

# *Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist*

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## I

Malcolm Caldwell, Scottish Marxist academic at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS) was born in 1931. A lifelong man of the left, he had been the Chairman of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and a long-term member of the Labour Party [1] – even standing as a Labour candidate in the 1977 local elections in Bexley, Kent. [2] He had also been selected by Bertrand Russell to be on the founding board of a radical monthly magazine *The Spokesman* that was supported by the Russell Foundation. [3] He was known to make some absurd and preposterous prophecies, claiming that by the 1990s there would be no oil left in the world [4] and that by the mid-1980s, Scotland would be independent of England. [5] But Caldwell was most in his element when writing about ‘the demonstrated strengths of the communist system.’ [6] With a persuasive ability, he helped to transform at least one person’s ‘anti-authoritarianism – and love of ordinary people – into a fierce and angry communism.’ [7]

Whilst he ultimately became known for his support for the Communist regime in Cambodia, [8] Pol Pot was not the only despotic dictator to garner his approval. Kim Il-Sung’s North Korea, Caldwell believed, was ‘an astonishing tribute not only to the energy, initiative and creativeness of the Korean people, but also to the essential correctness of the Juche line.’ No non-‘free world’ country that he had visited (including China) had ‘impressed’ him more ‘in terms of its all-round economic achievements.’ [9] On a report of a trip he made to North Korea, his astute political analysis included the observation that ‘the female military uniform is quite attractive: fitted tunic and pleated skirt.’ [10]

Caldwell had gone further than vocal critics against the war in Vietnam; he wanted North Vietnam to win. He headed up the South-east London Centre for Socialist Education that staged an event in 1966 to raise money for ‘the purchase of arms’ by the Vietcong for use in ‘their heroic resistance to foreign military aggression.’ [11] His support for Ho Chi Minh’s North Vietnam went so far that in 1967, the *Guardian* reported that Caldwell, along with the 1960s radical Tariq Ali, were considering opening up a North Vietnamese restaurant and that Hanoi had been approached who ‘promised to provide a super-chef.’ [12]

He co-founded the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* [13] that supported revolutionary Marxist movements in the region and in its first issue made clear his position that ‘since the vast majority of these people are peasants, the future must lie in their hands.’ [14] The essay was also published by *International Socialism*, the journal of the forerunner to today’s Socialist Workers Party. [15] He became infamous for his views on Cambodia and was variously described as ‘Democratic Kampuchea’s leading academic supporter,’ [16] a ‘tireless Khmer Rouge defender,’ [17] and ‘one of the staunchest defenders of the Pol Pot regime in the West.’ [18]

## II

The Marxist-Leninist Cambodian Communist Party came to power on April 17, 1975 [19] aiming to achieve a pure communist society. Slogans of the regime included: “The former regime must be destroyed, the enemy must be crushed to bits”; “What is infected must be cut out”, “what is rotten must be removed”, “it isn’t enough to cut down a bad plant, it must be uprooted”... “It is better to kill an innocent person than to leave an enemy alive” ... “To keep it, no profit; to destroy it, no loss.” [20]

From the moment they took power, the Khmer Rouge started killing people for *Angka Loeu*, The Organisation on High – Pol Pot and his Communist henchmen. They were determined not just to change Cambodian society, but to ‘shatter it to bits.’ [21] The population were ordered to leave the cities for the countryside. This order applied irrespective of what condition the people were in – the young, the old, the crippled, the bedridden, hospital patients – everyone. Millions of people were evacuated from their homes and forced to walk for days. Numerous people were being pushed in hospital beds by their families. Those that could not make it were simply killed. Lack of food and drinking water, sanitation, healthcare and epidemics breaking out increased the death toll; ‘an estimated 100,000 people died in a single cholera epidemic that broke out southwest of Phnom-Penh 15 days after the Exodus.’ [22]

Within one day of the Communists taking power, Fernand Scheller, the chief of the United Nations development project in Cambodia’s capital Phnom Penh stated, ‘What the Khmer Rouge are doing is pure genocide.... What is going on now is an example of demagoguery that makes one vomit.’ [23]

## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

Pol Pot's regime was barbaric. Officers of the previous Lon Nol government were rounded up, taken to fields and executed en masse. But it was not enough to kill the officers, in many cases their whole families were killed as well. The same applied to civil servants who had worked for the Lon Nol government and their families. [24] Whilst this 'Purification Campaign' started with the killing of officers and senior civil servants, by 1976, anyone who had worked for the previous government: 'the lowliest private, the most humble civil servant, the most innocent teacher, even foresters and public health officials, became prey.' [25] Students, teachers and anyone deemed an intellectual were in many cases killed for the simple fact that they had an education. [26] Bodies were strewn everywhere. The method of killing could be being shot, being stabbed, battered to death, bayoneted, having their throat slit, flogged to death, axed to death, decapitated, garrotted, heinous torture methods. [27]

There was a report of a Communist soldier without any warning killing a blind beggar with his bayonet. When asked why, the soldier responded: 'He could never work in the fields. He was useless to society. It is better for him to die.' [28] On the forced exodus into the countryside, meagre rations of rice were handed out. A witness reported seeing one man being riddled with bullets because he had the audacity to ask for extra rice for his three growing children. [29] A whole family could be executed for the minor offence of one family member: 'For example, if you were executed for being late for work, your whole family would be executed too.' [30] If someone was caught trying to escape the regime, they were executed. The possibility existed that the execution could involve a slow and painful death as was the case with Saray Savath:

