

## REVIEW OF GENOCIDE EDUCATION PROJECT Documentation Center of Cambodia

**Khamboly Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)***

### Context and Purpose

The publication of a new or revised history textbook for school students is an event that can ignite heated debate, sometimes even diplomatic rows between nations. Recent examples include disputes between Japan and Korea over the question of ‘comfort women’, and between China and Taiwan over the use of language that allegedly promotes the cause of Taiwanese independence. I am reminded of the adage that whoever controls the past determines the future. While these examples remind us that history may serve political ends, Khamboly Dy’s *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* is the product of an independent research institution dedicated to seeking ‘the truth’ in order to promote the laudable purposes of memory, justice and national reconciliation. The final version of the text has emerged from a rigorous process established by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) to provide for Year 12 students in Cambodian schools an accurate, engaging and informative account of a dark episode in the recent past that directly affected most of their families as well as the development of the country.

While it appears from a survey of university students conducted by DC-Cam that there is not a significant problem in Cambodia with outright denial of the past, it is also evident that young Cambodians lack specific knowledge of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). Given that the subject of DK had disappeared from textbooks by 2002 and that schools’ access to other sources such as films and the internet is very limited, this is not surprising. Demonstrably, then, DC-Cam’s genocide education project addresses an important gap in students’ knowledge, and it is heartening to note that government cooperation has been obtained to ensure that all teachers will have access to the new textbook. The publication of the text is also timely, as the imminent trials of some former Khmer Rouge leaders will renew public interest in DK.

### Author and Process

One of the notable achievements of this project is that *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* is the first book of its kind written by a Cambodian. It is important that Cambodian students learn their own history, at least in part, through sources produced by their fellow citizens, for it is Cambodians who must take ownership of their history and work out their future as an independent nation state. The author of the book, Mr Khamboly Dy, although not a graduate in History or Education, has a Master’s degree and received relevant training and experience working as an intern at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Voice of America, where he learnt about curriculum development and the design of educational material.

The process of researching the book involved reading a wide range of secondary sources published in English, including work on ethnic minorities. Moreover, the extensive collections of archival material held by DC-Cam were available to the author and he has evidently made considerable use of them. The book, then, is not only a synthesis of published scholarship, but also provides students with access (albeit limited) to some illuminating primary sources. The published text includes footnotes and a bibliography that allow students and teachers to find relevant further reading. In addition, readers are afforded some insights into “how we know” about the events of the period. One footnote, for instance, refers to various estimates of the number of deaths attributable to the DK regime and indicates how these were derived. The acknowledgement of differing estimates not only sets students an example of good scholarly practice, but also provides an opportunity for classroom discussion about how such statistics are compiled. Learning about the process of constructing History helps to promote critical thinking and the ability to distinguish between ‘truth’ and propaganda, so necessary if future genocides are to be prevented.

Drafts of the book were scrutinized by historical experts, and it is pleasing to note that the most internationally distinguished historian of modern Cambodia, David Chandler, assisted the author to make improvements to the text. This has ensured attainment of the highest possible degree of accuracy and objectivity. Cambodian government authorities have also had the opportunity to provide comments and to influence the wording of the text in a couple of places. These amendments have been judged not to compromise the integrity of the work. It is regrettable, however, that, to my knowledge, no Cambodian schoolteachers have been involved in the process to date. They are the people best able to suggest how the text might be constructed to serve pedagogical requirements, and they could have provided advice about the depth and language appropriate for Grade 12 students. As a practicing teacher of History at an international school in Southeast Asia, with experience of History education in Australia and the United Kingdom, my own remarks in this review are made without benefit of acquaintance with the current national curriculum and pedagogical practices of Cambodia.

## **Structure and Style**

The overarching structure of the book is chronological, as it traces the rise to power, establishment, rule, and collapse of the communist regime. Embedded within the narrative is a thematically-organized description of aspects of the rule of the Khmer Rouge: administration, economic policy, daily life, security, the Tuol Sleng prison, and foreign relations. This structure is suitable and effective, as it provides both coherence and comprehensiveness, while breaking up the account into meaningful units that can be correlated with a series of lessons. Indeed it provides a sequence that teachers can easily follow.

The book is principally a political history of the period, although the section on daily life under the regime may also be regarded as social history. The text is largely narrative and descriptive in style, and it provides brief explanations of some events. Explicit analysis and discussion of contentious issues are largely avoided. Although it might be argued that the presentation of a factual narrative best serves the purpose of objectivity, I would note that bias can inhere in the very selection and ordering of

facts as well as in interpretation and language. It is inescapable. I am not making an accusation of bias in the text in question, but rather addressing a broader issue related to the nature of historical truth as well as to educational philosophy and pedagogy. The reasons for the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge, for instance, are complex, involving interplay between various economic, social, political, ideological and diplomatic factors. Different approaches to history give primacy to one or a particular combination of these. It might be relatively simple to determine the truth of an isolated fact, but it is not simple – and there is no universally agreed method – to determine why a catastrophe like the Cambodian genocide occurred. While secondary school students require simplified accounts, I do not think it serves them adequately to steer clear of controversy.

