“Statistics List”

The notebook cover resembles a door with a single pane of glass onto which words have been stenciled in thick, dark ink. Someone has partly shaded the block print, further staining the white. In places, the rims of the lettering are smudged or bleed inside and out, an imperfection, a danger to be boxed in by sharp lines.


But this title directs attention from the text’s broader meaning, which, if concerned with torture, is about much more. Perhaps English-speaking scholars use this colloquial title because the Khmer “Statistics List” does not seem to make sense as the title for a set of lesson plans about interrogation. But it did in Duch’s world.

Statistics are models, trends extracted from a sampling of facts that provide a snapshot of a more complex reality such as a state, community, or population. Sorting what is disorderly, statistics use classification and categorization to reveal an arrangement that can then be further analyzed, ex-
plained, and used to predict future trends. Statistics are another modality of articulation that redacts, driving back as it obscures, leaving an excess of meaning. The very juxtaposition of “statistics” and “torture” is uncanny, as are the pages within.

“Be determined not to sleep while interrogating!”

The notebook begins with this disconcerting exhortation, written in block lettering on graph paper. I imagine Long Muy sitting, bloodied, beaten, and chained on the floor of his interrogation cell, while his torturer dozes, exhausted by the effort of beating his prisoner. The slogans continue:

“Be determined not to hesitate when interrogating Enemies!”
“Be determined to mount an offensive in interrogation to send answers to the Party without fail!”

More broadly, this text, consisting of notes taken by unidentified cadre from mid- to late 1976 onward during training sessions led by Duch, is concerned with “facts” discerned from past interrogations, ranging from cadre performance to detainee responses. These facts are parsed in terms of the “thick frame” of the CPK party line, which provides classificatory schemes for labeling people (for example, in terms of class and stance) and evaluating behavior. Based on this information, recorded in numbered and subdivided lists, the notes also provide an explanation of the past, identify problems and strategies for the present, and create expectations for the future. In doing so, the notes outline a model of enemy subversion and strategies for uncovering plots and preventing the regime’s downfall. “We are the Party’s Special Branch,” the notes record, highlighting the importance of the work.

The first set of lessons illustrates the central aim of interrogation: extracting information revealing treason and networks of coconspirators. Taken in the months following the arrest of Chakrei, these entries assert the existence of a “Free Khmer” network operating in the countryside and headed by East Zone secretary Sao Phim and his deputy Chhouk, the head of Sector 24. “Evidence” of this network’s “intention to smash our cadres, i.e. the Communist Party of Kampuchea,” has been demonstrated by “tracts, propaganda and sabotage,” as well as “revolt by military force.” By means of interrogation, the composition of these networks has begun to be uncovered in places like East Zone sectors 24 and 25 and Division 170, as well as the broader linkages to “enemies” such as Vietnam and capitalists.
At another point, the lesson discusses “what was gotten out of” a group of a dozen prisoners who were “pounded.” Their forced statements detail an alleged June 1976 meeting at which committees were established to carry out treasonous activities. The heads of the committees assigned to “distribute tracts” and “shoot and throw grenades” are named, as well as their location (Chhouk’s Sector 24). In addition, the notebook records the names of the leaders of the Free Khmer network in Division 170.

Elsewhere, the lesson plan discusses the sorts of questions needed to obtain such information. Sometimes the queries are quite broad, meant to establish a chronology of treason. A section titled “Questions to pound on while interrogating Ngim” lists 12 topics to be covered, such as leadership history and structure, internal and external links, networks of traitors, horizontal communication, and “personal histories from beginning to end.”

The “direction” of questions could also be specific, as when attempting to ferret out the details of the June 1976 meeting: “Were the meetings actually conducted or not? Who attended? What dates, Where?” or “What were the instructions in the meetings?” Such investigation, in turn, yields “The names of those we suspect,” “People who must be questioned,” and “Directions to pound and find enemies boring holes from within the units.”

Just asking the right questions is not enough. Interrogation has to be carried out with a proper revolutionary stance. Duch’s lessons again move between the broad and the specific. One section lists the Statutes of the Youth League, which require members to have, among other things, “A high renunciation of material ownership, power, views, ideology” and “Absolute obedience.”

Cadre are also required to engage in criticism and self-criticism to further hone their stance. In this spirit, Duch offers an “Evaluation of positive and negative points” and “Areas of improvement in the future” during an “Experience meeting on the work of the offensive: July 27, 1976.” The “Positive Points” include “Active combating, patience, carrying out our instructions to [the best of] our abilities, endeavoring to accomplish duties as assigned, whether the enemy’s response are clear or unclear.”

At times, the “Negative Points” seem odd and are often unsettling, even as they provide a glimpse into the S-21 torture chambers. In terms of “organizational discipline,” Duch told his students, “we beat prisoners without considering it in detail, in particular comparing their responses to those who are networked with them.” Another example concerns their performance when told to “attack” in their interrogations: “We did attack, but we gave more weight to torture than policy. . . . We still use loud voices when interrogating,
and when the enemies answer exactly what we intended to ask, we are happy and laugh, causing the enemy to immediately catch our weakness.”

The remedy, Duch states in his lessons, is for interrogators to understand the sources of past mistakes, which result from not maintaining a firm revolutionary stance, as well as the related proper methods and principles for interrogation. It is from such discussions that the “Statistics List” has gotten the moniker the “Torture Manual.” The language is often one of borders, interiority and exteriority, penetration and extraction, darkness and light. Each prisoner harbors a secret to be revealed.

A proper interrogation, the lessons make clear, involves an assumption (the guilt of the prisoners), belief (in the CPK and its party line), a “direction” (a set of questions related to a history of treasonous activities), and an objective (bring this hidden plot and a network of conspirators to light). “Our core duty,” Duch tells his cadre, is “to interrogate, analyze and to extract responses” from “those arrested by the party.”

These prisoners, he continues, “have been strongly active in the bases in all kinds of opposition activities,” which have been identified “by way of reports from our Special Branch, which the Party has examined and followed-up.” Here Duch suggests that S-21 reports are not merely passive bureaucratic filings but instead help drive the process. Since the prisoners are guilty by virtue of arrest, the notebook states, “we cannot hesitate and have ideological doubts that hinder our task, even if that person is our brother or sister. . . . The most important thing is for us to absolutely believe in the Party.”

To carry out their core duty effectively, interrogators must combine this correct ideological stance with proper use of a two-pronged approach in their questioning. The first is “politics” or seeking to “propagandize and put constant and repeated pressure on [the prisoner] at all times.” Torture, the second method, is supposed to be “supplemental,” though, the lecture notes, “past experience is that our comrade interrogators mostly fall into torture.” Indeed, the notebook records, “torture cannot be avoided. It only differs as to whether it is a little or a lot.” Everyone, Duch is stating in his lecture, is tortured because it is assumed that when “politics” is used a detainee will “confess at the very lowest level.”

