



Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison

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The horrific torture and execution of hundreds of thousands of Cambodians by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge during the 1970s is one of the century's major human disasters. David Chandler, a world-renowned historian of Cambodia, examines the Khmer Rouge phenomenon by focusing on one of its key institutions, the secret prison outside Phnom Penh known by the code name "S-21." The facility was an interrogation center where more than 14,000 "enemies" were questioned, tortured, and made to confess to counterrevolutionary crimes. Fewer than a dozen prisoners left S-21 alive.

During the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) era, the existence of S-21 was known only to those inside it and a few high-ranking Khmer Rouge officials. When invading Vietnamese troops discovered the prison in 1979, murdered bodies lay strewn about and instruments of torture were still in place. An extensive archive containing photographs of victims, cadre notebooks, and DK publications was also found. Chandler utilizes evidence from the S-21 archive as well as materials that have surfaced elsewhere in Phnom Penh. He also interviews survivors of S-21 and former workers from the prison.

Documenting the violence and terror that took place within S-21 is only part of Chandler's story. Equally important is his attempt to understand what happened there in terms that might be useful to survivors, historians, and the rest of us. Chandler discusses the "culture of obedience" and its attendant dehumanization, citing parallels between the Khmer Rouge executions and the Moscow Show Trials of the 1930s, Nazi genocide, Indonesian massacres in 1965-66, the Argentine military's use of torture in the 1970s, and the recent mass killings in Bosnia and Rwanda. In each of these instances, Chandler shows how turning victims into "others" in a manner that was systematically devaluing and racist made it easier to mistreat and kill them. More than a chronicle of Khmer Rouge barbarism, *Voices from S-21* is also a judicious examination of the psychological dimensions of state-sponsored terrorism that conditions human beings to commit acts of unspeakable brutality.

Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison Details

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Lauren says

Voices from S-21 is an informative, academic (but readable) account of S-21, the Khmer Rouge's secret prison in Phnom Penh where over 14,000 people were tortured, forced to confess to counterrevolutionary crimes, and killed. Chandler reconstructs the prison's grisly history using materials found in the prison's voluminous archives as well as interviews with the few survivors of the camp. Valuably, he also provides historical and psychological context to help us begin to understand how something so terrible could have occurred.

Overall, a worthwhile, lucid read that provides an introduction to a part of history that is all too often forgotten in American school curriculums.

Scott Lapierre says

Incredibly thorough, eye-opening, and horrifying.

"Over time one begins to see the details. On stairway landings, for example, holes have been knocked in the walls so the stairs can be cleaned by sloshing water down the staircases. Below each of these openings on the building exterior one can still see the stains of the blood that ran down the sides, as if the buildings themselves had bled."

Justin says

I read while I was in Cambodia and at the S-22 site, which made it a more visceral experience. A studious book about tortuous events, it's necessarily plodding and unpleasant. I'm glad I read it, but I don't know that I'd evangelize for the work.

I especially appreciated the context of the history of the museum at the site, and at the killing fields: the Vietnamese involvement and propagandistic purposes re-contextualized the museums in Phnom Penh for me.

This book is well-researched and worthwhile.

Andrea says

This was hard to read after spending time at S-21 and the Killing Fields. Pretty sickening stuff.

Igna says

Buku ini pada bagian awalnya begitu menarik karena menyajikan dengan cukup detail tentang apa yang terjadi di dalam S-21, akan tetapi semakin ke belakang ulasannya semakin membosankan, karena penulis terlalu sibuk membuat analisa sejarah, psikologis, dan membandingkan dengan kamp konsentrasi atau penjara sejenis di negara lain.

Walter Burton says

Well written and annotated history of the S21 prison & interrogation center used by the DK to extract confessions before sending good the prisoners to Cheong Ek, Killing Fields.

It takes a look into the people who were were on both sides and ends with a very interesting chapter on what is to be learned this.

Having visited both Toul Sleng & Choeng Ek this book was even more disturbing when taken into the context of the people who survived the Khmer Rouge. No one we met over forty had not been affected by the period of Khmer history.

Matt says

I read this shortly after visiting the S-21 in early 07, and my mind was fresh with the blood-stained floors and rusting chains used to restrain thousands of victims, so it's hard to separate that experience from an objective account of the quality of this book, but, suffice to say---any glimpse, with eyebrows or editing, into what went on at this prison in Cambodia in the late 70's will leave you rattled and in awe of the collective ignorance that the world perpetrated and continues to on atrocities that happen outside of Europe and Africa. The portraits of the victims, meticulously documented by Khmer Rouge captors, displayed in part inside this book, are worth the price of this book alone.