First the Red Khmers cut off his nose and ears; then they cut a deep gash into his arm. Thus, as he was bleeding to death, his arms were tied behind his back and attached to a tree. The rope was long, so the colonel could dance around the tree with pain.... For two days and two nights the colonel cried for help by his tree, but nobody was allowed to go near him. On the third day, he died. [31]

One officer was recorded as saying, 'In the new Kampuchea, one million is all we need to continue the revolution. We don't need the rest. We prefer to kill ten friends rather than keep one enemy alive.' [32] The journalist Elizabeth Becker reported that refugees from Cambodia described the regime 'as one without justice, one that discouraged free-thinking or intellectual pursuits of any kind.' [33]

With a similar attitude to Communist thought as Mao Zedong, Pol Pot believed that individualism had to be eliminated. [34] Books, bookshops and even libraries were set alight. ‘Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of books were thrown into the Mekong or burned on the river banks.’ [35]

Husbands and wives were prohibited from arguing with each other. If they were caught doing so more than twice, they were either separated or executed. One village chieftain announced that if an extramarital affair were discovered, ‘the people concerned will be killed.’ Separation of the sexes was strictly enforced. A commissar for the regime declared, ‘Sexual relations among unmarried couples are strictly forbidden.’ According to John Barron and Anthony Paul, in their extraordinary account of the Cambodian genocide, ‘The commissar concluded by announcing that henceforth boys and girls caught holding hands would be executed.’ [36]

The murder, terror and brutality seemingly knew no bounds. Stories such as the following from 1978 appeared all too frequently in the press:

A Cambodian refugee said today that a Khmer Rouge death squad took 78 Cambodian townspeople; their arms tied behind them, into the forest, forced them to kneel and methodically chopped each of them in the back of a head with a shovel. Three hours later, the only survivor, Yim Sot Tannakit, aged 15, awoke in a shallow ditch full of bodies. He said he crawled out and finding his whole family among the dead, began walking, still dizzy and bleeding, toward the distant Thai border. From the scars on his head and back it appeared he had been hit with the flat of the shovel instead of the killing edge. [37]

The deaths were not just violent ones. Epidemics of malaria, cholera and typhoid killed off many. Dysentery was also responsible for numerous deaths. A severe problem was malnutrition arising from rations of food available that were ‘insufficient to sustain life.’ Barron and Paul detailed the deaths through starvation. A soldier asked one woman if she had enough food and could take care of all her children. She admitted that it was not the case. The soldier said that he would take care of her daughters and proceeded to take her one-month-old baby and three year old daughter and ‘hurled both children in turn against the trunk of a large tree, battering each to death.’ [38] People were so desperately hungry that some would ‘eat literally anything edible – algae, leaves, tree bark, bindweed, locusts, grasshoppers, lizards, snakes, rats, worms, termites.’ [39] Barron and Paul provided

## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

a number of examples of deaths resulting from these issues. To note just one from 1975: 'Of the approximately 1,000 people inhabiting the New Village of Ta Orng, about 100 adults and the same amount of children died in the month of June.' [40]

There was a serious lack of any proper medicine. According to one account, a doctor 'went to see the Khmer Rouge to ask them for medication for the sick. Because of this, the Khmer Rouge accused him of being against the regime, of contesting it. They condemned the doctor to death through starvation. He was kept a prisoner in one of the huts without food or water until he was dead.' [41] For some who were ill, there became the possibility of being sent to a 'hospital' but that did not necessarily help. Barron and Paul provide a witness description of one 'hospital' in a former school building:

Classrooms and corridors were packed with soiled beds pushed closely to one another, thereby accelerating the spread of contagious diseases. Serum was stored in Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola bottles, and liquid potions of every description, including herb medicines, were kept in used penicillin bottles. Most of the 'doctors' and other personnel were illiterate. They made no effort to diagnose the ills of individual patients, treating everyone with the same mishmash of pills, herb concoctions and homemade serum. They administered injections with unsterilised needles so ineptly and brutally that a majority of the patients [the witness] saw had abscesses. Once when [a patient] was shouting in delirious pain, an unnerved 'doctor' bent over him and yelled, 'We can't help you! We don't have any medicine.' [42]

Estimates vary of the amount of excess deaths that the Khmer Rouge were responsible for in less than four years of power from April 1975 through January 1979. According to Craig Etcheson, an expert on the documentation of the Cambodian genocide in the period, the most reliable estimate was provided by the demographer, Patrick Heuveline. This study suggests that the most likely number of deaths due to excess mortality under the Khmer Rouge regime was 2.2 million of which 50 percent were via violent methods. If this figure of 2.2 million is accurate, based on Etcheson's data for the population in advance of the mass killings, the Khmer Rouge were responsible for the deaths of approximately thirty percent of the Cambodian population. [43]

