

BOOK REVIEW

Khamboly Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* (Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007)

The publication of a new history textbook for school students is an event that can ignite heated debate, sometimes even diplomatic rows between governments. Witness the recent disputes between Japan and Korea over the question of 'comfort women', or 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 show us how 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 of research, writing and review established by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) to provide for Grade 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 in general. The book supplies an important gap in current educational resources as the subject of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) - the regime of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge - had disappeared from textbooks by 2002, and other sources, including the internet, are largely unavailable to schools. Government cooperation has been obtained to ensure that all teachers will have access to the new textbook. Its publication is timely, for the imminent trials of some former Khmer Rouge leaders will undoubtedly stir public interest in the period.

One of the notable achievements of DC-Cam's project is that this is the first book of its kind written by a Cambodian. Khamboly Dy, an employee of DC-Cam, spent some time 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 sources published in English. Moreover, the author has made use of the rich collections of archival material held by DC-Cam. The book, then, is not only a synthesis of published scholarship, but also provides readers with access to some illuminating original material. Drafts of the book were scrutinized by historical experts, including the most internationally distinguished historian of modern Cambodia, David Chandler, who assisted the author to make improvements to the text. This has ensured attainment of the highest possible degree of accuracy and objectivity.

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 could easily follow. The text is largely narrative and descriptive in style, and it offers brief explanations of some events.

In its discussion of the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge, the book addresses the basic historical questions 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'how' with admirable care, but the more elusive – and pressing - question of 'why' is not answered adequately. The Khmer Rouge is rightly identified as a 'Cambodian communist movement' whose genesis lay in the struggle against French rule in the 1940s. We are told that its supporters were 'peasants' and 'nationalist students', and there is a narrative of the early history of the party which details its relationship with the Vietnamese communist movement and events in that country. The Cambodian leaders are identified by name and their roles described. While these details are important, there is arguably too much emphasis on individuals and the institution of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. A description of the social structure of the country is also needed, and the period of French rule should have been described, at least in a few sentences. Some account of economic change would be helpful. Then perhaps readers could understand the grievances of peasants and students and why they found communist ideology appealing. The international context of the time needs discussion so that the roles of such influential actors as the United States and China can be appreciated.

The central chapters of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* provide a wide-ranging and fascinating description of Cambodia under the rule of the mysterious 'Angkar'. Topics include the evacuation of the cities, the division of society into two new classes (the 'base people' and 'new people'), the separation of families, mass wedding ceremonies, abuses of children's rights, and the forced labor that resulted in a huge number of tragic deaths. There is also some discussion of resistance to the regime, particularly by Cham Muslims. The repression and mass killings are featured in two chapters, with a special focus on the Tuol Sleng interrogation and torture centre 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.

Extracts from personal accounts of people who experienced life in DK enrich the descriptions. They are an outstanding feature of the book. The extracts lend authenticity to the account, as the authoritative voice of the author allows space for other voices, representative of the social and ethnic diversity of the country. They also provide some insight into "how we know" about life at the time. In classrooms, they can be used to sharpen students' analytical skills, as questions of memory, exaggeration, omissions, distortion and bias are discussed. Learning about the process of constructing History helps students to distinguish between truth and propaganda, so necessary if future genocides are to be prevented.

A large number of illustrations support the text. 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. The illustrations break up the text and make it more student-friendly, and, moreover, help to address issues such as the identity of the Khmer Rouge and the nature of the regime. There are no photographs in the book of prisoners held at Tuol Sleng, although many exist and some are displayed at

the 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 the book, the killing of almost two million Cambodians by the direct actions and policies of the DK government. The text would have been enhanced by a representative selection of these grim images, emotionally distressing though they are.

The deficiencies of this book are few. It is the worthy product of a well-conceived and professionally executed project. I am confident that it will serve as an invaluable resource to Cambodian teachers and students alike, and appeal to the general reader who seeks a stimulating introduction to the subject. Indeed the book deserves an international readership. If similar tragedies are to be avoided in the future, then students everywhere need to know the truth about what happened in Cambodia during the 1970s. Political objectives outweighed humanitarian concerns and voices that told the truth to the world were disbelieved or sidelined. I therefore welcome the inclusion of DK as a case study in a new draft History syllabus for the Diploma Program of the International Baccalaureate Organization. *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* would make a valuable addition to the libraries and textbook lists of international schools, especially throughout Southeast Asia. It would also not be a bad thing if it found a place in the standard assortment of books hawked to tourists on the streets of Phnom Penh.

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