Who Could Make It Turn?: Responsibility in Pol Pot's Agrarian Revolution

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Ben Kiernan, director of genocide studies at Yale, was invited to contribute to 90 Years of Denial *commemorating the 1915 slaughter of Armenians. He seized the opportunity to write on Khmer Rouge Kampuchea, since much about that unparalleled catastrophe remains unknown, unacknowledged or misunderstood. The central dilemma of all genocides—who to blame and who to try (if you can try anybody)—is one with urgent Cambodian currency. Two former leaders of the Khmer Rouge are incarcerated awaiting the UN-sponsored trials which may never happen. Pol Pot is dead. And to muddy the who-to-blame waters, former influential Khmer Rouge operatives now hold top positions in the current government. Philip Short's comprehensive, gritty and controversial* Pol Pot: History of a Nightmare *is an effective means through which to revisit the killing fields. Short's desire to explore multiple causation—historical, ethnic, political, economic, and religious—seems to be sound scholary practice, but it ultimately shifts some of the blame away from key individuals whose perverse, simple ideas led to the deaths of at least one and a half million of their fellow nationals. Kiernan and others feel that much of Short's argument plays into the hands of those, like the current US administration, who feel it unwise to give the accused their day in court. This paper also highlights some of the absurdities marring Short's view of the crisis—he maintains that Cambodians as a race are slow and lazy and unproductive, and that Theravada Buddhism must bear some of the blame. It would be unfair to conclude from this that Short feels Cambodians got what was coming to them, but it is difficult to avoid the implication. No matter how much Short works for justice, sharing the blame amongst many inevitably reduces the responsibility of a few.*

"The train was going too fast. No one could make it turn."
Ex-Khmer Rouge village chief

"See blood on floor." Phnom Penh. 1993. With a small straggling group, I was visiting Tuol Sleng Interrogation Center, a former school where countless thousands were imprisoned, tortured, or liquidated during the Khmer Rouge nightmare, 1975 to 1978. Set up and run by the Minister for Defense, erstwhile school teacher Son Sen, it was a clearing house for enemies of the new state, including several members of the inner circle who fell foul of Pol Pot's caprice. Living and dying by the sword, Son Sen and eight of his family were ultimately eliminated in 1997, after someone else responded to the now infamous enigmatic smile and familiar euphemism: "I would like you to take care of it."

Back to taking care of "blood on floor"—daubs of too-bright scarlet stained the floor about a meter from the skeletal remains of a 50s cast iron bed, wrist and ankle restraints soldered to the frame. Other than the bed, the large square room was empty, still the unadorned classroom with checked vinyl floor and

pragmatic cinderblock walls.

"That's not blood." A quietly incredulous visitor.

"It blood from tortured man. Here. Pol Pot he kill many people here."

"It is not blood."

"It blood." Adamant and hurt.

"It's red paint."

Still at his post, despite the Vietnamese withdrawal, the guide's Monty-Pythonesque response would have been comic were it not for the dark truths redolent in that godless place. "Here... paint... yes..., but blood Pol Pot time!"

Speechless, we moved on to the next room.

1993 was a foolhardy year to visit Cambodia, a few months after Vietnam had been forced to end its 12 year occupation. The Khmer Rouge still held vast sections of the country outside a handful of urban centers. Pol Pot had been warmly received in China during the Vietnamese occupation, and he went on regular trips to Thailand in the 80s—in snapshots he can be seen there with his second wife and their children, a disquieting parody of normality. Within a few months of my visit, two Britons and an Australian were taken from their car and killed; soon after that three backpackers from Australia, France and UK were removed from an ambushed train, imprisoned for two months, then executed.

It was not, however, this danger that disturbed me most during my visit to Cambodia (it would have if I had been captured by the Khmers Rouge). Having the luxury of some critical distance that humid Sunday morning, what was disturbing at Son Sen's playground was the realization that violence is bad, but the propagandic use of it is almost worse. Some people approve of it. Others welcome it. It was still quite clear one year after the Vietnamese departure that Tuol Sleng, and the killing fields themselves, had been partly *staged* by the Vietnamese who needed a good excuse for occupying Cambodia. I left Cambodia with more questions asked than answers found, and am still puzzled thirteen years on.

Any visitor to Cambodia (I hesitate to say tourist, for being there defies the very notion) will perforce ask the same questions. How could the auto-genocide have happened in the first place? What is the nature of the kind of political pragmatism that uses violence and chaos for its own ends? Who is responsible? Why are some former Khmer Rouge operatives now holding the most powerful positions in the land, and others languishing in detention awaiting the ever-elusive war crimes trials? Why was the USA bombing the Khmers Rouge with frenetic, diabolic abandon in 1973-5 then sending them secret and significant support through the Chinese and other Cambodian guerilla groups four years later? "We don't like Cambodia," admitted Kissinger, "but we don't discourage Thailand or China from drawing closer to" her (Kiernan, 2005). Running with the hare....

