



POL POT

Cambodia's ruthless dictator cheated justice, dying before he could answer for the atrocities committed during his unrelenting quest to create a rural Utopia

By DAVID CHANDLER

On April 17, 1998, barely 500 m inside Cambodia from Thailand, a frail, 73-year-old former dictator—known by his nom de guerre, Pol Pot—was cremated under a pile of rubbish and rubber tires. He had died two days earlier in a two-room hut, held prisoner by former colleagues who had accused him of betraying the revolutionary movement he had once led. It was an ignominious end for a man who inscribed a merciless agenda on the psyche of two generations of Cambodians.

Between 1975 and 1979, Pol Pot presided over a

communist regime known as Democratic Kampuchea. His harsh, utopian policies, derived in part from Maoist China, drove an estimated 1.5 million Cambodians—or one in five—to their deaths from malnutrition, illness or overwork. At least 200,000 more were executed as enemies of the state. The ratio of deaths to population made the Cambodian revolution the most murderous in a century of revolutions.

There was rough justice in the closing months of Pol Pot's life, when he must have been fearful—as everyone in Democratic Kampuchea had been—that each day might be his last. Pol Pot had emerged on two

recent occasions to talk to journalists. He spoke fondly of his young daughter and fretfully about his health. Pressed to acknowledge responsibility for the past, he said, "I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people. Even now, and you can look at me, am I a savage person?" Pol Pot had either evaded the question or missed the point. No one had died because of his villainous appearance. Instead, victims had been sacrificed in a ruthless campaign to refashion Cambodian society. In the 1980s, Pol Pot had told his followers that "mistakes" had been inevitable during his rule because, using a revealing simile, "We were like babies learning to walk."

Pol Pot's own childhood was cosseted and secure. He was born in 1925, when Cambodia was still a protectorate of France. His father was a prosperous landowner, with elite connections. His sister and a female cousin were dancers in the royal ballet in the capital, Phnom Penh, living comfortably under the king's protection. Saloth Sar, as he was called in those days, went to live with them when he was six years old. He attended a series of French-language schools. Only a few hundred other Cambodians

enjoyed this privilege. His academic record was lackluster; he earned no high-school diploma. He seems to have been relatively popular without making much of an impression. "His manner was straightforward, pleasant and very polite," a former classmate told me. "He thought a lot but said very little."

In 1949, because of his fluency in French and his political connections, Saloth Sar was given a scholarship to study radio-electricity in France. He lived in Paris for the next three years, neglecting his studies and spending much of his time, he told an interviewer later, reading "progressive books." In 1952 he joined the French Communist Party, drawn by its anti-colonial stance. Soon afterward, because he had failed to pass any examinations, his scholarship was revoked and he went home.

After Cambodia became A YOUNG SALOTH SAR TAUGHT SCHOOL, PLOTTED REVOLUTION



May 19, 1925 in Prek Sbauv
Studies left-wing politics in France
Returns to Cambodia and joins Communist Party, which he leads a decade later
Khmer Rouge is victor of civil war and occupies Phnom Penh; reign of terror kills 1.5 million in next four years
Goes into hiding after Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia
Dies April 15 in Cambodian jungle

IRON FISTS THAT BROKE THE LAND

Asia has had more than its share of dictators. Pol Pot learned instant revolution from Mao Zedong, who was responsible for more human deaths than anyone else in history, while Southeast Asian dictators learned from each other about how to keep domestic dissent low and foreign bank accounts high. Many were generals (how a uniform changes people!) and all had the usual self-serving justification for holding onto power in the best interest of the nation. In every case they were wrong; the five big men profiled here all left their countries struggling, and their people impoverished, undereducated and hungering for justice.

By Terry McCarthy



YUAN SHIKAI
1859-1916

One of Asia's first 20th-century strongmen, he was asked to support

Sun Yat-sen's shaky Republican government but ended up forcing Sun into exile and taking power himself. As China deteriorated into lawlessness, Yuan had a compliant assembly make him Emperor. He celebrated by ordering a 40,000-piece porcelain service from the imperial potters. A rebellion finally toppled him.



KIM IL SUNG
1912-1994

The Great Leader developed a personality cult beyond Mao's

wildest dreams, but his rigid Stalinist regime was shaken by the withdrawal of Soviet aid and a long famine. His son and successor, Kim Jong Il, the Dear Leader, inherited a bloated military, a brain-dead economy and a reputation for terror and diplomatic belligerence that promised more years of isolation.



