

Documentary lays bare the banality of Khmer Rouge evil

Glenn Garvin

July 12, 2011

Writing about Adolf Eichmann, the bureaucrat-in-chief of Nazi genocide, the philosopher Hannah Arendt coined the phrase “the banality of evil.” Her point was that humanity’s most monstrous crimes have been carried out not by fanatics or sociopaths but by ordinary people who accepted the ideology of their government and regarded the slaughter of their victims as just another job.

I don’t know if I fully comprehended Arendt’s theory until I watched *Enemies of the People*, a documentary on Cambodia’s murderous Khmer Rouge government that airs Tuesday as part of the PBS documentary series *POV*. It is a singular experience to listen as former Khmer Rouge executioners reminisce about sucking on gall bladders torn from the bodies of their victims in order to cool off from all that clubbing and stabbing and shooting out in the jungle.

Enemies of the People speak softly but carry a big stick. It does not use a lot of facts and figures to describe the reign of communist terror by the Khmer Rouge, who killed millions of their countrymen — perhaps a third of Cambodia’s 7.5 million populations — in just four years. Nor is there much use of gory atrocity footage, the vast mounds of skulls and bones the Khmer Rouge left behind when they were finally driven from power in 1979.

The documentary’s power derives almost entirely from casual moments: A chance encounter with an old woman walking a country road who mentions that the nearby river used to bubble and hiss with the gas escaping from all the corpses rotting on its bottom. A former executioner recalling that a rural meadow was once cross-hatched with ditches because “I didn’t want to bury too many bodies in one ditch.” Another complaining how difficult it was to relax with a good dinner after day of slashing throats because no matter how hard he scrubbed, he just couldn’t get the smell of blood off his hands.

Enemies of the People are actually a film within a film. Co-directed by Cambodian journalist Thet Sambath and veteran British filmmaker Rob Lemkin, it is an account of Sambath’s low-key but relentless effort to produce a documentary on Khmer Rouge crimes. Sambath spent 10 years gently coaxing former Khmer Rouge to talk about the hows and whys of the country’s killing fields.

The task was seemingly impossible. Unlike Germany, which has endlessly picked at the scabs left by Nazi rule, or Russia, where an impressive array of scholarship on the crimes of communism has been produced, Cambodians rarely discuss what happened in their country between 1975 and 1979. Sambath’s friends and even the surviving remnants of

his family (his mother, father and brother all died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge) couldn't understand why he didn't move on. "I just wonder why he's so different than other people," says Sambath's wife, wistfully.

Watching Sambath gingerly employ misdirection and understatement to wheedle confessions from the former Khmer Rouge is a fascinating lesson in the craft of reporting.

"You did not kill many," he says, urging on a recalcitrant former executioner. "Just a few toward the end." The man obdurately claims to remember nothing, and then admits: "I only killed one. That's the truth."

Another only responds when Sambath playfully volunteers a friend for a throat-slitting demonstration. "You hold them like this so they cannot scream," the retired killer says, the fingers of one hand splayed across the forehead of the "prisoner" as he swipes a toy plastic knife across the throat. "After I'd slit so many throats like this, my hand hurt. So I switched to stabbing the neck."

Sambath's most dogged efforts were concentrated on Nuon Chea, the notorious second-in-command of the Khmer Rouge and their senior surviving member. It took three solid years of interviewing Chea before he admitted knowing that Cambodia was an orgy of murder during his rule, even then insisting the orders were given by someone else.

Finally Chea admits he and other senior officials ordered the killings to prevent ideological deviation from the Khmer Rouge program, which abolished not only property but the very concept of ownership. "We had to solve the traitor problem in the way we did so it didn't get out of our control and infect the innocent people lower down," he says.

Chea is no more emotional in confessing to the killings than he is to denying them. One of the few times he displays any passion is when he views a newscast on the execution of Saddam Hussein.

"This was the end of a patriot in an unfair society!" declares the agitated Chea: A civics lesson from Hell.