The creditable strengths (and a some of the weaknesses) of Philip Short's expansive and gripping *Pol Pot* (2005) lie in its sincere effort to try to find answers to these near impossible questions. Unlike Mao or Deng Xiaoping who made light of it, Short is dismayed by the extent of Cambodian destruction since "no other country has ever lost so great a proportion of its nationals in a single, politically inspired hecatomb, brought about by its own leaders" (pp. 10-11). Depending on whose figures you regard, about 1.5 out of 7 million inhabitants died within a three year period—that's a lot of red paint. Poor census records and long-term chaos makes computation of a reliable figure all but impossible, but there is also something indecent in reducing such a disaster to numbers. Suffice to say that Milosevic, Hitler and Stalin could have learned a thing or two about mass murder during the short period of Khmer Rouge rule, and Mao—ever the supporter

of Cause over life and limb—was green with envy at the radical extent to which Pol Pot was prepared to go. He could only dream about that which his admired Cambodian counterpart actually accomplished.

On a narrative level Short's history reads well, taking us through all the major periods in Pol Pot's life and describing them against cultural, political, and economic events of the times. Saloth Sar, as he was named at birth, was from a secure but modest land-owning family which had peripheral connections at court. The boy attended elite French-language schools, though never graduated with a high school diploma. He still managed to get a technical scholarship for study in Paris where again he failed to graduate. Losing his scholarship, he returned home to a newly independent Cambodia with little more than French Communist Party membership and some half-formed, dimly understood Marxist ideals. He taught at a small school and worked underground in secret communist cells until the early 60s, when he had to escape from an anti-communist purge. As a member of the maquis he lived under Vietnamese patronage for two or three years in jungle outposts, at one point walking all the way to Hanoi on the Ho Chi Minh trail to meet Vietnamese leaders. The meetings did not go well. A subsequent visit to China, and a better welcome there, pushed him towards a pro-Chinese stance from which he was never to depart. The Vietnamese, even when allies, were always going to be enemies.

It was not till the 1970 overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk by General Lon Nol that the Khmer Rouge revolution made headway, the government holding the cities and towns while the revolutionaries the countryside. Despite massive American bombing and massive underpinning, Lon Nol's corrupt administration imploded and the Khmers Rouge entered Phnom Penh almost unhindered on 17 April 1975.

At the time of triumph, none but a handful of the inner circle knew Pol Pot was the leader of the party. None admitted in public that it was a Marxist-Leninist movement. A week or so after being welcomed by an exhausted local populace, the cities and towns were emptied and Pol Pot's agrarian revolution began, a revolution that tried to destroy private property, money, investment, families, individuality, free thinking, the media, and, it goes without saying, religion. Throughout their time in government, Pol Pot was a well-guarded recluse with no public face. The large majority of deaths were caused by starvation and psychological trauma, both exacerbated by ineptitude, corruption and chaos. An estimated 300,000 politically motivated executions took place. Bush-like, in January 1979, the Vietnamese took it upon themselves to rid the Cambodians of a monster and bring freedom to the country by invading it with an army of 100,000 (Chandler, 1999). Pol Pot returned to the jungles for almost two decades, from where he lead the guerrilla war against the hated occupiers. Direct Chinese support, and indirect US support kept his revolution alive for almost 20 years. Just before Khmer Rouge military chief Ta Mok was going to hand him to the Americans, as rumor had it at the time, Pol Pot died of natural causes—perhaps—and his body burned near the Thai border on a pile of tires and other rubbish. It was 15 April 1998. He had been under house arrest by his own party for about a year and a half prior to that. David Chandler (1999) wrote this on hearing about his death: "When the extent of the disasters in Cambodia was known, Pop Pot survived in relative comfort and became a useful bit player in the cold war. When that conflict ended and Pol Pot lost his capacity for harm, his former friends began to consider bringing him to justice. He cheated their half-hearted efforts by dying in his bed, leaving history as his only judge."

Short's account is riveting and told through tight, economic prose. But he is not just telling a story. He is trying to answer questions—some the same as mine listed above, others his own: "Why did so many Cambodian intellectuals throw in their lot with a movement that turned out to be so ghastly? Why did so many former Khmer Rouge cadres, educated, thoughtful people, including some whose own relatives were

murdered under Pol Pot's rule, still maintain he was a great patriot, whose merits outweigh his faults? Why did the Khmer Rouge revolution go to such implacable, unbearable extremes?" (p. 11). Chandler (1999) asks the same question: How could a government be so "naïve, brutal and inept"? While other leftist revolutions have tried to equalize incomes, remove entrenched elites, control the press, use and misuse the legal system, limit the power of religion, control production and financial systems, the Khmer Rouge chose more "insane solutions. Money, law courts, newspapers, the postal system and foreign communications—even the concept of the city—were all simply abolished." Individual rights were not, as in other revolutions, diminished and seen to be less important than the collective—they were, Short points out, "extinguished altogether" (p.11).

In searching for answers that, at best, can only provide cold comfort, Short refuses to dismiss the Khmer Rouge rule as based on the simple insanity of one man—the Bad Man version of Carlyle's Great Man Theory which has been used to "explain" indescribable crimes committed by whole nations. The worst possible in national or international affairs should never, he argues, be dismissed through damning the lunacy of one man, be it Pol Pot, Hitler or Mugabe. In avoiding this tempting reduction, he follows in the footsteps of historians like Richard Overy in *The Dictators* or Ian Kershaw in *Hitler* who attempt to explain the influence of their respective dictators through the depiction of multiple aspects of the times, entire states and their empires, and various levels of societal interaction. Brought up in the two-dimensional psychopathic-tyrant theory, Overy, Kershaw and Short find, if not truth, some explanation in an exploration of the peripheries around power and events, as much as those at the centre. No wonder they write big books. But the more these structuralists move towards the idea of multiple causation, shared guilt, and collective responsibility they cannot help but shift some of the blame away from those accused of the most horrendous of crimes. Taken to its 'enth degree blame can therefore, in part, be left at the feet of the victims themselves. While simple Bad Man history is a perversion of the facts, too much blame sharing leads to a different kind of problem. If it is everybody's fault then ultimately it is nobody's. As the ex Khmer Rouge village leader pointed out "The train was going too fast. No one could make it turn." Short tries throughout to point to the monstrosities committed by the Khmer Rouge inner circle who stoked and drove the train, but his methodology leads in an opposite direction. Maybe it is impossible to find a comfortable mean.

