

MAN or MONSTER?

The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer

ALEXANDER LABAN HINTON

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The Accused, Fact Sheet, Public Version—Redacted

Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)
Information Sheet, Case 001
Case file No. 001/18-07-2007/ECCC-SC

Defendant

<i>Name</i>	Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch
<i>Date of Birth</i>	17 Nov 1942
<i>Place of Birth</i>	Kompong Thom, Cambodia
<i>Position in DK</i>	Deputy then Chairman of S-21 (security center known as Tuol Sleng)

Allegations

- Crimes against Humanity
- Grave Breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949
- Murder and Torture (over 12,000 dead)

Procedural History

<i>Arrest Date</i>	31 Jul 2007
<i>Substantive Hearings</i>	30 Mar–29 Nov 2009 (72 trial days)

<i>Judgment</i>	26 Jul 2010
<i>Final Decision</i>	2 Feb 2012

Participants

<i>Defense</i>	Kar Savuth (Cambodia) & François Roux (France)
<i>Prosecution</i>	Chea Leang (Cambodia) & Robert Petit (Canada)
<i>Investigating Judges</i>	You Bunleng (Cambodia) & Marcel Lemonde (France)
<i>Civil Parties</i>	90 victims and their lawyers
<i>Trial Chamber</i>	Cambodian Judges (Nonn Nil, President, Sokhan Ya, Mony Thou) Intl. Judges (J-M. Lavergne, France & S. Cartwright, New Zealand)
<i>Witnesses</i>	17 fact witnesses, 7 character witnesses, 22 civil parties

ECCC (Khmer Rouge Tribunal)

- *Type* International “hybrid” tribunal
- *Commenced* 2006
- *Temporal Jurisdiction* Crimes committed during Democratic Kampuchea (DK)
(7 Apr 1975 and 6 Jan 1979, the period of Khmer Rouge Rule)
- *Personal Jurisdiction* Senior Leaders & Those Most Responsible

Source: ECCC, “Kaing Guek Eav”; ECCC, “Case Information Sheet, Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch,” ECCC, “Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia: ECCC at a Glance.”

FOREGROUND

Monster

A Picture says a Thousand Words

—*Entry in Exhibition Comment Book, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (November 29, 2005)*

EVIL. Black ink staining white cloth. The word is written across the neckline of the man's polo shirt in a photograph at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A caption names him: "DUCH (original name Kaing Guek Eav aka Kiev)." Duch's head rises from the shirt collar, too large for his slight build. Pressed into a line, his lips conceal bad teeth. In the background, a man in a dark suit is a shadow behind Duch. Someone has scribbled in white marker across Duch's eyes, which glow, demonic. Another person has given him a small, pointy goatee, the kind associated with the devil. The picture is uncanny.

Some visitors to the museum would recognize Duch as the Khmer Rouge cadre who ran a secret security prison, S-21 (Security Office 21), at the site from 1976 to 1979. In the mid-1960s, Duch (b. 1942) had joined the Khmer Rouge, a Maoist-inspired group of Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries who had risen to power on the ripples of the Vietnam War. Upon taking control on April 17, 1975, they enacted policies leading to the deaths of roughly two million of Cambodia's eight million inhabitants, almost a quarter of the population, before being deposed by a Vietnamese-backed army on January 6, 1979.

During Democratic Kampuchea (DK), the period of Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia, over 12,000 people passed through the gates of S-21, which Duch ran beginning in March 1976. Almost all of the prisoners were executed, many

after being interrogated and tortured into making a confession. Evil. A picture is worth a thousand words, the saying goes. One look tells the story. What more needs to be said?

March 11, 2011, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh

I look again. I stand in an exhibition room at Tuol Sleng staring at Duch's photo. Two years before, on March 29, 2009, the day before Duch's trial at an international hybrid tribunal commenced, I passed through this room and, without much thought, photographed the wall on which Duch's photograph hung. His image was unmarked. Over the course of 2009, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), more colloquially referred to as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, held seventy-seven sessions that included the testimony of thirty-five witnesses and twenty-two victims.¹ Duch spoke extensively during his trial, making observations and offering his own version of events. Closing arguments concluded on November 27, 2009.

The verdict, delivered on July 26, 2010, was appealed by all sides, a process that is ongoing as I stand in the exhibition room. Like many others, I wonder if this sixty-nine-year-old man, who ran this camp where so much death and suffering had taken place, might end up walking free. Lurking in the background were other questions. Who is this man? Will his trial deliver justice? What sort of a person runs a place like S-21?

During the course of Duch's trial, I considered these questions as I attended dozens of trial sessions and interviewed court officials, civil society workers, and ordinary Cambodians from the city and the countryside. Sometimes during an interview, I would ask which moments in the trial of Duch most stood out. I received many answers. Some noted his ability to recite French poetry in the original or the time he chastised one of his former deputies for not telling the truth, bringing the man to tears. Others remarked on the testimony of the survivor and artist Vann Nath, whose description of S-21 undercut some of Duch's key claims; still more noted a startling turn of events on the last day of the trial.

Now, as I stand in front of the defaced photograph, I reread the caption that spells out Duch's name in capital lettering. It reminds me of a moment on the fourth day of Duch's trial, when he was given the floor to tell his story and discussed the origin of his name.

Wearing a white, long-sleeved dress shirt, the color associated with purity and clarity of thought and often worn by teachers and lay religious practitioners in Cambodia, Duch stood in the dock describing his path to M-13, the

prison he had run during the civil war that preceded DK. His dark trousers were pulled high at the waist, covering a slight paunch.

When Duch had finished his remarks, the Cambodian president of the five-person Trial Chamber, Nonn Nil, asked him to be seated in the dock and turned the floor over to Judge Jean-Marc Lavergne, the international judge from France who sat to Nonn Nil's far left. Each time the Trial Chamber entered and exited the court, Judge Lavergne's height was apparent: he towered over the other judges. Judge Lavergne had a boyish face, brown hair, and glasses. In a soft, almost delicate tone that belied his size, he often asked questions about trauma, character, and suffering, perhaps in part because of his past experience working with victims as a judge in France. When necessary, however, he could be direct, probing, and challenging, especially when moral issues arose.

