

Murderer of his people

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Christopher Andrew praises an exposé of the terrible crimes of Pol Pot

The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79

by Ben Kiernan
Yale, £25

Pot's reign of terror. Remarkably, 20 years later, not a single member of the Khmer Rouge has yet been tried, even in absentia, for the regime's crimes against humanity. Meanwhile Pol Pot has spent the past decade in a secret mountain hideout close to the Cambodian-Thai border, accumulating a personal fortune in precious stones and other booty.

Ben Kiernan's impressively researched and deeply disturbing book argues that the main driving forces behind Pol Pot's terror were a particularly homicidal form of ethnic cleansing and totalitarian ambitions. "Khmer Rouge conceptions of race," he argues, "overshadowed those of class." Better than any previous author, Professor Kiernan shows that Pol Pot's chief targets were Cambodia's ethnic minorities.

Vietnamese Cambodians, so far from being merely expelled in 1975, as some other writers have claimed, were systematically exterminated. Pol Pot's campaign



Pol Pot's legacy Victims of the torture centre at Tuol Sleng

against the Vietnamese extended even to the Khmers of Cambodia's Eastern Zone (bordering Vietnam), many of whom were accused of having "Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds".

Evacuees from the East were forced to wear blue scarves to mark them out for later extermination. Only defeat by the Vietnamese army prevented Pol Pot achieving the Final Solution

of the problem of Cambodians with "Vietnamese minds".

Professor Kiernan demolishes once-fashionable attempts to interpret the Killing Fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia as an extreme form of peasant revolution. They were, instead, the 20th-century's closest approach to a totalitarian society: "Despite its underdeveloped economy, the regime probably exerted more power over its citizens than any other state in world history."

Political indoctrination meetings played a relatively small part in Pol Pot's regime by comparison with other Communist states. His response to all opposition, whether real or imaginary, was extermination rather than re-education. The regime's definition of opposition became increasingly confused by bizarre conspiracy theories. Some of the prisoners at Tuol Sleng were forced to confess that they had been working simultaneously for the CIA, the KGB and the Vietnamese.

The main weakness in Professor Kiernan's generally authoritative study of the Pol Pot regime is that it lacks any extended analysis of Pol Pot

himself. Saloth Sar remains by far the most elusive of the 20th century's leading monsters. Whereas Hitler, Stalin and Mao made themselves the centre of grandiose personality cults, Pol Pot preferred — and prefers — obscurity. As late as 1978 the Cambodian ambassador in China denied that Pol Pot bore any relation to Saloth Sar who, he declared, had died during the Second World War.

As Ben Kiernan observes, the Pol Pot regime regarded secrecy as an essential condition of its revolution. For the first two years of the regime, it did not even identify itself as Communist. Thereafter the Central Committee membership list still remained classified. Most Party members kept their membership secret.

Now aged almost 70, Pol Pot remains the most notorious criminal still at liberty anywhere in the world. Norodom Sihanouk, reinstated as King of Cambodia in 1993, has recently declared it "absolutely necessary to set up a tribunal before Pol Pot and other dies". That tribunal, alas, still seems a long way off.

Professor Andrew's latest book is 'For The President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush' (HarperCollins).

SALOTH SAR, alias Pol Pot, will probably be remembered, against stiff competition, as the most homicidal ruler in modern history. Hitler, Stalin and Mao Zedong all caused greater carnage, but none killed as high a proportion of his own population as Pol Pot. In only four years his Khmer Rouge killed or starved to death at least one and a half million of Cambodia's eight million people.

The 100,000-page archive of the interrogation and torture centre at Tuol Sleng documents in detail the barely believable depravity of Pol Pot's secret police — the Santebal. It is difficult to interpret some of what it called its "human experiments" as anything more than primitive sadism.

Take, for example, the notebook recording how long it took for girls, variously mutilated — some dead, others alive — to sink to the bottom of a tank of water and then for their corpses to return to the surface. The smiling faces of some of the Santebal torturers, together with the cowed features of their victims, are pictured in Ben Kiernan's book.

Professor Kiernan heads the Cambodia Genocide Program at Yale University, which is training Cambodian lawyers to prepare the prosecution case against the key figures in Pol