Short's tour through his many peripheries is as comprehensive as it is enlightening and discomfiting. Three years of Khmer Rouge rule are seen in the context of 60 thorny years of Cambodian history and 60 years of world power-plays. He does not allow his readers to see Pol Pot and his government as an aberration, something that again would encourage dismissal and oversimplification.

Short joins David Chandler in trying to steer their readers away from the unwitting failings of the sincere and groundbreaking movie, *The Killing Fields* (1983), the first popular expose of the catastrophe. It both informed and colored the thinking of a whole generation on Kampuchea. Because movies have to start somewhere and have villains and heroes, its relatively simple lines of argument and narrative misled the audience at the same time as educating it. One of the movie's major villains was the USA itself, understandably since in the whole region that nation was culpable in the extreme. In its frenzy of deserved self-flagellation, it gave the impression that Cambodia was sleeping quietly and comfortably prior to being drawn into the Vietnam War. Here are the first words of the narrator, heard even before the title appears on the screen. A child is sitting on a water buffalo (if my memory serves me correctly) wearing a soldier's helmet as aircraft move across the distant background of clouded Equatorial sky: "Cambodia. To many Westerners it seemed a paradise, another world, but war in neighboring Vietnam burst its borders and

the fighting soon spread to neutral Cambodia." "Neutral" and "paradise" carry positive connotations, intimating that US bombing in 1973 shattered a nation that previously had been at peace.

This understandable American *mea culpa maxima* was first encouraged not by the movie but by English journalist William Shawcross (1979) in his seminal *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*. Of course the trouble with national guilt complexes is this—the actual people responsible for the misdemeanor or catastrophe never feel the guilt. Only decent people do, ones who would never commit the act in the first place. Shawcross, one of the latter, explained Khmer Rough atrocities as a direct consequence of the national trauma brought on by massive US bombing. Without diminishing US responsibility—Short is clear about that—he nonetheless stresses that cruel as it was, the Khmers Rouge had already commenced their violent programs prior to the US bombing, and would have pressed on with their ill-advised plans even without it. As Michael Sheridan (2004) puts it "Pol Pot institutionalized the killing of captives before Kissinger and Nixon made Cambodia the cockpit of the cold war." This is one of Short's convincing major departures from common thinking about Cambodia in general, and about American bombing in particular.

Khmer Rouge violence was politically motivated, and as such was not an aberration; furthermore it was part of a continuum of politically motivated violence that was part and parcel of every Cambodian government since independence (and before). On one hand, the atrocities of Pol Pot's rule differ from those of previous Cambodian regimes in its Leninist-Marxist roots—in its appalling misplaced idealism. On the other hand, it can be seen to differ only in quantitative terms. All powers in Cambodia have made the people suffer from too much reliance on simple ideas and fractured ideals. For decades since the close of WWII, Cambodians had been terrorizing each other, aided and abetted by Vietnamese *agents provocateur* in the rural areas, or by the army, police force and other para-military groups in the cities. All this even before China and the US attempted to use the Cambodian crisis for their own ends—usually to limit Vietnamese and Russian influence in the region. Cambodia's recent history as Short presents it, is characterized by blood baths that are disarming in their variety and in their sameness. It is impossible to summarize Short's inclusion of the different governments, eras, movements, influences, and struggles the Cambodians have had to face since the close of WWII—but one thing draws them together, their use of violence and fear as a means to an end.

Cambodia has been and still is a chaotic collection of rival groups locked into perpetual power struggles—if it suits them they unite temporarily; if it does not suit them they fragement. Lon Nol was Sihanouk's enemy at one stage, then his chosen Prime Minsterer, then the leader of the coup that removed him. Hun Sen aggreed to the joint Prime Minstership with Prince Ranariddh while at the same time plotting his downfall. Prince Ranariddh even made overtures to the Khmers Rouge, and two other small parties, about forming an alliance which could oust Hun Sen. Sihanouk himself wanted to be the Head of State of communist Kampuchea and only set up his Beijing government in exile when that seemed impossible. Internal Cambodian politics have been and are a cauldron of different kinds of opportunism.

But all in this cauldron, from Sihanouk and his self-serving feudal aristocracy to the local communist cell in a one-room jungle hut, take Mao at his word when he argues (from 1926 on) that violence is to be welcomed and encouraged as the only possible harbinger of revolutionary change. The cause must be more important than the individual. Struggle is "not like having people to dinner... or doing embroidery.... To put it bluntly, it is necessary to bring about a brief reign of terror in every rural area.... To right a wrong, it is necessary to exceed proper limits..." (Short, 2004, pp. 172-173). In this, most of the powers-that-

were and the powers that would-like-to-be in Cambodia concur. They also demonstrate, as did Mao, that "brief" as a category of violence would prove to exist only in the imagination. As in China, the victims of this "necessity" are uncountable. As colonial masters, the French could be unbelievably violent themselves (as Algeria would later attest). They supported the small heartless Cambodian aristocracy by ruling though them, a small elite which traditionally had scant regard for the lives and welfare of the general population. At the other end of the post-war political spectrum, the Issarak independence movement terrorized any community they saw as supporting the colonial masters. Issarak leaders, who carried *kun krak*—mummified human fetuses—to ward off the powers of the enemy, tortured and killed anyone they suspected of consorting with the French. The pattern of aristocratic power and distain for the general population and rural revolutionary terror against their influence was well-established by the closing days of the French rule.

