

DOI: 10.1355/sj41-2i

Bad Lieutenants: The Khmer Rouge, United Front, and Class Struggle, 1970–1997. By Andrew Mertha. Cornell University Press, 2025. xxvi+250 pp.

Bad Lieutenants reconceptualizes the Khmer Rouge as a political machine before, during and after their rule in Cambodia. The book presents a unified image of the regime: it demonstrates the party's consistent tactics throughout its nearly three decades run. It makes key contributions to studies of Cambodian history, politics and Marxist politics around the world. First and foremost, *Bad Lieutenants* demonstrates the continuity within the Khmer Rouge from 1970 to 1997. It argues that the party did not change its fundamental character either when it controlled the state in 1975 or when it retreated to the forests in 1979. Further, Mertha demonstrates that, contrary to common perspectives, this was a party that governed and engaged in politics with surprising longevity despite its portrayal as irrational and paranoid. Ultimately, however, the personal dynamics between the party's lieutenants became a double-edged sword: the three lieutenants individually played pivotal roles in sustaining the party, but their interpersonal competition contributed to its collapse. This book marshals essential data on how the party operated, offering insights into the personalities and organizational politics of the party.

The book moves chronologically from the party's origins through to its end in 1998. Mertha argues that the Khmer Rouge “condemned itself to two—and *only* two—distinct courses of action: to united front and, when that was no longer viable, to class struggle” (p. 187). Each chapter interweaves the historical context with an account of each of the three “bad lieutenants”. He explains that it is necessary to move beyond the idealogues Pol Pot and Nuon Chea “to tell the story of the *movement*”, continuing that the “three lieutenants”—Ieng Sary, Son Sen and Ta Mok—“better explain the totality of the CPK [Communist Party of Cambodia] from its harried beginnings to its brutal approach towards governance to its remarkable rebirth, and ultimately, to its ignoble, violent demise” (p. 11). Each chapter

traces the policies and practices of the party through the historical arcs of emergence, governance, rebirth and collapse.

The united front strategy served the party well prior to 1973, as detailed in chapter 1, and after its return to the forests in 1979, as discussed in chapters 3 and 4. The united front was “a *front* of being *unified* as a *strategy* to attain political dominance” (p. 35) that concealed the true nature of the CPK, pulling the strings from behind the scenes. This strategy enabled the growth of the CPK and deepened the seemingly strange coalition, through alliances with Sihanouk and the monarchists, among others, before those same pro-Sihanouk and moderate elements were purged.

As the Khmer Rouge began to consolidate power after 1973, and even more so after 1975, the true nature of the party began to reveal itself. It then shifted to the second strategy: class struggle. As early as 1973, it began to purge resisters and collectivize the economy, an approach that characterized the 1975 to 1979 period, and to which the party returned in the 1990s. Chapter 2 details how the three lieutenants manoeuvred and maintained power throughout the Democratic Kampuchea period (1975–79), but, as the chapter outlines, they barely retained their positions and narrowly missed being executed as class enemies themselves before the Vietnamese invasion in 1978. The quick retreat enabled the three to survive and resume their roles in re-establishing the party.

The return to the united front strategy enabled the Khmer Rouge to re-establish itself after 1979 as it returned to a state of civil war. The party relied on old alliances, like Sihanouk, along with his newly founded FUNCINPEC (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia), and the KPNLF (Khmer People’s National Liberation Front) to form the new coalition. Post-1979, Son Sen and Ta Mok re-established military networks that made “possible the organizational rebirth of the Khmer Rouge” (p. 109). The chapter also accounts for the coordinated efforts at controlling the refugee camps on the Thai border. Ieng Sary used the camp at Site 8 as an opportunity to demonstrate the party’s ability to govern and to bolster its legitimacy through foreign

affairs during this period. The three lieutenants expanded the military network, controlled the refugee camps and rehabilitated the party's public image through its engagement with foreign actors. In other words, they did the work to resurrect the movement and expand it throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

A return to class struggle in the 1990s led to renewed elimination of class and party enemies. This was the final undoing of the three lieutenants and the downfall of the Khmer Rouge. Mertha argues that "it had been the actions—or inactions—of [Pol Pot's] top lieutenants that led to the precipitous decline" (pp. 170–71) of the party. Not only did the party revert to strict class politics, but this period also revealed the depths of interpersonal politics that were no longer reconcilable, made worse by an inflexible refusal by Pol Pot to accept any moderate interpretation of Marx.

The conclusion suggests the depth of interconnection between the Khmer Rouge and global communism. In particular, it shows that the CPK learned lessons from Mao, but it also makes clear that other communist regimes were learning from each other as well. While Mertha dispenses with the question of comparison quickly in the opening chapter, this is an area where the book opens additional questions for further examination. It would be fascinating in future work to expand on the ways in which other communist revolutionaries responded to the catastrophe that was the Khmer Rouge regime, and to examine whether the lessons from the party's enforcers could hold beyond Cambodia.

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