

## Inside Pol Pot's Secret Prison

PRODUCED BY THE HISTORY CHANNEL  
DVD, 50 MINUTES, COLOR  
A&E TELEVISION NETWORKS, 2002

*Inside Pol Pot's Secret Prison* is available in four parts on YouTube at: <http://youtu.be/jtn7ar95NYY> (part 1); <http://youtu.be/sBqOXf8cMGw> (part 2); <http://youtu.be/IWAAYaqxAhs> (part 3); and <http://youtu.be/oXdAxnRf0vY> (part 4).

Reviewed by Sok Udom Deth



Screen captures from the documentary showing (left to right): S-21 building, an artist who survived the prison and one of his paintings, Kaing Guek Eav (Duch), and photos of some of the victims on the wall of the museum.

Produced in 2002 by The History Channel, *Inside Pol Pot's Secret Prison* offers a narrative overview of Tuol Sleng Genocidal Museum (also commonly known by its coded name, "S-21"). S-21 served as the main interrogation center and prison during the Khmer Rouge regime, when Cambodia was officially known as Democratic Kampuchea.

The fifty-minute documentary briefly discusses the rise and fall of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979) and life conditions during this regime. As apparent from the title, it shifts its focus to mainly explaining the function of S-21 as the main security center of Democratic Kampuchea. It accurately describes the accidental uncovering of the S-21 compound (formerly a high school campus) by two Vietnamese journalists who accompanied the Vietnamese troops into Phnom Penh as the Khmer Rouge leadership fled the capital when the regime collapsed. At the prison, the Vietnamese duo encountered decomposed bodies and undestroyed archives of execution logs, photographs, confessions, reports, and other documents that later allowed historians to reconstruct what took place there.

According to the documentary, at least 14,000 people were held at S-21 between 1975 and 1979, and only seven of the prisoners managed to get out of there alive (it is now known that there were actually twelve survivors at the time, though only three still live today). The prisoners of S-21 were suspected of being enemies/traitors of the state who must be "smashed"; the prison's modus operandi was, "It is better to kill ten innocent people than to let one guilty person go free." Prisoners were interrogated and tortured to "confess" crimes they were very unlikely to have committed, such as being Vietnamese spies; working for the CIA or the Soviet intelligence agency KGB; or, sometimes, rather absurdly, for both. In detailing their biographies, the prisoners were generally forced to name accomplices in their "treasonous plot against the state," thus resulting in continuous arrests of people who were by and large innocent of the crimes for which they were accused. In addition to suspected Việt Nam sympathizers and some foreigners, many prisoners at S-21 were former Khmer Rouge cadres, and even some former S-21 staff as well. Depending on their status background, prisoners were put in different types of cells. As shown in the documentary, the brutal torture techniques used during interrogation

included severe beating, electrocutions, nail-pullings, and others. After their forced "confession," the majority of S-21 prisoners would be taken to Choeung Ek (about fifteen kilometers south of Phnom Penh) for execution. The place is now dubbed the "Killing Field."

In most aspects, the documentary is successful in accurately informing the audience about the horrendous conditions at S-21 and its function within the context of the brutal Khmer Rouge rule over Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. The strength of the documentary rests on its consultation with experts on the issue, including Cambodian history expert David Chandler (also the author of *Voices from S-21*), Nate Thayer (the only Western journalist to interview Pol Pot after 1979, shortly before

his death), and Chhang Youk (Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, the main institution responsible for archiving and producing works related to Democratic Kampuchea history). The documentary also shows interviews of a few survivors and former staff of S-21 who vividly recount their personal experience (accompanied by the documentary's visual and audio dramatic reacting of the scenes) at the prison.

Nonetheless, the documentary is not without shortcomings. The title "Secret Prison" can be somewhat of a euphemism, given the atrocities committed at S-21. In 2003, Rithy Panh, a highly respected Cambodian filmmaker, also produced a documentary about the prison with a more vivid title: *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. Furthermore, Panh also managed to do what *Inside Pol Pot's Secret Prison* did not: show former prisoners and former S-21 staff coming face to face to discuss the latter's actions and whether they could be considered perpetrators or simply victims of a vicious system. The approach is thought-provoking and adds further nuances to the audience's attempt at comprehending such systematic crimes of this scale.

Because *Inside Pol Pot's Secret Prison* was produced in 2002, it is slightly outdated and leaves the audience uninformed about the latest development during the past decade. The documentary finishes by pointing out that since the demise of the Khmer Rouge regime, no one had yet been brought to trial for the prosecution of their crimes, though the possibility of a trial began to look more likely. Not surprisingly, the surviving victims of S-21 and relatives of the deceased eagerly awaited such a trial. The death of unrepentant Pol Pot in 1998 in the jungle already deprived Cambodia of its chance to bring the main culprit of the regime to justice. In June 2003, however, the agreement between the United Nations and the Royal Government of Cambodia Concerning the Prosecution under Cambodian Law of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea was signed, which was enacted in April 2005.

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)—more commonly referred to by the more informal name, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal—aims to prosecute two categories of alleged perpetrators for crimes committed between April 17, 1975, and January 6, 1979: (1)

senior leaders of Democratic Kampuchea and (2) those believed to be most responsible for grave violations of national and international law. The director of S-21, Kaing Guek Eav (alias “Duch”), was eventually brought to trial. In July 2010, the Trial Chamber found Duch guilty of “Crimes against Humanity” and “Grave Breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949,” and he was sentenced to thirty-five years’ imprisonment. This sentence was reduced by five years as a remedy for his illegal detention by the Cambodian Military Court between May 1999 and July 2007.

After appeals (by both the defense team and the coprosecutors), the Supreme Court Chamber in February 2012 affirmed Duch’s conviction and sentenced him to life imprisonment, and entered separate convictions for



crimes against humanity including persecution, extermination (encompassing murder), enslavement, imprisonment, torture, and other inhumane acts. Surviving senior leaders of Democratic Kampuchea Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea were also found guilty of crimes against humanity and were sentenced to life imprisonment in August 2014. In September 2011, Vann Nath, one of the few survivors at S-21 and author of *A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge’s S-21 Prison* (who also was featured in the documentary), passed away at sixty-five due to cardiac arrest. Robert Hamill also produced a documentary in 2011 in honor of his eldest brother, Kerry Hamill, with the title *Brother Number One*—a reference to the well-known nickname of Pol Pot. In 1978, Kerry Hamill sailed his yacht along with two other men and anchored at Koh Tang Island to shelter from a storm without realizing that he was in Cambodian waters. He was later tortured and “admitted” his CIA affiliations, and was executed on Duch’s order.

In a broader sense, what happened at S-21 symbolized the atrocities of a utopian Communist regime whose leaders stopped at nothing in their attempts to root out any possible threat to their leadership. In the context of the Cold War, however, it is important to bear in mind that although nothing approached the Pol Pot regime’s transgressions against humanity, brutal crimes were also committed by right-wing autocratic regimes in different parts of the world in their quest to eliminate Communist threats to their regimes. See, for example, a recent South Korean film, *The Attorney* (2013), which tells a story about a trial of innocent students who were tortured to “confess” their revolutionary aspiration and Communist plot against the military government in South Korea during the 1980s.

Overall, with the aforementioned caveats in mind, the documentary *Inside Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* is a useful resource for teaching students about the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge leadership between 1975 and 1979, and is recommended for instructors who teach courses on Asian and world history or the Cold War in general. ■

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