Judge Lavergne was the first person afforded the opportunity to directly question Duch during the trial proceedings. As he posed his questions, he sometimes gesticulated, exposing the sleeves of his blue-and-white-striped dress shirt beneath his undersized red court robe. If he at first asked Duch about the historical context that had led him to M-13, Judge Lavergne soon turned to other factors that had influenced Duch to become a revolutionary, including the teachers who had sparked Duch's interest in politics and his possible exposure to violence while imprisoned shortly after joining the Khmer Rouge.

After returning to the topic of the oath Duch had sworn to the Party, Judge Lavergne asked Duch if that was when he had changed his name. "My revolutionary name," Duch replied, "was the name they had me select in 1967 while I was secretly undertaking political study."² Judge Lavergne asked him to elaborate.

"This name," Duch replied, glancing at the court camera, "is commonly used by Cambodians and doesn't have any special meaning." Pausing for emphasis, Duch continued, "But for me, it did. I loved this name." His oratorical skills, honed during years of teaching, were on full display, leading some observers to comment that he sounded pedantic, rehearsed, or even disingenuous. He explained that when he was young, his grandfather had praised the work of a local sculptor who had this name.

Duch had also encountered the name in a primary school text. In one passage, he told the court, "The teacher instructs Duch to read from a book. Duch rises and stands straight, his head turned face forward and unwavering, as he reads carefully and clearly. It was the first essay in the text. So I was interested in the name Duch. It was a good name and a Khmer name."³ Shifting back to 1967, he explained that when he was asked to select a revolutionary name, he chose

“Duch” because “I knew that the name Kaing Guek Eav was a Chinese name. I was becoming part of the Khmer Revolution so I had to use a Khmer name.”

Then, raising his maimed left hand, fingers extended, Duch, as if having concluded a lesson, returned to Judge Lavergne’s original question and summarized the key points of his answer: “Thus, with regard to the name Duch, in terms of its exact meaning, it is a name that I liked because I respected the work of the artisan Duch and I believed that the child Duch from the book was a good student.” Duch punctuated each point with a wave of his hand in the air, then leaned back in his seat and turned off his microphone.

“So the reference,” said Judge Lavergne, seeking clarity about the memory of events that took place more than 40 years before, is to a student “who is particularly disciplined, particularly obedient, who is always ready to answer questions asked to him, who is always ready to learn, who is always willing to do what he’s told. Was that the reference?” Duch replied, “Your Honour is correct. I liked the name Duch because I wanted to be like this pupil who was orderly and disciplined, a student who feared, respected and obeyed his teacher, a youth who was waiting to fulfill his duty, whatever it might be, well.”⁴

Returning to the time when Duch joined the revolution, Judge Lavergne asked him to confirm his reasons for doing so. “I was resolved to liberate the nation and my people so that they would be free from oppression,” he replied. “I did not have the intention of committing crimes against my country. . . . My oath was [given to serve] the people.”⁵ When Duch finished his reply, he inhaled sharply and murmured “mmm” as he nodded his head.

Duch noted that rather than harboring criminal intentions, he had been ready to fearlessly sacrifice everything to serve the revolution, whether it be imprisonment, separation from his parents, or even death. Beyond joining the revolution, Duch stressed, “the thing I loved the most was being a teacher.” He paused, then inhaled and continued, “I hoped that, after the revolution had been won, they would not discard me but let me be a teacher again. This was my thought. I didn’t know they would pull me in and have me do this sort of [criminal] work.”⁶

Before the session ended for lunch, Judge Lavergne asked Duch which qualities his superiors saw in him when they chose him to run a security center. “The most important quality,” he replied, “was loyalty to the Party. My patron, teacher Son Sen, knew me clearly, as did Elder Chhay Kim Hor and, later, Elder Vorn (Vorn Vet). They knew I was straight with them and would not dare to hide anything.” The Communist Party, Duch then added, also looked for those who “paid attention and did their work responsibly and precisely.”

He had begun to speak in short bursts with sharp intakes of breath; Duch then raised his voice and quickly finished, “For my entire life, if I’m not able to do something, I won’t do it. But if I am able to do it, I do it meticulously and well.”⁷

| | |

Meticulous. This word was often used to describe Duch. It seemed to fit in many ways. He arrived in court prepared, sometimes carrying stacks of documents with color-coded annotations. On occasion, he corrected lawyers or recited court document numbers by heart. His memory was unsettling, both for its detail and selectivity.

But as soon as it seemed possible to get a fix on Duch, his image suddenly shifted, like his name. The revolution was not the last time he would change it. At the end of DK, when the Vietnamese-backed army routed the Khmer Rouge, Duch fled in haste into the jungle, where he remained for years, continuing to serve the Khmer Rouge, who waged war against the new People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government. He also returned to education, and he was teaching at a primary school in Samlaut district by 1985.⁸

In 1986, Duch changed his name to “Hang Pin,” when he was sent to China to teach Khmer literature.⁹ During the 1990s, he again returned to education, teaching at a high school and working in a district education office. Several of his children also became teachers. Duch claimed that he had begun seeking a way to leave the Khmer Rouge as his relations with the group had begun to fray in the 1990s, pointing to a 1995 incident in which he had been injured and his wife stabbed to death, during a robbery that he thought had been an assassination attempt.¹⁰

Duch had converted to Christianity the following year. During his trial he met with his pastor, who also served as one of his character witnesses. In 1999, photographer Nic Dunlop stumbled on Duch in a remote village.¹¹ He subsequently told Dunlop and journalist Nate Thayer: “It is God’s will you are here. . . . I have done very bad things before in my life. Now it is time for *les represailles* [to bear the consequences] of my actions.”¹² Duch said that he wanted to reveal the truth about S-21, whose existence Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot had denied, claiming that it was a Vietnamese fabrication.¹³

Shortly thereafter, Duch was also interviewed by the representative of the UN high commissioner for human rights, Christophe Peschoux. During his trial, Duch claimed he had been deceived and “interrogated” by Peschoux, perhaps worried that his comments during this interview suggested he had been more

actively involved in the day-to-day operations of S-21 than he would acknowledge during his trial.¹⁴ He was soon detained and locked in jail, where he would remain for many years as negotiations to establish a tribunal dragged on.

