

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Did the killing fields really take everyone by surprise?

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'Mais, ma chérie, Cambodians are not savages.' Except that some Cambodians were savages, a discovery that doomed the diplomat who spoke these words and rocked the world. Or did it? The trial of the Khmer Rouge's master interrogator, charged with killing more than 12,000 people, has shown that some nations should have known what was coming – and done something

Richard Nixon was in the White House, Leonid Brezhnev in the Kremlin and Pierre Trudeau had just got married. The Beatles had broken up, and American troops were slowly beginning to withdraw from Vietnam.

It was 1971, and the fall of Saigon was still four years away – as was the day the Khmer Rouge in neighbouring Cambodia would overrun Phnom Penh and launch a reign of terror in which as many as 2.2 million people would die.

But in the forest clearings and muddy ponds of central Cambodia, the horror had already begun.

At a secret compound known as M-13, teenaged peasants clutching Kalashnikovs kept watch over palm-covered pits in which shackled prisoners awaited their fate as enemies of the revolution. When they weren't being tortured or shot, the prisoners died of malaria or starvation, or drowned when there was a flood.

And when evening fell in the jungle, their torturer, a former math teacher known as Comrade Duch (pronounced DOOK), would feel sorry for himself and turn to French poetry for comfort.

He was especially fond of this stanza:

Moaning, weeping, praying is equally cowardly. Staunchly carry out your long and heavy task, in the path to which Fate saw fit to call you. Then, later, as I do, suffer and die in silence.

It is from *La mort du loup*, a 19th-century classic by Alfred de Vigny about a doomed wolf confronting those who've been hunting him down.

Today, gaunt and grey as he appears each morning in the prisoner's box of a Phnom Penh courtroom, Duch mentions the poem again. He seems to fancy himself a stoic, misunderstood figure, but those testifying against him say he's nothing but a wolf.

Training ground for genocide

Duch's real name is Kaing Guek Eav. The 66-year-old father of four is the sole defendant in Case 001 of the first United Nations-approved trial of a Khmer Rouge.

With hundreds of spectators in cathartic attendance each day, Cambodia's darkest chapter is gradually relived in court, revealing how the methods and ideological foundations of the genocide emerged years before the killing fields happened – and detailing how the tragedy needn't have come as a bolt out of the blue.

Just as there were advance signs of the Nazi Holocaust and the Rwanda slaughter, the world did receive prior warning of what was to come.

In his opening statement at the trial, Robert Petit, the Canadian prosecutor who has since resigned, effective this week, described M-13 as Duch's “training ground.” It was there that he developed techniques that were to make him the Khmer Rouge's chief interrogator and head of S-21, better known as Tuol Sleng, a high school in Phnom Penh that was converted into a prison where thousands disappeared.

M-13 is also where Duch's atrocities first came to light. Testifying at the trial, French academic François Bizot recalled how he tipped off his country about the Khmer Rouge.

Travelling in the countryside while conducting a scholarly study of Buddhism, Mr. Bizot was captured, accused of being a CIA spy and brought to M-13. His two Cambodian aides died there, but he proved interesting to Duch, who treated him relatively well and let him go after three months.

Former Khmer Rouge prison chief Kaing Guek Eav alias Duch before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia on June 29.

As he was leaving, Mr. Bizot was asked by a Khmer Rouge cadre to pass a copy of a 30-page political manifesto to the French embassy, perhaps because he believed victory was imminent. Fluent in Khmer, Mr. Bizot translated the document into French, struggling with the Communist terminology. Although he doesn't remember the exact words, he said the manifesto “foreshadowed the policies that were already being put in place by the Khmer Rouge.”

He made his delivery – but nothing happened. It was only years later, while searching the archives of the French foreign ministry, that he learned what diplomats in Phnom Penh had done. Rather than sending the entire manifesto, they provided Paris with a summary that, he says, “didn't say much. It was a text that seemed lacking in interest.”

As for the original, “I regret very much that this text has obviously disappeared.”

Mr. Bizot wasn't alone in raising a flag, according to Alexander Hinton, director of Rutgers University's Center for the Study of Genocide.

Prof. Hinton says other clues came up in the early 1970s from scholars who had interviewed defectors and refugees fleeing rebel-held zones. Word was circulating that atrocities were taking place but, in a region marked by years of conflicts and brutality, those ominous signals didn't register, he adds. “It was very difficult to convey accurately what was happening.”

But even after it became clear “what was happening,” the world was in no hurry to act. As Henry Kissinger, then the U.S. secretary of state, urged Thailand's foreign minister seven months after the fall of Phnom Penh: “You should also tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won't let that stand in our way.’

A doomed diplomat reassures his wife

Just how oblivious the outside world was to the reality of the Khmer Rouge has been readily apparent in much of the testimony in Duch's trial.

Antonya Tioulong told the court about her sister Raingsy, who remained in Cambodia when her family resettled in France. But then, as rockets rained on Phnom Penh at the end of March, 1975, she wrote: “Must I leave as soon as possible?”

It was the last they heard from her. On April 17, the capital fell.

The killing went on for years. French nurse Martine Lefevre described what happened to her husband in 1977. A diplomat at the Cambodian embassy in Senegal, Ouk Ket was recalled when expatriates around the world were urged to return and help to rebuild the country.

As he prepared to leave, Ms. Lefevre expressed fear for his safety. “He looked at me and touched my cheek and said, ‘Mais, ma chérie, Cambodians are not savages.’”

He too was never heard from again. Like Raingsy Tioulong, he was among the victims of Tuol Sleng, where blindfolded prisoners were brought in handcuffs, tortured for weeks into “confessing,” and then executed.