From the start, the interrogator should expect resistance, deception, and “reactions.” For example, prisoners “use tricks to confuse us,” such as when they “complain and plead to us. They pretend to be docile and say that they did not betray us.” At other times, those being interrogated have “reactions, curse us, and say that we mistreat them and that they are not traitors.”
situation is dangerous, Duch’s lessons warn, since the reactions may raise “doubt that they may not be enemies.” A subsection titled “Why the enemies have reactions” adds that “ideological doubts” can also arise and the interrogator may begin to “have hesitations with them. Sometimes we are enraged at them, and that makes us lose our mastery . . . [and makes] them think about other things,” including “life and death.”

“Mastery” (mâchaskar), a key DK concept connoting action according with ideology, is invoked throughout Duch’s lessons. Indeed, one lecture stresses the importance of studying “the movement of three tons per hectare,” which meant, in the context of S-21, to “attack without hesitation” and “get results quickly to report to the Party.” As Duch noted during his trial, interrogators competed to outperform others in their “attacks” and the “results” obtained.

If prisoners resisted, there were “counter-strategies” that, if combined with a proper stance, would provide interrogators with the mastery needed to overcome these “tricks” and get a confession. Initially, Duch’s lecture suggests, prisoners engage in “all kinds of non-stop reactions.” The purpose of the preliminary investigation, he suggests, is to introduce the prisoner to the disciplinary structures operative in the interrogation room and to “constantly observe their expressions and behaviours.” The “precaution” better enables the interrogator to deal with prisoner reactions, such as trying to provoke or even strike the cadre. At such times, the notes state, a cadre should “walk away and do not become short-tempered and beat them. We do whatever necessary to have mastery.” The goal was to “break” the prisoner.

When in control, the interrogator could use “politics” more effectively. Duch’s lessons provide a long list of the “forms of propaganda” used in past interrogations, including “coaxing and soothing” prisoners, offering them food and suggesting they might be reinstated; “threatening, distracting, breaking them skillfully, arranging small scenes to make them docile and hopeless, seeing that they cannot resist any longer”; manipulating their feelings by making them think of their families; and suggesting their guilt was minor, thereby giving false hope.

Torture should be used as necessary but remain secondary. “The objective of torturing,” Duch instructs, “is to get their answers,” to “make them feel pain so that they will respond quickly,” and to “make them afraid.” He offers a number of caveats, reminding his interrogators that torture “is not done for fun” or “to let off steam.” A prisoner might be beaten “to make them scared, but absolutely do not let them die.” Interrogators had to monitor their prisoner’s
health and their use of physical violence. “Do not get greedy and want to be quick,” he cautions, since this “leads to death and the loss of a document.”

The death of a prisoner, in other words, had nothing to do with the loss of a human life: it was only significant insofar as it meant information was lost and the Party did not get “results.”

Duch’s lessons also discuss the process of confession. “If they do not answer everything or if the answers are not clear, do not despair,” he advises. “There has never been an enemy who confessed the first time . . . it develops gradually.” Interrogators should have patience, control, and mastery and avoid influencing the prisoner’s answer: “It is imperative to let them talk or write and to not interrupt them or correct them immediately to what we want, what we know, or what we want them to say.” Instead, the cadre should stick to “the points that the Party instructs us to ask” about the “details of background, character, interrelated [traitorous] activities, and purposes of conducting the activities.”

The confessions had to follow a specific style. In a lecture on “Methods in making Documents,” Duch specifies that prisoners must “write about their traitorous lives in a smooth and clean narrative that is practicably clear and has reason, [has] bases for espionage and infiltration inside us, in a step-by-step process according to their plans.” What they wrote had to be written “by themselves with their own words, their own sentences and their whole ideas.” Once they had finished a draft, the interrogator should “press on the weak points and put pressure on them. We give them reasons that they still lie, hide, exaggerate or subtract from the story. The writing and paper must be neat and clean.” Afterward, the document had to be “signed in acceptance of responsibility, clearly dated and must show whether it is the first or the second response, so that the Party can grasp their ideological development.”

To make the Party “comfortable” with the confessions, Duch advises, “do not press on names, do not lead them to talk, or beat them to say what we want.” A good document is one in which “our comrade interrogators are skillful in analyzing, detailing matters, raising doubts, and tackling their weak points.” The work is one of “intense struggle” between “an enemy who uses every trick to conceal their treasonous activities, their network and their leaders” and “our comrade interrogators,” who are “talented at burrowing in and closely questioning in order to penetrate the mysteries inside their minds.”

Interrogation, the lecture concludes, is part of the Special Branch’s “work of class struggle. That is, it is aimed at smashing the oppressor class, digging their trunks and roots out to defend the Party,” the revolution, and the political
“line of independence and mastery.” Interrogation did so by “[digging] out the mysteries of the enemy, no matter how dark, and smash[ing] their trickery, their organizational networks, and their plans. . . . We never stop.”

Interrogation

The “Statistics List” and other surviving S-21 notebooks are revealing about interrogation, both in terms of the models they offer of how questioning should proceed and confessions should be produced and in terms of the “problems” encountered. During a meeting on July 27, 1976, for example, Duch notes an incident in which, after a prisoner had become “exhausted and sleepy,” the interrogator “gave them liquor to drink which slowed down our work.” Another lesson discusses “the problem of enemy escape,” which might result from negligence, as when someone “in Brother Pon’s group forgot to lock the shackle bar.” (Duch would clarify to the court that no one escaped from S-21.) Duch chides the interrogators about carelessness or being “absent-minded,” as when cadre would “walk away and leave an enemy alone” or “throw away Special Branch paperwork.”

Discarding paperwork could also violate secrecy, a topic frequently mentioned in Duch’s lectures. A subsection states that secrecy is part of the meaning and “soul of Special Branch work.” Thus prisoners must be guarded closely, “because if they escape they will talk about their confession.” Interrogators should not “go around talking about the enemies’ responses to other groups, offices, ministries or families.” Documents should not be left scattered about but instead “burned” so they do not “fall into the enemy hands.”

Interrogation also apparently sometimes involved a degree of boredom or aversion, as when cadre fell into “clock watching” or worked “irregular hours.” Indeed, some of the lectures highlight how interrogation was bureaucratized and routinized. The notebook includes a section on “The system of making routine daily reports” in which Duch tells the instructors to include specific types of content (focusing on “important leaders” and “examples to make it clearer”) and style, including the drawing of “lines with your pencil before writing. Write to the point and the essence.” A final report, in turn, should include a “daily diary,” an “organization table,” a “table of outlined responses,” and “remarks of the group chief.”

Such routines were meant to produce confessions having a uniform structure and focus, which almost always included a cover sheet, a chronology detailing a history of subversion, details of alleged subversive activities, and a list of the prisoner’s “string of traitors.” In many ways, confessions resembled
the revolutionary biographies cadre periodically wrote, with the confession listing the date when the prisoner allegedly joined an enemy network at the point in the cadre biography where the cadre would have specified the date when he or she “joined the revolution.” The confessions also often included annotations, letters, and detailed summary reports.