As his replies to Judge Lavergne illustrated, Duch made a number of disquieting claims. A man accused of mass murder appeared to be portraying himself as a hero, almost a martyr, someone who embodied qualities that everyone would applaud: hard work, diligence, resolve, devotion to nation, trustworthiness, and the accomplishment of duties. This paradox often found expression in descriptions of Duch, including media stories at the start of his trial that ran with titles like “Man or Monster?”¹⁵

Given the salience of this question in popular discourse and as a key undercurrent of Duch’s trial, I have chosen it as the title of this book. Beyond the apparent “either-or” choice the question demands, it has a second sense that asks to think critically about the framing and the opposition it suggests. More broadly, this question speaks to larger issues in the study of perpetrators, to arguments at the heart of this book, and, relatedly, to our humanity and everyday ways of thought. As I discuss in the epilogue, the question is provocative and haunting, offering two narrow alternatives to characterize a complex person—in a manner that parallels the reductive categorization and transformation of people into “enemies” that took place at S-21.

For many observers, both the heinousness of Duch’s alleged crimes and their seeming incomprehensibility were heightened by the fact he was a teacher, a person immersed in learning and knowledge. This is particularly true in Cambodia, where teachers are highly esteemed. In fact, the Khmer term for “teacher,” *krou*, is etymologically related to the root of the Sanskrit *guru*, sometimes connoting a learned “master.” This is how Duch often described his *krou*, Son Sen, who he also described as his patron (*me-*), a term that means “mother” while also connoting the idea of a leader, supervisor, or master.¹⁶

Indeed, Duch’s background as a star mathematics student and later teacher repeatedly emerged at the trial, suggesting that to more fully understand what happened at S-21 it was necessary to always bear in mind his background. Like Son Sen, who was Duch’s teacher at the National Institute of Pedagogy in Phnom Penh, Duch joined the revolution as part of what he identified as a group of intellectuals. Indeed, many of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, including Pol Pot, were intellectuals who had been teachers.¹⁷ Duch’s own teachers, including Chhay Kim Hor and Ke Kim Huot, helped inspire his interest in revolution and politics. Later, two of Duch’s top interrogators at S-21 were former teachers, including one who also taught math.

His pedagogical practices had also seemed to suffuse his work. When describing interrogations, he depicted the back-and-forth exchanges with the prisoners almost as mind games. He said his goal was to critically ascertain the truth. He also seemed to handle the written prisoner confessions like student papers, annotating them extensively, sometimes in red. He explained, “I had been a teacher. I had used red ink to correct students, to assess students’ points, and to provide my observations to students. So when I went to S-21, I maintained this idea of using red ink in order to differentiate from the black ink that prisoners wrote in.”¹⁸

Perhaps most jarring of all was the fact that Duch decided to locate his prison on the grounds of a school. Classrooms were used for interrogation and prisoners cells. Prisoners were executed on site. Meanwhile, a short distance away, Duch converted a building into a lecture hall where he held political sessions and instructed his interrogators. This former teacher, who claimed to have been forced to become a torturer and executioner, chose to have these acts carried out in a place of learning.

I visited Tuol Sleng many times, looking for clues about this uncanny man and the acts of mass murder of which he was accused. Like me, tens of thousands of people—including tourists, diplomats, officials, researchers, survivors, and students—toured the compound. Some, moved by what they had seen, decided to graffiti Duch’s photo, to articulate an understanding of him and the violent acts he had committed at the site. This book is my articulation of Duch, the extermination center he ran, and his trial, all of which are suffused with the uncanny. His story and trial say something about all of us, a link suggested by Duch’s photo and these acts of defacement.

| | |

Now, as I gaze at Duch’s defaced photo at Tuol Sleng, I glimpse a trace of this connection. At Tuol Sleng, many of the exhibitions, ranging from display cases to paintings, are bordered in black by a square wooden frame. Duch’s photo, in contrast, is “frameless,” lacking such a clearly visible border. Looking closely, I notice a background rectangular trim suggesting the photo is mounted from behind on a frame that is otherwise out of sight.

If a frame colloquially refers to a “structure surrounding a picture, door, etc.,” it more abstractly suggests a “basic underlying or supporting structure of a system, concept, or text,” including our ways of thinking about the world. To frame something is to place it in a surround, thereby sharpening the image, a

notion that may be extended to the articulation or formulation of a “system, concept, or text.”¹⁹ As it “confers structure,” a frame encloses that which is depicted within, as illustrated by the images framed in the Tuol Sleng exhibitions, including Duch’s photograph. At the same time that the frame renders something visible, however, it also forms a border cordoning it off from, even as it nevertheless remains related to, that which lies beyond the border. When a frame foregrounds something, therefore, it simultaneously suggests a background pushed out of sight by the very existence of the frame and what is articulated within.

The faint trim surrounding Duch’s defaced photograph therefore raises a series of questions that resonate with the issues of this book. How is Duch’s photograph framed by the context of Tuol Sleng, the trial, and the understandings of passersby? How do these frames, as illustrated by the graffiti in his photograph, suggest an articulation of Duch as evil? To label him “evil,” however, is to suggest a reductive explanation that naturalizes violence and directs our gaze away from the larger context of his actions.

Ultimately, much of the “evil”—and I place this term in quotes to note my hesitation in using it, due to the naturalization of violence it suggests, even as I recognize the severity of the violence the word conveys—that took place at Tuol Sleng was premised on the same, everyday ways we think, as we classify and assert a structuring order of the cosmos and the beings who inhabit it. In other words, the reductive frames that Duch and his associates brought to bear at S-21 parallel our everyday ways of thinking, including, as illustrated in Duch’s photo, characterizing another person as “evil.”

Indeed, this dynamic structured Duch’s trial itself, as his subjectivity was framed in a variety of ways, including the rendering of a juridical status through the proceedings and the verdict. There is a large literature on “frames” and “framings”;²⁰ I use the term in a restricted sense to refer to the ways our experience is organized so as to “point toward” a given articulation (and simultaneously to “point away” from that which is suggested as irrelevant even if related to what is highlighted): a frame is a surround that foregrounds an image and suggests an articulation of it.