III

Horrors, such as those I have detailed above, were not found in the extensive writings of Malcolm Caldwell. In fact, the opposite was the case. In 1978 he wrote an article for the *Guardian* entitled, 'The Cambodian defence.' Caldwell dismissed accounts of atrocities from Cambodian refugees: 'A refugee may give an honest account (to the best of his own knowledge) without it necessarily being accurate.' He tried to dismiss the stories of refugees that François Ponchaud published in his book, *Cambodia Year Zero* and claimed that 'Testimony by "responsible" refugees does not support the massacre claim.' Caldwell did admit to the fact 'some people did die during the move to the countryside,' but then justified the forced emigration with an argument he provided without any evidence, that if it had not occurred, 'It is certain that many, many more would have succumbed.' He claimed the 'scourge of malaria' in Cambodia occurred because it had been released by Americans. He also attributed deaths from 'disease, malnutrition and injury' to be 'directly attributed to American action' long after the Americans had left. Caldwell regurgitated propaganda from 'Hu Nim, the Kampuchean Information Minister' as if it were accurate. [44] It is possible that Caldwell was not aware that Hu Nim was no longer the Information Minister: the previous year he had been taken to the Tuol Sleng school, Pol Pot's main 'torture and execution centre' where he was executed by being 'lashed' and subsequently 'filled up with water.' [45]

Caldwell's universe, it seems, was a parallel one; when the responsible press were writing about Cambodia being 'ruled by fear' with the whole population subject to 'cruel treatment if not wanton killing,' [46] Caldwell was writing about 'the economic progress' in the country. [47]

In his essay, 'Cambodia: Rationale for a Rural Policy,' Caldwell aimed to refute 'the view that that revolutionary regime is atavistic, anachronistic, barbaric, rustic, ascetic, anarchic, cruel, irrational, and intent upon commanding a forced march back to the Dark Ages.' [48] In order to do this he shamelessly regurgitated the propaganda provided by Pol Pot's regime. For example, he quoted a spokesman for the regime, saying in 1976, 'The masses of the people even now live far better than ever before despite the destruction of war... for the first time our people feel they are masters of their destiny.' [49] A speech by Pol Pot from 1977 was quoted to illustrate the successful policies of the regime: 'We continue to strive to improve the conditions of life and health of our people, because we hope to increase our population to 15 to 20 million in the course of the next 10 years or more.' [50] Caldwell also extensively quoted from a pamphlet entitled, *Democratic*

## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

*Kampuchea is Moving Forward*, [51] neglecting to mention that it was written by The Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea. [52] Caldwell concluded that in time, 'the Kampuchean revolution will appear more and more clearly as one of the most significant early indications of the great and necessary change beginning to convulse the world in the later 20th century and shifting from a disaster-bound course to one holding out the promise of a better future for all.' [53]

So that he could corroborate the information he had provided from official sources, he quoted from a Peking based PLO representative who had travelled around Cambodia 'accompanied by leading Kampuchean figures, including Ieng Sary, Deputy Prime Minister, in charge of Foreign Affairs.' Caldwell reported this representative of a Palestinian terror organisation as saying, 'By the end of 1975 and the beginning of 1976, the government of Kampuchea was able to secure food supply for every citizen and have a surplus.' Caldwell quotes the representative as adding that there was so much rice that by February 1976, 'the government offered 50,000 tons of rice for export and sale.' [54] This can be compared to the fact that in the summer of 1975, Cambodians were dying as a result of food shortages. This was particularly acute by late August and early September and there were areas where no rice was delivered at all. Moreover, by the same February 1976, where the PLO representative claimed that the government was offering rice for sale, there was substantial rice shortages in some areas leading to malnutrition and deaths in the coming months. [55]

Whilst singing the praises of Pol Pot's regime, Caldwell did not lose an opportunity to put down the West. He approvingly cited Thiounn Prasith, Kampuchean Ambassador to the United Nations, saying in April 1976, 'There is more terrorism on the streets of New York than in Cambodia.' [56] He quoted from a 1977 study that argued, 'there are still over 20 million malnourished Americans' and 'the income of the poor in America is declining.' [57]

Caldwell had a long history of atrocious scholarship. In 1973, jointly with Lek Hor Tan, he wrote *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War*. The book contained a preface by Noam Chomsky. The political stance of the authors was clear from their note at the beginning of their joint work. They dedicated the book to, amongst others, 'the revolutionary masses of the world, in the hope that it will contribute, in however small a way to the ultimate defeat of American imperialism, and thus to opening for all of us – in the West as in the East – the prospect of a better, fuller, and more

human and humane life.’ [58] Scholar of Cambodia, Milton Osborne, carried out a review of the book for *Pacific Affairs* where he stated:

Despite its panoply of academic paraphernalia, this is not a scholarly work. Most charitably, it might be described as a passionate polemic.... much of the book appears tendentious: a determined effort to present facts, and less than facts, for a purpose.... The book’s problems... [include] the consistent bias that shapes all episodes reviewed by the authors, and in their less than acceptable standards of acknowledging sources. [59]

Caldwell and Tan were also accused of plagiarism. Osborne noted ‘a remarkable degree of “parallelism”’ between sections of Caldwell and Tan’s book, and the work of three others, providing a number of examples.[60] Osborne was not the only one to note problems with the book. In a review for *The American Historical Review*, John Cady declared:

Apart from the many historical distortions and omissions that could be cited, the book can be faulted on fundamental grounds. Historical validity derives from the objective examination of available evidence, not by fitting selected items into preconceived theory. The authors in this instance make no effort at detachment, to restrain their emotional involvement in a highly controversial situation. [61]

