

Unholy halls
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What is probably the grimmest secondary school building in the world lies in a leafy suburb of the sprawling city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

TUOL Svay Prey High School, now known as Tuol Sleng, is an average looking building that follows the model of many secondary schools in Asia: a three-storey block with a staircase at each end and covered balconies that students walk along to get from one classroom to the next.

In front of the L-shaped school buildings is an open area, now grassed, that would once have been filled with the voices of students taking their morning and afternoon breaks or doing PE or playing football or basketball.

But all that was before the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975 and turned it into the main torture centre for the people of Phnom Penh.

Detailed records of the Khmer Rouge's activities there emerged through the work of the Yale Genocide Project.

"Thousands of people – officials from the old government, those accused of being middle class and latterly mainly Khmer Rouge members suspected of disloyalty – were brought to the prison.

"Their presence in Tuol Sleng meant that they had already been condemned. Once inside, they were weighed and photographed. Then the questioning began. Prisoners were told to write detailed confessions setting out their disloyalty.

"They were told to admit they were spies and implicate friends and family. Refusing to confess was not an option, and those that tried were brutally tortured. Many were tortured anyway," reported BBC news.

Estimates vary on how many Cambodians were killed by Pol Pot's regime but 1.8 million seems conservative – almost a third of the country's population at that time. Of those, 17,000 passed through Tuol Sleng on their way to the killing fields of Choeung Ek just outside the city.

Foreign correspondents covering Cambodia's 1970-1975 war gathered together en masse in Cambodia for the first time in 35 years to attend a memorial ceremony for 37 foreign and local journalists who died covering the conflict.

When the Vietnamese liberated Phnom Penh in 1975, just seven people of those 17,000 were alive and they found 14 decaying corpses still lying on the floors and the iron bedsteads on which they had been tortured.

The Vietnamese buried them in the courtyard but wisely left other things as they were and these rooms, with their bedsteads in place and with grainy blow-ups of the corpses on the walls, are the first that visitors encounter.

Today, an unnerving peacefulness hangs over the buildings of Tuol Sleng. The fact that they were once a high school lends an added poignancy to the emotional distress that all visitors inevitably undergo.

These rooms, with their bloodstains ingrained in the floor and the shackles that once held prisoners' legs still attached to the beds, were once classrooms. Their familiarity means that you can almost still hear the excited chatter of students, the voice of the teacher and picture the rows of upturned faces.

It is a stark contrast to the screams of the tortured that must have echoed around these bare walls in the late 1970s.

In the next building, things get worse.

The Khmer Rouge documented their deeds extensively and with care. Tuol Sleng had its own photographer whose job was to take mug shots of all the prisoners. These stark black-and-white pictures fill the next two classrooms in the adjacent school block. There are hundreds of them, attached to rows of display boards.

Inevitably, many are of children – the children that should perhaps have filled these classrooms with their laughter. The blank frightened stares chill and it is a hard heart that does not feel tears rising.

My eye was caught by one small boy, of eight or nine I should think, whose image would later haunt me as I visited the UN monument at Choeung Ek and looked at the heap of skulls carefully labelled by age.

Perhaps his was one of them; perhaps his was still lying in the mass burial pits that have been deliberately left undisturbed.

Unanswered questions

The director of Tuol Sleng was Kaing Guek Eav, born in the central province of Kampong Thom in the early 1940s, but he was more generally known as Comrade Duch.

After many years of laying low, during which he worked for the American Refugee Committee, he was identified by photojournalist Nic Dunlop in April 1999. Dunlop handed him over to the authorities.

But having pursued him relentlessly and successfully, Dunlop was suddenly overcome with doubts.

Was there any point in starting a process that would inevitably lead to a lengthy and tortuous trial? Duch was a man already in his seventies. Was he sincere in his remorse, his charity work and his conversion to Christianity? The ending of Dunlop's book, *The Lost Executioner*, is full of unanswered questions.

Duch's defence was always that he had no option but to carry out the orders of his superiors in the Khmer Rouge Central Committee.

"If I had tried to flee, they were holding my family hostage, and my family would have suffered the same fate as the other prisoners in Tuol Sleng. If I had fled or rebelled, it would not have helped anyone," he told a British newspaper in 2007. The Khmer Rouge genocide tribunal said on May 24 that the verdict will be delivered late next month.

But whatever Duch's fate, a visit to Tuol Sleng is a gruelling experience and raises big questions.

I think it was the novelist John Fowles who once wrote that a major failure of our times was to come to terms with the fact that evil exists.

Tuol Sleng thrusts that reality into the face of every visitor, and to anyone with children or involved in education, it thrusts a follow-up question: what are you doing to prepare those children for a world in which the deeds of evil men and women can and do thrive?

How do you recognise evil, oppose it, deal with it, and even, like that little boy, suffer it? For me, Tuol Sleng's silence was deep and heavy with reproach. The reasons for teaching history have no finer advocate.