The frame of a picture, like that of Duch’s photo at Tuol Sleng, provides a way of visualizing this point. Indeed, we might think of the frame as being relatively “thick” or “thin,” depending on the extent of structural pressures directing our gaze toward a more singular articulation of the foregrounded image. If the structural pressures may be social, cultural, economic, or religious, they may also be enmeshed with political power in contexts like S-21, Tuol Sleng, and even the ECCC.

These frames have both a public and a private life. On the one hand they are manifest in a variety of public institutions, such as cultural codes, collective memory, and social rituals. On the other the frames that are related to this public knowledge and related practices are learned by individuals, who internalize them, sometimes in highly variable ways, and then publicly reenact and retransmit them in their everyday practices. The degree of variation changes across time, place, and person. At times, given frames may be more widespread and somewhat less variable when sociopolitical pressures and institutional focus is brought to bear (“thick frames”)—though such structural force is never complete and is met with a degree of resistance and variation, even if it often manifests in less public or “offstage” contexts.

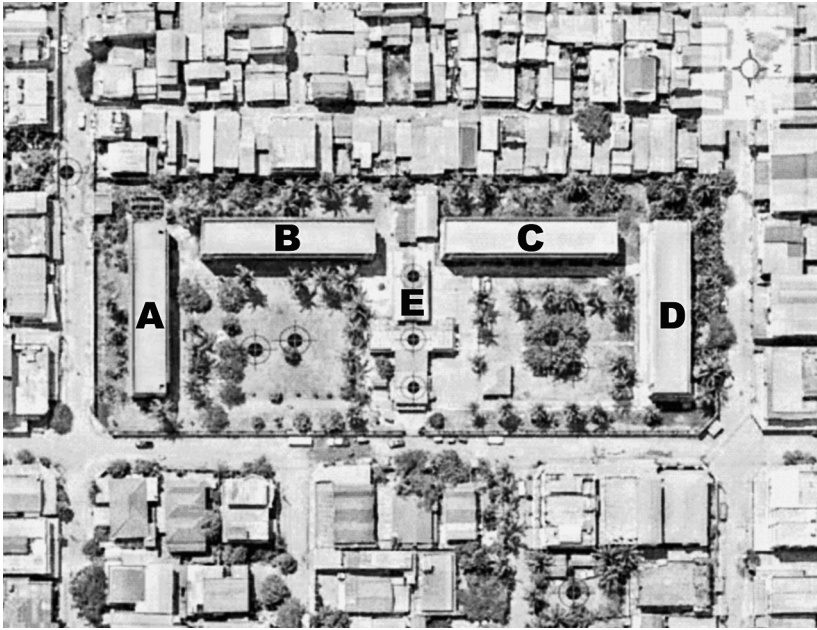


Tuol Sleng is suggestive about such “thick frames.” At one time today’s Tuol Sleng compound was part of S-21, where tremendous political pressures asserted the legitimacy of given DK frames for viewing the enemy. These DK “thick frames” are illustrated in the first half of this book. The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, in turn, reframes this past in a different way, one linked to a specific politics of memory in the PRK, the regime that replaced DK after the Khmer Rouge were deposed by over 100,000 Vietnamese troops following an off-and-on military conflict that began soon after the Khmer Rouge took power and escalated into outright war in 1978.

Startled by the sudden arrival of Vietnamese troops in Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, Duch and his men fled the S-21 compound, leaving behind thousands of confessions, photographs, memoranda, execution lists, and other materials that came to serve as the archival basis for exhibitions at the museum at Tuol Sleng, which was established later in 1979, and more recently as a significant portion of the material evidence introduced in Duch’s trial.²¹ Even in 2011, the Tuol Sleng museum remained informed by this PRK politics of memory—in part because the leaders of the PRK continued to hold power and still linked their legitimacy to their overthrow of the DK regime. Indeed, this was part of the Cambodian government’s motivation for agreeing to the establishment of the ECCC.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

As a guest tours Tuol Sleng, this PRK political frame is immediately evident. The genocide museum consists of four main buildings, lettered A–D, which



Aerial view of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Photo courtesy of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

are laid out in the shape of the two legs (A and D) and top (B and C) of a rectangle.

Each of the four buildings has three stories, though the primary exhibitions are located on the bottom floors. Guests usually proceed sequentially, starting with Building A. Duch's photo hangs in a second-floor room of Building D, in an exhibition area that is noted by signage but is not on this main tourist circuit. Buildings A–D enclose a fifth single-story building (Building E), which is not open to the public and now hosts Tuol Sleng administrative offices. During DK, some of the rooms in Building E were also used to process prisoners and included a room where, in 1978, several prisoner-artisans worked. At the time of Duch's trial two of these artist-prisoners, Vann Nath and Bou Meng, were still alive and testified, presenting their own perspective on life in the prison. Over the years they have also periodically returned to Tuol Sleng.

I see Vann Nath, whose health is poor, slowly walking along the path toward Building D, one arm knotted behind his back to clasp the other. Soon after the DK regime was toppled, Vann Nath returned to work at Tuol Sleng, painting portraits relating to S-21 that are among the most powerful exhibits at the museum. Now I watch him disappear into Building D, where his paint-

ings still hang. He reemerges on the third-story balcony of Building D and gazes at the tourists below.

I think about how Vann Nath stands in a corridor along which young students walked in pre-DK times, then S-21 guards and prisoners, and now tourists. From a distance, the open entrances and windows of the classrooms appear blacked out and impenetrable, connected only by the exterior balcony passageways. The chipped grey-and-white concrete buildings are fronted by a courtyard of yellowed grass, palm trees, and clean yellow-and-red brick paths. Here and there, visitors sit on benches, chatting or in silence.

As usual, many of the Western tourists below are dressed in shorts and carry backpacks, water bottles, and cameras. I notice a child, perhaps five years old, get a smack from his father after dropping the family's guidebook. A group of Muslims, perhaps Cambodian Chams, a group directly targeted by the Khmer Rouge, are gathered in front of a sign near Building E, where people sometimes begin their visits before walking to Building A. In Khmer, English, and French, the sign describes how the prison was established by Pol Pot and his "clique":

INTRODUCTION TO THE TUOL SLENG GENOCIDE MUSEUM

In the past "TUOL SLENG" Museum was one of the secondary schools in the capital, called 'Tuol Svay Prey' high-school.