In the journal *Race & Class*, on which he served on the Editorial Committee, [62] Caldwell, ignoring substantial evidence to the contrary, shamelessly declared: ‘The evacuation of Phnom Penh was not, therefore, an unpremeditated act of savagery (as portrayed in the Western press), but a well-thought-out operation to feed its starving people.’ He referred to the mass slaughters that occurred in Cambodia as ‘alleged,’ arguing that one could ‘dismiss’ estimates of large deaths that were regularly published in press. At the same time, he grossly exaggerated the amount of Cambodian deaths caused ‘as a result of American aggression’ in the period 1970-75 with an estimate of 800,000. [63] Judith Banister and Paige Johnson via modelling ‘the highest mortality [they] can justify’ came out with 275,000 deaths in the period. [64] Marek Sliwinski, in his demographic study, arrives at a comparable estimate of 240,000 war deaths out of which there were 40,000 deaths as a result of American bombings. [65] In any event, the estimate of 800,000 provided by Caldwell is simply ludicrous.



## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

In *The Times* newspaper in 1977, Caldwell wrote an article where he provided support for the policies of the Khmer Rouge, citing the need for 'profound changes' that 'could be brought about only by revolution,' and urging people 'not to jeer at the social experiment being conducted in Kampuchea.' Despite the fact that the killings were often arbitrary, Caldwell argued that, 'when the Kampuchean's claim that "only the most serious criminals" were executed after liberation, it is worth recalling just how serious – indeed monstrous – their crimes were.' [66] This article led to a stinging response from *The Times* columnist Bernard Levin. Levin thundered that not only was Caldwell 'tireless in his praise for Communist Cambodia,' but also that he was 'inexhaustible in his denials of the truth about it' and '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.' Levin went on to compare Caldwell to the Holocaust Denier, Arthur Butz, and concluded:

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. [67]

Caldwell's enthusiasm for Pol Pot's regime was uncontainable. In his own *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, he referred to the events of April 1975 when the Communists came to power as 'unforgettable and historic.' [68] Even a sympathetic obituary noted 'his systematic attempt to deflate Western journalistic reports of mass executions in Kampuchea.' [69] It was therefore no surprise that at SOAS Caldwell 'met with conservative opposition from both colleagues and the administration, who tried to oust him. They did succeed in halting him at the lecturer's "efficiency bar" for salary increases on the grounds that his work was insufficiently scholarly. After his position was secured he was restricted in his teaching duties, even barred from teaching certain courses.' [70]

### IV

In December 1978, Malcolm Caldwell, as a 'friend' of the Communist regime was invited to Cambodia with two American journalists, Elizabeth Becker of *the Washington Post* and Richard Dudman of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. [71] Caldwell was 'really keyed up to go' [72] and 'leaped at the chance' [73] to visit the regime that

he had written about so favourably. One of the reasons for this was that he wanted to know whether it would be possible for 'developing countries to have economic development based on total self-reliance and on a "total social revolution" like in the case of Kampuchea.' [74] His view was most aptly described by Sopal Ear, in a remarkable thesis, as one of 'see no evil, hear no evil.' [75] Shortly before departing for Cambodia, Caldwell delivered a speech to the Institute of Race Relations where he provided support for Pol Pot's regime. He concluded that 'the Kampuchean experiment, which may appear to the Western media and to the Vietnamese and Russians as totally irrational, reactionary and backward, is a very valid and valuable experiment.' As far as Caldwell was concerned, 'it would be a great pity' and 'a very great tragedy' if 'the Kampuchean experiment were to be extinguished.' [76]

Whilst they recognised Caldwell as a 'friend,' the Cambodian officials believed Becker and Dudman to be CIA agents. [77] The three Western travellers were guarded on their trip to Cambodia and the doors of their guest house were locked after their first day meaning that they could not venture out alone. [78] What struck Becker and Dudman was the silence of Phnom Penh. Dudman said Phnom-Penh had 'the eerie quiet of a dead place – a Hiroshima without the destruction, a Pompeii without the ashes.' [79] Becker expressed similar sentiments. Discussing one trip through the city, she said, 'There were no food stalls, no families, no young people playing sports, even sidewalk games, no one out on a walk, not even dogs or cats playing in alleyways.' [80] On one occasion when they could see children playing, Becker thought the scene was staged. On the trip they were fed propaganda from senior officials. They were told there was no problem with human rights and that 90 percent of the Cambodian population were 'better off' because of the revolution.' Viewings of propaganda films were on their agenda. Their guides ensured that they would see none of the horrors of the regime, their movements strictly controlled. [81] Caldwell found factory conditions to be 'Dickensian,' but that did not put him off the regime. He commented, 'I have seen the past and it works.' [82]

On December 22, 1978 the day before they were due to leave Cambodia, the three Western visitors were granted an audience with Pol Pot. This was via two separate meetings. In the first meeting were the journalists, Elizabeth Becker and Richard Dudman. The second meeting was with the 'friend' of the regime, Malcolm Caldwell. The meeting with Becker and Dudman was not so much an interview as a lecture by Pol Pot. In her book, *When The War Was Over*, Becker recounted parts of the lecture that Pol Pot had given them. It was mainly a case against Vietnam

## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

and that if Cambodia did become 'a satellite of Vietnam,' it would be 'a threat and a danger for Southeast Asia and the world.' This was the message that Pol Pot wanted the journalists to deliver to the outside world. Caldwell's meeting was very different. According to Becker, Caldwell and Pol Pot 'spent most of the interview discussing revolutionary economic theory.' At the end of the meeting Pol Pot 'personally invited Caldwell to return the following year to measure how the revolution had prospered.' Caldwell returned from his meeting 'delighted.' [83]

Back at the guest house that evening, Caldwell and Becker had an argument about Cambodia, with, according to Becker, Caldwell arguing that the Cambodian 'revolution was worthy.' Caldwell unsuccessfully attempted to try and get Becker to change her mind on Cambodia, even at one stage comparing the country to Scotland. Ultimately they retired to their rooms.

