

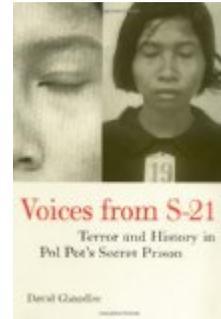
H-Net Reviews

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David Chandler. *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xiii + 238 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-22247-2; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22005-8.

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Toward Understanding S-21: Inhumanity at Its Worst

The twentieth century is recognized as the century of genocide, involving an unprecedented and monstrous death figure—187 million people—across the globe. One of these genocides played out in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, in which approximately 1.7 million people (or 21 percent of the country's population) lost their lives. Making the list of the "World's Worst Massacres,"[1] it was one of the worst human tragedies of this last century. The events surrounding the Cambodian genocide have also been extensively researched and covered since it occurred in the context of the cold war, of which the United States was a central part. Major academic/research institutions, such as Yale University, have taken it up as part of its genocide research projects.

While all genocides (or democides—mass murder committed by governments) have certain common characteristics, each have unique or salient dimensions. With some genocides, wanton massacres and rapes also occurred over prolonged periods of time. In others, massacres and rapes were widespread, but concentrated within a short time span, such as the genocide in 1971 in Bangladesh (former East Pakistan), where approximately 3 million people were killed, 250,000 women were raped, and 10 million people were made refugees within a 9-month period by the Pakistan army. In certain cases, torturing people while holding them in prisons or concentration camps over a long period was common. In Cambodia, not just prison torture, but making inmates confess to their alleged crimes and preserving the docu-

ments of these confessions became salient aspects of the genocide. It is in this respect that David Chandler's book *Voices from S-21* occupies a special place in genocide research.

While the story of the Cambodian secret prison in Tuol Sleng during 1975-1978 is all too well known, Chandler's book represents a systematic case study of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal campaign. The code name of the prison was S-21, where thousands of men, women, and even children were brought for interrogation and torture and then executed at a nearby killing pit. Most people were killed on the spot for "counter-revolutionary crimes," which included matters as frivolous as talking out of turn, being educated, incest, extramarital affairs, flirtation or falling in love, or wearing eyeglasses, for example. Only those detainees who were considered relevant for interrogation were sent to S-21. These people numbered 14,000, of which only a handful came out alive, and these survivors provided critically valuable information about and insight into S-21. This focused study of S-21, based on first-hand sources and witness accounts, provides a better understanding of the secretive and violent mode of thinking and actions of the Khmer Rouge.

With his past diplomatic service in Cambodia, fluency in the native language and already several books on Cambodia to his credit, the author is a renowned authority on the subject. While he has used secondary sources as well, his background enabled him to dig deeply

into the pertinent research material and construct a compelling portrait of what transpired in S-21. His primary goal was to study “S-21 and its archive on their own terms ... particularly as a means of entering the collective mentality of the Khmer Rouge and also as a way of coming to grips with a frightening, heavily documented institution” (p. ix). Based on archival resources Chandler himself had gathered over the years, as well as other pertinent material available in Cambodia and elsewhere, Chandler’s book offers an engaging portrait of the inner workings and thoughts of those who spearheaded the genocidal campaign.

The first part of the book provides the reader with the pertinent details about how people ended up in S-21, how they were interrogated and how answers were extracted from them in an inhumane environment of torture. Chandler’s research and documentation of S-21’s operation and experience is a vital source for getting to the depth of this horror. Historians as well as genocide researchers would find Chandler’s work extraordinary—a model worth emulating in studies of other genocides.

After discussing the historical background of how S-21 came to the fore of world attention, in chapter 2, Chandler provides a general narrative about S-21 as a “Total Institution” and “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (p. 14).

