



Inside the Killing Fields

**More Than 30 Years After the Khmer Rouge,
Artifacts of Inhumanity are Left Behind**

BY RICHARD G. FREEMAN



This is a typical cell in Building S-21, a grade school that was converted into a prison by the Khmer Rouge.

A visit to Cambodia brings with it the ancient splendor that quiet place on the Gulf of Thailand has to offer. The ordinary traveler acclimates herself to Phnom Penh, dotted with Buddhist temples in unlikely places and buzzing with motorbikes in even more unlikely places. Then it is off to Siem Reap for the obligatory three or four days absorbing the grandeur and mysteries and puzzles offered by the Angkor Wat and the 250 square miles surrounding temple complex. Your guidebook reliably informs you that the Khmer (pronounced “K-mai”) kingdom ruled what became Indochina from 900 to 1300. Then the kings and princes and priests – after fighting endless wars against the Thai and Vietnamese – surrendered to disease or poverty or both and left scores of elaborately carved places of worship and ceremony sitting in the jungle to be discovered by a French explorer in the early 1900s.

The committed traveler, however, will engage in what might blithely be called “The Genocide Tour.” On a recent visit before trekking around all of the above my wife and I, drawn to the country by our son, who works there, occupied several days observing the legacy of an idea whose time came and went and left behind it memories of misery and torn clothing and bones.

On April 17, 1975 an army assembled by an electrical engineer named Pol Pot entered Phnom Penh, then as now a bustling Asian metropolis marked by low-slung French colonial architecture (red roofs and etched sidewalk tiles). The Khmer Rouge (roughly “red Khmer”) methodically went from door to door and at gunpoint ordered the populace out of their houses. The Khmer Rouge lied and told the people whom they evicted that an American bombing raid was about to occur and they had to march northward to the countryside. The population obeyed. Most never returned.

The Khmer Rouge, like its brethren in Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany, was a political movement organized around an idea. All educated in Marxism either in Paris or Moscow, the senior leadership subscribed to the belief that the society could be remade through a series of swift and grand gestures. The central initiative called for moving the population of the cities out to the countryside and leveling the social stratum. The Khmer Rouge tortured and then executed lawyers and doctors and professionals, perceived intellectuals, people who wore eyeglasses and religious leaders. A few American and Australian expatriates, in Cambodia to hunt butterflies or flora, were caught, tortured and executed.

The Khmer Rouge’s idea, like Lenin’s, was to create a classless society where bliss would reign in the absence of social rank and privilege. The idea took with it more than 1.7 million Cambodians. Like the Nazis, (and now the Taliban) the Khmer Rouge initiated their campaign by lining up their victims and shooting them. Like the Nazis the Khmer Rouge found that bullets were expensive, so they resorted to other means of killing. The axe to the head became the method of choice.

The first stop on the Genocide Tour takes the traveler to Tuol Seng Genocide Museum, located between Sihanouk Boulevard and, yes, Mao Zedong Boulevard (how apt to name Phnom Penh’s main thoroughfare for the highest-ranking mass murderer of all time!). Here Pol Pot’s boys tore fingernails out and cut nipples off of men and women, burned, crushed, drowned, and hacked at least 10,000 people. In outward appearance Tuol Seng appears benign: it was a grade school before being crudely converted into a prison by subdividing the classrooms with brickwork that looks like it belongs on a backyard barbecue. The Khmer Rouge efficiently renamed the school “S-21,” presumably so it could live up to its role as the locale of industrialized torture. It consists of three low-tiled buildings arrayed around a large courtyard with a flagpole and dead fountain in the middle. Inside someone thought it instructive to adorn the walls with badly colored Marxist/realist paintings of torture procedures, including those named above. You can have a chat with one of S-21’s rare survivors, who mans a booth each day. He may be one of the few physically intact victims of Pol Pot.

As you wander on throughout the countryside you become aware of men of a certain age whose limbs are amputated thanks to land mines. But more of that later. On to the Killing Fields.

A hectic ride in a “tuk-tuk” (half exposed cab, half motorbike) takes you to a bucolic location on the outskirts of Phnom Penh (or maybe not; it is hard to discern where the city stops) that the Khmer Rouge used to axe people to death. Of course, the term “Killing Fields” has been borrowed from the 1985 movie based on the life of Cambodian photojournalist Dith Pran as recorded in a series of articles by Sydney Schanberg of *The New York Times*. Dith Pran first used it to put into words places such as Cheoung Ek, the emblematic

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“killing field,” I suppose, because it is so near the center of Phnom Penh (there is a similar location in Siem Reap for those who want to observe the remnant of genocide while pondering ancient temples).