At just before 1.00am on December 23, Becker was awakened by the sound of gunfire. She was shortly face to face with a Khmer carrying guns and ammunition. He did not shoot at her and she managed to escape to her room and hid in the adjoining bathroom. A gun man found Dudman, shot at the floor and he also ran to his room. The gunman shot twice at his door, but he was unhurt. There were more gunshots. Malcolm Caldwell was subsequently located dead on the floor of the guest house. Nearby was the body of a gunman who Becker thought may be the same Khmer who had pointed a gun at her. This death was an alleged suicide. [84]

In 1977, François Ponchaud published his book, *Cambodia Year Zero*, which detailed the horrors the Khmer Rouge inflicted on the Cambodian population. At the end of the book Ponchaud asked, 'How many of those who say they are unreservedly in support of the Khmer Revolution would consent to endure one hundredth part of the present suffering of the Cambodian people?' [85] A year after the book was originally published in French, Malcolm Caldwell, Pol Pot's apologist, suffered the same fate as a large proportion of the Cambodian people.

On December 25, two days after Malcolm Caldwell was assassinated, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and by January 7, 1979 Phnom Penh was under their control. The despotic and murderous regime of Pol Pot came to an end. [86]

Who was responsible for the murder of Caldwell remains a subject of debate. Radio Democratic Kampuchea reported that the murder of Caldwell was 'a political crime committed by the enemy of the Kampuchean revolution aiming at opposing the

activities of the sincere friends of Democratic Kampuchea the world over in order to prevent them from spreading the influence and prestige of the Kampuchean revolution.’ [87] A Cambodian diplomatic source speculated that a pro-Vietnam anti-government group might have carried out the murder. [88]

The Vietnamese denied responsibility and laid blame for the killing on the Cambodian government. Wilfred Burchett, an Australian communist, broadcast on Radio Hanoi of his conviction ‘that Dr. Caldwell was murdered by the Cambodian authorities because he had discovered some facts and had probably made his views known.’ However, the Sunday Telegraph reported, ‘This is discounted by Dr. Caldwell’s colleagues in London. They say he had a list of names about whose fate he wished to inquire, but was completely in support of the Pol Pot government.’ [89] But giving weight to Burchett’s theory was that whilst in Cambodia, he privately told those he travelled with that he did not believe ‘some anti-Vietnamese claims of the Cambodian authorities.’ [90] Caldwell was supportive of both the Vietnamese and Cambodian regimes and believed that the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict was ‘detrimental to the broader interests of Third World liberation struggles.’ [91] Moreover, Caldwell noted in his diary that he was not sure if some of the scenes he witnessed in Cambodia were ‘spontaneous or staged’; according to Dudman, he said that something he saw on his trip was a ‘charade.’ [92] But Becker dismissed any suggestion that Caldwell changed his mind about Pol Pot during the visit. She was emphatic: ‘He did not. He regularly sided with the Khmer Rouge in arguments.’ Becker added that Caldwell, ‘refused to discuss Vietnam and he brushed away Khmer Rouge suggestions that he openly sided with Cambodia in its war with Vietnam.’ [93] Dudman also confirmed that Caldwell had made no mention of any disagreement with Pol Pot subsequent to his meeting with him. [94]

It can however be noted that Caldwell’s brother, David Caldwell wrote a letter to the *Guardian* in 1982 where he said that the last time he had spoken to Malcolm was ‘a few days before his departure for Kampuchea.’ According to David Caldwell, Malcolm assured him of his ‘determination to seek out the truth about the Pol Pot regime.’ Noting that ‘this can never now be proved,’ David Caldwell believed that this is exactly what Malcolm did but that ‘(a) he dared not admit this to either Becker or Dudman while still in Kampuchea, and (b) he intended to publicise his information on his return to the UK.’ [95] This claim from Caldwell’s brother can be considered in the light of the fact that Caldwell’s personal notebooks that contained ‘copious observations’ made on his trip to Cambodia including notes on his visit to Pol Pot, contained ‘nothing derogatory.’ [96]

## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

In late 1981, a Japanese newswire reported that two signed 'confessions' by the alleged murderers of Caldwell were housed in a Cambodian prison that Pol Pot's regime used for political prisoners. According to this news report, the confessions to the murder were dated January 5, 1979, the date the alleged assassins were themselves killed. The instructions for the murder of Caldwell were given by Son Sen, the deputy premier in charge of national defence. Son Sen's younger brother, who was a high ranking foreign ministry official, both planned the attack and gave instructions for it to be carried out. The news report explains: 'At the time of his assassination, deputy premier Son Sen had reportedly been involved in a power conflict with Pol Pot and deputy premier Ieng Sary. Son Sen was then demoted in power raking and eliminated from the five-man supreme power body of the regime.' [97]

