

ICC In Conversation

Dr. Carla Shapiro, a research fellow at U of T's Munk School of Global Affairs, speaks with Francisco Alvarez, managing director of the ROM's Institute for Contemporary Culture, about the upcoming ICC exhibition *Observance and Memorial: Photographs from S-21, Cambodia*. This important exhibition presents a rare archive of photographs found at the S-21 prison run by the notorious Khmer Rouge (the Communist Party of Cambodia, which ruled the country from 1975 to 1979) and provides the historical context on events that led to the archive's creation.

Francisco Alvarez: The mass murders that occurred in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime are not well known by Canadians. Why is that?

Carla Shapiro: In the 1970s, the Vietnam War, known in Vietnam as the American War, dominated the news, and by the time the Khmer Rouge (KR) took power in Cambodia there was a certain fatigue for news of war and conflict coming from Southeast Asia. Of course, this was greatly compounded by the fact that the KR was a very secretive regime and tightly controlled any information coming out of Cambodia. The capacity of Western journalists to cover Democratic Kampuchea (as Cambodia was renamed after the KR takeover) was highly restricted; those who stayed did so at their own risk. Dozens of journalists were killed or went missing in their attempts to report on what was taking place. As in most regimes involved in mass murder, such activities were kept hidden—this secrecy was a legacy that continued in the post-KR period and, to a certain extent, contributed to this dearth of knowledge in the West about the KR era.

Many countries in the West actively supported the Khmer Rouge for years after they were removed from power, and even after the atrocities were well known; as such, this non-celebratory chapter in our history has been left mostly unexplored. In the immediate post-Khmer Rouge era, Cambodia itself attempted to bury its past in the interest of rebuilding a society beset by division. It is only recently, with the trials at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (or ECCC, commonly referred to as The Khmer Rouge Tribunal), that both domestic and international interest has been re-focused on the crimes that took place under the Khmer Rouge. It is also worth noting that the atrocities took place decades ago in a country in Southeast Asia that few Canadians know much about. As Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, Kosovo, and now Syria have each, in their time, moved to the forefront of media attention for gross human rights violations, Cambodia has, most often, been relegated to a distant, if not almost forgotten, past.



FA: What is S-21 and why were these extraordinary documentary photographs of the prisoners created?

CS: S-21 was the largest and most notorious of the 197 prisons set up throughout Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime. S-21 is more accurately described as an interrogation and torture centre rather than a prison, as more than 14,000 prisoners were sent to S-21, but by the time the Vietnamese military entered Phnom Penh in January 1979 only 12 survived. The KR regime began to falter soon after taking power. The agrarian utopia that Pol Pot and the other KR leaders envisioned failed to produce the necessary amount of food needed to sustain the populace. Rather than look to their own misguided policies, leaders blamed internal and external enemies. The regime became increasingly suspicious and more and more people were accused of being enemies of the state—even high-ranking cadres in the Khmer Rouge. Special prisons such as S-21 were required to handle and “process” such “valuable” prisoners. “Process” refers here to systematic torture and execution. Prisoners were forced to confess to crimes they were suspected of committing and to implicate others in a larger conspiracy. Soon after arriving at S-21, prisoners, sometimes accompanied by their spouses and children, were photographed. There was a specific documentary unit at S-21 whose job it was to take “portraits” of all incoming prisoners. Each photograph was attached to the prisoner’s “confession” file, which contained a detailed biography and transcripts of information extracted under torture. The photographs were used as a means of correctly matching the prisoners being interrogated with their file. In some cases, such as for high-ranking military officers, post-mortem photographs were also attached to the confession file, and the completed file forwarded to the KR leadership as evidence that the mission had been completed. After “confessions” were extracted, prisoners who did not die during the interrogation process were executed in the killing fields of Choeung Ek, a few kilometres from S-21.

Of the 6,000 extant prisoner photographs, 105 will be shown in *Observance and Memorial*.

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Far left and left: S-21 prisoners, identities unknown.

FA: What else will people learn in the exhibition?

CS: The exhibition will describe the rise of the KR in the context of colonialism, civil war, and the ongoing conflict in neighbouring Vietnam. It will endeavour to explain the ideology behind the KR—what exactly they were trying to achieve but which ultimately led to the deaths of nearly 2 million people, more than one-quarter of the population. The exhibit will also explain why security centres such as S-21 were set up. Importantly, *Observance and Memorial* will name and provide biographical information about several of the individuals pictured in the exhibition. While most victims of S-21 remain anonymous, several have been identified by surviving family members, friends, and acquaintances. As well as sensitively memorializing the lives lost, learning something of the lives that were extinguished as a result of KR policies is a key part of the exhibition. Reflecting on individuals caught up in the destruction brought on by the KR state leads exhibition visitors to ask their own questions—about the nature of violence, about the capacity of humans to be harnessed to commit genocide, and about political activism when gross human rights violations are taking place. What might be done while thousands, if not millions, perish? This is a question as relevant today as it was in 1970s Southeast Asia. The exhibition implicitly asks its visitors these difficult questions.

FA: The S-21 photographs are intended to be seen as documentary evidence of crimes against humanity, not as fine art portraiture. Why is this distinction important?

CS: The victims pictured were caught at a moment of terror, heading to a fate unknown but sensing peril ahead. The photographs were taken to document a process of torture and murder. They were never intended to be displayed on gallery walls. However, in their “afterlife” they hold great educational potential. The portraits are being shown at the Royal Ontario Museum as witnesses to the atrocities that took place during the KR regime and to bring awareness to the public about this period in our world’s history, which few, here in Canada, know took place.

The fact that there is artistic merit in the photographs (the lead photographer, Nhem En, was a trained photographer) creates a tension between their documentary function, as evidence of the crimes committed, and a certain aesthetic engagement, and it is this tension, which cannot be denied, that makes this exhibition so compelling and helps raise these necessary questions.

FA: The second round of war crimes trials against former Khmer Rouge leaders is currently under way and garnering international news coverage. How else are Cambodians recovering from the trauma of the events of the Khmer Rouge period?

CS: The scale and level of destruction that took place make coming to terms with the past extremely difficult—decades, even generations of time will be required. Unlike the genocide of the Jews that took place during Nazi Germany or the genocide in Rwanda where Hutus killed Tutsis en masse, the atrocities committed under the Khmer Rouge regime were inflicted by Cambodians upon other Cambodians—and thus recovery from the trauma involves an even more complex psychological dynamic. Cambodia’s history of unaddressed human rights violations has been divisive. It has left a legacy of trauma, and has stifled the country’s development—psychologically, politically, and economically. The criminal prosecution of senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge via the ECCC is necessary to address the culture of impunity that had been the norm in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. Trials, and their enshrined notions of accountability, are essential in the search for truth and justice. The first trial to take place at the ECCC was for the chief of the S-21 prison—Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch. Trials offer some measure of justice for the victims of the Khmer Rouge; however, there are other paths that help individual survivors and the country as a whole address the trauma that took place. Museums that provide venues for exhibitions about the history of Democratic Kampuchea, both in Cambodia and internationally, serve such a purpose—by providing another critical forum for dialogue and mourning.

DR. SHAPIRO is associate curator of *Observance and Memorial: Photographs from S-21, Cambodia*, and a researcher at the Asian Institute, Munk School of Global Affairs, at the University of Toronto. The exhibition runs from August 11, 2012, to March 17, 2013.