After the 17th, April 1975 Pol Pot clique had transformed it into a prison called 'S-21' (Security office 21) which was the biggest in Kampuchea Democratic. It was surrounded with the double wall of corrugated iron, surrounded by dense barbed wires.

The classrooms on the ground and the first floors were pierced and divided into individual cells, whereas the ones on the second floor used for mass detention.

Several thousands of victims (peasants, workers, technicians, engineers, doctors, teachers, students, buddhist monks, minister, Pol Pot's Cadres, soldiers of all ranks, the Cambodian Diplomatic corps, foreigners, etc.) were imprisoned and exterminated with their wives and children.

There are a lot of evidences here proving the atrocities of Pol Pot clique: cells, instrument of torture, dossiers and documents, lists of prisoner's names, mugshots of victims, their clothes and their belonging's.

We founded the mass graves surrounding, and in particular, the most ones situated 15 Km in the south-west of Phnom Penh, in the village of Chhoeung Ek, District Dankgor, Kandal Province.²²

Both the prose and the broken English translation highlight the fact that the museum has not been renovated in the manner of the contemporary Holocaust museums found in much of the Global North. Instead, the museum bears the imprint of the PRK regime, which, following the war, sought to enhance its domestic and international legitimacy by highlighting the atrocities of the “fascist” (and thus by implication not truly socialist) “Pol Pot clique.” Tuol Sleng became “Cambodia’s Auschwitz,” a symbolic reminder of the suffering and death that occurred during DK. Indeed, Duch in some ways came to occupy a place similar to that of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat who arranged the transport of the Jews to the death camps and came to serve as a symbol of Nazi atrocity.

Building A highlights this PRK atrocity frame. In front of it, the group of Chams stops before a memorial terrace with fourteen white, raised coffins. A sign, “The Victim’s Grave,” states: “The 14 victim’s corpses have been found by, the army forces of the Front Union of Salvage National Kampuchea, through the building ‘A’ and carried its to bury in this place,” noting that the corpses included “a woman victim. [T]hese victims were the last ones who had been killed by the agent of S.21.” Again, the translation does not quite work, even if it strikingly connotes victimhood and atrocity.

This theme of atrocity is amplified in ground-floor rooms of Building A, where another sign explains that S-21 used them for torture and interrogation. Each cell contains a metal bed frame in the center of the floor and a few other items that were found at the site, such as iron shackles, ammunition cans that prisoners used to relieve themselves, and instruments of torture. For many years, visitors could see bloodstains on the white-and-tan checkerboard floor.

Black-and-white photos, marred by mildew, suggest what the cells looked like when Phnom Penh fell on January 7, 1979: dead prisoners, faces bashed in, lying on or next to metal bedframes to which they are shackled, in puddles of blood. The rooms have no electricity or light. The only illumination comes through the barred windows on either side of the cells, the iron rods casting shadows against the walls. The display contrasts strongly with the verdant vegetation that can be seen outside. A nearby sign on the lawn lists the security regulations at the prison, which threatened prisoners with admonitions such as “While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all.” During the trial, Duch stated that this list, like some other Tuol Sleng exhibits, were fabrications.

Ahead, a Cambodian schoolteacher with a megaphone leads a class of teenage students, dressed in white-and-black uniforms, toward Building B. I think of Duch lecturing his students in prerevolutionary Cambodia, and then

interrogators at S-21. The teacher leads the students past a series of photographic panels that, with the aid of terse captions, tell the story of DK.

The narrative starts with an attribution of guilt: a panel of “Kampuchea Democratic Leaders” that includes photographs of “Brother Number One” Pol Pot, the French-educated leader of the Khmer Rouge, and top associates of his, such as “Brother Number Two” Nuon Chea; Pol Pot’s brother-in-law and later foreign minister Ieng Sary; and Duch’s patron, defense minister Son Sen, another French-educated intellectual. In a group shot, several of the leaders stand in front of a limousine, dressed in black as they await the arrival of a foreign delegation.

The panel includes two photos of Duch that were discussed during his trial. In one, he stands before a microphone, a slight smile on his face, as he lectures at S-21. Photographer Nic Dunlop carried this photo with him in the Cambodian jungles, hoping he would one day find Duch. In the other photo, Duch stands, solemn, with his wife and the families of three of his S-21 comrades. The photos raise questions that were asked during his trial, such as how a person could raise children while running a center where entire families were killed and babies smashed against trees.

The time frame of the PRK narrative begins with “The Arrival of Kampuchea Democratic 1975,” a panel that includes photos of children clapping for heavily armed and stern-faced Khmer Rouge who, after the long civil war (1968–1975), victoriously entered Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Little is said about the civil war itself, when Cambodia, caught up in the currents of the Vietnam War, was rent by violent upheaval.²³ Homes and communities were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of Cambodians perished during this conflict, which was exacerbated by intensive US bombing. The Khmer Rouge movement gained momentum in early 1970, after Prince Sihanouk was deposed by General Lon Nol and joined the revolutionaries in a united front, calling on his peasant followers to fight Lon Nol’s Khmer Republic. As the ranks and territorial control of the Khmer Rouge rapidly increased in the early 1970s, Duch was running M-13 prison and developing methods of interrogation he would bring to S-21.

Other photos in the first rooms of Building B highlight the massive socioeconomic changes the Khmer Rouge set in motion immediately after taking power. A large map of Cambodia with arrows depicts how the Khmer Rouge rusticated the urban population on taking power, warning the inhabitants that the cities might be bombed so they had to leave for a few days. They were not allowed to return. Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge began to round up perceived



Pol Pot, also known as “Brother Number One,” prime minister of DK and the leader of the Khmer Rouge. Photo courtesy of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) / Sleuk Rith Institute (SRI) Archives.



DK leaders and members of the Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Facing forward, from left: Pol Pot (CPK secretary and prime minister of DK), Nuon Chea (“Brother Number Two”; deputy secretary of the CPK Central Committee), Ieng Sary (deputy prime minister for foreign affairs), Son Sen (deputy prime minister for defense), and Vorn Vet (deputy prime minister for economy). Photo courtesy of the DC-Cam / SRI Archives.



