

Books

Rivers of cold blood and houses of cards

The Pol Pot Regime: race, power and genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79

Ben Kiernan
Yale University Press, £25

More than 17 years after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, Ben Kiernan has drawn up a minute account of the suffering they inflicted on Cambodia. His information is based on 500 interviews, 100 of them conducted with refugees in France, the remainder in Cambodia itself. Chillingly, he does not feel at liberty to reveal the real names of most of his respondents; the Khmer Rouge are still a force to be reckoned with and their opponents are afraid of being identified.

The outcome of Kiernan's painstaking researches is a book which lacks the dramatic sweep of Elizabeth Becker's *When the War Was Over* or David Chandler's *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* but contains far more vital detail than either about what it was like to live under Pol Pot and his bru-

tal henchmen. The author, who runs the Cambodian Genocide Programme at Yale University, has charted the course of the Khmer Rouge *gulag* before its former inmates die or time distorts their memories. The mine of information which they have provided does not make for easy reading but will be an invaluable source for future historians.

Kiernan estimates that the Khmer Rouge caused the deaths of 1,671,000 people, or 21 per cent of the population, during the three and three quarter years they were in power. In absolute terms the Khmers, above all those driven out of the towns, suffered the most. But it is the high percentages of losses among other ethnic groups which reveal the racist ideology behind Pol Pot's quest for power. The entire Vietnamese community was eliminated, half the Chinese, 40 per cent of the Thais and Laos, and 36 per cent of the Chams, a Muslim minority. The rate of slaughter picked up from 1977 onwards, especially in the Eastern Zone, which abuts Vietnam; 250,000 people are thought to have died there in 1978.

The most notorious centre of oppression was Tuol Sleng, the former high school in Phnom Penh where the Special Branch under an ex-teacher called Deuch tortured and killed Communist Party members suspected of disloyalty. The photographs of the victims are among the ghastliest mementoes of Khmer Rouge rule. The methodical mindset which they betray calls to mind not only the documents of Auschwitz but also the lists of intended victims carefully compiled by the Hutus in Rwanda before they launched their genocidal attack on Tutsis in 1994. The combination of bureaucratic banality and bloodletting is especially sinister.

If Kiernan's account of Cambodia under Pol Pot is matter-of-fact, it does not lack telling examples of the misery to which the population was reduced. During the evacuation of Phnom Penh in April in 1975 one cripple lacking both hands and feet is seen "writhing along the ground like a severed worm". A deportee, too frightened to complain for fear of jail or death, says: "If we said anything they would say we were obstructing the wheel of history. We would lose our arms and legs... We never knew when we would ever see the light of happiness and dignity." Describing the Khmer Rouge's constant search for internal enemies, one witness reports: "... if you said something a little wrong like 'We are all tired', they would take you away and kill you." In 1977 in the Northern Zone, executions increased, children were removed from their parents and collective eating was introduced. "Cooking utensils were all confiscated", Kiernan writes, "and the people had to eat rations of 'bamboo in soup, boiled with a little rice and banana' or soup made from salt, banana stalks, and tiny fish. They ate with the one spoon each person was allowed to keep." Towards the end,

after the slaughter of nearly 1,000 people in the Eastern Zone, a witness tells the author: "Their clothes were then distributed to everyone in the cooperative, still all soaked in blood. I had to wash the set I received for weeks to get it clean. But that was how I got proper clothes to wear."

Pol Pot's persecution of suspected enemies within went hand in hand with an aggressive attitude towards neighbouring countries. In early 1977 there were border clashes with Thailand and Laos. The main target, however, was Vietnam, from which the Khmer Rouge hoped to win back some of the old Cambodian empire. Such folly was to lead to their undoing; Vietnam became both the chief sanctuary for opponents of the Phnom Penh regime and the instrument for overthrowing it, by the invasion of December 1978.

Pol Pot prided himself on having won a "clean" victory in 1975 without outside help. In fact, the Khmer Rouge received captured American Artillery from the North Vietnamese, and credits and arms from the Chinese. Once they were in power, their main ally was China, which, among other goods, supplied foodstuffs, fuel, medicine, cloth, bicycles and weapons. In return, Cambodia exported raw materials, including geokoes, musk deer antlers, buffalo horn and tiger bones. Kiernan remarks that plunder of local ecology on this scale had not been seen since at least the seventeenth century.

It is important not to forget, first, that the Communists were initially popular with the people of Cambodia and, second, that they never succeeded in crushing dissent, whether within the party or outwith. In winning popular approval, they were helped by repression under Sihanouk and Lon Nol and by American carpet-bombing of the Cambodian countryside. They lost support by depriving the peasants of what they cherished most - land, family and religion - forcing their victims to adopt the survival strategy of "digging in, bending low and cursing inwardly". The most serious internal threat to the regime came from the Eastern Zone, which led inevitably to heightened use of terror tactics against the local population.

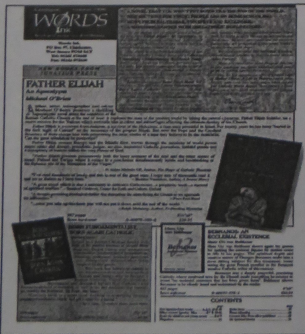
The Pol Pot regime furnishes a classic example of totalitarianism. It was obsessively secretive and, in its search for absolute power, forever discovering new enemies. Employees of the Lon Nol government, which it overthrew, were the first targets, then the ethnic minorities, then cadres within the Communist Party itself. It could not stop until it had brought about its own ruin. "Chasing its tail in ever-shrinking circles, the Centre fell prey to its own fears", the author writes of the last days. "The revolution was devouring itself." Kiernan has compiled an invaluable record of the workings of a political phenomenon of our century, a materialistic ideology applied to the enslavement of a people. Better understanding of what happened in Cambodia, which this book amply provides, should put the world on guard against its repetition, whether in Asia or beyond.

Simon Scott Plummer

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