

Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple. By Rebecca Moore. (Westport, Conn., Praeger Publishers, 2009. xi + 179 pp. \$34.95)

Thirty years after 918 people died in the November 18, 1978, mass suicide/murder at Jonestown, Guyana, what have we learned? Initial accounts depicted Peoples Temple leader Jim Jones as a demagogue who commanded brainwashed followers to kill their children and themselves. Horrific images of men, women, and children sprawled about the agricultural commune's central pavilion indicated obedience. At an airfield, members killed a congressman, three reporters, and a defector. In Guyana's capital, a mother slit her children's throats, then her own.

In this important book, Rebecca Moore offers a reappraisal of the tragedy. She traces the demise of Peoples Temple, reviews the literature on Jonestown, and follows survivors to the present. Instead of demonizing the group and labeling it a cult, as others have done, however, she humanizes members and positions the movement within American religious and political culture.

People's Temple began in 1954 in Indianapolis as a Christian church. Influenced by his impoverished childhood and Father Divine's interracial ministry, Jones attracted black and white members with his commitment to social equality and racial harmony. The church ran nursing homes, opened free restaurants, fought segregation, counseled alcohol and drug addicts, and provided clothing and employment services. By the mid-1960s, Jones had abandoned Christianity for belief in his own divinity, psychic phenomena, and communism, and he had moved his flock to Ukiah, California. In 1972 the Temple made San Francisco its headquarters. Jones cavorted with politicians and championed liberal causes. He also faked healings, abused followers, and demanded that paychecks and Social Security checks be signed over to the community. Some defected and alarmed outsiders with their stories. Fearful of negative publicity and increasingly unstable mentally, Jones fled to Guyana in 1977. Members who followed him cleared trees, planted vegetables, formed schools, and heard a constant barrage of messages

from Jones that the United States wanted to destroy them. Isolated in the jungle, they practiced and then enacted “revolutionary suicide” to declare their conviction that the world was corrupt.

Moore convincingly argues that Peoples Temple, at least until its climactic ending, was not an aberration. It borrowed from the Social Gospel, Pentecostalism, black religion, and communism. It paralleled other new religious movements in the 1960s and 1970s and reflected the era’s countercultural, anti-capitalistic, and multiracial values. Although driven by a paranoid leader, most members were not brain-washed fanatics but individuals intent on creating a just society.

Understanding Jonestown relies on a vast collection of primary and secondary sources, including audiotapes of Jonestown life, FBI reports, survivor narratives, and media accounts, much of which can be found at the website *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (<http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>). This digital collection, started by Moore in 1998, provides an invaluable companion piece for those who want to teach and study Jonestown.

Seeking understanding of Peoples Temple has been Moore’s personal as well as professional quest. She lost two sisters and a nephew at Jonestown: Carolyn was Jones’s mistress; Kimo was their son; and Annie was Jones’s nurse. Weaving in her family’s tragedy adds insight and value. This empathetic narrative successfully contextualizes Peoples Temple within its time, even while the mass murder/suicide defies full comprehension.

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