In the History courses with which I am familiar, students are encouraged to *explain* historical developments, and, at the higher levels of achievement, to describe and critically analyze different interpretations of history. Therefore, textbooks written for these courses often provide outlines and discussions of historiographical issues as well as narratives of historical events. These provide students with a variety of interpretations to explore, and invite them to make their own judgments. I think that teachers favoring this kind of approach can still make effective use of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* (some ways will be suggested in the discussion of the book's content below), but they will also need to use additional sources. This is standard practice in schools in many countries, but given the constraints of time and resources, it would have been helpful to provide some guidelines. Perhaps a set of companion notes for teachers can be published in the future.

## **Content**

This section will review the content of the book in three sub-sections: the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge (chapters 2 and 3); the establishment and rule of the regime (chapters 4-10); and the decline of DK (chapter 11).

### **The Rise to Power of the Khmer Rouge**

Chapter 2 addresses the questions 'who were the Khmer Rouge?' and 'how did they gain power?' The Khmer Rouge is rightly and emphatically identified as a 'Cambodian communist movement' whose genesis lay in the struggle against French rule in the 1940s. We are told that their supporters were 'peasants' and 'nationalist students', and there is a narrative of the early history of the movement which carefully details its relationship with the Vietnamese communist movement and events in that country. The Cambodian leaders are identified by name and their roles described. Some reasons for the success of the Khmer Rouge in the civil war are given.

The chapter addresses the questions 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'how' well, but the more elusive – and pressing - question of 'why' is not answered adequately. There is arguably too much emphasis on individuals and the institution of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (important though their roles were). A description of the social structure of the country is needed, including ethnicity and religion as well as class. The period of French rule might have been described, at least in a few

sentences. Some account of economic change would also be helpful. Then perhaps students could understand the grievances of peasants and students and why they found communist ideology appealing.

It would also be worth placing the events in Cambodia into the category of post-colonial wars of succession and linking them more explicitly to the Cold War. If students were able to identify some similarities and differences between events in Cambodia and other states where colonial rule ended after the Second World War (such as Korea), they would be better able to account for the course of history in their own country. The Cold War context helps to explain the external influences on Cambodian events. Students would be able to appreciate, for example, why the United States bombed the country in 1973 (mentioned on page 12). I am not suggesting that a full account of comparative examples be provided, just a few more pointers that might enable students to make connections with related topics that may actually be studied as part of their History course. As the book stands, the connections to Vietnam are stressed (there are more than twenty references to Vietnam in about five pages of text), at the expense, perhaps, of discussion of other issues. This reflects, I think, an emphasis on providing an institutional history of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, rather than any bias. I am concerned, however, about how this section might be read by some students.

Chapter 3 examines the seizure of power by the Khmer Rouge following their victory in the civil war. The description of the 'liberation' of Phnom Penh is enriched by fascinating extracts from accounts given by ordinary people from the time, including a cyclo driver who described what he saw during the evacuation of the city. I will discuss the value of such sources in the section below on the rule of DK. I was somewhat surprised by the use in the text, *without* inverted commas, of the term 'liberation', although I suppose its use represents the perspective of the Khmer Rouge at the time. It would be interesting to discuss this in the classroom. The chapter also includes a brief statement of the aims of the new regime, but these are neither analyzed nor put into any context. A unique event like the evacuation of the cities needs a more complete explanation.

### **The Establishment and Rule of Democratic Kampuchea**

The central chapters of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* provide a wide-ranging and thought-provoking description of Cambodia under the rule of the mysterious 'Angkar'. We are told that Angkar was 'made up of men and women who were members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea' (page 18), we learn how they administered the country, there is an account of the central plan to collectivize agriculture, and the daily life of members of both classes of society under the regime (the 'base people' and 'new people') is described. There is some discussion of resistance to the regime, particularly by Cham Muslims, and the repression and mass killings feature prominently, with two chapters devoted to the subject, including one on Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, which is now an important museum that students living in or near the capital might be able to visit as part of their study of the period. As explanation for the wholesale reconstruction of society undertaken by the regime, we are told that the Khmer Rouge aimed to modernize agriculture and make Cambodia independent, both economically and politically. It would have been helpful to make brief, but specific, comparisons with Stalinist Russia and Mao's China, in

order that students might be able both to place 'collectivization' into a broader context and better appreciate such distinctive features of the Cambodian experience as the routine separation of families.<sup>1</sup>