Duch started there as the deputy commander, and thanks to his experience at M-13 was soon promoted to head of a facility that prosecutors say was at the apex of the Khmer Rouge security network.

In court, he paints himself as a mere cog in the machine – “I sacrificed everything for the revolution, sincerely and absolutely.” This week he went so far as to claim that he agreed to become Pol Pot's lead torturer just to save himself and his family.

“I made many attempts to avoid being chief of the prison but the Khmer Rouge's leaders rejected my requests,” he argued. “I did my best to survive. ... I feared I would be killed.”

Others see him quite differently, as an interrogation innovator ever eager to please his superiors.

Françoise Sironi-Guilbaud, a French psychologist who interviewed Duch at length, testified that he grew up craving acceptance. Not only was he a member of Cambodia's Chinese minority who'd been saddled with a debt-ridden father, he was disenchanted by a failed romance, the arrest of his friends and the theft of his bicycle, which hampered his studies. Communism, she feels, gave him a place where he was appreciated.

Dr. Sironi-Guilbaud says he told her that he “couldn't be at the same time a revolutionary and have feelings,” when in fact he was insecure and began to worry when his superiors started to be purged from the regime. He compensated, she said, by “demonstrating extreme zeal and allegiance in order to hide his fear, going beyond his masters' expectations.”

Even his mentors weren't safe

His S-21 victims included three of his own mentors: a man who sponsored him as a member of the Communist party, a high-school teacher who had inspired him and university professor Phung Ton, who taught Duch and knew several intellectuals who became top Khmer Rouge officials.

The professor was at a conference in Switzerland when the capital fell, and his wife and seven children wound up among the millions of city dwellers forced into slave labour on collective farms – but they took comfort in thinking that he was safe.

Four years later, after the Vietnamese toppled the Khmer Rouge, the family returned to Phnom Penh, and one day his daughter Sunthary happened to trade some rice for palm sugar that came wrapped in newspaper.

“I hadn't seen anything in writing since 1975,” she testified. So she took a close look at the paper, only to find photos of Tuol Sleng victims, including one of a hollow-eyed man with a sign that read No. 17 hanging from his neck. It was her father. He had come back after all.

Prof. Ton is one of the 12,380 men, women and children Duch is charged with killing. He ran Tuol Sleng from 1976 to the last days of the regime, eradicating everyone from

members of the old Cambodian regime to Communists who'd been purged, as well as Vietnamese prisoners of war and travellers from the West.

He is not being prosecuted for what he did at M-13 because it happened before the Khmer Rouge came to power, but evidence about the camp was introduced to demonstrate there was a pattern to his behaviour.

Mr. Petit, who spent three years in Cambodia before heading home to Ottawa, told the court that M-13 is where torture methods were devised by Duch, who candidly told the court how he experimented by soaking a woman before exposing her to the elements, and tying prisoners to poles.

Also while there, he perfected a system of detailed record-keeping, reporting the confessions he extracted to his superiors so they could expand their purges.

When he went to Tuol Sleng, he brought along many of the young staff he trained at M-13, people chosen for the kind of political purity that was to become a Khmer Rouge obsession. U.S. historian and Cambodia scholar Craig Etcheson told the court that Duch recruited guards from local farm boys he considered free of “capitalist or feudalist influences.”

Duch boasted to the tribunal that he found ways to enable the boys to carry out the revolution. “Once we educated them, their very nature changed. They went from being gentle beings to people capable of working in situations of extreme cruelty.”

Rice farmer Chan Khan was just 13 when he started at the camp and testified that, like the other guards, he was afraid of Duch. Of course, he had more reason for fear than most: Both of his grandfathers were among the prisoners there.

He resisted the judges' requests to explain what happened to them – which, according to Anne-Laure Porée, a Cambodia-based journalist covering the trial, may be because he is the guard who, according to a 2003 book, was forced to beat his own grandfather until the old man addressed him as “elder brother.”

Why? Because, as Duch coldly told the judges, “we had to smash the enemy spies. There was a class struggle.”

Another farmer, Uch Sorn, testified how he was caught up in the class struggle.

Now 72, he lived near M-13 in 1973, and one day, while on his way to buy hogs, he was arrested on suspicion of being a spy, taken to the camp and tossed in a pit. Eventually allowed out to work as a labourer, he saw prisoners tied to posts, being whipped or beaten with bamboo sticks, submerged in a pond or executed with a blow to the neck. Dogs, he said, wandered around the compound with human bones in their jaws.

“Each day I saw prisoners dying. Every single day. There was never a day no prisoner died,” he said.

Back then Uch Sorn wouldn't dare to look Duch in the eye, but “today, I am not afraid of him,” he told the court, “because he is now a tiger with no teeth.”

Anti-Americanism causes blindness?

The trial, which opened in February, is expected to wrap up this month. But there is still no clear explanation for why the early warnings about what the Khmer Rouge was up to had so little impact.

As Antonya Tioulong told the court, “we weren't alarmed” when Phnom Penh fell and contact with her sister was cut off.

“The French media were calling it ‘A Socialist Victory ... A Pink Victory in Southeast Asia.’ We thought that a normal Communist regime would be in place. We were far from thinking there would be a tragedy of such proportions.”

François Bizot has a theory about what happened. Now 69 and an emeritus professor at the École française d'Extrême-Orient, he wrote his memoirs in 2003 and attributed the skepticism about the reports of Communist atrocities to widespread anti-American feelings among Europeans.

“Fear of appearing to support the Americans so froze minds that nowhere in Europe were people free enough to voice their indignation and denounce the lies,” he explained.

“Popular wisdom was on the side of liberty and non-intervention ...

"Yet there were those witnesses who, many years earlier, had condemned the horror being plotted in the shelter of the forests.

“A turn of bad luck made me one of them.”