Duch speaking at S-21 meeting. Photo courtesy of the DC-Cam / SRI Archives.



Duch (third from left, not wearing a cap) and S-21 staff and families. Duch's deputy Mam Nai (Chan) is first from the left (the tallest man in the photo). Photo courtesy of the DC-Cam / SRI Archives.



Cambodians working on an irrigation project: “January 1, Dam, Chinith River, Kompong Thom Province, 1976.” This photograph is thought to have been taken by a Chinese photographer during a visit by DK Minister of Social Affairs Ieng Thirith. Photo courtesy of the DC-Cam / SRI Archives.

enemies, including former Khmer Republic officials, civil servants, military, and police. Tens of thousands of people likely perished during this initial phase of forced evacuations and executions.

The evacuations and arrests were just part of a larger Khmer Rouge project of mass social engineering, which involved obliterating everything that smacked of capitalism, “privatism,” and class oppression.²⁴ Broadly, the Khmer Rouge targeted Buddhism, the family, village structure, economic activity, and public education—key sociocultural institutions in prerevolutionary Cambodia. More specifically, they sought to eliminate corrupting influences from the past by banning nonrevolutionary art and styles, destroying and damaging temples, curtailing media and communication, ending traditional holidays and rituals, separating family members, homogenizing clothing, and eliminating private property, including photos and other mementos. A series of black-and-white photographs in a panel titled “Forced Work in Kampuchea Democratic” depict one dimension of the collectivization process, as large groups of Cambodians, with shovels, hoes, and baskets in hand, worked to build dams and canals, which were at the center of a DK attempt to create a pure, self-sufficient agrarian society.

In the new society, each person had to be reformed, like hot iron, in the flames of the revolution. The Khmer Rouge called this “tempering” people, literally “to harden by pounding” (*luat dam*). If hard labor in the countryside provided a key method of tempering, so did the Khmer Rouge practice of self-criticism.

A person’s consciousness was to be reshaped during such processes until it aligned with the Party line, which colored the past in revolutionary red. Borrowing a Maoist metaphor that resonated with Buddhist conceptions of the wheel of life and two wheels of *dhamma*, the Khmer Rouge spoke of “the Wheel of History” (*kang bravattasas*) that, powered by natural laws that had been discerned by the “science” of Marxist–Leninism, moved Cambodia inexorably toward communism, crushing everything in its path.²⁵

Achieving this goal required the creation of a country filled with a new sort of person who, after being “tempered” by hard peasant labor, criticism and self-criticism sessions, political meetings, and constant indoctrination, would develop a political consciousness that accorded with the Party line and history. Those showing signs of being unable to rid themselves of vestiges of the past—dwelling too much on one’s former life, complaining, appearing unenthusiastic about the revolution, making mistakes, or missing work—were sometimes said to have “memory sickness” (*comngii satiaramma*).²⁶

If the sickness was chronic or did not heal rapidly, it was “cured” by execution. Indeed, execution served as the most direct means of obliterating counterrevolutionary memories. After economic failures, suspected treason, and disagreements over the pace and direction of the revolution, the list of enemies widened, eventually expanding far into the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. At S-21, Duch and his cadre played a key role in this process, extracting confessions that implicated others.

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At Tuol Sleng, I follow the students through the rest of the white-walled rooms of Building B. The victims, represented as depersonalized corpses in Building A, are given faces, though ones frozen in the frames of black-and-white mug shots. Most are set in checkerboard panels, a panorama of suffering and humanity. If a visitor looks closely, clues about the victims come into sight. Women crop their hair and wear black, revolutionary-style. No one smiles. The faces of some prisoners are swollen and bruised. Many have numbers affixed to their shirts. In a few cases, the pins are stuck into skin.

Some of the photos have been enlarged, including ones of foreigners, a little boy with an iron chain around his neck, dead prisoners lying on the ground. Other photos reveal blindfolded mothers and children, including an almost iconic photo of a mother holding a sleeping infant. A placard on her chest states her name, Chan Kim Srun, and date of arrest, March 14, 1978. She looks as if she is about to cry. There is almost no explanatory text. Lacking captions, the photographs are left to speak for themselves.

The students and I continue to Building C, which is masked by a cobweb of barbed wire. The bottom floor classrooms are filled with small, dark, brick-and-cement cells; the ones on the floor above are made of wood. A sign notes that the barbed wire was used to prevent “desperate victims” from jumping to their deaths, a point the guide also makes while telling the group about female prisoners who attempted suicide. A smaller sign with a bar crossing out a hand holding a pen instructs: “Do not write or paint on the photos and wall.”

Through much of Building D, Vann Nath’s paintings, based on what he witnessed, heard, or was told about by other prisoners,²⁷ provide a thread depicting the atrocities that took place at the prison. In one room, portraits of a baby being taken from a mother and a detainee being whipped are positioned next to a display case filled with instruments of torture: iron bars, rope and wire, shackles, a shovel, even an axe. In another painting, a forlorn and emaciated prisoner sits alone, shackled by the ankle, in a tiny brick-and-mortar cell. I look down at the floor and see the cement outline of the tiny cells depicted in the painting, the trace of a trace, classroom, cell, museum, art, memory. Vann Nath’s paintings have dark backgrounds, against which are cast pallid, half-clad bodies in various states of pain and ruin. The visitors in the group are silent.

Torture is highlighted in the third room. Vann Nath’s paintings depict some of the techniques. In one, a prisoner’s head is immersed in water as an interrogator watches. Another shows a pair of interrogators at work. One takes a scorpion out of a cage while his partner uses pliers to pinch the nipple of a bare-chested woman strapped to a platform. Pointing to another painting depicting a cadre using pliers to extract a prisoner’s fingernails above a small pool of blood, the guide says, “You can see how victim tortured like this. Very cruel.”

The students continue on to the last room, the climactic ending. If the tour began with unrecognizable corpses (Building A), moved to photos of the victims’ faces (Building B), and through the now empty cells in which prisoners were kept (Building C), to portraits and displays depicting the prisoners’ bare



Chan Kim Srun (Sang) and
infant, S-21, 1978. Photo courtesy
of the DC-Cam / SRI Archives.



