

book that should be read by analysts and policy-makers trying to understand what makes Australia tick.

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***Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison.* By David Chandler.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 238pp.

Anyone who visits Toul Sleng museum will undoubtedly be moved by the degree and scale of atrocities committed in this secret torture centre during the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. It is not just the blood stains on the floor, nor the torture implements on display, nor, indeed, the map of Cambodia made of human skulls. It is also the extraordinary *documentation* of violence that took place at this former high school in suburban Phnom Penh between June 1976 and January 1979. In one section of the centre, the walls are covered with stark black and white photos of the faces of those about to be executed: men, women, and children — some with blindfolds, some bearing the marks of torture, most wearing numbered tags. All have about-to-die looks of despair, horror, or incomprehension. These were some of the more than 14,000 inmates who passed through Toul Sleng before being taken to the nearby Choeung Ek “killing field”. Upstairs, in another section of the centre, can be found row upon row of filed photographs and documents, including autobiographies and “confessions” of the inmates of what the Khmer Rouge code-named S-21, or *santebal*.

With assistance from Vietnamese and East German specialists, the Toul Sleng archive was assembled in the 1980s by the regime that replaced the Khmer Rouge in January 1979. The 7,000 black and white photographs and negatives were methodically cleaned, restored, and catalogued in 1994 by the Photo Archive Group, and a selection of them appear in the haunting *The Killing Fields*, edited by the two American photographers responsible, Chris Riley and Doug Nivan, and published in 1996. The documents were photographed by Cornell University onto 213 reels of film. These primary sources are what historian David Chandler drew on to prepare his thought-provoking *Voices of S-21*. Between 1993 and 1998, he examined more than 1,000 confession texts,

scanned hundreds more, and read all the available administrative materials from S-21.

As to why S-21 produced such voluminous documentation, Chandler offers six possible explanations: this provided proof of hard work; the administrators were genuinely curious about betrayals of their “beloved Party” and hoped to plumb the depths of counter-revolutionary schemes; the prisoners spun out their confessions to avoid or postpone torture or execution; and fourthly, he accepts Steve Heder’s suggestion that the documentation was to provide material for a history of the ruling Communist Party. Chandler’s final two reasons are that reading confessions and execution reports would have made the “upper brothers” feel temporarily secure (p. 50), and that, in Cambodian tradition, writing was highly valued, as it was often limited to priests and their students, and held secret religious power (p. 105).

Chandler regarded a study of S-21 documents 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). In his afterword to the book, *The Killing Fields*, Chandler proposes several explanations for the Khmer Rouge’s treatment of S-21 inmates: in precolonial times, Cambodian regimes had shown little, if any, mercy for citizens accused of treason; a prisoner’s innocence was not assumed (indeed, “prisoner” in Cambodian, *neak thos*, means “guilty person”); the previous Lon Nol regime regarded the Khmer Rouge as *thmil*, “non-people”, and outside Buddhist civilization; and finally, preparing self-critical autobiographies was a feature of Communist Party meetings throughout the world, and the Party controlled its members’ lives, in part, by owning their life stories (pp.104–5).

In *Voices of S-21*, Chandler goes further than in his earlier writings, and adds that working at S-21 required reverence for authority and unquestioning obedience, and for this the authorities chose young, malleable, idealistic workers. A second element was the extremes the authorities employed to dehumanize prisoners, allowing the violence to be more extreme and more acceptable to those employing or overseeing it. Thirdly, to illustrate the Khmer Rouge leadership’s obsession with eliminating “enemies”, Chandler cites the Party’s motto, “One hand is for production, the other is for beating the enemy” (p. 41), and the adage, “It is better to arrest ten people by mistake than to let one guilty person go free” (p. 44).

Chandler also explores the identity of S-21. Was it Cambodian? Was it a communist facility? And/or was it based on one or more foreign models? The Cambodianess derived from a deep-rooted culture of exploitation, protection, obedience, and dependency (p. 149).

Furthermore, Chandler reminds us that the bas-reliefs at twelfth-century Angkor Wat depict a “hell” similar to S-21 (p. 121); that the Cambodian word for torture, *tearunikam*, means “fierce”, “savage”, “cruelty” and “barbarism” (p. 116); and that “enemies” were subhuman (p. 150). Was S-21 communist? Certainly, Khmer Rouge leaders could have been influenced by policies and practices in other communist countries, notably the Moscow show trials and purges in the 1930s, and re-education campaigns in Maoist China and Communist Vietnam. Was S-21 foreign-influenced? Chandler’s comparisons with similar institutions are extensive: Nazi Germany, Argentina, Spain, Iran, Indonesia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, to name a few. However, as Chandler says: “no precise or overriding foreign model for S-21 can be identified” (p. 7). Finally, he determines that S-21 was, to varying degrees, Cambodian, communist and foreign (p. 150) but, “As an amalgam, it was unique ... Its inflexibility and totality, its isolation ... and the masses of documentation assembled there were without precedent” (p.152).

And Chandler’s conclusion? “None of this violence is surprising, given the wholesale dehumanization of prisoners and the culture of the prison, but it is chilling to see it so dispassionately written down” (p. 136). And his final words: “To find the source of the evil that was enacted at S-21 on a daily basis, we need look no further than ourselves” (p. 155).

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