The chapters on daily life, the security system and Tuol Sleng prison are particularly engaging. Extracts from personal accounts enable the reader to see life through the eyes of ordinary Cambodians, as men and women from different regions and even of different ethnic backgrounds tell their stories. This is an outstanding feature of the book. Not only is the text made more interesting to students, but, once again, the reader is afforded insight into "how we know" about the past. The extracts lend authenticity to the account, as the authoritative voice of the author allows space for other voices. They also provide a means of introducing important historiographical issues and developing higher order thinking skills. Teachers can discuss with students the value and limitations of the extracts as historical sources. Students can examine them for consistency and consider whether they fairly represent society at the time. Issues of memory, exaggeration, omissions, distortion and bias can be addressed through exploring the implications of their origin and purpose. Perhaps some students will be prompted to ask questions of older relatives with memories of the period. A small 'oral history' project might be established. Similarly, the Khmer Rouge slogans that are another interesting feature of the chapters can be analyzed. This section of the text is indeed rich in pedagogical opportunities that allow students to become active inquirers rather than simply passive readers.

The chapter on foreign relations gives most attention to China and Vietnam, which were the two most important external influences on Cambodia at the time. Some details of China's assistance to the regime are provided, but no explanation of China's motives is given. Here, an important context to understand is Sino-Soviet relations.

### **The Decline of DK**

Chapter 11 outlines three reasons for the fall of the regime: a weakened populace, the purges, and clashes with Vietnam. The decisive reason, we are told (I think correctly), was Vietnamese intervention.

A concluding chapter to the book summarizes the main features of DK. Its emphasis is the human tragedy that occurred during 1975-9. There is a helpful acknowledgement that the ideology of the Khmer Rouge was derived from communist movements in China, the former Soviet Union, and Vietnam. I think there should also have been some discussion of the unique features of the Cambodian regime. Nevertheless it is helpful to emphasize borrowing from related communist models, as exclusive emphasis on the events in Cambodia as 'genocide' implies different historical comparisons that are not so valid.

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of such comparisons see David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, second ed. (Chiang Mai: Silk Worm Books, 1993), pp.215-16.

## Photographs and Illustrations

The text is very well supported by illustrations, especially photographs. There are photographs of Khmer Rouge leaders, soldiers, officials, and projects such as irrigation. There are maps showing the sites of mass graves and the zones and regions of DK. The DK flag and national emblem are also featured, and there is a photograph of a document held in the archives of DC-Cam. The illustrations not only break up the text and make it more student-friendly; they also help to address issues such as the identity of the Khmer Rouge and the nature of the regime. The photographs are valuable primary sources that teachers can use as objects of analytical exercises. For example, students could be asked to use the photographs to answer the question 'who were the Khmer Rouge?', and they might discuss their value and limitations as historical evidence.

There are no photographs in the book of prisoners held at Tuol Sleng prison, although many such photographs are displayed at the Tuol Sleng Museum and can be accessed through DC-Cam's website. These photographs are important and confronting historical sources of what is a principal focus of this book, the killing of almost two million Cambodians by the direct actions and policies of the DK government. I think the text would have been enhanced by a representative selection, emotionally distressing though they might be.

## Conclusion

*A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* is the worthy product of a well-conceived and professionally executed project. It provides a clear, accurate, objective and scholarly narrative, enriched by personal accounts and (presumably official) photographs. I am confident that it will serve as an invaluable resource to Cambodian teachers and students alike. While I have reservations about the extent to which it *explains* the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge and the actions of the regime, this is something that further reading can address.

The subject of the book is also of interest and importance to students and general readers outside Cambodia. The human tragedy that occurred under the regime of Democratic Kampuchea is one for which the international community as well as the leaders of the Khmer Rouge ought to take some responsibility. As Peter Maguire argues, the United Nations clearly failed the people of Cambodia as political considerations outweighed human rights concerns.<sup>2</sup> The contributions of the United Nations and countless NGOs to the post-civil war reconstruction of the kingdom suggest that some responsibility has been accepted. If similar tragedies are to be avoided in the future, then students around the world need to know about DK (among other shocking infringements of human rights that occurred during a very violent century).

Certainly the Cambodian experience is addressed in works on twentieth-century world history (as well as Cambodian history) published in English. One of the most recent examples is the eminent and popular British historian Niall Ferguson's *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred* (Penguin Books, 2007), an attempt to

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Maguire, *Facing Death in Cambodia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

explain the extreme violence of last century. The importance of Cambodia is also recognized by the inclusion of DK in secondary school History programs such as that of the International Baccalaureate Organization. The draft of a new syllabus nominates 'Kampuchea' as a case study in its twentieth century history options. There is a relative dearth of good texts available in English on Southeast Asia that are suitable for high school students. *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* would make a valuable addition to the libraries and textbook stocks of many schools, especially international schools in the region. Given that an English-language version of the text already exists, it would be worthwhile, I think, exploring that marketing opportunity.

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