Unidentified prisoner, S-21. Photo courtesy of the DC-Cam / SRI Archives.

life at S-21 in graphic detail (Building D), the visitors are last presented with tangible remains. For many years, the far wall included an enormous map of Cambodia made up of skulls, supposedly taken from every province in Cambodia after DK, with the country's rivers painted blood red. This sort of image has become iconic of Cambodia, which is often represented, like other sites of mass murder, by association with skulls or, in the case of Cambodia, by the phrase "the killing fields." After a controversy about the appropriateness of the map of skulls, the exhibit was taken down in 2002, though some of the skulls are still on display.

On the other walls of the room, Vann Nath's paintings illustrate how the prisoners were tied in a line and marched to a mass grave, where a Khmer Rouge executioner clubbed them on the back of the head and slit their throats. One painting, set at the edge of a pond overflowing with corpses, depicts a Khmer Rouge cadre bayoneting an infant who has been tossed into the air. A large photograph of a mass grave filled to the brim with the remains of the dead reinforces the message. Some visitors break down in tears.



On exiting building D, I see a sign inviting guests to view temporary exhibitions on the second floor of Building D. The group of students ascends the stairway. I follow them into the second-floor corridor and the first room, where an exhibition, entitled "Vanished," is displayed. A series of panels tells the stories of the "new people": the urbanites and rural refugees the Khmer Rouge marked as less trustworthy, since they had not supported the Khmer Rouge during the civil war. A young Western tourist, a large water bottle dangling from her hand, gazes at a black-framed poster of a black-and-white family portrait photograph. In the next room, the group of students listens to their teacher as they view a second exhibition, "Stilled Lives," which broadens the story, telling about the experiences of the "base people" who had supported the Khmer Rouge during the war and often enjoyed higher status as a result, some serving as soldiers or cadre. The students continue on to a third floor classroom, where Vann Nath waits, as he now does on occasion, to tell them about his experiences at the prison.

The third room's exhibition, "Victims and Perpetrators? Testimony of Young Khmer Rouge Comrades," profiles several people who worked at S-21. I pause by photographs of a man I recognize, Him Huy, a former S-21 guard who oversaw the transport of detainees to an execution site.



Him Huy and S-21 guards. Him Huy (fourth from left) is in the center, with a gun slung behind his right shoulder. Photo courtesy of the DC-Cam / SRI Archives.

A black-and-white DK photograph of Him Huy wearing a Mao cap is juxtaposed with a 2002 color photo of him with his wife and infant in his rural village. His large hand is outstretched, gently holding the fingers of his child. Vann Nath told me that, at S-21, Huy was “savage” and had killed many people. “I didn’t want to work there,” Huy states in an accompanying panel. “I was ordered to do this; if I had refused, they would have killed me.”

Duch made the same claim.

People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) Atrocity Frame

Duch’s photo hangs in the fourth room. I gaze at it, consider how his photograph is framed within the museum, which was created soon after DK by the new PRK. This backdrop inflects not just Duch’s defaced photograph but also his trial and the ECCC.

In advance of their invasion of Cambodia, the Vietnamese pieced together a small, pro-Vietnamese group of Cambodian communist leaders, made up of longtime Cambodian revolutionaries who had been living in Vietnam for years and Khmer Rouge defectors who had fled the DK purges, to create the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation. This group, which included Hun Sen, the then young Khmer Rouge defector who has effectively

ruled Cambodia since becoming prime minister in 1985, formed the nucleus of the PRK, which next came to power.

Almost immediately the new regime was beset by problems of legitimacy. The PRK government, initially headed by Heng Samrin, was closely linked to Vietnam, which had supplied roughly 150,000 troops for the invasion and wielded obvious influence over the government, including the appointment of its top leaders. While initially welcoming Vietnam's help in overthrowing the Khmer Rouge, many Cambodians remained suspicious of a country that was often viewed as a historical enemy coveting Cambodian land.

Some Cambodians also viewed the PRK regime with suspicion both because, like DK, it was socialist and because, like Heng Samrin and Hun Sen, a number of high-ranking officials were former Khmer Rouge.²⁸ Finally, the PRK government was increasingly threatened by new resistance groups and a resurgent Khmer Rouge army that, after arriving in tatters at the Thai border, was propped up by foreign powers.

Memory mixed with politics as the PRK regime set out to articulate a narrative of the recent past that would buttress their legitimacy both domestically and abroad.²⁹ Genocidal atrocity stood at the center of this story. The new PRK political narrative centered around the theme of a magnificent revolution subverted by a small group of evildoers, led by the "Pol Pot" or "Pol Pot–Ieng Sary–Khieu Samphan clique."³⁰ Inspired by a deviant Maoist strain of socialism, the narrative went, this clique had misled or coerced lower-ranking cadre into unwitting participation in a misdirected campaign of genocide.

As a result, most former Khmer Rouge cadre, including by implication many PRK officials, were said to be not ultimately responsible for the DK violence and suffering. Socialist discourses remained central to this narrative, as the PRK regime could still speak of how the revolutionary movement had "won the glorious victory of 17 April 1975, totally liberating our country" from "the yoke of colonialism, imperialism, and feudalism."³¹ With a growing Khmer Rouge insurgency on the border, this PRK role as liberator had resonance for many Cambodians.

Besides civil war, the PRK regime faced other domestic problems, ranging from an economy and infrastructure in shambles to potential famine.³² Entire government bureaucracies, including the health care and educational systems, had to be completely rebuilt. Staffing was extremely difficult since the Khmer Rouge had targeted civil servants, intellectuals, educators, and professionals. Only a handful of legal personnel had survived, a legacy that has contributed to Cambodia's contemporary judicial problems.

