbs to the temptation of presenting the Khmer Rouge as simply showing up in Phnom Penh in April 1975. Little mention is made of what was happening in the regions under the Khmer Rouge's control prior to 1975. More attention should also have been paid to the responsibility of other external actors, including China, Vietnam and ASEAN.

Maybe the famine between 1975 and 1979 was partly a result of what came before, but some readers might question the comparisons in terms of scale. Marek Sliwinski (in *Le génocide Khmer Rouge: Une analyse démographique*, 1995) estimated that there were fewer than 310,000 total deaths during the Khmer Republic era, while other historians suggest as many as 600,000. By contrast, most scholars agree that at least 1.5 million people, if not double that, died during the Khmer Rouge era (as suggested by Ben Kiernan, in *The Pol Pot Regime*, 2008). Although the exact numbers are highly contested, and many of the deaths were not related to famine, they do indicate a marked difference in mortality rates between the two periods.

Tyner provides in-depth context and thorough explanations of the progression of Cambodian history. His expansive statistics support most of his arguments, and he draws upon a range of

contemporary sources, both local and foreign. Overall, this book is a welcomed contribution to the existing literature on Cambodian history, especially as the passage of time allows scholars to (less controversially) offer more nuanced interpretations of the Khmer Rouge period.

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