After buying a ticket to tour this warm artifact of man’s inhumanity to man, the genocide tourist receives one of those audio necklaces. I regret not obtaining from somewhere a transcript of the audio tour. For whosoever assembled the speaking guide gives an honest, blunt, painful history of the three years, eight months and 20 days of Pol Pot’s rule. You learn about the background of the senior leadership (Pol Pot’s practical training stood out in a collection of philosophers, mathematicians and economists) and just what they had in mind (a classless, agrarian people), how they did it (by killing an ascertained 1.7 million people and possibly 2.5 million to 3 million) and you hear from some of the henchmen who carried out the plan. The tour features testimony from soldiers and escaped victims. It is especially telling that the Khmer Rouge, like modern Islamists, made use of conscripted soldiers as young as 12 years old.

This site hosted many shallow graves. For narrative purposes the excavators have left some of the pits open and some of the bones and torn clothing scattered about. The centerpiece is a towering glassed-in *stupa* (Sanskrit for shrine in Buddhist parlance) containing rows and rows of rows of skulls. Each skull bears a cleaved space in the middle marking where the axe fell. The visitor removes his shoes and walks around the circular innards of the *stupa*, never avoiding a row of skulls and irresistible to the urge to whisper a quiet prayer.



Civil war followed the Khmer Rouge takeover. And you can’t have a civil war without land mines. A former child soldier of the Khmer Rouge, gripped by conscience, made it his task after the Vietnamese “liberated” the country in 1979, to remove land mines. This man – who for some unexplained reason adopted the Japanese name “A-ki-ra,” collected thousands of his rusted specimens and grouped them handsomely along with exploded shell



This glassed-in stupa contains row after row of skulls, each bearing a cleaved space where the axe fell.

casings in a place named, fittingly, the Land Mine Museum. If you are so disposed you can purchase a small wooden model of an unexploded land mine to take home.

In the area around the land mine museum especially but all over the country groups of double amputees, victims of land mines, perform music on traditional instruments while seated compactly on the ground. They appeared around the temples, near the Land Mine Museum and other spots where tourists are sure to flock.

The day we visited the Land Mine Museum a land mine exploded outside of Siem Reap, killing two people.



To put all we have seen into some perspective we boarded another

“tuk-tuk” which took us down busy boulevards to another abandoned school. This one, however, housed the grandly named “Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,” or ECCC (www.eccc.gov.kh/en). It is here where the Khmer Rouge is on trial.

In 2003 after extended negotiations the Cambodian government and the United Nations established the ECCC. Our government and other western governments support a tribunal that consists of self-contained prosecutorial, defense, trial and appellate functions. The whole affair is housed in a UN-like structure where the visitor, after serious physical screening, can sit in a UN-like amphitheatre and watch the proceedings taking place in a long wide courtroom dominated by a high bench.

The tribunal is on its second case.



More than 8,000 bodies were buried in this killing field in the outskirts of Phnom Penh.

Many ranks and files participated in the Khmer Rouge atrocities. The court's organizers deliberately decided to place on trial the "senior leadership of the Khmer Rouge." And senior they are. The first defendant, Kang Kech Eav, alias "Duch," was the commander of S-21. He pleaded guilty and made a statement dripping with contrition. The second defendants are senior leaders who are charged with "Crimes Against Humanity, "Grave Breaches of the Geneva Convention of 1949" and "Genocide" [but only of "the Cham and Vietnamese people," because they are identifiable racial minorities; the defendants allegedly did not murder Cambodians because they were Cambodian because the murderers themselves are Cambodian.]

The trials are open to the press. A representative from George Soros' Open Society attends every day. The outside parking lot was crammed with tour buses. Any person in Cambodia who wants to witness the proceedings

receives free transportation from any point in the country. When we entered there was a large contingent of villagers staring at the trial workings.

And there was trial work being done that day. A tall English woman attired in that long robe and little white bib you see in the Daumier drawings was in the middle of what turned out to be an hour-long tirade on behalf of her client, the defendant in the third case. Her client is Ieng Thirith, now in her 80s, who was minister of social affairs in the Pol Pot regime. Yes, she was the person who engineered the cleansing of the cities. The court had found Ieng Thirith incompetent and severed her case from those of three other senior leaders. The issue before the court was whether to release her conditionally or unconditionally. It was the conditions of release that occupied the English lawyer for an hour of repetitive palaver. Occasionally, a member of the bench (this was the Supreme Court sitting) interrupted. The viewer followed

the proceedings via simultaneous translation in any language afforded free and provided by an audio necklace just like the one at the Killing Field.

In what I consider a treat for the Genocide Tourist the court asked to hear from the defendant. Two guards brought the little lady in, gingerly holding her by the arms as she almost tumbled out of the oversize white blouse she wore. The judges asked her questions "does she have friends anywhere else in the world?" She said she had many friends. "Where would she live?" Her overborn-looking daughter was present.

We could hardly breathe. There, right before us, as many as 3 million lives later, stood the heart of the Khmer Rouge. Old. Small. Incompetent. The court held the matter under advisement. ■

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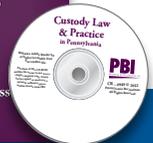
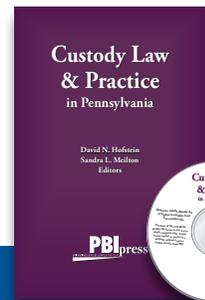
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