Chapter 3, “Choosing the Enemies,” provides an account of how, intoxicated by Maoist “doctrine of permanent revolution,” the leadership of Cambodia was paranoid about counter-revolutionary “enemies” (p. 41). They thought and imagined perceived enemies who were actively plotting to undermine or subvert the revolution everywhere. Their bigger concern was the “internal enemies,” who were posing as revolutionaries, but in reality working against the cause. To free the country of such “sickness,” the leadership embarked on the Purge of 1975. The initial thrust of the purge was to quickly liquidate the suspected counter-revolutionaries. Gradually, the mode changed to seek out and detain the suspects for interrogations and extract confessions. The latter phase included purging the diplomats and intellectuals, even at the level of the Central Committee, who in turn confessed and implicated hundreds more. By 1977, Pol Pot shifted focus away from Cambodia’s economic development under the Four-Year Plan to the “enemies” of the plan who were allegedly sabotaging its development in the northwestern

region of the country. Ultimately, the Vietnamese invasion brought about the collapse of the Cambodian regime and prevented further genocide and government repression.

In the next chapter, “Framing the Question,” Chandler proceeds to shed light on how the detainees/prisoners who were brought to S-21 faced their interrogations. The process of interrogation was influenced by the practices of other Communist regimes. However, interrogation is an art that has matured throughout history. Except for regular police interrogation in civilized democracies where rule of law and due process are well established, torture and interrogation have been almost inseparable. Things have not changed a great deal, as exemplified by scandals involving U.S. military in Abu Goraib and Guantanamo Bay.

In the case of S-21, the interrogators presented themselves as already knowledgeable of the “truth,” so their main task was to “coax and terrify the prisoners” until they confessed and “produce a document that coincided with” what the Party claimed to already know (p. 79). Therefore, an ordinary confession did not get anyone “off the hook.” As they did not know the rules of the game, the detainees had to play the cruel guessing game as to what crime they were to confess. Some of the common themes of confession were to implicate oneself for subversive counter-revolutionary activities and also implicate associates. Many of them had to confess that they were either Vietnamese or CIA agents. Of course, even the interrogators were under pressure as the “concealed” rules or goals of interrogation were frequently changed by the party leadership.

Despite all the punishment and torture, some of the confessions display genuine courage and conviction. In some cases, the prisoners made statements asserting their innocence and accusing the regime of depriving people of “all popular democratic rights and freedoms” (p 100).

Chapter 5, “Forcing the Answers,” is an extremely difficult chapter for it brings together the details of how routine torture compelled the prisoners into making confessions the way S-21 officials wanted. The reader may need to apply a degree of detachment to read through the prisoners’ detailed horrors. There was not just violence, but also sadism. As the interrogators’ notes reveal, the torture was to be used not only during interrogation, but continued after completing the documentation related to each case. In other words, in many cases the interrogators were going to torture anyway. Typical to most such

cases of genocide, the interrogators subsequently on trial claimed that they committed “crimes of obedience,” i.e., they were merely carrying out the orders of their superiors or they would have been subjected to retributions.

The final chapter attempts an explanation of S-21 that, according to the author, “might be useful to survivors, historians, and readers” (p. 143). While on one hand recognizing the challenge of not making the suffering of the victims “bearable to others,” and on the other being unduly detached from the terror and inhumanity, Chandler makes it clear that some balance has to be struck if we want to extract some pertinent lessons for future use (p. 144). Drawing on a host of comparative theories about history, genocides, social psychology, and other pertinent disciplines, Chandler attempts to shed light on some underlying issues. Pointing to experimental studies in the United States, Chandler observes that in the context of a dehumanized environment even ordinary people gradually showed insensitivity to human suffering and torture.

There is a vast field of literature on genocides and crimes against humanity that study various genocides separately as well as comparatively. The same is also true

about the genocide of Cambodia and one of its components, S-21. Chandler has tried to draw on the related theories and critique those in the context of trying to understand S-21. However, quite understandably, there is nothing new in terms of explanation specific to this genocide or S-21. The author did not attempt to offer any synthesis of various theories, studies, and explanation about other genocides and apply them to Cambodia or S-21. In conclusion, Chandler underscores an essential, underlying truth and reality: “To find the source of the evil that was enacted at S-21 on a daily basis, we need to look no further than ourselves” (p. 155). Some might find this conclusion rather banal, others provocatively profound. Most humans are adept at blame-shifting games, lacking a self-critical attitude. We are often all too unaware of our own potential for evil.[2]

Notes

[1]. Greg Brecht, “World’s Worst Massacres,” *Whole Earth Review* 2 (1987): p. 74.

[2]. James Walker’s *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) can be a useful supplementary reading to better appreciate Chandler’s conclusion.

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