As these confessions were likely obtained under torture, it is likely that they are what the regime wanted the captured men to say, as opposed to the truth. Elizabeth Becker believed the 'confessions' were 'suspect, full of factual errors and dubious reasoning.' However, whilst unreliable, Stephen Heder, who examined the documents, did believe them to be authentic. One of the confessors, 'the Contemptible Peoun,' said that it did not matter which of the foreign guests were assassinated – any one would do to discredit Pol Pot. 'The Contemptible Chhaan,' the other confessor, said, 'It would be enough to attack the English guest, because the English guest had written in support of our party and the Kampuchean people for a long period of time already . . . We must absolutely succeed in attacking this English guest in order that the American guests would write about it and disseminate the information to the world that the Kampuchean revolution was not loyal to its friends in the world.' As Becker notes, the relevance of these confessions is that the Vietnamese can be ruled out as the killers. If the regime by this time still wanted to implicate the Vietnamese as they had with their immediate reaction, the 'confessions' from 'the Contemptible Chhaan' and 'the Contemptible Peoun' would have been that they were Vietnamese agents. [98]

The journalist Donald Kirk, writing in *The New Leader*, took a different track. He was of the opinion that there was 'a considerable gap between the ideologues and the slaughterers,' stating that 'Pol Pot and his close associates were out of touch with the movement they unleashed. The actual killers were remote, anonymous figures who had been totally denied the riches and comforts of the colonial and postcolonial periods.' Kirk continued: 'During the time Pol Pot was acquiring the trappings of Marxism-Leninism in Paris, they were building up a personal, visceral

hatred toward anyone with a bare modicum of money and education. Revolution presented an opportunity to avenge long-simmering grievances.’ [99]

There have been various other theories. *The Economist* mentioned the possibility that Caldwell ‘was killed by an anti-government guerrilla.’ [100] The new leadership of Cambodia after the end of the Pol Pot regime believed ‘the assassination of Caldwell was a crime by the whole Pol Pot regime.’ [101] There was a theory, emanating from a Khmer Rouge inquiry, that it was a lone gun man, an angry guard who was having problems in his love life and expressed his anger by murdering Caldwell and then committing suicide. British intelligence believed that the murder of Caldwell was carried out on Pol Pot’s orders. Even Pol Pot himself had a theory. According to his biographer, Philip Short, he ‘told aides he believed that Dudman was the killer. The American was a CIA agent, he said, and had murdered Caldwell to discredit the regime.’ Short’s own view of the ‘likeliest explanation’ was that Caldwell was murdered by a ‘Vietnamese commando unit’ because ‘no one else had a comparable interest in showing up Khmer Rouge incompetence and no one else was as well-placed to do so.’ [102] David Chandler, a biographer of Pol Pot, thought the likely guilty party were ‘opponents of Pol Pot’ who carried out the murder ‘to embarrass the regime.’ Chandler also suggests it worth considering the possibility ‘that Caldwell was a casualty in a personal feud among low-ranking cadre.’ [103] Richard Dudman suspects that those responsible were ‘anti-Pol Pot agents’ who were not pleased with Pol Pot’s effort to ‘begin opening his regime to the world.’ [104]

In 2003, Alan Scott-Moncrieff, made the film, ‘The Angry Skies’ that claimed Pol Pot was responsible for the murder. A high-ranking official who was interviewed for the film said that the meeting between Caldwell and Pol Pot was recorded and when the meeting was over, Ieng Sary came into the room and told Pol Pot that too much had been said and that Caldwell had to be eliminated. When asked to comment on this theory, Elizabeth Becker thought that it unlikely. ‘It was an extremely serious decision to kill him and allow us to go back and tell the story and a simple interview does not cut it. Their decisions were based on much more realpolitik.’ [105]

In 2008, the Scottish newspaper, the *Sunday Herald*, published a story that also claimed that Pol Pot was responsible for the murder of Caldwell. As the paper states, ‘According to the classified documents, journalist Wilfred Burchett had seen an official Cambodian report a year [after the murder] which said: “Caldwell was murdered by members of the National Security Force personnel on the instructions

## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

of the Pol Pot government.” The article repeated the view, dismissed by Becker, that Burchett had expressed previously -that Caldwell may have changed his mind on the Pol Pot regime and that Pol Pot had him murdered to prevent him writing critically on the country. [106]

This author tends to agree with those who claim that Pol Pot was responsible for the murder of Caldwell, but presents a different motive. Pol Pot's main concern at the time was the conflict with the neighbouring Vietnam and he wanted to convince the world that Cambodia was under attack from that country. The visit of Becker, Dudman and Caldwell to Cambodia was sure to get press coverage not least because two of three were there as journalists. In my opinion, Pol Pot believed the best way of demonstrating to the world that Vietnam was a serious threat would be if at least one of the visitors were killed. Killing Becker or Dudman would not have benefitted Pol Pot (he probably realised that he would be the prime suspect for one of their murders). Alternatively, if Caldwell was assassinated, then the world may see Vietnam as the aggressors. In any event, Becker was surely accurate when she stated in her book on Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge revolution, ‘Malcolm Caldwell's death was caused by the madness of the regime he openly admired.’ [107]