The process of getting to this end point, however, was inconsistent, as interrogators combined “directions” and techniques given by Duch and their team leaders with their prior experience and proclivities to “break the prisoner” as the confession “moved forward” toward a “clear confession.” This process could be disrupted in a variety of ways, including “moral violations.” Instead of questioning female prisoners about “political matters,” Duch remarks in a lecture, interrogators “instead asked about [the] women's morality according to their sexual desires. While the Party’s instructions were to beat female prisoners with the whip, to absolutely not beat them with hands only, we violated this.”

Several incidents of sexual or “morality” violations, which were officially forbidden by the regime, took place at S-21. One former S-21 interrogator who testified during Duch’s trial, Prak Khan, once told me that while he didn’t recall most of the people he interrogated, he remembered a young woman named Nai Non, with whom he “fell in love.” She was beautiful, he said, and the male cadre had no contact with single women. Plus, he added, he was young, and his hormones were flowing.

For the first few days, Prak Khan told me, he interrogated her using “politics,” asking about her activities and network. When she did not confess, he said, he threatened her with a whip and then banged hard on a table, causing her to urinate on her clothing. She immediately agreed to confess. But she was illiterate, so he had to write much of the confession. He said that he sent seven or eight drafts of the confession to Duch, who kept telling him that her confession was not yet “clear.” In the end, Prak Khan interrogated her, day and night, for perhaps three months. While he said that he pitied Nai Non and did not violate her, other interrogators did violate prisoners, both male and female, during interrogations.

With regard to the “agreement of fact,” Duch had only partly agreed with the closing order statement, which had said: “Rapes were committed at S-21.” He said only one such incident had occurred, when an “interrogator inserted a stick into teacher Deum Sareaun.” This incident stood out for several reasons. First, Duch said that he was “shocked” by this violation of the rules of interrogation. He filed a report and waited for his superior’s reply. None was
forthcoming. So he “asked that the interrogator be removed from interrogating female detainees.”\textsuperscript{46} It was at this time, he said, that he decided to form the group of female interrogators.

Duch explained that he took no further action against Deum Sareaun’s interrogator because she had been his primary school teacher and Duch was afraid of appearing “individualistic.”\textsuperscript{47} Nevertheless, he said he had been “very angry” about her abuse, even as he “tried to hold back my emotion” so that his superiors and subordinates would not “degrade my performance.”\textsuperscript{48} During DK, proper revolutionary stance and loyalty required demonstrating that one had cut off one’s emotions from former family, friends, and teachers. If he had intervened, Duch suggested, he would have lost face and perhaps come under suspicion. “Everyone was afraid,” he remarked, “and only thought about his or her own life.”\textsuperscript{49}

Perhaps this is why Duch also did nothing when Deum Sareaun’s husband, Ke Kim Huot, was forced to eat excrement at S-21. Ke Kim Huot had also been Duch’s teacher and had joined the Khmer Rouge, eventually becoming the head of Sector 7 in the Northeast Zone before his arrest on July 13, 1977.\textsuperscript{50} Ke Kim Huot would remain imprisoned at S-21 for almost a year. His interrogation began the month of his arrest and continued into April 1978.

The long interrogation suggests that Ke Kim Huot resisted even though he was tortured from the start. In a July 22, 1977, report on “the contemptible Sot’s confession,” the preliminary interrogation team notes that Ke Kim Huot has “spoken about the situation some” but has “not yet confessed,” even as they “request opinion and instructions, urgently!”\textsuperscript{51} The report explains that Ke Kim Huot “admits participating in activities of the popular movement” but “speaks very deceptively about it,” and “on joining the CIA, he confesses nothing.” The report then discusses Ke Kim Huot’s “health and torture.”

iv. Regarding [his] Health and Torture

1. On the morning of 18.7.77, we decided to do torture. We told him the names of those who had implicated him. In doing this, we did not grasp his weak points. We were forceful, but the results were zero. My analysis is that I observed his spirits fall somewhat. While being tortured he did not react, and when we brought him back for interrogation again, we [still] got nothing. On his health, he ate a little gruel, and cannot sleep well. Our medics are treating him.

2. On the morning of 20.7.77, we pounded him one more round. This time he reacted, cursing, saying he was not a traitor. Those that implicated
[him] were all traitors. . . . His health got weaker, but there was nothing remarkable.

3. On the afternoon of 21.7.77 we pounded him another round. Electrical wire and shit. This time he cursed those who hit him very much, [and said] Go ahead and beat me to death. Had him eat two or three spoonfuls of shit, and he asked about Hing, Neou, San, and Ranh.

4. By nightfall, we went at him again with electric wires, this time pretty seriously. He became delirious. He was [all right]. Later he confessed a bit as reported above.52

The report then lists five cadre who Ke Kim Huot had been told had implicated him as a CIA agent, including Deum Sareaun. Ke Kim Huot, in turn, “said he had nothing to answer to send to Angkar . . . that he now just waits for death, and he can close his eyes and die easily because he had sacrificed and was loyal to the party.”53 The report concludes by stating that the team’s “operative line is to continue to torture with mastery, because the enemy is breaking emotionally and is at a dead end,” even as it once again requests “guidance from Angkar.”54

In the end, Ke Kim Huot would produce a confession that accorded with the script of treason demanded at S-21. During the trial, Duch noted that Comrade Toy had annotated Ke Kim Huot’s confession,55 suggesting that he had been passed along to S-21’s interrogator of last resort, one who tortured with abandon. Even as he moved toward his final confession, written on April 29, 1978, Ke Kim Huot appears to have performed a last act of defiance. An undated version of his confession states that while he was teaching from 1956 to 1958, Duch was among “the students who studied hard, especially by asking me questions and paying attention to my explanation about politics and democratic view.”56 In a March 7, 1978, version of his confession, Ke Kim Huot ranks Duch number 11 in his “list of those who participated in traitorous activities with me.”57 Ke Kim Huot was executed on May 10, 1978, less than two weeks after his final confession.58

Ke Kim Huot’s confession suggested that a wider range of tortures was used at S-21 than Duch had admitted. After Duch confirmed that Ke Kim Huot had been forced to eat excrement, Judge Nil asked Duch about other forms of torture, including forcing prisoners to drink urine (Duch replied that he didn’t know but believed this took place) and making them “pay homage to an image of a dog,” a form of torture that Duch acknowledged and that is mentioned in
a 1978 lecture notebook. Duch explained that he sought to educate his cadre “to distinguish the position of the enemies and friends. So they were told not to regard any detainee as a friend by addressing” him or her politely. As an example, Duch spoke of Chum Mey, “who was addressed by the very young interrogators as ‘a’ [despicable]. . . . I think it was very humiliating . . . [and] by making the detainees pay homage to a picture of a dog, it was severe.”

