

Cambodia: a lesson that must not be forgotten

Believe it or not, Pol Pot and his followers had only the noblest of motives for the slaughter.

By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

This year's reported death of Satho Sar — a.k.a. Pol Pot — brought back a flood of memories.

I had the privilege to serve with the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in the 1992-93 period.



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One of my jobs was Chief of Military Civic Action, which afforded me the chance to travel throughout the country.

While visiting various provinces, including areas controlled by troops loyal to Pol Pot, I had the opportunity to personally inspect, up close, the incredible damage done by Pot and his Khmer Rouge.

During his reign in the middle and late 1970s, he was responsible for the deaths of approximately 2 million of his own countrymen and the mangling of hundreds of thousands more. One Cambodian in every eight died in one of the longest-running murder sprees in recorded history.

No family was left untouched by the brutal genocide. Cambodia's story is one of the saddest of this or any century.

The lesson learned there must never be forgotten.

Believe it or not, Pot and his followers had only the noblest of motives for the slaughter. According to their brand of Marxist ideology, potentially, the most effective way to create a Communist utopia was to start all over again by destroying all vestiges of Western influence in Cambodia. This plan included butchering anyone who had a college degree, spoke a foreign language, or practiced a religion.

For reasons difficult to understand, people who wore eyeglasses were also executed. Those in this unlikely group were considered potential counterrevolutionaries and therefore ostensibly had to be eliminated.

The children of the educated often came to suffer the same fate as their parents, apparently on the assumption that the apple does not fall far from the tree.

The Khmer Rouge theory was that counterrevolutionary parents were likely to spawn counterrevolutionary offspring, so whole families were murdered.

Urban dwellers were forcibly removed from their homes and then force-marched to re-education camps in the countryside. Many of the old, very young, or ill never made it. Tens of thousands died of starvation, dehydration, and malaria en route to these camps. Their bloated, sun-blackened, rotting corpses were left by the roadside during the trek.

Pol Pot turned Cambodia's entire capital city of Phnom Penh into a ghost town almost overnight in pursuit of a perfect classless society. He also outlawed private property, abolished the possession and minting of money, closed all traditional institutions of learning, and forbade the practice of religion. Whole families were broken up. Pot's new family structure for the people of Cambodia was the political party called Democratic Kampuchea (DK).

The killing fields were large multiple shallow mass graves. Since bullets were considered too expensive for mass execution purposes, the DK cadre took to using picks and shovels to crush the skulls of men, women, and children found to be politically unreliable. The dead and dying were thrown into these mass unmarked graves and unceremoniously buried. Some were buried while still alive.

The worst tortures, though, were saved for former members of the DK cadre. Those felt by Pol Pot to be ideologically impure were arrested without warrant and imprisoned at Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh. Tuol Sleng, a former high school turned torture chamber, counted more than 20,000 prisoners through its gates. Prisoners, though, seldom

lived long enough to fill all the cells.

Tuol Sleng's purpose was to extract detailed confessions. Like the Inquisition of Spain in the 15th and 16th Centuries, the DK were enormously successful. The Khmer Rouge interrogators who ran the prison always succeeded in extracting the "appropriate" confessions. Death often became preferable to daily persecution at Tuol Sleng. The tools of the interrogator's trade were drowning pools, hot tongs, poisonous scorpions, savage beatings, long-term malnutrition, electrical shock to genitalia, and more.

The victims of Tuol Sleng were cataloged like animals. Full-face photographs were taken of every prisoner. The DK kept excellent



dies. At that point, the light of life goes out of their eyes. Today, Tuol Sleng prison is a kind of macabre museum.

The pictures of Tuol Sleng's victims are hung by the thousands in row after row on bare stark walls. There was no light left in their eyes. Inhumanity and brutality difficult to imagine had extinguished the light of life. Unfortunately, there were only six recorded survivors of Pol Pot's torture prison.

Pol Pot will go down in history with the likes of mass murderers Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. Pol Pot, Hitler, and Stalin all led successful political movements that ultimately appealed to humankind's basest nature.

Although the self-serving window trimming was always the same — for cultural justice, for national purity, for socialist peace — the twisted promises always went unfulfilled. The ultimate result was unspeakable death, pointless destruction, and incalculable misery.

Human beings cannot be ennobled or bettered through the killing and torture of the defenseless. Let us hope that someday, this lesson will be taken to heart in all of the world's cultures.

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records of their crimes against humanity. The vacant nearly lifeless eyes of those photographed, knowing that they were going to be killed horribly, tell a profoundly sorrowful tale. World War II Nazi concentra-

tion camp survivors surely know that look.

Death in such places is reported to occur well before the victims' hearts stops beating. A kind of spiritual death occurs when all hope