Short's first-hand accounts of localized violence and the way Cambodians were forced to become emotionally immune to it, form much of the terrifying content of his study. Chhang Song, later a senator, remembered childhood fishing expeditions which had to remove human heads from the ponds before they could start to find food. "It didn't bother us; we were used to it. We would yank them out by the hair, and throw them aside. That was around 1949.... I was 10 or 11 years old" (p.88). Sihanouk's governments through the 50s and 60s were ripe with self-serving corruption. While pretending to be civilized they were brutal and cruel. Sihanouk and the variety of means he used to remain in power looms large in the book—I guess there are more pages devoted to his antics than Pol Pot himself. In one short life he was Prince, King, abdicated King, Head of State, Deposed Head of State, possible Kampuchean Head of State, Leader of a government in exile when that didn't happen, King again, Second Abdication—it is a singular personal history and one that reveals the extent to which a clever individual can go to keep in power or try to keep in power. He was as brutal as he was mercurial, crafty as he was charming. During his first reign as King, Short records that there was one policeman for every 60 residents in Phnom Penh, one of the "highest urban rates in the world. Anyone against Sihanouk, particularly communists, would, in the best traditions of the totalitarian state, simply disappear in the middle of the night. One of the King's international advisors, Charles Meyer, records that "several hundred" in his ken were so treated. Sihanouk appointed his erstwhile enemy, General Lon Nol, to subdue rural rebellions by sanctioning what he called "extreme harshness" (pp. 152-153). This included a bounty paid to soldiers on the presentation of rebel heads. In order to increase income, Lon Nol's faithful simply lopped off anyone's head, claiming it formerly topped a rebel body. Who could prove that it didn't? In 1970 Lon Nol repaid Sihanouk's confidence in him by ousting the then Prince in a coup, and supported by the Americans continued the vicious assault on his own people till his regime fell apart and the Khmers Rouge walked in. Once again the US proved that pragmatics rather than ethics was their major motivation in foreign affairs, and that they would support anyone, however inept or evil, if it was in their national interest.

Nations outside Cambodia continually meddled and interfered, muddying the waters even more—Vietnam, China, US all became *de facto* supporters of Mao's notion of ignoring restraint and allowing the efficacy of a "brief" terror. In trying to ensure the survival of the Lon Nol government, the USA dropped three times more bombs on Cambodia than they did on all of Japan for all of WWII. A dimly conceived anti-communist tactic, the bombing was also, in Short's view, a "virility symbol" in the face of stymied action in Vietnam and Laos as a consequence of the Paris Peace Accord: "B-52 sortie rates peaked at eighty-one a day, a third higher than in Vietnam, and air traffic congestion became so acute that bomb-loads sometimes fell dozens of miles off target" killing indiscriminately (pp. 215-216). While the USA has been savagely criticized by its own scholars for its role in the sordid affair, especially its support of Lon Nol

and indiscriminate bombing, Short is keen to point out that self-interested China has almost totally been let off the hook, and though as culpable as the USA or Vietnam has never been called to account for its decade long weapons-support program for Pol Pot. As China's own record shows, such disasters are to be described as understandable mistakes.

The Khmer Rouge atrocities were partly the consequence of their wholesale adoption of simple ideas—ones given too much support too quickly. Short, well aware of the dangers in simple ideas and simple ideals, shows this in the actions of the revolution itself, and in the behaviors of other international players. Can the Khmer Rouge capital crime of picking up decaying fruit at the side of the road be seen to be more insane than the American bombing or even the domino theory itself? In Philip Short's *Pol Pot* nobody—but nobody—comes out of it smelling of roses, including the present post-occupation government which he describes as rotten to the core. Led by Hun Sen and Chea Sin, two former and unrepentant Khmer Rouge operatives, contemporary elections have been controlled by graft and bullying, much in the same way Sihanouk grafted and bullied forty years earlier.

The book's comprehensive depiction of patterns of murder and violence—national and international—suggests that the title, *Pol Pot*, is something of a misnomer. We end up discovering far more about such characters as the mercurial Sihanouk, the sinister Khmer Rouge Foreign Minster, Ieng Sary, and pragmatic Head of State Khieu Samphan than we do the elusive Pol Pot himself. Short's reputation as a biographer was firmly established after the 1999 publication of his rich and comprehensive *Mao: A Life*, in which he is able to quote from an unending number of primary and secondary sources from and about the man. Mao himself was an avid communicator, so there are reams of revealing sources available for any biographer. Pol Pot, who was pathologically secretive, is another matter entirely: frequently changing his name he became so many people he almost ended up as nobody. Add that to the problem we have when trying to envision diabolic leaders whose names represent ultimate evil in human terms. The "real" Pol Pot hard to locate and harder to describe.