The fact that Duch authorized the interrogation of Ke Kim Huot, Deum Sareaun, and so many other former friends and colleagues raised questions about his character and motivations. In Cambodia, teachers are highly esteemed, and students are expected to show them gratitude and respect. Duch’s seeming indifference increased doubt about the genuineness of his professed remorse, an issue Judge Lavergne explored. “Have you ever imagined,” he asked Duch, “what these prisoners could have felt [while being tortured]?” “Have you ever imagined what would be felt by a person whose head was placed in a plastic bag?”

Most of Duch’s replies avoided issues of feeling, offering indirections or specifications that veered from the intent of Judge Lavergne’s line of questioning. But at times he seemed to get genuinely upset, as when he answered repeated questions about the extreme violence of S-21. He sometimes looked down, sighed slightly, and spoke very slowly, as if the words wouldn’t come out. At one point he broke down and began to sob while discussing one of his former teachers. “The accused, collect your emotions,” Judge Nil instructed.

Judge Cartwright, questioning him later the same day, asked: “Today, in this courtroom, you appear to me to be deeply ashamed and regretful of your part in the obtaining of confessions using torture. Is that correct?” “Your Honour,” Duch replied. “I do not deny it.” When she inquired why, then, he had not been concerned at the time and primarily focused on his tasks, he responded that his failure to assist anyone was “beyond cowardice because I betrayed my friends, because I was afraid of being killed.”

Besides raising questions about Duch’s state of mind, Ke Kim Huot’s confession was also suggestive about the interrogation process. Even though they were in an extremely one-sided power dynamic, those being interrogated had a degree of agency and resisted, sometimes refusing to confess even when severely tortured. A few prisoners tried to commit suicide, including Sous Sopha, who picked up and swallowed a screw, due to the “carelessness” of a guard. Since Sou Sopha was considered an important prisoner, Duch “ordered a medic from the general staff to operate on him, and when he recovered then we continued the interrogation. So all this was done in order to get the confessions.”
The Confession of Ya

The word “confession” suggests a teleology, focusing on an end point, and a prisoner’s lack of agency. While many of the S-21 confession portfolios are incomplete or did not survive, some, like Ke Kim Huot’s, include multiple versions and detailed notes, sometimes even correspondence between the interrogators and Duch. In contrast to the Long Muy cover page, which Duch used to argue that he was merely a middleman, such documentation implies a more active role, an issue the prosecution would press.

To highlight this point, the prosecution discussed in detail the confession of Ney Saran, known as Ya, the former secretary of the Northeast Zone. In September 1976, following the interrogations of Chakrei and Chhouk, Ya was summoned to Phnom Penh. His arrival coincided with a September 20 announcement that Pol Pot was stepping down as prime minister for health reasons. Ya was arrested at Duch’s office the same day under the pretext of a medical consultation. His young wife and child soon followed.

Duch explained that Ya had been implicated in a number of confessions. But, more broadly, his arrest was related to a “bitter” dispute between on the one hand Ya and Keo Meas, another senior party member arrested shortly after Ya, and on the other Pol Pot and Son Sen concerning “the stance toward Vietnam.” Anyone perceived as deviating from the party line regarding Vietnam, Duch emphasized, was considered a traitor. Ya had long-standing ties to the Vietnamese, having, among other things, overseen during the civil war military logistics involving contact with Vietnam, headed a region adjoining Vietnam, and been involved in unsuccessful border treaty negotiations between the countries. Besides being suspect for his ties and supposedly “soft” stance toward Vietnam, Ya is thought to have expressed reservations about some CPK policies regarding class structure, the evacuation of Phnom Penh, the use of violence, and rapid collectivization. Pol Pot’s “resignation” may very well have been a ruse to sow confusion as Ya and Keo Meas were arrested.

Duch noted that Ya was a full-rights member of the CPK Central Committee, ranking number 10. As in a few cases involving high-ranking prisoners, Duch acknowledged that he participated in Ya’s interrogation. However, in keeping with his defense, he said the interrogation actually involved three people: himself, Pon (“the interrogator”), and Son Sen (“the one who supervised and made corrections”). Once again, Duch positioned himself as an intermediary.

The prosecution pushed Duch on this point, highlighting annotations and notes he had made on drafts of Ya’s confession. At the start of the interrogation,
Pon wrote a note informing Ya that on the previous morning the security office had held a meeting in which Ya had been named as a coconspirator accused, along with Chhouk and Keo Meas, of establishing a Workers’ Party of Vietnam network. Pon’s note then asked Ya about his traitorous activities with Keo Meas and Chhouk, including letters to Chhouk. According to this note, Ya replied, “If you force me to answer using torture, I’ll say anything.”

In this first phase of back-and-forth, the parameters of the confession are established, as the interrogator suggests the “direction” the confession should go. The prisoner resists and contests the accusations (Ya writes a five-page letter of protest), while already aware that torture is a possibility. Next, Ya was provided with more details about the “direction” his confession should take: Duch wrote a four-page letter elaborating on the alleged plot to establish an alternative party linked to Vietnam. The letter begins by offering false hope, suggesting that Ya has only temporarily been detained due to his “missteps” in following the “influence of people who used to be trustworthy.” You are aware, Duch’s letter continues, in a more menacing tone, “that the Soviets and Vietnamese are bones stuck in our throat which have to be scooped out and thrown away.” Cadre were judged not just by their words, but by their revolutionary stance and behavior, Duch writes. To demonstrate their stance, cadre had to reveal to the Party “whatever is inside us.” He concludes by urging Ya to confess, the sooner the better; but “the choice is yours.”

Ya’s torture began the next day. In a September 25, 1976, letter that the prosecution displayed on the court monitor, Pon reports to Duch that, following instructions, “we began the torture in the morning by whipping approximately 20 times with small rattan. In the evening, we tortured by whipping 20–30 times with three woven strands of electric wire.” This torture was supplemented by “propaganda” that included showing the prisoner Duch’s four-page letter and excerpts from other confessions regarding “secret contacts with Vietnam.” Ya was told, “There is only one path: confess to the Party.” Pon notes that Ya “started to respond and confess verbally,” writing a one-page letter by hand.

Again, we see the process by which the interrogator gives cues to the prisoner about how the confession should be written, showing excerpts of previous confessions that model language and prose. Ya was literally beaten into making a one-page confession. The next day Duch visited Ya in his cell. His visit was recorded in another memo sent by Pon to Duch, which notes that Duch asked Ya if his wife and children knew what had happened to him. When the prosecution asked why he had brought up the issue of Ya’s family, Duch
explained: “Brother Ya had a young wife—25 years younger—so the upper echelon” requested Duch and Pon to raise the issue so “Brother Ya would consider the wife’s situation.”

Here Duch used a tactic mentioned in his interrogation lectures: lying to prisoners and manipulating their emotions by mentioning their family and friends. It appeared to work. That evening, after Pon informed Ya he would be tortured, Ya agreed to confess. Pon instructed him to “write up a systematic account of your traitorous activities from beginning to end.” In the second iteration of his confession that followed the next day, Ya wrote eight pages admitting he had conspired with Chhouk and Keo Meas, who, like him, were under the influence of Vietnam. However, he concludes this confession by stating that he still follows the party line and offering his respects to “Brother Pol [Pot], Brother Nuon, and Brother Phim.” He signs his letter “a real communist soldier, ready to die.”

