

Literary Review

HIDE AND SEEK IN THE KILLING FIELDS

The Lost Executioner: The Story of Comrade Duch and the Khmer Rouge

Nic Dunlop

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In an interview following his infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, Professor Philip Zimbardo said ‘the line between good and evil is permeable and almost anyone can be induced to cross it when pressured by situational forces’.¹ This very statement is at the heart of countless examples of standard defence of mass murderers, criminals and torturers; from the Second World War, through Bosnia to Rwanda, men generally seen as “evil” had claimed that “they were just following orders”. After 30 years of constant conflict and the death of circa two to three million people, the few central perpetrators from the Khmer Rouge rule who have been tried could only but say the same. Armed with curiosity, a need for justice and a ragged photograph kept secretly in his back pocket, Irish photographer and author Nic Dunlop² wanders into the heart of war-torn Cambodia with the hopes of finding the notorious prison commander Comrade Duch to ask him to reveal how and why he ended up becoming the person he is.

The book is effectively structured along the three notable stages of Comrade Duch’s life: before, during and after the Khmer Rouge; each part is signified by the name and identity Duch was going by.

Part I, titled *Kaing Guek Eav*, tells the story of the origins of Comrade Duch as well as of the Khmer Rouge. Duch was born Kaing Guek Eav on 17 November 1942 as the only son to a poor Chinese-Khmer family of five³ - during a time when Cambodia was already undergoing steady economic decline. Being a largely agriculture based nation the large landowners drove farmers into a vicious cycle of debt forcing thousands of Cambodians to become ‘slaves in their own land’⁴.

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¹ ‘Professor Philip Zimbardo: The Interview’, at: http://forejustice.org/zimbardo/p_zimbardo_interview.htm (accessed on 27 February 2018).

² ‘Nic Dunlop’, at: <https://www.nicdunlop.com/> (accessed on 27 February 2018).

³ N. Dunlop, *The Lost Executioner*, London: Bloomsbury 2010, p.29.

⁴ *Ibid.*

David Chandler, a scholar on Cambodia, writes ‘the history of Cambodia before 1970 was tragic, because its people were exploited by their leaders and, in a sense, by their own way of looking at the world’.⁵ This left the otherwise proud descendants of the grand Angkorian Empire in a humiliating position, which then became a key element to later Khmer Rouge propaganda.

Following the long period of neglect during French colonial rule, Cambodia experienced a rapid expansion of education. Duch is described to have been studious by those who’ve known him, and what set him apart from most of his peers was his interest in political developments⁶. He was a favourite among his teachers, and demonstrated leader-like qualities among his fellow students⁷. These traits proved to be very handy when he eventually became the Commandant of the Khmer Rouge’s central secret prison. However, the rise of literacy created a surplus of students, so much so that the country produced an educated elite whose prospects were bleak: while before the educational reforms, a secondary education guaranteed a job in the government, this was no longer the case⁸. The now dislocated youth who left home to attend school broke away from the traditional life of their families and felt an increasing detachment from the old way of life. This new educational system was creating the conditions for the effective spread of Communism.

Further factors have contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge: the already existing financial gap and class division between the populations of cities and villages, and the economic and military destabilisation of Cambodia by the US starting from 1966. Duch in the meantime was spared from the bombings due to being incarcerated for ‘playing with politics’.⁹ What he did not escape was, however, the otherwise centuries old ‘normal practice of torture in Cambodian prisons’¹⁰. Having spent two years in one and being subjected maltreatment of this kind, it is likely that the experiences of torture largely contributed to Duch’s development into a cruel, evil even, prison commander. When he was given general amnesty along with hundreds of other political prisoners, his family recalls how Duch went home for a brief visit- but little did they know that this would be the last time they would see “Kaing Guek Eav”.¹¹

This leads the reader to Part II: Comrade Duch. When he left home in 1970, he disappeared into a new and highly secretive world from which he would not return for over twenty years. While the civil war was tearing the country apart, deep in the zones of the Khmer Rouge, Duch discarded his old identity, assumed his *nom de guerre* Duch and started his new incarnation as a prison commandant. He set up his first prisons code-named M-13 and M-99 where despite never receiving official training for his work, Duch and his prison guards executed torture in a meticulously organised and disciplined manner.¹² Absent an exact science for torture, his prisons were ‘experimental schools of brutality’¹³, where he was weeding out the enemies of the Khmer Rouge and perfecting methods of interrogation.

⁵ D. P. Chandler, ‘The Tragedy of Cambodian History’, University of British Columbia: Pacific Affairs 1979-52, pp.410-419, at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2757655> (accessed on 27 February 2018).

⁶ N. Dunlop (2010).*supra* note 3, p.51.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Idem*, p.79.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p.76.

¹¹ *Idem*, p.79.

¹² *Idem*, p.83.

¹³ *Idem*, p.87.

When the over eight year long civil war - rooted in a fight over ideologies, territory and leadership - ended with the defeat of the Khmer Republic and with the proclamation of Democratic Kampuchea 1975, the unitary, agrarian-socialist, one-party utopia of Pol Pot and his party members was born. Simultaneously, a 'prison network spread like a cobweb across the country'¹⁴ centred at the headquarters of prison *Tuol Sleng* (commonly referred to S-21), and at its helm was Comrade Duch. In "S-21" the "S" meant *Santebal*, an amalgam of two words: *santiouk* (security) and *norkorbal* (police); *Santebal* was also the name of the Khmer Rouge secret police, an organic part of the party's organisational structure.¹⁵ The Communist Party of Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) implemented a violent, destructive ideology on the nation with the central aim to destroy the past and start from "Year Zero", an arbitrary attempt to restart the country's history. Campaigns of terror and genocide were fuelled predominantly by communist ideologies particularly that of Marxism and Maoism.