FERDINAND MARCOS
1917-1989

He was a civilian and he won office by election. But Marcos grew dictatorial,

declared martial law in 1972 and squashed all opponents. His former beauty-queen wife, Imelda, famously filled her closet with shoes. But after the assassination of his chief rival, Benigno Aquino Jr., Filipinos rose up in a People Power revolution, drove Marcos into Hawaiian exile and replaced him with Aquino's widow, Corazon.

NE WIN
1911-

Trained as a soldier by the Japanese, he took power in a 1962 coup and instituted the disastrous Burmese Way to Socialism. For 26 years, Ne Win ran the state according to the principles of numerology—all banknotes are divisible by nine—and fended off mortality with baths of dolphin's blood and helicopter trips circling pagodas. When students rallied for democracy in 1988, he had them shot and put opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. She won the Nobel Peace Prize, he won global ignominy.



SUHARTO
1921-

He put down a supposed communist coup in 1965 and soon was running Indonesia as a personal fiefdom. Suharto raised his people's standard of living, but his generals got rich, his family and cronies got richer, and anyone who complained got clobbered. A plunging rupiah and street demonstrations finally pushed him out in May 1998, after 32 years of corrupt and uncompromising rule.



independent in 1954, Saloth Sar led a double life, teaching in a private school in Phnom Penh while he worked in secret in a small, beleaguered communist movement. He enjoyed the conspiratorial rituals of underground politics and dreamed of seizing power. By 1963 he was in command of Cambodia's Communist Party. Fearful of the police, he fled the capital and sought refuge with a handful of colleagues at a Vietnamese military base, "Office 100," on the Vietnam-Cambodia border. For the next two years he chafed under humiliating Vietnamese protection.

In 1965 Saloth Sar was summoned to North Vietnam for consultations. Walking north along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, he took two months to reach Hanoi, where he was taken to task for his nationalist agenda. The general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Le Duan, told him to subordinate Cambodia's interests to Vietnam's, to help Vietnam defeat the United States and to postpone armed struggle until the time was ripe.

Although bruised by these attacks, Saloth Sar said nothing to antagonize his patrons. Soon afterward, however, he travelled to China and was warmly welcomed by radical officials. Inspired by the early phases of the Cultural Revolution, Saloth Sar transferred his loyalties to a new set of patrons and a more vibrant revolutionary model. The visit to China was a turning point in his career. Prudently, however, he said nothing to the Vietnamese about his change of heart. Back home, he established his headquarters in a remote, heavily wooded section of the country. For the next four years, with a group of like-minded colleagues, he polished his utopian ideas and nourished his hatreds.

His chance came in 1970 when Cambodia's ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was overthrown in a pro-American coup. The Vietnamese communists swiftly allied themselves with the

Khmer Rouge—as Sihanouk had dismissively labeled Pol Pot's group—against the new regime in Phnom Penh. The Vietnamese provided the rag-tag Khmer Rouge with arms and training. When they withdrew in 1972, Pol Pot felt betrayed. But by then, the Phnom Penh army had been badly battered and the Khmer Rouge had become a formidable guerrilla force.

The war ended in April 1975, when the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh. Most of the city's 2 million people, exhausted by years of violence, welcomed the invaders. They saw these silent, heavily armed young men as fellow Khmers, with whom a new society might be built. Their optimism was tragically misplaced. Within days, the Khmer Rouge drove them all into the countryside to become workers in agricultural communes. They also emptied Cambodia's other towns and abolished money, markets, schools, newspapers, religious practices and private property.

The Khmer Rouge spurned anyone with money or education. The revolution derived its energy, they believed, from the empowerment of the rural poor, from their recent victory and from what they thought was the intrinsic superiority of Cambodians to the hated Vietnamese. Pol Pot assumed that the Cambodian revolution would be swifter and more authentic than anything Vietnam could carry out. His Chinese patrons, hostile to Vietnam, agreed. By mobilizing mass resentments, as Mao Zedong had done, Pol Pot inspired tens of thousands of Cambodians, especially teenagers and people in their early 20s, to join him in dismantling Cambodian society and liberating everyone from the past.