At one time or another Saloth Sar reinvented himself as Pouk, Hay, Pol, '87', Grand-Uncle, Elder Brother, First Brother, '99', and Phem. There may even be other aliases we have yet to discover:

> "It is good to change your name," he once told one of his secretaries. "The more often you change your name the better. It confuses the enemy." Then he added in a phrase that would become a Khmer Rouge mantra: "If you preserve secrecy, half the battle is won." The architect of the Cambodian nightmare was not a man who liked working in the open. (p.5)

The "more often you change your name the better. It confuses the enemy...." Well, the enemy writing this review is still confused, Short's research notwithstanding. Pol Pot was mediocre to abysmal at almost everything he did. He was a poor student in Phnom Penh and Paris, a shallow Communist with little understanding of Marx, a poor military strategist, a dangerous friend, an untrustworthy colleague, and an unmitigated disaster as a leader. He has, however, stymied the best efforts of the best biographers to come to grips with him and has continued to win more than half the battle there. It surprises me that Nayan Chanda, one of the specialists on Indochina I most respect, writes in *The Washington Post* that Short gives us a "vivid picture" of the man. William T. Vollmann in *The New York Times* also writes that Pop Pot is "vividly drawn" when he appears, but like Chanda complains that his real appearances in the biography are all too rare. Short does wonders with the scant information he at hand, but scant it remains.

In the study there are as many mysteries as there are facts. Before he went to Paris we know little about him. He had links with the palace through his older sister. One of his early light adolescent sexual experiences took place in the corridors of the royal palace when he was a plaything for some of the women at court. We know he was part of the secret leftist underground when he returned from Paris, yet he also drove a flashy Citroen and appeared very much the young man about town. We don't know how much of this is post-adolescent identity confusion or part of a clever cover. When there is an eye-witness account of him it rarely includes any insight beyond the vague response possible from someone who meets him briefly. The following summary of Chandler's quoted eye-witnesses from Socheat Som (2001) will show what I mean by the absence of real insight in eyewitness accounts:

> People who knew him at that time found him "well presented... and attractive figure. His deep voice and calm gestures were reassuring. He seemed to be someone who could explain things in such a way though you came to love justice and honesty and hate corruption" (Chandler, 1999, p. 51). Some students remembered him "as calm, self-assured, smooth featured, honest, and persuasive, even hypnotic when speaking to small groups" (Chandler, 1999, p. 5).... In 1962, Pol Pot spoke at a seminar in Phnom Penh to an audience consisting of Buddhist monks and college students. One participant remembered Pol Pot's speech as "harmonious and persuasive; he uses examples skillfully. He made himself easy to like" (Chandler, 1999, p.62).

If these fragments, ones that convey little sense of the man himself, are all we can glean from his days as a teacher, even less can be said about his time in early 50s Paris when the foundations were being laid for his later warped communist theories. He is inconspicuous in the Parisian Indochinese Cercle Marxist. In the few pictures of the group which exist, he is either not there at all or inconspicuously lurking in the background. Once home, he was the party leader from October 1962, yet thirteen years later when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge the combined secret service agents of the USA, Vietnam and China were unaware of the role he was playing. While Mao, Lenin, Castro and Stalin personified their revolutions, Pol Pot hid behind his. During his years in government, the ordinary operative or cadre did not know him in any shape or form. If a car or bicycle was confiscated or a special challenge issued it was for "Angkar", a vague term which encapsulated the revolution. If a child was executed for inefficiency or indolence or stealing food it was because Angkar was displeased. If a hospital had medicine, it was because Angkar was generous. Prior to the now famous announcement of September 1977 many of his followers did not know their own party was Marxist-Leninist at all (Haigh, 2005).

In 1978 when he knew that the days of his regime were numbered, and he was clutching at straws, Pol Pot gave his first ever interview to a Yugoslavian journalist whose first question remained—and still remains—unanswered: "Comrade Pol Pot, who are you?" What kind of leader was he? He is only somewhat like Ian Kershaw's Hitler, an "unperson" completely lacking in the kind of "negative greatness" that has been recognized by other historians and biographers. Kershaw also describes Hitler as an indolent dictator who was not really keen to get involved in the day to day running of his empire. And when he did get involved, such as directing every detail in the Eastern campaign, he was universally and calamitously inefficient. They have this kind of gross inefficiency in common at least. Pol Pot was so secretive, so hidden away in his well-protected inner sanctum, that we don't know how lazy he was, but we do know that as a military, social and political strategist he was inept. It is certainly true in both Nazi Germany and Pol Pot's Cambodia that much of the cruelty, social disintegration, and inefficiency was caused by countless individuals "working towards" the dictator's vaguely formed and frequently unexpressed desires and longings. Given all of Short's work, however, the reader is ultimately left with the conclusion of David

Chandler's 1992 biography, *Brother Number One:* "I was able to build up a consistent, but rather two-dimensional picture.... As a person, he defies analysis." While Short's picture can't take us much further than that, what he does do is put Pol Pot into a more complex social and political world. He also presents us with some meaty issues that will be the source of heartfelt debate for some time to come.