Over the next two days Ya continued to develop his confession. In a version dated September 28, he discusses his alleged history of conspiring with Chhouk. In a notation added to the cover sheet of this version, Duch records that he has sent the original and two copies to his superiors. More detail had been demanded.

The next day, Pon sent Ya a letter praising him for “initial steps” outlining his “contacts with Brother Chhouk,” while noting that “there were still some shortages” about which “Brother Duch” had requested elaboration. In particular, Duch had requested that Ya provide more detail on “secret meetings” that included discussion of “actual conversations, plans and objectives.” In a one-page reply, Ya discusses an initial meeting with Chhouk in which they walked through “thick forests” while discussing how to build up counterrevolutionary forces. Ya was required to date and sign Pon’s memo after affirming that his replies had not been coerced.

This dialectic between the interrogator and the interrogated, in which the former indirectly instructed the latter on how a confession should be written, continued. Later in the day on September 29, Pon sent another memo to Ya requesting still more information, including names of contacts with Vietnam. “Brother Ya,” Pon begins. “According to Brother Duch’s instruction, can you confirm and detail your traitorous activities? What was your support? Forces from outside the country, how? Forces inside the country: other than Sector 24, what other forces did you rely on?”

In Ya’s reply, fewer than a dozen pages and designated Confession Four, he once again seeks to protest. Instead of signing off on Pon’s memo as before, Ya
adds that while he has not been coerced, “my responses since the night of the 28 September 1976 were made after I was severely and strongly tortured.” This led Duch to take out his marker.

The prosecution requested that Duch’s response be displayed. In it, Ya’s caveat has been redacted: his loose scrawl is struck through by red lines. Next to what Ya wrote is a note Duch made, dated September 30, 1976; the prosecution asked Duch to read it to the court. “I wrote [to Ya],” he began, speaking quickly. “Do not write the words that I have crossed out in red. You don’t have the right to report to Angkar. I have the right.” Duch skipped over two additional lines; they read “I have reported it already. I have reported clearly. Do not play tricks, wanting to deny. You cannot.” Duch explained to the court that his superiors had ordered Ya’s torture, “so there was no need for [Ya] to write it in a confession.”

On September 30, after Duch made this annotation, Pon rewrote the memo, backdating it to the previous day. The new version looks exactly like the original, as if copied by tracing. But Ya’s comments have been edited out in the redacted version, which shows only his affirmation that what he has written has not been coerced. There is no sign of Duch’s comment or the redaction. But there are hints if one opens “Confession Four.” On the pages within, someone, most likely Pon, has made extensive comments, markings resembling a teacher’s comments on a student paper or edits on a manuscript. Confession Four begins with the heading “Relationship between Comrade Brother Phim and I,” notes that Ya and Phim were born in the same region, and details their encounters from the 1950s onward.

On the first page, where Ya speaks of how “Brother Phim stayed at my house [in Phnom Penh],” Pon comments, “In Phnom Penh, how did you get orders and instructions from Brother P like this?” Just below, where Ya states, “From what I knew [Sao] Phim had disappeared at one point,” Pon writes above: “From whom?” When Ya mentions a meeting, Pon asks what it was about and who attended, telling Ya: “Just write about the traitorous work.” And so Pon’s editing process continues, with underlining, inserted remarks, parentheticals, and other questions and comments made in the margins.

What is most striking are the large sections of text, sometimes as much as half a page, which Pon has crossed out. Next to one of these redactions, Pon directs: “You have to write about betraying the Party. Do not write like this again.” In another place, he crosses out two paragraphs and comments: “You should clearly differentiate between the slaves of the Vietnamese and true revolutionaries.” Elsewhere Pon adds in parentheses above text where
Ya alludes to subversion: “The plan to shoot Brother Pol and Brother Nuon at the Independence Monument.” Throughout, Ya is given explicit directions about what to write. Failure to do so would mean torture.

This threat was made more menacingly as Ya continued to resist. On September 30, after Ya refused to follow the “direction” of the interrogation cues, Duch wrote a note to Pon with the header “IX [Ya] reacts, denying contacts with Vietnam” and the confession number crossed out. After reading the text, Duch tells Pon, he has “decided not to send it to Angkar . . . from experience, only hot methods will work with this Ya. We cannot play friendly with him. Impose them on him.”

The following day, in a note written on graph paper, Duch informs Pon that he has consulted with Angkar, which “has decided that if this fool Ya continues to beat around the bush and hide his traitorous links and activities, Angkar has decided that he can be killed. Do not let him play games with us any more.” Duch complains that Ya is “looking down” on S-21 and the Party and that it is okay to “use hot methods strongly and for a long time,” while reiterating “even if you make a misstep and he dies, you will have done nothing wrong.” Below, Pon writes, “Brother Ya, Please read and consider this letter seriously.”

When the prosecutors confronted Duch with this memo, he asserted that his message had been part of “a strategy to bluff” and scare Ya, part of a “game” or “trick.” Cambodian Deputy Co-Prosecutor Yet Chakriya asked Duch if he had been angry. Ya refused to confess and had lost patience with him. “You could say that,” Duch replied and added that it was “the upper echelon [that was] no longer patient” with Ya.

These threats seemed to work. On October 1, Ya wrote his fifth confession, responding to a series of specific questions based on his previous responses that instructed him “to make your report precise and practical in sequence supported by logical reasons and incidents.” Ya’s confession includes more details and begins to conform to the more standardized form of S-21 confessions, with each page dated and signed at the bottom.

This is the latest version of Ya’s confession that remains. Most likely he produced additional versions before being executed shortly after completing the last one. Apparently portions of his confession were later read out, along with excerpts from the S-21 confessions of other senior leaders, before cadre gathered at the Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh. In 1997, shortly before his death, Pol Pot still tried to rationalize the DK violence by alleging plots, including one led by Ya, who “had been a Vietnamese agent since 1946.”
Articulation

After Ya’s death, his name continued to appear in confessions. If, in 1976, Duch sometimes lectured his interrogators about the “Khmer Serei network” and the purge of some cadre linked to the East Zone and Vietnam, by 1978, as war with Vietnam intensified and after two years of purges, Duch’s discussions of alleged plots frequently focused on Vietnam.

