

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

By David Chandler

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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 Trails 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 racialist 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.

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

- Sales Rank: #928883 in Books
- Brand: Brand: University of California Press
- Published on: 2000-01-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.04" h x .75" w x 6.04" l, .97 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 251 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Chandler presents a grisly but lucid historical accounting of S-21, the secret prison where at least 14,000 people were interrogated, tortured, forced to confess to counterrevolutionary crimes and executed during the reign of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. This "anteroom to death," as Chandler labels it, was discovered by two Vietnamese photographers in the wake of the invasion that forced out the Khmer Rouge in January 1979. Drawn to the site by the smell of decomposing flesh, the men discovered the bodies of 50 recently murdered prisoners, an array of implements of torture and a vast abandoned archive of institutionally sanctioned torture and murder. (The area was immediately turned into a museum.) Chandler methodically reconstructs the history of S-21, working with both the archives discovered there and his own interviews with survivors of the camp; he offers some context for his evidence by drawing on his considerable knowledge of the region's past (the Australian scholar is the author of a history of Cambodia), for instance, identifying Chinese models for the camp. His assessment is of a government gone mad with paranoia, which must torture and murder its own citizens to protect itself against conspiracies that arise against it--"hidden enemies burrowing from within" who were viewed as more dangerous than outside threats. In attempting to understand how such evil arose, Chandler comes to the dismaying but arguable conclusion that places like S-21 and Nazi concentration camps originate in our own everyday capacities to order and obey, form bonds against outsiders, seek perfection and approval and vent anger and frustration upon the helpless. 13 b&w photos not seen by PW. (Jan.)
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Review
"Grisly but lucid." --"Publishers Weekly

From the Inside Flap

"The Khmer Rouge terror constitutes one of the most horrific instances of mass murder in the twentieth century, and Chandler has immersed himself in a unique and largely unexplored collection of primary sources from hell. This will be a very important and enduring work. . . . Moreover, no scholar is better situated to undertake this project than David Chandler."—Craig Etcheson, Director, Cambodian Genocide Project, Yale University

"A truly impressive book that clearly transcends the realm of Cambodian and South Asian studies. Not only has Chandler worked through a massive amount of material, he has also situated his analysis within a knowledge of Khmer history that is without equal."—Charles Keyes, University of Washington

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Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison can be one of your starter books that are good idea. Many of us recommend that straight away because this publication has good vocabulary that may increase your knowledge in vocab, easy to understand, bit entertaining but nevertheless delivering the information. The article writer giving his/her effort to get every word into delight arrangement in writing Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison but doesn't forget the main level, giving the reader the hottest along with based confirm resource details that maybe you can be considered one of it. This great information could drawn you into fresh stage of crucial thinking.

Julio Keith:

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