Mark says

After traveling to Cambodia, I wanted to understand the genocide that occurred there and how after everything it could have happened. this is a great book if you are trying to understand man's inhumanity to man in a Cambodian context.

Roderick Vincent says

This book covers one of the lowest points of Cambodian history. It is truly sad and horrific, and this was a

difficult book to read.

While the events and psychology of the Pol Pot regime were well covered, I was a bit disappointed that the "voices" mentioned in the title were for the most part silent. I suppose part of that is understandable since so much was lost, but I think the narrative aspect of this was lost to more of the factual. Comparison between Stalin's regime and China were well done, but this read more like a thesis than the narrative the title advertises.

Charlane Brady says

I feel weird rating this book amazing but it is amazing in an unfathomable way. I visited S-21 in 2002 and I could barely walk after entering the building. The history is numbing. Thousands of men, women and children were tortured, incarcerated and killed. Only seven prisoners who entered survived.

David Chandler does a superb job describing what happened and how it was universal.

Aimee says

This is the book I wish I'd read before visiting S-21 and Choeung Ek. Chandler shaped his analyses on S-21's development and the unspeakable tortures that took place there using scholarly research and interviews with victims and prison guards. This is not a book that you can take in at one sitting--it requires time to process, and the nature of the subject matter is disquieting, to say the least. Chandler's "final thought" reflects a quote from Zygmunt Bauman (a Polish sociologist of Jewish ancestry whose focus has been the Holocaust): "The most frightening news brought about by the Holocaust and what we learned of its perpetrators was not the likelihood that "this" could be done to us, but the idea we could do it."

Wesley Gerrard says

Tuol Sleng or S-21 was the secret prison of the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Comrade Duch and his workers put to death in S-21 over 14000 enemies of the State. These enemies of the party centre were treated like they were subhuman and animals and eventually all prisoners were 'smashed to bits' or annihilated. Like the horrors of the Nazi death camps, the Stalinist Soviet Purges or Mao's Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot spared no sympathy for those that stood in his way. Once transferred to S-21, a prisoner could expect to have to fully denounce any fellow conspirators and confess totally to either real crimes or most often perceived imaginary ones. The use of torture was inevitable and screams from the prisoners kept neighbours in Phnom Penh up all night. Documentation for S-21 was immense and workers had to detail every confession and their actions to appease the Party Centre bosses and give the detainment and ultimate executions a quasi-legal framework. The author does a very thorough study of that evidence that is recovered and has interviewed the few survivors that escaped after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Chandler attempts to explain the inhumanity. His obvious sympathy for the victims extends into attempts to understand the mindset of the guards. The psychological insights are profound and this most disturbing case study serves as a warning to our race over any future mistakes that can be made when places like S-21 spring up and crimes

against humanity are perpetuated. This dark tale of horror is a compelling read and I have given it a five star rating.

Kh?i ??n says

the book is a very good, sharp and detailed pictures of what happened in Toul Sleng, and from that angle, actually reflects very clearly what moved and killed under the Khmer Rouge. For casual readers, it is full of confession and the paranoid atmosphere at the time. For researcher, it is very well written and did the bibliography carefully with a huge number of resources.

Marianne says

This book was a shameful reminder of the possibilities of human existence. Incredibly well researched and given a balanced account of hundreds of frames of reference, it seeks to explain the horrors of Tuol Sleng Prison under the Khmer Rouge. It accurately reflects the confusion and paranoia of that period. Now I have to educate myself with how the regime could even come to existence. Excellent recommend.

Michael says

Not what I expected. (Even though I wasn't sure what to expect... haha) The first half(or more) of the book was... well... repetitive. There is A LOT of talk about how prisoners were arrested for made up reasons and tortured to make false "confessions" in writing. And I mean A LOT. I almost gave up on this one. I was literally to the point where I was thinking "OK!!! I get it!! They were arrested because of paranoia and forced to make false confessions. I GET IT!!! Move on!!" Once you get past that(finally) it gets a little more interesting. I just feel there as way to much time spent on the tons of documentation(confessions) left behind in the prison. And even though the chapters change... the topic doesn't.(for the first half of the book) Just more discussions about the forced "confessions". I would suggest maybe trying a different book on the subject. This one concentrated to much on the documentation and not enough on the actual actions of the prison.(In my opinion) I just feel that with all that documentation, the author could have painted a better picture of what life(and death)was like in S-21. I was getting pretty bored reading it. Sorry for using the word "documentation" so much.... but that is pretty much what 80% of this book is about.