Two interrogator notebooks from this time illustrate this shift. Both refer to networks that had been uncovered. A lecture dated July 28, 1978, for example, states that after Koy Thuon’s “connections were solved, the movements have made leaps in every sector.”99 Sector 7, which Ke Kim Huot (alias Sot) had headed, is provided as an illustration. The notes refer to “despicable-Sot” and a dangerous “disguised enemy” who had “embedded as cadre.”100

Another key event recorded in the notebooks was Sao Phim’s suicide on June 3, 1978, and the subsequent smashing of “despicable Phim’s network,” described as “equal to 17 April 1975.”101 On June 6, 1978, Duch instructs his interrogators about “the meaning of the great victory [over despicable] Phim and his clique and the future direction of the work of the Special Branch.” Sao Phim, Duch asserts, was the secretary of the Workers’ Party of Kampuchea (WPK), an organization allegedly run by CIA operatives in partnership with Vietnam. Among the CIA operatives linked to the WPK, Duch names Koy Thuon, Ya, and Keo Meas. Meanwhile, a large-scale purge of the East Zone commenced, as “we swept away his connections in the base.”102

By July 7, Duch had woven the alleged plots and traitorous networks uncovered at S-21 into a more singular articulation, detailed in a 24-page document titled “The Last Joint Plan.”103 Handwritten, the text resembles a school lesson, with headers and sublists, most of which are no more than a sentence or two. The first section, “Introduction,” consists of two points, the first of which discusses the answers of Chhouk. A third point has been scribbled out.

“The Last Joint Plan” lays out a history of subversion, listing nine CIA networks operative before 1970 and involving cadre trained in Hanoi, intellectuals, the Khmer Serei, Soviet students, capitalists, and longtime revolutionaries like Ya.104 “The Last Joint Plan” describes how such counterrevolutionaries infiltrated the revolution and lists their alleged subversion, ranging from murder and abduction to sabotage, rumor, banditry, rebellion, and coup attempts. The document concludes with a section noting the WPK’s alleged founding
by Keo Meas and Ya and the involvement of a variety of “leaders of the treacherous party,” including Koy Thuon and Tum (Siet Chhe).

Like the interrogator notebooks, “The Last Joint Plan” provides Duch’s articulation of the alleged conspiracies in which S-21 prisoners were involved. The supposed networks, subversive activities, and histories of treason delineated in this document provide a baseline that Duch’s interrogators could use to guide their questioning and the process of calibration between interrogator and prisoner. As the process of Ya’s interrogation illustrates, the sought-after articulation demanded that prisoners adjust the details of their lives to fit the presupposed schema of treason, one thickly framed by the Party line.

Duch stated he never believed the entirety of a confession. Thus, even as a confession harmonized with the sought-after articulation of treason, it was never complete, since confessions redacted complex life histories and associations, producing “strings of traitors” that always included an excess: the never-ending lists of imagined counterrevolutionaries not yet arrested.

Duch’s use of the cover page of Long Muy’s confession also had this sense of an excess of meaning that has been redacted from the narrow legal articulation of obedience to authority that Duch asserted. Who was Long Muy? What had he done and what happened to him at S-21? While such questions can never be fully answered, we can catch hints in the trial record and related documentation. “The Last Joint Plan,” for example, lists “the Chinese residents” as one of nine counterrevolutionary groups established before 1970. This group, the document states, originated with expatriates from China who created the Kok Min Tang (Kuomintang; KMT) and subsequently “controlled, managed and established all Chinese associations, schools and hospitals” in Cambodia.¹⁰⁵ They later went underground and “conducted seemingly revolutionary activities” while maintaining links to Vietnam, the CIA, and China.¹⁰⁶ Nget You (aka Hong), the longtime revolutionary whose arrest greatly worried Duch, is listed as the “chief of the Chinese community,” which “The Last Joint Plan” states was “wiped out in Feb 78.”¹⁰⁷

Nget You is also mentioned in the Chan notebook, under the heading “Attack the KMT.” Duch’s S-21 lecture of March 22, 1978, given shortly after Nget You’s March 13 arrest, urges his interrogators to continue research to find the KMT: “Capture them at all costs. Do not keep them. We [must] attack the KMT until they dissolve. . . . We must dig it out trunk and roots.”¹⁰⁸

A March 17 entry, in turn, states that the regime faces three “conflicts,” including one with the KMT, which is controlled by “Imperialist America.” In this lecture, Duch notes that “we got one back in 76 or 77,” when a “despicable
Chuon” was interrogated. Noting the KMT’s links to Chiang Kai-shek, the lesson claims that “KMT = CIA,” while warning that the group has “plans to kill Brother with poison or with a bomb” and thus that “[we] must get them all.” Over two dozen Chinese cadre, including Nget You, were sent to S-21 in March 1978 alone.

The “Chuon” to whom Duch refers may have been Long Muy. Indeed, Duch’s first notation on the cover of Long Muy’s confession states that the prisoner’s “forces” were from Sector 22 and were connected to the KMT network in Peareang. Duch’s second remark links Long Muy to Siet Chhe (Tum), the former head of Sector 22 who is listed in “The Last Joint Plan” as a WPK leader. He was arrested on April 30, 1977, just a few months before Long Muy. Long Muy’s problematic ties to the Chinese network and the East Zone (which included Sector 22) are highlighted by Son Sen’s remark that “this man is a string of the Cambodian-Chinese” and Pol Pot’s instruction to contact “the East.”

If Duch never discussed the pages of Long Muy’s confession, the document was included in the court record, and other sections—including a typed version over 50 pages long—survive in archives. The version in the court record is written in clear, precise script and concludes with the date (August 29, 1977) and Long Muy’s signature and thumbprint. A brief notation at the end of the document lists the interrogator as Oeun.

According to court documents, Long Muy was arrested a little more than a month earlier, on July 16, 1977, at the Office of the General Staff. Like Ya, Pang, and others, Long Muy may have been tricked, perhaps sent to the Office of the General Staff on a pretext. On his arrest, he was likely handcuffed, and perhaps blindfolded, before being led to S-21’s reception area, where he would have been photographed and required to give background information before being taken to his cell. There he would have been shackled and would have lived in abject conditions.

One day Oeun may have arrived at Long Muy’s cell and escorted him to an interrogation room. He might have seen blood on the floor or instruments of torture lying about. He would have been chained to the floor before questioning began, perhaps with a command to confess his traitorous ties to the CIA. Like most prisoners, he probably replied by professing his innocence, at which point he may have been beaten or tortured.

While more than one Oeun worked in the interrogation unit, Long Muy may have been questioned by Vong Oeun, who himself was arrested and interrogated at S-21 in early 1978. It is impossible to assess the accuracy of S-21 confessions, which mix truth and fiction. In any event, Vong Oeun’s confes-
tion states that, among other offenses, he “tortured enemies, causing loud screams of pain [to] penetrate from one room to another, thus causing enemies to become nervous and feel uneasy,” and “committed villainous acts such as undressing women and piercing their vulvas with sticks.” This statement may reveal more about the moral violations at S-21 than any actual act done by Vong Oeun; nonetheless, Duch repeatedly stated that almost every prisoner was tortured. It is almost certain that Long Muy was as well.

As the interrogation proceeded, a process of calibration between Oeun and Long Muy would likely have taken place, as Long Muy reconstructed his past to accord with the structure and content his interrogators sought. Extrapolating from the questions in the “Statistics List,” Long Muy may have been asked to discuss the following topics.

