

A HISTORY CLASSROOM AT FORMER KHMER ROUGE S-21 PRISON

SINCE NOVEMBER 21, 2011

An anti-public education Khmer Rouge slogan stated “there are no diplomas, only diplomas one can visualize. If you wish to get a Baccalaureate, you have to get it at dams or canals.” Another stated “Study is not important. What’s important is work and revolution.” As a result, formal schools were totally prohibited under the Khmer Rouge’s dictatorial and murderous rule. The regime turned public schools and pagodas into prisons, stables and warehouses.

Tuol Sleng prison, also known by its code name of “S-21,” was created on the former grounds of Chao Ponhea Yat high school, originally constructed in 1962. The Khmer Rouge converted the school into the most secret of the country’s 196 prisons. Most of the prisoners taken to Tuol Sleng were Khmer Rouge cadres accused of largely fictitious acts of treason, such as collaborating with foreign governments, or spying for the CIA or KGB. Typically the entire family an accused traitor would be imprisoned. Most often, prisoners had no knowledge of the charges against them when arrested, but they were tortured until they confessed whatever crimes they had been accused of. After having confessed, each prisoner was marked for execution.

Experts estimate that somewhere between 14,000 and 20,000 people were held at Tuol Sleng and executed. Only seven known prisoners survived after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) held that at least 12,273 prisoners passed through Tuol Sleng in its trial judgment against former Tuol Sleng commander Kaing Guek Eav alias Duch. As the number of survivors has received less attention, most Western media repeated the figure of seven survivors and this has been repeated for over 30 years. However, after several years of research, the Documentation Center of Cambodia estimates that at least 179 prisoners were released from Tuol Sleng from 1975 to 1978 and approximately 23 additional prisoners survived when the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge regime on January 7, 1979.

Today the four buildings in the compound of the prison form the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, which was opened to the public in 1980. Within the first few months of its opening, over 300,000 locals and 11,000 foreigners visited the museum (Chandler, 1999). People from all over the world visited the museum and currently, approximately 250 people visit on an average day. Many Cambodian visitors travel to Tuol Sleng seeking information about their relatives who disappeared under the Khmer Rouge.

While the museum has been a success in generally raising awareness of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, it still lacks a thorough educational dimension, which could make the experience of visiting more dynamic, educational and memorable. Since its conversion from a place of learning to a place of horror and degradation, Tuol Sleng has never reclaimed its original status. However, in the future, in order to reclaim the positive, educational heritage of Tuol Sleng and add an educational element to the museum, a classroom has been created to provide free lectures and discussions on the history of the Khmer Rouge regime and related issues, such as the ECCC. The classroom will also serve as a public platform for visitors and survivors to share information and preserve an important period of Cambodian history for future generations to learn from.



Top: Children of the Khmer Rouge cadres attending classroom in a refugee camp along the Khmer-Thai border, 1980. Photo by J. Kaufmann. Source: DC-Cam Archives.
Bottom: Former S-21 head of prison guard, Him Huy (in the blue shirt), and former S-21 child survivor, Norng Chan Phal (in the white shirt) who lost his parents at S-21, relaxing after distributing the textbook A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979) to thousands of students in Kampong Thom province, Cambodia. Photo by Heng Smith. Source: DC-Cam Archives.

LECTURERS:

Staff members from the Documentation Center of Cambodia and Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Each participating staff member has obtained foreign degrees and who have certification in Teaching the History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979), from the Cambodian Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS).

GUEST SPEAKERS: National and International Scholars on Cambodia and S-21 Survivors

TOPICS COVERED:

Who were the Khmer Rouge?	How did the Khmer Rouge gain power?
The Khmer Rouge Hierarchy	Khmer Rouge Domestic Policies
The Khmer Rouge Security System	Office S-21 (Tuol Sleng Prison)
Khmer Rouge Foreign Policies	The Fall of the Khmer Rouge
The Verdicts of the ECCC	Reconciliation in Local Communities

SCHEDULE

Monday	Wednesday	Friday
2pm-3pm	9 am - 10 am	2 pm - 3 pm

VENUE

Building A, 2nd floor, 3rd room

In collaboration with Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum
Supported by the Governments of Belgium, Sweden (Sida) and The United States of America (USAID)

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