Accuracy is of the essence for new Khmer Rouge dictionary
Henri Locard
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Author Solomon Kane has completed the first historical dictionary of the KR, but French historian Henri Locard argues that the ambitious work is limited by multiple inaccuracies.

One must agree with David Chandler, author of the foreword for Solomon Kane's Dictionnaire des Khmers Rouges (Dictionary of the Khmer Rouge), who calls the book "an extraordinary work". It is amazing to see how a single man could amass such an amount of data covering such a dense subject. Unfortunately, it seems to fall somewhat short of his self-proclaimed ambition of "a tool for completely deciphering the tragedy that ... has cost the lives of almost two million Cambodians".

Chandler provides a highly complimentary foreword that skilfully explains the historical significance of the Democratic Kampuchea regime. It is a pity, however, that the dean of Cambodian historical studies gave wrong dates for both Cambodia's independence and America's massive bombings (although in the later case, I am quite sure this must be a mistranslation from Chandler's English).

I am not certain that this kind of format - a dictionary - is best suited to the subject, apart from the biographical entries that constitute the most solid backbone of the book. Although well-documented entries are numerous, there are far too many that are inaccurate. Also, the author does not tell us much about his sources, which makes it very difficult for the reader to check the information.

Role of US dubious
When describing the fateful American bombings (p.56), the author writes: "According to sources [which sources?], the campaign would have made 300,000 to 1,000,000 victims among the guerrillas and the civilians." One reliable source, indeed quoted but not used by Kane, is the demographer Marek Sliwinski's Le Génocide Khmer Rouge (The Khmer Rouge Genocide). It is reckoned in this book that the civil war made a total of some 310,000 victims, or about half of the number most often quoted. Among those, some 17.1 percent were killed by bombardments, or about 53,000 people, both civilians and military. True, unexploded ordinances continue to this day to be very lethal for the Cambodian population, as Kane rightly points out. But can he also explain why, when the American bombings ceased in August 1973, the civilian population continued nevertheless to take refuge in all the cities? Were they not just running away from the war but also from the repression and the collectivisation inflicted by the revolutionaries?
Kane repeats the accusation that the Americans were involved in the March 18, 1970, so-called "coup", although there is no evidence of this in American archives. Kane accuses Lon Nol of having thrown overboard the policy of neutrality during the Cold War. But so had Prince Sihanouk when he tacitly allowed the Vietminh to use large pockets of the country as sanctuaries in the second Indochinese War. And that was precisely why he was voted out of office by the National Assembly, under military pressure.

The same approach is further developed in the entry concerning the [current] trials of the KR leaders (p.307-10). Americans are accused of having made sure that only the 1975-79 period was involved. But, if this was true, certainly some communist countries were not keen to see their involvement in the coming to power of the KR being further researched either. Kane fails to quote the true reason why the US delayed for so long to help finance the KR tribunal: the fear it would not meet international standards, and because of the corruption prevailing in Cambodia.

**Facts and figures**

Kane is speculative in his approach to figures: he tends to inflate them. What is the source of the 60-percent death toll of the Chinese? We are told they were 400,000 in 1975 and 175,000 in 1979. It is the same with the Chams: we are given figures that could lead the reader to believe that as many as 60 percent of the Chams died under DK, while the figure is closer to 40 percent, which is horrendous enough (p.69).

Among other inflated figures, we have the entry on the mass graves (charniers, p.72-75) and an uncritical repetition of extravagant figures: some contained 100,000 to 150,000 victims! The same implausible number is given for pits in Kampong Chhnang (p.214), and Kampong Thom (p.216).

Among other inaccuracies, we can quote: What evidence has the author that the people starved partly because of "bad harvests" (p.133); the real reason was of course that rice was stolen by Angkar and that meals were collectivised. Several witnesses have told me harvests were all good under the regime.

Keo Meas cannot have "participated" in the July 1954 negotiations in Geneva, as the Khmer Communist groups were not admitted (p.191) to the negotiation process. Kambuja was not "an Anglophone magazine" (p.198). It was written in French - I contributed to it in the sixties - but an English edition was also produced, translated from the French. Khieu Samphan could not have been "the first member of the CPK to have been received by Mao Tse-tung" in 1974, and in claiming this, the author shows he is quite ignorant of the etiquette amongst communist parties or countries. Pol Pot had already been received by Mao twice before, in 1965 and in 1970 (p.201).

Where did the author see that Khieu Thirith got a degree in English literature, "after an exhaustive study of the works of William Shakespeare" (p.204)? She did not join the maquis in 1968, but in 1965 (p.205). How could Ieng Sary have "accepted a post as
history teacher at Sisowath High School" (p.210), given he was never offered such a post?

Nuon Chea did not study at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, but Thammassat (p.227). Kane rightly reports that Nuon Chea was trained for two years in the North Vienamese maquis, from 1952 to 1954, but fails to mention that he became a friend of Le Duan, the successor of Ho Chi Minh. This saved him from being tried in the July 1979 "genocidal" trial in Phnom Penh of the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique".