The methods he chose were naive, brutal and inept. In 1976 a hastily written Four Year Plan sought to triple the country's agricultural production within a year—without fertilizer, modern tools or material incentives. The plan

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CORBISS-BETTMANN; FABIAN-SYGMA; LAPI-VIOLETT; BURT GLINN—MAGNUM PHOTOS; DAVID B. COON—CONTACT PRESS IMAGES

pa
an
se
we
of
m
fri
R
g
ti
C
T
fr
to
cc
re
te
di
f
w
r
p
h
w
a
n
a
t
f
t
t
c
r
c
a
l
f

paid no attention to Cambodian geography or common sense; the nation's farmers were prostrate after five years of civil war. Attempting to meet impossible quotas and frightened of reprisals, Khmer Rouge workers cut back the grain allotted for consumption. Tens of thousands of Cambodians starved to death. Thousands more collapsed from overwork and the almost total absence throughout the country of medical attention.

Pol Pot refused to accept responsibility for these disasters or to ameliorate rural conditions. Instead, he blamed "hidden enemies, burrowing from within" and set off a wholesale purge of the Communist Party. His paranoia, propping up his self-assurance, knew no bounds. In 1977 he made a state visit to China, which promised him military assistance against Vietnam and moral support for his radical agenda. Sporadic fighting between Cambodia and Vietnam flared up toward the end of the year, and full-scale war between the two countries broke out in 1978. Pol Pot declared that if every Cambodian soldier killed 30 Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge could win the war. He also asked China to send troops to help him. The Chinese refused. Trained as guerrillas,



of terror. Several of these men remain in power in Cambodia today.

Aside from brief forays to Bangkok and Beijing for medical treatment, Pol Pot spent the next 18 years in fortified encampments in the forests of Thailand and northern Cambodia, protected by Thai military forces and what remained of his guerrilla army. Throughout the 1980s, he conducted seminars for Khmer Rouge military leaders. He often mesmerized them with his sincerity, his low, melodious

ary he had married in 1956, succumbed to mental illness. In the mid-'90s, deprived of foreign support, the Cambodian communist movement gradually fell apart. In 1996, Pol Pot's brother-in-law, Ieng Sary, who had served as his foreign minister, defected. Thousands of Khmer Rouge followed suit. The remnants of the movement were commanded by a veteran military leader, Ta Mok, who arrested Pol Pot after the former dictator had ordered some of Ta Mok's subordinates killed.

ineptitude and distance from reality, Pol Pot's place in history is assured, thanks largely to the damage he inflicted on his people. In the late 1970s, along with Mao Zedong, he enjoyed a moment of fame among those who felt, as he did, that the best way to change the world was to dismantle most of its social structure, violently and at once, regardless of the human cost. In his headlong rush toward independence and ideological perfection, Pol Pot was spurred by more experienced communist powers, eager to see if the Cambodian experiment, more radical than anything they had tried, might work.

When the extent of the disasters in Cambodia was known, Pol 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.

David Chandler is a visiting professor at Georgetown University and the author of Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot

“ I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people. You can look at me, am I a savage person? My conscience is clear. ”

POL POT, in 1997, shortly before his death

the Khmer Rouge were outmaneuvered and outgunned.

On Christmas Day 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia with more than 100,000 troops. The country cracked open like an egg. Pol Pot fled by helicopter to Thailand; when the invaders entered Phnom Penh on Jan. 7, the city was deserted. The Vietnamese established a puppet government composed largely of former cadres who had fled the Khmer Rouge reign

voice and his genteel charisma. To his disciples, there seemed to be no connection between this smooth-faced teacher and the violence of his past—except perhaps for his repeated emphasis on “enemies.” In fact, Pol Pot's disconnection from reality seemed to many to be proof of his unworldliness, ardor and enlightenment.

Pol Pot remarried in the mid-'80s, after his first wife, a highly educated revolution-

Listening to a broadcast of the Cambodian service of the Voice of America on April 15, 1998, Pol Pot learned that Ta Mok planned to deliver him to the Americans for trial. Soon afterward, he told his wife that he felt faint. He lay down. By 10 p.m. he was dead, reportedly from heart failure, possibly from suicide. His death, like his life, left many questions unanswered.

Despite—or perhaps because of—his paranoia,