For the next decade, Cambodia remained entangled in the web of the Cold War. Linked through Vietnam to the Soviet bloc, the PRK regime found itself isolated by a strange coalition of Thailand and its anticommunist Southeast Asian neighbors, China, and the United States and other Western democracies. Revitalized by covert Thai-US-China support, the Khmer Rouge deftly played on Cold War fears. Former DK foreign affairs minister Ieng Sary soon became their top spokesperson. In a June 1979 interview he warned: “If Cambodia became a Vietnamese satellite it would have direct repercussions on Thailand.” Ieng Sary also denied that the Khmer Rouge had carried out a genocide, stating that “in all of Cambodia perhaps some thousands” had been killed. Instead, it was Vietnam that was carrying out “a genocide of our race and nation.”³³

The United States and other Western powers did little to refute such denials, with diplomats often avoiding the use of the term “genocide” when referring to the Khmer Rouge.³⁴ Cambodia’s seat at the UN was even awarded to the Khmer Rouge, creating a situation in which the DK delegation was given international legitimacy while the PRK regime became diplomatically isolated and was prevented from receiving needed international aid.

In this context, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was established. Just days after Duch and his men fled, Vietnamese soldiers noticed a bad smell coming from the compound and were shocked to discover dead bodies and the trove of documentation that had been left behind. Under the guidance of Vietnamese experts, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was quickly created to provide domestic and international audiences with evidence of the atrocities of the “Pol Pot clique.” By mid-1979, groups of officials and journalists were being taken to the site, which soon opened to receive friendly foreign delegations and the Cambodian public.

The PRK regime asserted this atrocity narrative in a variety of domains, ranging from the construction of memorials to the creation of highly politicized schoolbooks, some of which taught young students to learn to read and write using short vignettes demonstrating the atrocities of the “Pol Pot clique.” One lesson focused specifically on S-21. On the Tuol Sleng wall where Duch’s photograph hangs, other photographs depict related PRK commemorative initiatives. Several show scenes from the August 1979 People’s Revolutionary Tribunal, at which the PRK regime convicted Pol Pot and Ieng Sary in absentia of genocide. Another photo shows a woman with her fist pressed against her forehead as she speaks into a large microphone at a PRK genocide remembrance event, likely the annual “Day to Remain Tied in Anger” against

the “Pol Pot clique.” The woman sobs. Rows of skulls are displayed behind her. The eye sockets, dark and empty, stare.

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On the ledge of the single barred window in the room, I see a book with a red cover that invites visitors to “please comment.” People from all over the world have written comments about their impressions of the museum, most of which are dated and signed. Many of the entries by Cambodians echo the PRK atrocity narrative, referring to the “Pol Pot regime/cliue,” describing its actions as “savage” or “cruel” (*khokhov*), and noting the person’s anger and anguish (*chheu chap*).³⁵ I glance back at the Duch photo, notice that someone has written “despicable cruel one” in Khmer on Duch’s white shirt just below the English “evil.” From the vantage of this PRK atrocity frame, only a savage monster could have run a place where such terrible acts took place.

Human Rights Frame

Reading through the lined comment book, I find entries that range from a word or two to half a page or more. They are written in many languages, though most are in English and Khmer. If the English-language commentaries invoke atrocity, they often do so from a human rights frame that points toward an interpretation of them as mass human rights violations or crimes against humanity. Many of the comments reference the post-Holocaust refrains “Never forget” and “Never again.” These invocations are often linked to humanitarian sentiments, not just recognizing the suffering of the victims but asserting an empathetic connection to them and moral desire to act.³⁶ The museum artifacts provide the point of connection that links the visitor to both victim and perpetrator. A man from the UK wrote: “I have never been so disturbed to see such inhuman suffering by the people. So barbaric. Let us be sure this never happens again.”³⁷

This refrain of “Never again” also appears in another theme found in the remarks of visitors to Tuol Sleng: global citizenship. While this term is fairly elastic, it connotes membership in the global community, with an accompanying worldly perspective and commitment to a set of transnational rights, duties, and obligations. These include a commitment to human rights and global concerns, ranging from international law to environmental issues and social justice. While humanitarian sentiments are often associated with it, global citizenship suggests a more cerebral approach, one involving understanding

(versus the driving compassion of humanitarianism) and appropriate action, including the imperative of prevention.

Relatedly, many of the commentaries mention learning “lessons” from Tuol Sleng, which a number describe as an “eye-opening experience.” From this perspective, Tuol Sleng serves a pedagogical role. Thus a woman from Oregon wrote: “Stunning in its absolute cruelty and efficiency . . . / I can only hope we (as a global community) take the lessons from this place and prevent such evil from consuming another innocent life.”³⁸ Others discourse about geopolitics, human rights violations, perpetrator motivation, the obligations of the global citizen, and the possibility for justice and healing.

After the start of the Duch case, justice became a more frequent theme in the commentaries at Tuol Sleng. One of the longer entries in the comment book reads: “A fair & just trial with all evidence presented free of bias or emotion will give Cambodians & the world the closure required. A court trial is not about revenge, it is about truth, & from that truth according justice.” On the side of the page, a person has written: “This is exactly my sentiment.”³⁹ The focus on the end point of justice illustrates the future orientation of many of the commentaries, which move from the devastation of the past to a better future. In many cases, the Cambodian case is depicted as a particular example of the universal category of crimes against humanity, a point emphasized by noting the link to other cases of mass human rights violations.

Such invocations of “justice” dovetail with a set of discourses and practices at the Tribunal itself, which might be called the “transitional justice imaginary.”⁴⁰ In this articulation, Duch’s trial represents a manifestation of a larger process of humanitarian uplift by which authoritarian conflict-ridden states are transformed into their opposite, a progressive neoliberal democratic order characterized by human rights and the rule of law.

During the February 2009 initial hearing, Duch’s lawyer, François Roux, explicitly made this connection, asserting that “seeking transitional justice” is at “the very core of what we’re about here [in the court].”⁴¹ To highlight his point, Roux quoted transitional justice scholar Pierre Hazan’s comment that transitional justice seeks to rebuild societies torn asunder, a process in which people needed to “perceive the humanity of the other” to succeed. According to Hazan, Roux added, transitional justice was characterized by “the one key formula” of “truth, justice, forgiveness [and] reconciliation.”⁴²

If Hazan’s point about “seeing the face of the other” played a role in Roux’s defense strategy for Duch, transitional justice was the motor of the transformation of a failed past into a successful future. This assumption was