1. The backgrounds of the KMT in Peareang
2. The leaders of the KMT
3. The leaders of Sector 22
4. The KMT’s contacts with Vietnam
5. The Office K-16 translator unit network
6. The origins and background of the KMT
7. Plans prior to the coup and up to 17 April 75
8. Plans after 17 April 1975 and up to 77
9. The leaders’ contacts with Vietnam and the CIA
10. Personal histories from beginning to end
11. The ways the KMT contacted other groups of conspirators

Long Muy’s confession follows the prototypical structure that emerged from such S-21 questioning, outlining how he secretly embedded himself in the revolutionary ranks, plotted and carried out subversive activities, and conspired with traitors. The information is pieced together, like so many S-21 documents, along the lines of a school plan, with sections, topic headings, descriptive material, and numeric lists.

The handwritten version of Long Muy’s confession begins by providing basic biographical information, such as his age (33), birth date (September 21, 1944), marital status (married), birthplace (Snay Pol village in Peareang district, Prey Veng province), and position (head of the K-16 office translator group), before turning to his “traitorous activities.” The document notes that Long Muy’s father, Liv Hann Pen, was born in China. He fled to Cambodia, for fear of the Chinese Communist Party, and soon thereafter supposedly joined the KMT. He would have nine children.
The second section of Long Muy’s confession discusses the organization and counterrevolutionary activities of the KMT, noting that his father came to work in the market at Snay Pol village, located in Peareang, the district with the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese in Cambodia. Long Muy lists the names of alleged leaders and members of the KMT and their anticommunist stance. At a 1957 meeting, Long Muy’s confession states, a meeting was held at which it was decided all the teachers in the Chinese schools should have a KMT stance and use books produced in Taiwan and Singapore. The KMT leader at the time, Li Chriel, supposedly told the assembled group: “We must fight communism without fail.”

Long Muy’s confession contains double-edged critiques of the Khmer Rouge, claiming that his father complained that communism was “unjust, lacking free rights . . . time to rest, and enough food to each so that everyone becomes so thin that just the bones are left.” Later, the confession says, Long Muy began to work as a teacher, before his cousin helped convince him to join the Khmer Rouge on May 1, 1969. That cousin, Yann Pheng, was also known as Ieng Si Pheng; this name is listed in point 3 of Duch’s annotation on the cover of Long Muy’s confession.

After joining the revolution, Long Muy’s confession states, he worked in Peareang, colluding with other KMT members to undermine the Khmer Rouge and connecting to Tum, the secretary of the region. In 1972, for example, Khmer Rouge soldiers needed provisions. Kuomintang leaders, the confession claims, instructed “their members [to] pack insufficient amounts of rice without dishes, containing nails, tree leaves, and sandy soil”116 and to seek to bid up the price of rice and refuse to sell it to Khmer Rouge soldiers, who might starve.

During the civil war, the confession continues, the KMT allied with the CIA, for whom Long Muy allegedly became an agent in 1973. The supposed objective was to “burrow deeply inside and thwart the revolution” by propagandizing against the Khmer Rouge and engaging in sabotage. His confession lists many more examples and asserts that the KMT network extended to many ministries.

In Office K-16, Long Muy’s confession states, he and his associates sought to subvert the revolution by “breaking up the solidarity between Kampuchea and China, humiliating the Communist Party by raising the issue of the maintenance and destruction of state property, and provoking trouble among office chiefs.”117 As the head of the translation group, Long Muy was allegedly able to further undermine DK-Chinese relations by failing to prepare his subordinates. The inability of trainees to grasp what was being said supposedly
created tension and angered Chinese guests. A September 1, 1977, version of Long Muy’s confession lists 85 members of his “group of traitors.”

At different points in Long Muy’s confession, someone has drawn a vertical line alongside a passage or underlined text, presumably to highlight content deemed significant, such as a subversive act or a mention of a coconspirator. A thick red mark highlights a passage discussing how the KMT-CIA group started using the name “Labor Party of Kampuchea,” an alternative moniker for the WPK. Another highlighted passage discusses Long Muy’s supposed recruitment of two cadre into the WPK. At another point, someone has drawn a vertical line next to a part of the confession where Long Muy discusses his wife, who was also arrested. He quotes her complaining that “there will be no one [left] to work if Angkar continues to arrest such a large number of people.”

Long Muy’s confession provides one articulation of his life, mixing fact and fiction and framing events to fit the S-21 confession schema. In an attempt to learn more about this former prisoner, DC-Cam interviewed some of his family and friends. Long Muy’s brother Tai confirmed the authenticity of the confession, noting that only Long Muy could have known the names of so many people from their village. Some details “were true and some were untrue” or distorted.

Long Muy’s father, for example, had immigrated to Cambodia to flee the Chinese communists and later sent Long Muy to school before he returned to teach in his home village from 1963 to 1966. His father began to worry that his son was becoming politicized after he fell under the influence of Ieng Si Pheng, a community leader who had gone to school in China, where he had learned in depth about Maoism.

While Long Muy had alluded to his revolutionary activity during the civil war, his family didn’t learn that he was a cadre until just after April 15, 1975. Two of his three brothers subsequently joined the movement. Long Muy went to see his family a few times, including a visit in 1976 when he informed them he might study in China. He gave his family two photographs of himself in front of Wat Phnom in Phnom Penh. In one, a blotched black-and-white photograph, he stands in dark revolutionary garb, head raised slightly and lips set in a defiant line, as he stares into the distance. He wears a traditional Cambodian scarf around his neck. Behind him two Buddhist spires rise into the air. He is alone.

Long Muy’s family never heard from him again. Ironically, they were able to fill in some of the gaps in their knowledge about his revolutionary life by reading his confession. Tai remembered his brother as someone who “hoped to develop . . . [and] was true to the country but was charged with betraying
“He noted: “the documents answer my questions. I know where he died. I feel released from [my] anger.”

Execution

Almost everyone who passed through the gates of S-21 perished. Given the political line that “the enemy had to be smashed,” Duch stated, the detainees were “treated as dead people” whose end had been briefly delayed. Usually prisoners were executed within a month or two after confession. S-21 records, for example, state that Long Muy was executed on October 23, 1977, almost a week after his wife had been killed and over two months after the latest date on materials in his confession portfolio. In some cases, such as that of Ke Kim Huot, execution was delayed for longer periods.

In keeping with his defense strategy, Duch claimed that Son Sen’s General Staff made the decision “to smash” in accordance with the March 30, 1976 Decision. The management of the execution process, he said, was overseen by the three-person S-21 committee, though he acknowledged being “overall in charge.” The decision-making meetings often just consisted of Duch and Hor, since Huy resided at S-24 and could not attend the daily meetings. Since there was a standing order to execute prisoners and Duch was in regular communication with Son Sen, Duch and Hor often decided when detainees, particularly those deemed less important, were killed.

The timing of executions was influenced by logistical concerns, which sometimes resulted in a spike in numbers. Prisoners were executed en masse, Duch noted, during the purges of Koy Thuon’s network (early 1977), of Division 920 (October 1977), of the West Zone (April 1978), and of the East Zone (late 1978). “We had to make sure,” Duch explained, “that the premises were not too overcrowded.”

