

Why? This question is not addressed directly in Sofsky's book, but he shows it becomes superfluous. "Absolute power aims at increasing itself. It is impelled by totality. It has fulfilled itself when there are no exceptions. [. . .] The perfect subjects of this power are those which it has killed." Questions focusing on the task of analysing relative power are meaningless in the face of absolute power. Absolute power has its own rationality, which appears insane from the point of view of any other social rationality. The special, one could call it negative, rationality of absolute power consists in overpowering all other rationalities and subduing them. A system of absolute power therefore seems irrational, but is still devastatingly effective as an instrument of terror because it minimizes the possibility of developing counterstrategies based on the assumption and application of conventional rationalities.

Finally, one could look at a possible consequence which Sofsky, wisely confining himself to the sociological analysis, only hints at. He describes a social institution which had made the transformation of persecution into destruction its organizing principle. So the order for the systematic destruction of all European Jews and Romanies was issued to an organization prepared for such a task and which only had to acquire the technical means to carry out the genocide. This one purpose evaded distortion by the special rationality of absolute power, because it encountered an institution which fitted this purpose like no other. Sofsky ends his reflections on the relationship between terror, negative rationality, absolute power and a policy of genocide thus: "Unlike all previous forms of power, absolute terror produces absolutely nothing. Its actions are completely negative, a work of vanishing without trace. It realizes itself in the complete destruction of man."

Jan Philipp Reemtsma

CHANDLER, DAVID P. *Brother Number One. A Political Biography of Pol Pot*. Westview Press, Boulder [etc.] 1992. xv, 254 pp. Ill. \$24.95; £16.95.

Although most publications on communism in Cambodia offer biographical information about Saloth Sar, alias Pol Pot, no formal biography had been written until now. David Chandler, a writer and editor of several studies on communist Cambodia, is certainly well qualified to fill this gap. But the lack of sources would appear to be an insurmountable obstacle. Pol Pot's biography is set against a backdrop of a communist movement which from the outset put few of its activities on paper; and Pol Pot himself is almost obsessively secretive. The available texts of his speeches and other interventions can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and in various meetings with foreign journalists he revealed almost nothing about himself. This shortage of traditional, printed, sources – which have proved valuable in the preparation of biographies of Eastern European communist leaders, for instance – can be compensated in part by interviews with eyewitnesses. This genre of historical material, of necessity frequently resorted to by all students of Cambodian communism, raises issues of bias, failing memory and mutually conflicting testimonies. But besides the usual problems there is the specific complication that, as Chandler himself admits, his informants were never prepared "to associate the person they had

known with the horrors of the 1970s. Victims of Pol Pot's regime, they were unwilling to alter or deny their relatively pleasant collection of the man" (p. 4). In addition to this by now almost traditional source of oral evidence, Chandler is one of the first researchers to have had extensive access to the "confessions" of political prisoners, including former allies of Pol Pot, made during the terror regime of "Democratic Kampuchea". But the historical significance of this category of source material is even more difficult to ascertain because of the coercion and torture under which the confessions were secured.

Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising, and it would be unfair to criticize Chandler for the fact, that this biographical study does not provide sufficient information in certain essential aspects and in general offers only a shadowy picture of Pol Pot. Perhaps the most successful is the section dealing with the first twenty-five years of his life, which deals with the milieu in which Saloth Sar was born in 1928, his school years (1936–1949) and a three-year study visit to Paris on a Cambodian government grant (1949–1952). But here too the reconstruction of Pol Pot's life remains full of gaps because of the lack of sources. We know nothing about Sar's time at the Catholic primary school near the royal palace in Phnom Penh (1936–1942): "no anecdotes", Chandler notes (p. 17). The same is broadly true for the subsequent six-year stay at the elite secondary boarding school founded by Norodom Sihanouk in 1942, with the exception that we know that Sar formed important relationships at this time with future political friends and enemies (e.g. Khieu Samphan, Lon Nol). Chandler also offers the reminiscences of three fellow students, who report that Sar was an average student with pleasant manners (pp. 18–19). Why Sar then went to the *École Technique* to study carpentry remains unclear (again, "no anecdotes", p. 22), as does the reason for him being awarded a grant to study in France, specifically to take "courses connected with radio-electricity" (p. 28). Even with regard to the Paris years, the best documented of his life, there are still large gaps and contradictions in the evidence. He clearly had close contact with radical fellow students and took part in meetings of a discussion group of Cambodian students who read texts by Marx and Stalin. In 1952 he "almost certainly" (p. 202) became a communist, i.e. he joined the French Communist Party. The evidence from the Paris years is contradictory on at least two scores. Was Pol Pot an avid reader, as Keng Vannsak recalls, or did he regularly go to the cinema, as Mey Mann claims (p. 34). And did Sar play a marginal role in the radical discussion group, as Keng Vannsak, himself a participant, claimed, or did he play a key part in the debates, as an anonymous participant reports to the French journalist François Debré.

Chandler uses two means to compensate for the lack of relevant sources. Firstly, he shows a clear tendency, especially in the first part of the biography, to supplement the documentation with essentially unwarranted suppositions. Thus he draws a parallel between the dancing lessons which Sar saw his aunt give to the corps de ballet in the royal palace during his school years and the "painstaking ways in which Pol Pot has trained his subordinates in the Cambodian CP" (p. 11). And he claims to know broadly what preoccupied Pol Pot and his fellow students on the boat to France in 1949 (including the answer to the question why Sar was less homesick than the others on board, pp. 27–28). Pol Pot's mistrust of others need not be derived from Stalin; a natural inclination in this direction would be a more obvious explanation (p. 3). And Chandler's

forceful suggestion that as early as the final year in Paris Pol Pot had a clear idea how, emulating Stalin, he would take over the Cambodian CP by administrative means ("I will hold the dossiers") is based on the dubious assumption that the witness cited in this context by Debré is more credible than other available evidence, according to which Pol Pot was a rather marginal figure at this time (pp. 36, 187). Moreover, as Ben Kiernan, a former colleague of Chandler's, indicated, the source is most probably apocryphal (see Kiernan's detailed review of Chandler's biography in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, LII (1993), pp. 1076–1078).

A second means of compensating for the lack of source material is the author's tendency, especially noticeable in the second half of his study, to transform the biography in the direction of a general historical survey. Now any biography of a politician of national stature (Hitler, Stalin, Churchill) requires setting in a wider context. But this has got rather out of hand when Chandler presents the period between 1963 (the year Pol Pot became secretary of the Cambodian CP) and January 1979 (when the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror came to an end) as a general history of the communist movement, in which Brother Number One occasionally warrants some attention.

In his introduction Chandler appears to recognize that the available sources do not allow a reliable picture to be painted of Pol Pot as a person: "there is something transparent and elusive about him that makes a biographical inquiry unsatisfactory and incomplete. Often in my research I had the uneasy feeling that Saloth Sar/Pol Pot was just outside my line of vision observing *me*" (pp. 5–7). But *why* then this biography?

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