### V

Despite the fact that Caldwell championed Pol Pot's genocidal regime, his death was a great loss for some. Bob Hering and Ernst Utrecht, who saw to it that some of his work was posthumously published, argued that Caldwell's ‘whole academic work was devoted to the discovery of the truth and the defence of the oppressed,’ and that his death was ‘an irreparable loss for the liberation movements of the third world.’ [108] The editorial board of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, a journal still in existence that Caldwell founded, said that Caldwell was ‘an intellectual of considerable calibre and a committed scholar.’ They denounced *The Times*, *the Daily Telegraph* and other newspapers that had attacked Caldwell's work as ‘the reactionary press.’ His death, they claimed, was ‘a tragedy for the Left’ and ‘his many books and articles combine theory and practice in a way that will inspire readers and supporters for many years to come.’ [109] An obituary in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* referred to Caldwell as a ‘tireless critic of imperialism’ and an ‘indefatigable activist’ whose death ‘left a huge gap that cannot easily be filled.’ [110]

After his death, a memorial meeting attended by hundreds was held in his honour in London. [111] Numerous messages of condolences were sent. Labour Member of Parliament Joan Lester wrote expressing her regret of the death of ‘a true fighter for socialism.’ [112] The Socialist Workers Party said that whilst they had differences with Caldwell, they mourned the death ‘of a courageous fighter against imperialism.’ [113] The Revolutionary Communist League of Britain said that Caldwell’s death was ‘a tragedy for all the peoples of Indo-China, and especially the Kampuchean people.’ [114] The Cambodian specialists, Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua, wrote that ‘Malcolm’s scholarship and intellectual honesty, and his genuine enthusiasm and sacrifice for the poor and exploited will always be a constant source of inspiration to us.’ [115] Noam Chomsky wrote from the USA that ‘Malcolm Caldwell was a fine scholar, whose work was distinguished by integrity and passion.’ Chomsky added, ‘There can be no more fitting memorial to Malcolm ... than the willingness of others to take on the tasks that he confronted.’ [116]

A sympathetic obituary in the *Guardian*, noted that with Caldwell’s death, ‘Cambodia has lost one of the very few people in the West who were sympathetic to its revolution.’ John Gittings, who wrote the obituary, compared Caldwell to Noam Chomsky, ‘a lone heretic in the academic world of enormous personal charm who was respected internationally for views which many colleagues failed to understand.’ Gittings concluded that Caldwell’s work would ‘undoubtedly’ be ‘better appreciated after his death.’ [117]

The *Daily Telegraph* was more on the mark. In an editorial following Caldwell’s death, they noted he was ‘Intelligent and, by all accounts, charming’ but lamented that ‘he lent his energy and scholarship to the defence of one of the darkest totalitarian regimes of even this totalitarian century.’ They continued: ‘Few horrors of the new rulers of Cambodia seemed too vast for him either to deny that they were happening or to insist that they had all been exaggerated, or to imply that the victims had it coming to them anyway.’ They did not doubt his sincerity but noted ‘his activities were all the more appalling because of his sincerity.’ The editorial concluded, ‘no doubt his murderers thought his death necessary to their revolution. Malcolm Caldwell’s life thus reaches a dreadfully appropriate apotheosis.’ [118]

Malcolm Caldwell was not the only one who whitewashed the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. As Sophal Ear commented, along with Caldwell, there was Laura Summers, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, George C. Hildebrand and Gareth Porter,



## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

as well as Torben Retbøll who were counted among the writers that 'romanticised the Khmer revolution.' [119] David Hawk of the Cambodia Documentation Commission noted, the persistence of Caldwell, Chomsky and others who defended Pol Pot 'diverted attention and refocused discussion from "how should Khmer Rouge bloodlust best be exposed and protested" to "whether or not the refugee accounts were exaggerated and were the accounts of largely politically motivated propaganda."' [120]

'The Truth is,' as Bernard Levin commented in *The Times*, 'there is a Caldwell – or there are several Caldwell's – for every tyrant, every murderer, every oppressor or torturer, who acts in the name of a political creed.' [121] With the behaviour of those on the left who currently support genocidal organisations in the Middle East, Levin's comment is as true today as when he wrote it over thirty years ago.

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## Democratiya 16 | Spring/Summer 2009

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### Notes

- [1] Easey 1979, p. 245.
- [2] Bell and Seldon 1979.
- [3] 'New journal for Left on sale next week,' 1970.
- [4] Windschuttle 2006.
- [5] Becker 1988, p. 427.
- [6] Caldwell 1967.
- [7] Hawkins 1998.
- [8] In this essay, for the period under Pol Pot's leadership, Cambodia and Democratic Kampuchea are used as interchangeable terms.
- [9] Caldwell 1979a, p. 94.