It is all but impossible for a book like *Pol Pot: History of a Nightmare* not to be contentious. No matter what he writes or does not write he is going to irk someone. The most controversial aspect of his research methodology is his extensive use of face-to-face interviews with former leaders of the Khmer Rouge revolution, many from the comfort of a lounge room chair in comfortable surroundings, some in Paris, a few in the USA, and some in Cambodia. A sizeable part of Short's saga is, he writes, seen from "the vantage point of those who created it." Some see this as a valuable source of information, but to other readers this is rather like interviewing Goering or Goebels and expecting them to tell the truth about their former leader and their part in what happened. We know that much of Albert Speer's comments on the Third Reich, his former mentor and friend, and his role in the whole business were very much intended to keep himself alive—to his dying day he insisted that he never knew anything about the holocaust, and many believed him. Joachim Fest (2001) in the latest biography of the architect leaves no doubt that he did know, and for decades managed to pull the wool over many eyes, perhaps including his own. In using alleged criminals to tell their own story, Short is treading intriguing but questionable territory.

His list of interviews with former Khmer Rouge leaders, operatives and cadres is long and comprehensive, including Head of State Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary—Pol Pot's brother-in-law and Foreign Minister, Security Chief Phi Phuon, and Son Sen's brother, Nikan, who like many others defected to Hun Sen's party in 1996. The list would have been much longer were it not for Pol Pot's predilection for the elimination of those closest to him. He was a great believer in the maxim that three friends can keep a secret as long as two of them are dead. In *The Washington Post*, Nayan Chandra (2005) expresses his disease about this, feeling the weight of evidence gathered by Short favors a few at the expense of the many. Short provides "an anatomy of the Khmer Rouge nightmare without the cries of its survivors."

Short may have foreseen such criticism, but he did not prepare well for it, only arguing for a paragraph in his "Acknowledgements" that he can, by and large, sort out the lies, half-truths, and the facts of the matter by cross-referencing the former leaders' accounts with other sources at hand. While he does this, and can be see to be doing it, he nonetheless leaves himself open to claims that he is sleeping with the enemy, and that there is something indecent in sitting down to civilized conversations over a cup of tea with leading members of Pol Pot's inner circle who must bear a sizeable part of the responsibility for mass murder, mass starvation and heartless social experimentation. It would be unfair to Short to suggest that he is comfortable with all the former leaders he interviews. On the first page of the book he gives a singularly critical portrait of Pol Pot's brother-in-law, Ieng Sary. A co-founder of the Cercle Marxiste in Paris he also joined the French Communist Party with other members of his group. He later rose to full membership of the CPK Standing Committee in 1963, and later served as Vice-Premier for Foreign Affairs 1975-1979. He gradually lost influence during the Vietnamese occupation in the 80s, pragmatically defecting to Hun Sen in 1996, an act that guaranteed his survival. He now lives quite comfortably as a privileged citizen in Phnom Penh. This is Short's uncomplimentary picture of the man the day the capital city fell to his party:

> He was fifty years old and balding, with an incipient paunch. [This paunch seemed to be a characteristic he shared with the rest of the well-fed inner circle.] A devious, manipulative man, crafty rather than clever, his smooth domed forehead, pale complexion and part-Chinese ancestry gave him

> a striking resemblance to an ultra-leftist Chinese Politburo member named Yao Wenyaun, one of the so-called 'Gang of Four'.... Sary was capable of singular vindictiveness but also of loyalty to useful subordinates, who repaid him with lifelong devotion. He concealed insincerity beneath a calculated ability to make himself agreeable. A British Ambassador who... attended lunch with Sary and his wife... likened the experience to having tea with Rosemary West and her husband, two murderous sexual deviants whose names became a byword... for grisly perversion. But that was the distaste of hindsight.... (p. 3)

This is a convincing portrait of a villain for whom Short has no respect—quite clearly interviews with him set the biographer on edge. This is not always the case with other members of Pol Pot's inner circle. It seems, tonally at least as he does not find some of the company discomfiting. There are times when it can be argued that he whitewashes the worst of their crimes. Kiernan (2005) records one such example.

He cites the 40 times Thiounn Mumm's versions of events were included in the book. Mumm, from one of Cambodia's wealthiest aristocratic dynasties, turned his back on that past and threw in his lot with the revolutionaries—at least until self-preservation suggested otherwise. Short presents Mumm as "educated" and "thoughtful". In fact, he seems to quite like him. But despite his claim that he checks and cross-checks all former leaders' stories with other sources, he fails to include one of the most credible and infamous accounts of Mumm's revolutionary zeal. He was seen to upbraid several starving children in his care who were actually dying at the time. They had eaten foraged poisonous tubers, and foraging was a capital crime. An individual could not pick up food, since all food belonged to the commune. Mumm lectured them even as they were expiring or had expired: "This is what happens to undisciplined children." Kiernan, who cites this incident, feels that Short should have gone to far greater lengths to avoid giving the impression that these were good, civilized human beings who happened to do bad things.

It is clear that Short is trying to remain objective throughout, something that is essential given the emotive nature of the subject matter. Nevertheless his attempt at rational distance, and his giving voice to former Khmer Rouge leaders, is potentially offensive to relatives of long-dead victims. It also puts many general readers on edge. But this is not the only aspect of *Pol Pot* which will do so.

As mentioned above, the failed Khmer Rouge agrarian revolution is really part of a wider continuum of terror and violence which plagued Cambodia since WWII, and perhaps long before. Short's view of 60 years of internecine struggles (such as Khmers Rouge vs. Khmers Rouge) and vicious inter-party strife (such as Lon Nol's military government vs. Marxist revolutionaries) and international strife (such as Vietnamese colonial designs on the whole of Indochina and the USA's swapping sides when it felt like it) is comprehensively described and well-documented. He contextualizes the complex network of political forces causing the chaos and really gets his teeth into it. But he also makes some extraordinary sweeping claims that leave too many questions begging and ultimately bring into question the value of his work.