In the entry on genocide (p.144-45), Kane overlooks a vital piece of information: it was the Vietnamese who first stuck that label to the DK regime to justify their intervention. No other communist regime has had the honour to be called "genocidal" since - not even North Korea, which must have exterminated as many of its citizens as DK, although over a much longer period, no doubt.

Too many entries are broad approximations. For instance, when describing the sahakor, the KR basic administrative division, the author gives the usual translation of "cooperative", instead of the more accurate "people's commune", as they were called in China. To support the allegation, Kane claims that the people had a free choice in the creation of those collectives during the civil war, and collectives were "supported by the rural communities" (p.111). So, once again, why did the population, including many peasants, flee those "liberated" zones in the hundreds of thousands after August 1973 when the American bombing had ceased? There is no evidence that collectivisation was popular with any layer of the society at any time.

The entry on the Montagnards contains a number of useful and accurate pieces of information. But in this case the author is somewhat misinformed. The villages of the ethnic minorities were not brutally "destroyed" to make room for the Labansiek State Rubber Plantation in the early sixties, but dismantled and transported by the company trucks, to be moved further on, as there was then plenty of available space on the rich volcanic plateau. The minorities were given the choice either to be salaried on the plantation, to start their own rubber plantation with saplings given by the State company, or move further if they wished to continue with their traditional way of life.

One curious assertion is that Pol Pot based his repression of Buddhism on article 20 of the constitution. Does he really believe that the ultimate leader of the revolutionary regime cared in the least about the legality or illegality of his criminal decisions (p.59)?

The entry on Maoism misses much vital information, speaking mainly about the so-called Cultural Revolution, overlooking the Great Leap Forward that directly inspired Pol-Potism. We have here mainly the fanciful image of the doctrine entertained by some French "intellectuals" in the sixties and early seventies that was aeons from the reality in China at the time, and later DK (p.237-38).
Useful information
The Mey Man entry contains plenty of useful information about that Marxist intellectual of the early days of the revolutionary movement, who refused to follow the party along its violent ways. In later life, he set up the UN Human Rights office in Pailin which is curiously called une officine (a pejorative word in French for an agency or something of the sort). What is a pity is that Kane failed to mention that this was the only "intellectual" connected with the KR movement who, shortly before his death from cancer, publicly expressed his profound regret to have seen his career associated with that criminal movement. He spent the last months of his life translating the remarkable history of Cambodia written by the late Nhiek Tioulong (The Khmer Chronicles) from French into Khmer.

Kane states that Pol Pot escaped four assassination attempts, without mentioning that we are not at all certain if those were real or imagined (p.323). Philip Short believes they were figments of Angkar's imagination. At least the question should be raised.

In the entry about "collectivist ideology" (p.99), Kane alludes to the 1869 Basle Conference of the Socialist International, but manages not to mention either the forced collectivisation under Stalin, Mao or Ho Chi Minh, which all served as models for Pol Pot.

Sometimes, the book is a directory of the many minor KR military leaders, in particular in the eighties and the nineties, that is, much after the rout of the regime. But Kane has neither identified their real names, nor given dates during which they operated. A single entry around the KR military leaders in those post-DK decades might have regrouped information of use for history.

Quantity, not quality
All this being said, there are numerous very useful and well-informed entries. And it is a remarkable achievement for a single individual to have accumulated so much data, with such dedication over more than a decade. For instance the entry on the refugee camps in both Vietnam and Thailand (p.64-66) is well-informed, as is the one on animism (p.35). We could quote the "Cambodian Master Performers Program", thanks to which the first Cambodian opera by Him Sophea was first performed in Lowell, Massachusetts, and will soon be performed in Cambodia itself.

The author is indeed a great expert in military art. We can quote, for instance, the entry on Chan Chakrey, purged in August 1976, the description of his rivalry with Kae Pauk, and the informative entry on Chou Chet (p.92-93). And so are the entries on the Vietnamese invasion (p.170-72) and the military aspects of January 7, 1979 (p.175-76). One apposite reference is the entry on Hate Day (p.176) instituted by the PRK regime; it was ironically first celebrated precisely in 1984 - a reference to George Orwell, whose description of the totalitarian State was prophetic in the case of DK, as it was modelled on the Stalinist regime (p.176-77). Clever too is the brief description of justice under DK, in which "slogans are a substitute for a civil code" (p.177), and one can add, a criminal code as well.
Kane is absolutely right when he denounces the myth that Buddhist monks were widely targeted by the KR (p.59). Quite rightly, Kane insists, too, that industry played a significant part in DK's economy (p.167).

Indeed, Solomon Kane has accumulated an impressive amount of information on the lethal regime. But writing a dictionary on the KR must be well beyond the reach of any single individual. He would have been well-advised to have formed a team of both international analysts and Cambodian survivors, in order to produce a fully reliable compendium of KR lore that would be of use to the coming generations.