



Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple: The History of the Most Notorious Cult and Mass Murder-Suicide in American History

Charles River Editors

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- *Includes pictures
- *Includes accounts of the cult and the massacre
- *Includes Jim Jones' quotes about his life and the massacre
- *Includes online resources and a bibliography for further reading
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"We didn't commit suicide; we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world." - Jim Jones

The United States has never had a shortage of cults based on religious teachings and charismatic leaders, but perhaps none are as infamous as Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple, which remain notorious for the mass murder-suicide event in Jonestown, Guyana on November 18, 1978, during which nearly 900 people drank cyanide-laced Flavor Aid, including nearly 300 children. To this day, "drinking the Kool-Aid" is a popular phrase in America to refer to people who blindly follow a person or idea without thought, and the event at Jonestown was the deadliest deliberate act involving Americans in history until the 9/11 attacks. In addition to those deaths, Peoples Temple members also murdered a handful of others on the same day, including journalists, a member trying to leave Jonestown, and Congressman Leo Ryan.

Almost from birth, Jones believed he had a higher calling, and after being immersed in various Christian churches and both political and religious doctrine, Jones founded the Peoples Temple in Indianapolis in 1955, when he was still in his mid-20s. While that might have been an unusual course in life for most Americans, Jones was hardly the first to take such a path, and indeed, his group expanded at a remarkable pace in the 1960s, which included a move to California after Jones claimed to foresee a nuclear attack on Chicago and the destruction of Indianapolis. By the 1970s, services at the group's Temple attracted thousands of visitors, even as Jones increasingly criticized Christianity and the Bible.

Of course, none of the previous locations earned the notoriety of Jonestown, which the Peoples Temple established in Guyana along the northern coast of South America in the mid-'70s. Meant to be a "socialist paradise" and "sanctuary" from America's "creeping fascism," over 900 members headed to the new settlement by 1978. That November, Congressman Leo Ryan arrived in Jonestown to investigate various claims about the Peoples Temple and met with some members who wished to defect from the group. In response, Jones issued a tape decrying outsiders' efforts and directing members to commit suicide, and when some pushed back, he chided them: "Stop these hysterics. This is not the way for people who are socialists or communists to die. No way for us to die. We must die with some dignity."

Survivors described the ensuing event, during which children drank the poison first and were followed by parents who lay down to die as a family. Others indicated that Jones had simulated mass suicides on a couple of other occasions before to test members' loyalty as well, so people remained unsure whether the event was real, even as Jones told them, "I tell you, I don't care how many screams you hear, I don't care how many anguished cries...death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life. If you knew what was ahead

of you – if you knew what was ahead of you, you'd be glad to be stepping over tonight." Although many began to worry once they saw the poison take effect in others, most of those who drank the poison were dead within 5 minutes, while Jones apparently shot himself in the head.

Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple: The History of the Most Notorious Cult and Mass Murder-Suicide in American History chronicles the notorious cult and the mass murder-suicide. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Peoples Temple like never before.



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