While he revaluates American blame for the tragedy—while still recognizing their culpability—he attempts to lay some of the blame for the descent into madness at the door of Theravada Buddhism. In his view, Lon Nol was a butcher in part because he was a follower of an arcane wing of Cambodian Buddhism. Here Short shows him pondering the desirability of the military coup which did, as history shows, remove Sihanouk from power:

> Lon Nol prevaricated. Everything he had achieved in his life had been due to Sihanouk's

> patronage. He knew the Prince trusted him. But he was ambitious and profoundly affected by esoteric Buddhism. The mystics and seers he frequented had persuaded him that his fate was to restore the glories of the ancient Khmer-Mon empire by waging war against the *thmil*, the hated unbelievers.... (p. 197)

When Short needs to stress that it was a perversion of Buddhist notions which misled the impressionable general, he does not. And in other parts of the biography repeats the unsustainable claim that Buddhism's very nature played a part in the cataclysm. "Every atrocity the Khmers Rouge ever committed, and many they did not, can be found depicted on the stone friezes of Angkor, in paintings of the Buddhist hells..." (p. 445). Buddhism, he posits, stresses the ultimate and desirable loss of individuality, suggesting that the philosophic "demolition of the individual" led to a uniquely Cambodian disregard for life and limb. Pol Pot, he suggests, took the road he did late in life because as a child he was marked by a love of "detachment" which encouraged "suppression of individuality—in both thought and behavior" (p. 23). He takes this an unfortunate step further when he makes a general comparison between the evils of Hindu-influenced Buddhism and the other two world religions:

> In Cambodia, institutional restraints against wrongdoing are weak. Law was, and remains, whatever the power holders say it is. The impersonal fatalism of Theravada Buddhism erects fewer barriers against evil than the anthropomorphic God of Christianity or Islam who sits in judgment and threatens sinners with hell-fire. (p. 445)

Tell that to the Armenians who open the abstract of this essay. Tell that to the victims of the Jewish/Slavic/Gypsy/Homosexual Holocaust at the behest of Christian Germany. Tell that to the victims of the current Iraqi conflict. If all this is not bad enough, Short seems determined to seek negative criticism when he seriously argues that Chinese and Vietnamese Confucianism somehow produced a more rational communism than that witnessed in Buddhist Cambodia. Tell that to the 20 million starved to death in the Great Leap Forward, or to the countless ravaged souls still living with the scars from excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Religious zeal, political zeal and philosophic zeal have the same disastrous consequences when they are used to excuse or encourage murderous behaviors—in this they are more alike than different. It is a commonplace that religious perversion has been part and parcel of violent human conflict as long as we have been on this planet. But as an historian, how does Short evidence or quantify his subjective feeling that Buddhism has something to do with the nightmare? Or that Christianity encourages more self control? Or that Chinese Confucianism is more rational than Hindu-inspired Theravada superstition? He doesn't. He simply can't.

Elizabeth Becker (2005), one of three Westerners to meet Pol Pot (the night after the meeting, soldiers burst into the government guest house and murdered her fellow visitor, Malcolm Caldwell, in the room next to hers), is highly suspicious of Short's painting "all of Cambodia's misfortunes as a continuum of a cultural malady... [in which] the Khmer Rouge becomes an extreme example of the country's problems rather than an exception." She worries that holding all of Cambodia at fault is a "new version of blaming the victim." In other instances Short pronounces Cambodians lazy, saying the Khmer Rouge addressed this old problem of 'how to make Khmers work' by pursuing radical policies which turned most of the population into slaves. In other words, Becker worries that Short's multiple view of causation leads him to another version of "they had it coming to them." Furthermore, it would be relatively easy to quote untold numbers of first-hand accounts which reveal positive Buddhist behaviors in action which provided the saving grace at a time of potential crisis. While Short admits that many communist cadres were kind and that many remember

the agrarian displacement as a happy, uncomplicated time, he never suggests that such good deeds may have had Buddhist inspiration. Buddhist compassion and concern for all forms of life (since they are interconnected) fails to get a mention in his long work. And while he takes time to blame aspects of misplaced Buddhist mysticism, he rarely puts Marxist-Leninism under the microscope to find out why that political philosophy has failed to produce a society which values human rights at the same time as party security. This is an odd lack of balance. An unnamed reviewer in *The Economist* (2004, November 4) feels it necessary to defend Buddhism's reputation as a "gentle faith" while at the same time condemning the overconfidence of a small group of Marxist-Leninists who see themselves as the "self-selected possessors of the truth.... Perhaps things were made worse by Pol Pot's desire to outshine the communists in Vietnam; and maybe also by some still unexamined twist in his psyche. All the same, it was the pseudoscientific certainty of Marxism-Leninism, that malformed child of the enlightenment, which was chiefly to blame." Short should have given this more critical attention.

