

Blood and guts of the evil Khmer Rouge

WE will wait a long time for a book that tells us why a sleeping south-east Asian kingdom became a laboratory of systematic evil; in the meantime, here is the best account of how it was.

Ben Kiernan's massively authoritative and dispassionate study quickly establishes itself as the most thorough and comprehensive work on Cambodia's four years of living death. *The Pol Pot Regime* in all its brisk clarity gets us closer to the heart of Cambodia's darkness than anything since Francois Ponchaud's best-selling *Cambodia: Year Zero*.

As someone obliged to relive Cambodia's agony as head of the Yale University Cambodia Genocide Program, Prof Kiernan has acquired superhuman qualities of detachment. The scholar in this field needs more than the professional, minimum of that commodity, lest the hysteria and horror of Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge name for their regime) infect the history and render it unreliable.

As to this historian's relation to his subject matter, two things are notable: the first is that most of primary source material is founded on interviews with hundreds of survivors from all "zones" of DK. These



The Pol Pot Regime - Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979,
By Ben Kiernan
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Colin Donald

were almost all conducted in 1979 and 1980, soon after the regime's destruction by the Vietnamese Army. Along with unprecedented access to DK archives this resource is the bedrock of the book's authority, and it is remarkable that Kiernan has sat on this material for over 16 years.

Meantime he wrote other books (including *How Pol Pot Came To Power*, 1985), and learned from others' mistakes, before offering his own *magnum opus*.

Also striking is a footnote, quite late on, where he mentions that nine members of his wife's family were victims of the terror.

Detailed as it is, Kiernan's book avoids the pitfalls of another school, dedicated to the minutiae of Khmer Rouge economic theory (such as it was), and analysing the differences between regional centres of power etc. Kiernan takes issue with Michael Vickery's usefully pedantic *Cambodia 1975-1979* (1984), which was so narrowly focused on the Khmer Rouge's "peasantist romanticism", that it read like an apology for a Rousseau-esque fantasy gone horribly wrong.

Generous in its acknowledgment of other scholar's discoveries and achievements, the Kiernan book

comes down hard on their sillier, unsustainable assertions. His central theme is that the extreme ethnic nationalism of the Khmer Rouge regime outweighed all their pretensions to Marxist, or even Maoist, ideological correctness. In this sense *The Pol Pot Regime* is very much a product of its time, being the most systematic study of Pol Pot's campaigns of ethnic cleansing, against the Chams (the "forgotten Muslims" of Cambodia), the Chinese, the Vietnamese minority, and even ethnic Khmers returned from Vietnam. As far as Pol Pot and his centralised power structure were concerned, they all might as well be killed, according to the mantra "to spare them no profit, to remove them no loss."

Kiernan wastes no space assessing Pol Pot's pretensions to ideological rectitude. The man was (is) a petty-bourgeois megalomaniac - a speciality of this century it seems - whose pleasure in killing was allied to a limited self-control. It took four years before DK's blood-drunkenness defeated itself through pointless attacks on their Vietnamese allies. Had they not brought destruction down on themselves, the death toll of 1.5 million starved and mur-

dered would of have risen much higher. It hardly seems possible, but Kiernan's Pol Pot emerges from the shadows as a more repellent figure than previously supposed. The scale of his moral deadness, the intricacy of his sadism and the bureaucracy of torture and death in which he cocooned himself defy belief. Page after page of this book reads like rustic *grand guignol*, staking out the outer frontiers of what humans are capable of. What were Pol Pot and his clique hoping to achieve? The peasant fundamentalist (back-to-the-land) reading is qualified by the regime's incompetence at organising food production. The view of the DK leadership as ultra-patriots is made nonsense of by the revelation that they flogged off the country's natural resources at laughably low prices. Pol Pot never issued a coherent philosophy for his terrorised subjects to abide by, and his class analysis was no more than "clan politics developed into a baroque hierarchy of caste", with "kinship always the crucial factor." It was as if a group of paranoid and essentially stupid gangsters were in command of a country.

If it was Pol Pot's whim to have thousands killed and tortured at a

stroke, then he would do so, whether or not the victim was a peasant "new person" or a reactionary/bourgeois/intellectual "old person".

"There were no laws," as one victim later told Kiernan, "if they wanted to kill us, they would do so anyway."

Kiernan also does useful work in disentangling some of the personalities from the monolith of "Angkar" - DK's central "Organisation" (such bland terms abound). Notable here is Khain Khek Iev, alias Duch a Himmler-like figure who ran Tuol Sleng Prison, the regime's main torture and killing factory in Phnom Penh. As the revolution devoured itself in an orgy of chaotic factional infighting, recurrent spasmodic purges and paranoid recriminations, death centres such as this struggled to keep pace with demand.

It is impossible to read Kiernan's study without being grateful for the clarity of mind and strength of nerve that allows him to fight on through the bloody mess of DK politics. Many in Cambodia and abroad would prefer to forget everything, for reasons honourable and dishonourable. It takes courage to lay such a solid foundation for recovery.