The idea and heavy propaganda of class struggle, the abolition of the intelligentsia and the elimination of party enemies were all acts of state terror that stemmed from communist roots. Furthermore, Khmer Rouge ideology also heavily relied on racism and xenophobia which also left its mark on Democratic Kampuchea. The overarching Khmer sense of racial superiority and preference of atheism over any religion provided another fundamental basis for the mass killings within the country. By consequence, everybody and anybody could be the enemy, which resulted in the prisons working overtime. Prisoners were already 'physically and emotionally broken' by the time they crossed prison gates and were 'at the total mercy of their captors'.¹⁶ Similarly to Mao and his Cultural Revolution, the Khmer Rouge too believed in an obsessive and continuous cleansing of society that was 'essential for producing a pure revolution'.¹⁷

Dunlop proceeds to portray in detail the brutality and precision by which Duch and his prison guards executed the atrocities. Meanwhile, he highlights the larger themes which describe the essence of "perpetrator-hood" the Khmer Rouge forced on its members. Central to the party's functioning was the notion of conformity and obedience, which was implemented by instituting fear in every member of the Kampuchean society. Due to fear of incarceration and almost inevitable death, anyone could become a perpetrator of a crime if it could have meant their own salvation. This is what Zimbardo meant when he said that there is a fine line between good and evil, because situational forces can pressure anyone into committing immoral deeds. This happened both within the confines of the Organisation, as well as at an individual level. A second notable theme is the construction of a social identity, practically creating a division between the "them" and the "us". The "them" signified the imagined state enemies, the jeopardisers of the revolution. This was the justification for the inhuman treatment the otherwise innocent people were subjected to. Women and men, the young and the elderly were all stripped of their humanity and their individuality through various methods, all which Dunlop uncovered while traveling the country and interviewing Khmer Rouge affiliates, a handful of survivors and friends and family members of both the perpetrators and the victims. By the end of Khmer Rouge rule, the country was in desperate need of foreign intervention.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p.103.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p.113.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p.114.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p.128.

The Lost Executioner rounds up the journey of Dunlop and Duch in Part III: *Hang Pin*. Comrade Duch, along with other key figures of the Communist Party of Kampuchea disappeared when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979. The emergency refugee situation that this created presented the ideal opportunity for top-tier perpetrators to hide in the secret world refugee camps along the Cambodian-Thai border, where they enjoyed the protection of the Thai military¹⁸. The increasing need for humanitarian intervention brought in the United Nations (UN) and other non-governmental organisations to the refugee camps, and tried to bring a halt to the continuous fighting that took place between the Khmer Rouge and everyone else. In fact, it was the UN's largest and most ambitious peacekeeping mission to create 'a politically neutral environment' in the lead-up to 'free and fair elections' and an end to the war¹⁹ - something the UN had 'failed to deliver'.²⁰

In this chaos, it was by chance that Dunlop accidentally ran into Comrade Duch personally, in a completely new persona and name: *Hang Pin*, the humanitarian, the Christian. In a refugee camp working with the American Refugee Committee (ARC), Duch became the Community Health Supervisor²¹, and adopted Christianity hoping to reach salvation through his belief. Nic Dunlop, upon the third encounter managed to convince Hang Pin to reveal his true identity, and confess his sins; when the story of this confession appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Duch seemed to have once again disappeared, only for the world to learn that he had given himself up to the authorities.²²

Duch's discovery re-ignited the need for a tribunal to try former Khmer Rouge leaders. Across the country, everyone Dunlop spoke to - including people who worked at *Tuol Sleng* - believed that surviving Khmer Rouge leaders should be put on trial²⁴. Pol Pot has been long dead, and others' cases were dismissed in the meantime. Putting the now aging perpetrators to court became an increasingly pressing matter - and after years of hassle and negotiating, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was established. The "Agreement between the United Nations and the Royal Government of Cambodia concerning the Prosecution under Cambodian Law of Crimes Committed during the period of Democratic Kampuchea", entered into force in 2005²⁵, and Duch was the first to be tried; he was convicted of crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the 1949 Geneva Conventions.²⁶

Duch was originally sentenced to a total of 35 years in prison - a verdict many Cambodians saw as a betrayal²⁷. Whether this is fair or just remains questionable: how can one measure the damage and pain that was inflicted by men like Comrade Duch? Judge Cartwright said 'a sentence can only

¹⁸ *Idem*, p.200.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p.217.

²⁰ *Idem*, p.242.

²¹ *Idem*, p.254.

²² *Idem*, p.277, 278.

²⁴ *Idem*, p.288.

²⁵ 'Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia', at: <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/keyevents> (accessed on 28 February 2018).

²⁶ 'Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia', at: <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/case/topic/90> (accessed on 28 February 2018).

²⁷ N. Dunlop (2010), *supra* note 3, p.323.

be symbolic'²⁸. Co-prosecutor Chea Lang mentioned that at least the judgement 'represents credible legal acknowledgement of the Khmer Rouge's criminal policies'.²⁹ Can that be considered enough? Dunlop concludes as follows:

'The reaction to the verdict highlighted the chasm between two worlds: that of the theory of Western justice and the real-experience of emotional loss. To many it seemed wrong that Duch should receive a fair trial when none of his victims did but, as one Cambodian journalist wrote, 'Justice should never be vindictive'.³⁰

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Idem*, p.324.