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Cambodia's horror as five lived it

A JOURNALIST EXPLAINS THE KHMER ROUGE THROUGH INTERCONNECTED LIVES.

By Dan Southerland

I came to this book about Cambodia's "killing fields" carrying a lot of emotional baggage. As a reporter for this newspaper I covered the war in Cambodia on and off for five years from 1970 until close to its end in 1975. I vividly remember colleagues and Cambodian assistants who were killed by the Khmer Rouge. As far as I know, the Khmer Rouge killed every foreign reporter, photographer, and TV cameraman they captured. Of the six or seven Cambodian drivers and guides I employed, only three survived.

More than four decades later, many of us are still trying to understand why the Khmer Rouge adopted policies that led to the deaths of 2 million or more people through executions, starvation, overwork, and disease. Several impressive books have been written on the subject. But Robert Carmichael's *When Clouds Fell from the Sky* is a standout. Carmichael chronicles the rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge through the interconnected stories of five different people.

I should state early on that Carmichael has become a friend whom I try to see on visits to Cambodia. But my respect for him and his work stands well apart from our personal connection. Carmichael is a veteran journalist who has spent a total of eight years in Cambodia. He knows his material thoroughly and in this narrative manages to both humanize the story and bring new insight into the causes of the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror.

The central character he profiles is Ouk Ket, a Cambodian diplomat who returned to Phnom Penh to help rebuild his war-shattered country in 1977 – a time when it was not yet clear how the newly victorious Khmer Rouge would rule. The 30-year-old diplomat, who had served in Africa, had received a typewritten letter from the Democratic Kampuchea Embassy in Beijing addressing him as "Beloved Comrade." "The Ministry has decided to ask you to come back to Cambodia," it said.

The letter sent to Ket, a royalist and not a communist, was one of hundreds sent to Cambodian diplomats and intellectuals around the world inviting them to rebuild their homeland. As Carmichael notes, the letters seemed benign, but "in truth they were a ruse." The ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge leaders were convinced that their enemies were everywhere. They murdered everyone they could find who had served the previous government. But Ket didn't believe the many refugee stories of massacres and slave labor that had begun to reach the outside



KHMER ROUGE LEADER POL POT LEADS A COLUMN OF HIS MEN (CIRCA 1970).

world. Cambodians wouldn't kill Cambodians, Ket believed.

Upon returning to a nearly empty Phnom Penh, Ket disappeared. The last that his family heard from him was a postcard from Beijing, his point of departure for Cambodia.

In 1970, Ket had married a French woman, Martine Lefevvre, whom he'd met as a student in Paris. That same year, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the head of state in Cambodia, was overthrown by his own prime minister in a bloodless coup. Sihanouk was persuaded to join with his former enemies, the Khmer Rouge. In 1976, Sihanouk returned to Cambodia, but the Khmer Rouge forced him to resign as head of state. He became a virtual prisoner of the Khmer Rouge.

Ket had been posted as a diplomat to Senegal. A son named Mackara and a daughter named Neary were born there. When her husband went missing in Cambodia in 1977, Martine began to hunt for him. But it was only when she reached a refugee camp inside Thailand that she learned that Ket's name was on an execution list at the S-21 Prison in Phnom Penh. At least 14,000 prisoners at S-21 had died of torture or execution.

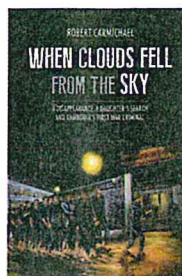
The man who ran S-21 with ruthless efficiency was Kaing Guek Eav, widely known as Duch. Carmichael's most difficult task in writing his book was explaining Duch's motivation, personality, and psychology.

Duch was a conscientious student, then a caring mathematics teacher. It's hard to imagine what turned him into a mass murderer, and Carmichael doesn't pretend to have all the answers. Duch was a man who "believed fervently in totalitarianism." For him, the individual had no value. The collective was all.

Carmichael's book brilliantly and movingly refutes this notion by using five individual lives – those of Ket and his family, and Duch – to so effectively tell the story behind the massive collective tragedy.

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NONFICTION



WHEN CLOUDS FELL FROM THE SKY

By Robert Carmichael
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