I mentioned at the beginning of the paper that Short's attempt to leave no stone unturned, speculative or otherwise, and to eschew overstatement of the Bad Man Theory is going to be both a strength and a weakness in his work. In a sense he is caught in his own comprehensive energies and in his attempts to answer the unanswerable. All this I can understand, and accept in a way. What I do have trouble accepting is his sophist-like debate at the end of the book on whether the mass murderers running the Khmer Rouge government should be tried for genocide or not. If the former leaders should be tried, he argues, "it should be for crimes against humanity, of which they are guilty... not for genocide of which they are innocent." Using the U.N. General Assembly's 1948 definition of genocide he concludes that they did not set out to "exterminate a national, ethnic, racial or religious group." One other reason they should not be tried for genocide is that such a direct attribution of blame is too "pat" and that all of it cannot be laid at the feet of a "handful of warped leaders". "Evil," he suggests, "is not a discrete condition that can be isolated and set apart" (pp. 446-447).

A reader would expect Short to quote accurately from the UN definition, especially since he is using it to support his argument that trying former Khmers Rouge for genocide is unfair. Kiernan (2005) points out that he does not:

> Short opposed a tribunal for the Khmer Rouge, considers them guilty of crimes against humanity, but not genocide because they "did not set out to exterminate a 'national, ethnic, racial or religious group'." As his authority for this definition, the book's UK edition cited "Article II of the UN Genocide Convention," but Short truncated its definition of genocide: acts committed "with intent to destroy, *in whole or in part*, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such." Quoting selectively, he substituted "exterminate" for "in whole or in part." In the US edition, Short has failed to correct his error, but has deleted his note citing the Convention, leaving his quotation unverifiable.
>
> Short thus overlooks the case that the Khmer Rouge committed genocide against substantial "parts" of Cambodia's majority Khmer Buddhist community and of ethnic minorities such as the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cham Muslims.... Short compares Pop Pot's violent "dispersal" of every one of Cambodia's 113 Muslim communities to "school bussing in the United States to achieve desegregation."

Short includes the kind of argument that has always been used to shift blame away from the criminal to the society at large. In his description of errors brought about by an "irrational...cultural heritage" he, in part at least, removes some of the monstrous from the Pol Pot regime. His is a milder version of Deng Xiaoping's

reassessment of Pol Pot in 1984: "I do not understand why people want to remove Pol Pot. He made some mistakes in the past but now he is fighting against the Vietnamese aggressors" (Kiernan, 2005). 1.5 million mistakes—at least.

My objection is not that the legalistic debate between "genocide" and "crimes against humanity" should be avoided. It should not. My objection is founded on Short's ill-timed, poorly-developed inclusion of it, almost as an afterthought on which to end the book. In such a catastrophic set of events, a couple of pages of semantic word-play seem out of place and even tasteless. In *90 Years of Denial* Kiernan points out why Short's disavowal of genocide comes at a bad time. While in office, Secretary of State Colin Powell managed to persuade Congress to put aside US $ 3,000,000 to pay for a tribunal which would examine the behaviors of Khmer Rouge leaders. That money was withdrawn after his resignation. For many in the US Congress it is too difficult a conundrum. Who do you try? Former Khmer Rouge operatives lead the current corrupt government while others have been imprisoned since 1999. Ieng Sary lives as a comfortable private citizen in Phnom Penh. Lon Nol lived for ten comfortable years of retirement in Hawaii after the fall of his American supported regime. Suong Sikoeun, close associate of Ieng Sary and fellow defector to Hun Sen in 1996, lives comfortably in Malaysia. Pich Cheang, now resident in Anlong Veng as a free citizen, was Zone Chief of Staff and director of the Kampuchean National Bank. Phi Phuon, Chief of Security, also defected to Hun Sen and for his pains now holds a provincial post as governor of Malay. Why was Ta Mok, the general who arrested and tried Pol Pot, awaiting trial and none of the above? I can't begin to answer that question, and neither does Short.

While the current US administration lauds its efforts in removing Saddam Hussein from office to free the Iraqi people and further the cause of world democracy, it restates, once removed, the support the Carter and Reagan administrations offered the Khmer Rouge by ensuring they retained the official Cambodian seat in the UN. Like Deng in China they seemed relatively accepting of Khmer Rouge "mistakes" while in power, and did not seem to mind supporting a murderous regime since it served their anti-Russian and anti-Vietnamese ends. Short seems to throw his weight behind those who do not wish to see a full scale trial or enquiry into those responsible for the deaths of so many people. After all, we all make mistakes.

Short's work is, by any standards, one of the major contributions to contemporary Indochinese scholarship. It is sincere, impossibly comprehensive, and demands much of itself. It is rich in detail, ground-breaking in methodology, and highly original in its approach. It engages itself in the Cambodian descent yet it makes great effort not to allow outrage to cloud its judgment. Herein lies its strength and its weakness. One can't help but wish for a bit more outrage from time to time. "No doubt," concludes Vollmann (2005) in his review, "some people will be offended by the book, not only for its indiscretions, but also for its restraint. Wasn't Pol Pot a monster pure and simple? How dare Short imply otherwise! This attitude, understandable though it is, hinders our apprehension of reality. The truth is that even now you can find poor people in Cambodia who—no matter that they lost relatives in the Pol Pot time—wish for the return of the Khmer Rouge."

It is telling that critics with solid backgrounds in Indochinese affairs—Kiernan, Becker, Chanda—are less convinced and have more reservations than general reviewers coming to the material for the first time. Pol Pot himself, mirroring Deng's revaluation of his worth, admitted to his followers after they lost power that their "mistakes" were the consequence of their radical charting of new social territory. "We were like babies learning to walk." Philip Short does not support this gross kind of evasion of responsibility, doing much to ensure the truth is told as he sees it. It is unfortunate, therefore, that he plays into the hands of

those who do.

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