Duch admitted he was able to save a handful of people from execution, though he claimed his power was limited. Thus S-21 could “keep someone for helping [with] the work at the office,” though S-21 then became accountable for that person, and Duch’s superiors might still order their execution. Perhaps fifteen prisoners, including artists and a dentist, were “used” in this manner. Glancing briefly toward the civil parties, Duch noted, “I see Mr. Chum Mey here in the Court [who was one of them].”

More controversial were documents suggesting that many more S-21 prisoners had been released, including S-21 release manifests that Duch claimed were a ruse developed by Nat to hide arbitrary executions. Duch’s argument was in keeping with his repeated claim that all of the S-21 prisoners, with
the exception of the prisoner-workers, were executed. For if Duch had had the authority to release prisoners, his claim to be a mere cog in the machine would have been undercut.

Duch also suggested he once staved off the death of several prisoners by preventing them from being poisoned. At the time, Nuon Chea gave Duch a dozen capsules to administer to detainees while instructing him not to tell anyone. Duch speculated that Nuon Chea may have done so to test the medicine after a confession alleged a plot to poison Pol Pot. Without telling anyone, Duch discarded the medicine and “cleaned inside the capsule with a cotton bud” before replacing the powder “with paracetamol,” to eliminate the possibility the capsules were poisonous. Later, he informed Nuon Chea that the medicine had had no effect. Duch noted that while all prisoners were destined for execution, he didn’t want them to die by his “own hands.” Distinguishing his administrative role from that of the executioners, he explained, “I tried not to be involved in the killing of those people directly.”

As this incident suggests, not every prisoner was executed in the same manner. Some were killed during medical experiments and procedures, which Duch claimed began under Nat. These practices included drug trials and medical operations on live prisoners to teach students about anatomy. At least 100 prisoners also died after S-21 medics drained the “blood in their body and they died.” Their blood was given to injured soldiers. Son Sen once complained that the transfused blood had caused rashes, so Duch said he ordered that the prisoners “be well selected before their blood would be drawn and injected into any combatant, to avoid any disease or infection.” The lethal blood drawings only ended after the head medics at the hospital and at S-21 were arrested.

If prisoners sometimes died from torture, injury, starvation, malnutrition, illness, or suicide, most were executed at the edge of a mass grave. S-21 used three main sites during the course of DK. Initially, many S-21 prisoners were executed on the grounds of Ta Khmau, the former psychiatric hospital that Nat’s unit began using as a prison at the end of the civil war. The use of this site ceased a few months after Duch assumed the helm of S-21.

Son Sen later informed Duch that the site was being transferred to the Ministry of Social Affairs. To maintain secrecy, Duch ordered Hor to exhume and cremate all of the corpses, literally reducing them to ash in an act that epitomized the sense of “smash” in Khmer: crushing something to bits. With the exception of some corpses already buried underneath two big canals, Duch told the court, “No bones were left.” Four vacationing Westerners
who had been sent to S-21 after sailing into Cambodian waters were similarly “smashed” when Pol Pot allegedly ordered that, after being killed, they be “burned to ash” in car tires so that “nothing would remain.”

After S-21 was relocated to Ponhea Yat High School, prisoners were executed near or on the grounds of the compound. While executions took place on the Ponhea Yat High School grounds throughout DK, Duch on his own initiative searched for another site, due to concerns about the potential for epidemics, given the rising number of detainees. He selected Choeung Ek, a Chinese graveyard located just outside Phnom Penh, only afterward getting Son Sen’s consent. The prosecution and civil party lawyers would later point to this act, like the selection of Ponhea Yat and Duch’s unilateral decision to build individual cells, as evidence of Duch’s initiative. To ensure secrecy, he had a fence built around Choeung Ek.

The majority of Tuol Sleng prisoners were killed at Choeung Ek, where a special unit carried out the executions. When asked if he had taught them the method of execution, Duch, invoking a Khmer adage, replied, “I [did] not need to teach crocodiles how to swim, because the crocodiles already [knew] how to swim.” During the civil war, he explained, Hor had led a company of special forces who had engaged in direct combat. Afterward, this unit had worked under Nat, where they learned methods of execution later used at S-21. Duch recruited some of these combatants as interrogators. Others were selected as executioners, given that they were accustomed to and skilled at killing. A small group of these men remained stationed at Choeung Ek, where they would dig and later fill the mass graves.

By the time they were taken for execution, prisoners like Long Muy would be emaciated and severely weakened. While again claiming that he was not certain exactly how things had proceeded and had learned the details after DK, Duch said that such prisoners were told that they were “moving to a new home,” a pretext meant to keep them calm even as their arms were tied behind their backs and they were blindfolded and instructed to remain silent. In the evening, the prisoners were driven to Choeung Ek in Chinese trucks, which were covered. Special forces personnel, including a driver and three guards, accompanied them.

On arriving at Choeung Ek, the prisoners were placed in a small hut. One by one, they were removed and their names recorded. By torchlight, they were then led, still bound and blindfolded, to the edge of the mass grave. The executioner would then strike them on the back of the head with an axe and slit
their throats. Always ready to cast aspersion on his predecessor, Duch claimed that Nat had been quite “proud of killing prisoners by slitting their throats.”

Afterward, the prisoner’s handcuffs would be removed. Duch acknowledged that, following Son Sen’s orders, he once reluctantly traveled to Choeung Ek to observe the process. “I went there for a very short time,” he told the court. “I did not dare look at the pits. I did not go and look in the house where the prisoners were kept.” He claimed that he got most of his details for his report to Son Sen from Hor. He had little contact with the executioners because “they were afraid of me.”

Duch said the families of S-21 detainees were sometimes also sent to the prison. The spouses were usually executed at Choeung Ek, sometimes after also being interrogated; their children, who were quickly separated from their parents after arriving at S-21, often met a different fate. While Duch rebutted a survivor’s claim that children had been dropped from the top floor of the prison (since this would have violated the rule of secrecy), he acknowledged that children were held by the legs as their heads “were banged against a tree.” This method was used at Choeung Ek, though Duch speculated that children might have been executed in the same manner as adults at S-21 to avoid making too much noise.

At the end of a long day of questioning about the executions, one in which Duch repeatedly emphasized his distance from the process, Judge Lavergne asked him if this detachment was due to avoidance or a lack of concern. Did the prisoners have “any kind of human reality for you? [Or was] your job just executing simple mathematical operations such as addition and subtraction, or was it simply to make sure to guarantee the quality of the confessions? Was that all your work was about?” Duch replied that he had “tried to avoid seeing the place that could affect my emotion. . . I was terrified, shocked and moved, but there was [a] . . . small feeling deep inside me, that kept me moving on.” Referring to the photo of himself leading an S-21 study session, he admitted that even if he now felt shame, “I was rather proud at that time for maintaining the class stand firmly.”