## EZRA | Malcolm Caldwell: Pol Pot's Apologist

- [10] Caldwell 1978b, p. 284.
- [11] 'Miscellany,' 1966.
- [12] 'Miscellany,' 1967.
- [13] Easey 1979, p. 245.
- [14] Caldwell 1970, p. 63.
- [15] Caldwell 1969-70.
- [16] Gunn and Lee 1991, p. 75.
- [17] Ear 1995, p. 33.
- [18] Bell and Seldon 1979.
- [19] Karney 1989, p. 13.
- [20] Tan 1984.
- [21] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 40.
- [22] Quinn 1989, p. 183.
- [23] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 203.
- [24] Barron and Paul 1977, pp. 66-71, p. 82.
- [25] Quinn 1989, p. 190.
- [26] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 77.
- [27] For numerous examples, see throughout Barron and Paul 1977 and Quinn 1989.
- [28] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 76.
- [29] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 114.
- [30] Quinn 1989, p. 202.
- [31] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 147.
- [32] Yathay with Man 1987, p. 148.
- [33] Becker 1978b.
- [34] Quinn 1989, p. 193.
- [35] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 21.
- [36] Barron and Paul 1977, pp. 135-37.
- [37] Hazelhurst 1978.
- [38] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 117.
- [39] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 138.
- [40] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 141.
- [41] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 148.
- [42] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 158.
- [43] Etcheson 2005, pp. 117-19.
- [44] Caldwell 1978a.
- [45] Quinn 1989, p. 198.
- [46] Harris 1977.
- [47] Caldwell 1979a, p. 55.

- [48] Caldwell 1979a, p. 50.
- [49] Caldwell 1979a, p. 54.
- [50] Caldwell 1979a, p. 61.
- [51] Caldwell 1979a, p. 57, p. 58, p. 59, p. 61.
- [52] Ross 1987.
- [53] Caldwell 1979a, p. 103.
- [54] Caldwell 1979a, p. 51.
- [55] Barron and Paul 1977, p. 198.
- [56] Caldwell 1979a, p. 54.
- [57] Caldwell 1979a, p. 77.
- [58] Caldwell and Tan 1973, p. xiii.
- [59] Osborne 1973.
- [60] Osborne 1973.
- [61] Cady 1974.
- [62] Bell and Seldon 1979.
- [63] Caldwell 1977b.
- [64] Cited by Heuveline 1998 p. 59.
- [65] Sliwinski, 1995, pp. 41-48 (NB, the author would like to thank Paul Bogdanor for providing this source.) See also Margolin 1999, p. 590.
- [66] Caldwell 1977a.
- [67] Levin 1978.
- [68] Caldwell 1976.
- [69] Bell and Seldon 1979.
- [70] Bell and Seldon 1979.
- [71] Becker 1988, p. 323, p.401.
- [72] Kiernan 2002, p. 443.
- [73] Nossiter 1978.
- [74] Hering and Utrecht 1979, p. 8.
- [75] Ear 1995, p. 22.
- [76] Caldwell 1979b, p. 334.
- [77] Chandler 2008, p. 274.
- [78] Becker 1988, p. 404.
- [79] 'Silence, Subterfuge and Surveillance,' 1979.
- [80] Becker 1988, p. 406.
- [81] Becker 1988, pp.401-9.
- [82] Kiernan 2002, pp. 444-45.
- [83] Becker 1988, pp.425-27.
- [84] Becker 1988, pp. 427-29. See also, Becker 1978a.

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- [85] Ponchaud 1978 p. 215.
- [86] Becker 1988, p. 431.
- [87] 'Radio Democratic Kampuchea on murder of British professor,' 1978. This statement was an official one from the Democratic Kampuchean Press Agency – a copy of the press announcement dated 25 December 1978 is available in the J.A.M. Caldwell file in the SOAS archive.
- [88] 'Western Visitor Slain in Cambodia,' 1978.
- [89] Dobson 1979.
- [90] Chanda 1979.
- [91] Kiernan 2002, p. 446n28.
- [92] Kiernan 2002, p. 445.
- [93] Becker 1982a.
- [94] Day 1998.
- [95] 'Letters to the Editor,' 1982.
- [96] Hillmore 1979.
- [97] Japan Economic Newswire, 1981. NB. In June 1997, Pol Pot denounced Son Sen and his wife as traitors and ordered them to be killed. They, and thirteen others close to Son Sen, were assassinated. According to information Pol Pot gave to an interviewer, he had only ordered the murder of Son Sen and his wife. He declared the others murders 'a mistake.' See Short 2004, p. 440.
- [98] Becker 1982a. See also Becker 1982b.
- [99] Kirk 1986.
- [100] 'Cambodia: Into the heartland,' 1979.
- [101] Japan Economic Newswire, 1981.
- [102] Short 2004, pp. 394-95.
- [103] Chandler 2000, p. 155.
- [104] Dudman 1997.
- [105] Puttick 2003.
- [106] 'Pol Pot murdered Scot in Cambodia,' 2008.
- [107] Becker 1988, p. 430.
- [108] Hering and Utrecht 1979, p. 10.
- [109] Editorial Board, Journal of Contemporary Asia, 1978.
- [110] Bell and Seldon 1979.
- [111] *Malcolm Caldwell 1931-1978: A Tribute and a bibliography*, 1979, p. 7.
- [112] *Malcolm Caldwell 1931-1978: A Tribute and a bibliography*, 1979, p. 50.
- [113] *Malcolm Caldwell 1931-1978: A Tribute and a bibliography*, 1979, pp. 51-2.
- [114] *Malcolm Caldwell 1931-1978: A Tribute and a bibliography*, 1979, p. 51.
- [115] *Malcolm Caldwell 1931-1978: A Tribute and a bibliography*, 1979, p. 63.
- [116] *Malcolm Caldwell 1931-1978: A Tribute and a bibliography*, 1979, p. 60.
- [117] Gittings 1978.

[118] 'Editorial,' 1978.

[119] Ear 1995.

[120] Collier and Horowitz 1989, pp. 254-67.

[121] Levin 1978.