

# Cambodia's Curse: the Modern History of a Troubled Land, by Joel Brinkley, New York: Public Affairs Books, 2011. 386 pp.

Donald W. Beachler

*Professor, Politics Department, Ithaca College, USA*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

---

## Recommended Citation

Beachler, Donald W. (2014) "Cambodia's Curse: the Modern History of a Troubled Land, by Joel Brinkley, New York: Public Affairs Books, 2011. 386 pp.," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2: 81-82.

DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.8.2.8>

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol8/iss2/10>

***Cambodia's Curse: the Modern History of a Troubled Land,***  
**by Joel Brinkley, New York: Public Affairs Books, 2011. 386 pp.**

---

**Reviewed by Donald W. Beachler**

*Professor, Politics Department, Ithaca College*

Joel Brinkley, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, former *New York Times* reporter, and Stanford University professor, has written a book on Cambodia that is every bit as gloomy as its title and subtitle indicate. The small Asian country has been afflicted by war and genocide and their traumatic aftermaths. In recent decades Cambodia has been beset by frequent political strife that has turned violent at times. The nation is so riddled with corruption that Brinkley reports that \$18 billion dollars in foreign aid has done little to alleviate the suffering of impoverished Cambodians who constitute a large majority of the population. Cambodia has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world and it is a major center of sex tourism for pedophiles. While Brinkley provides interesting reporting and analysis on all these matters, this review will focus on concerns most likely to interest readers of *Genocide Studies and Prevention* - his extensive coverage of issues related to the Cambodian genocide.

The chapter of *Cambodia's Curse* that may be of greatest interest to readers of this journal is the 25-page narrative that Brinkley provides on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal officially known as the Extraordinary Chamber in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). The establishment of a tribunal was a long and convoluted process that involved a measure of international pressure and a considerable degree of resistance from the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen. The issues that complicated the process, which eventually resulted in the trial of some Khmer Rouge leaders, are explained well. Brinkley writes about the trial of Comrade Duch who was in charge of the notorious Tuol Sleng (S-21) detention center where perhaps 15,000 prisoners were murdered after undergoing horrific torture. As delineated in an article in this issue by this reviewer, the ECCC also indicted the four highest-ranking members of the Khmer Rouge regime. Brinkley does an excellent job of analyzing the political motives of the Hun Sen regime in delaying the trial and in limiting the number of defendants who could be tried. The reader comes away with the distinct impression that this is a court that most of the world simply did not care about, and of those who did care, most preferred that it not exist. In any event, Brinkley's chapter on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal is indispensable reading for anyone wishing to understand the contentious politics of the genocide trials.

Brinkley informs the reader about a topic that has received little attention in the popular press when he discusses the lasting psychiatric impact of the Khmer Rouge years on large segments of the Cambodian population. Brinkley references academic research that claims that millions of survivors suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to a study cited by psychiatrist Muny Sothara, a survey in Kampong Chan province indicated that 47 percent of the residents suffered from PTSD or other psychotic disorders. Muny Sothara and California psychologist Nigel Field both claim that parents often pass PTSD to their children.

Brinkley cites the work of professional researchers on topics such as PTSD, noting that quotes without reference refer to personal interviews he conducted. Still, when Brinkley cites someone discussing academic research on important matters, it would be helpful to have some reference to the relevant materials. Furthermore, while this is a work of journalism rather than an academic treatise, it would be useful to have a citation that would allow the reader to follow up on assertions made by various scholars. Indeed, the entire book would do with more bibliographic material. The bibliography at the back of the book consists of a list of 14 books and contains no works by noted scholars of the Khmer Rouge such as Ben Kiernan or Steve Heder. David Chandler's important book on S-21 and his biography of Pol Pot are also not included in the bibliography. Readers coming to some of these topics for the first time would especially benefit from a more robust list of sources.

Other parts of the book that concern the rise, reign and fall of the Khmer Rouge will be familiar to those who have some knowledge of this horrific era in Cambodian history. The skepticism about claims of Khmer Rouge atrocities (during the years the Cambodian Communists were in power) held by many critics of U.S. military involvement in Indo-China is discussed as is the support offered by the U.S. government for the

Khmer Rouge regime after it had been driven from power by Vietnam in 1979. For American policy makers, Cold War strategic calculations clearly trumped any concern for human rights. These issues will be interesting to the general reader while those versed in the politics of this era will find little that is new.

Brinkley recounts the role of Norodom Sihanouk and his successor, the American ally, Lon Nol, in helping to create conditions that facilitated the ultimate triumph of the Khmer Rouge. Brinkley departs from those who are inclined to absolve Sihanouk from responsibility for the horrors that befell Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. He rejects the views of William Shawcross on the impact of American bombing of Cambodia, expressed in the well-known book, *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Destruction of Cambodia*. While not absolving Lon Nol and the U.S. of all blame for the rise of the Khmer Rouge, Brinkley holds Sihanouk more responsible by arguing that, when the deposed prince allied with the Cambodian Communists and advocated that his former subjects support them, he set Cambodia on the road to genocide.

It is when he deals with controversial issues, such as the impact of American bombing, that Brinkley's lack of sourcing detracts from the power of his book. He claims that "more recent scholarship has suggested that the American bombing for all its wanton, deadly results, so disrupted the nation that it delayed the Khmer Rouge's ultimate victory until after the B-52 campaign had ended in August, 1973." (p. 32). Brinkley is essentially claiming that scholarship indicates that it was the halt in the U.S. bombing, a goal of American leftists and liberals (a group to which Brinkley claims to be a quondam member) that permitted the final victory of Pol Pot and his murderous comrades. Yet, the curious reader in search of this scholarship will receive no help at all from Brinkley - for there are no references to support his claims about revisionist scholarship on the impact of American bombing. Surely, when dealing with such a controversial matter, mere assertion does not suffice as proof.

Despite this reviewer's reservations about the lack of adequate sourcing of some claims offered by Brinkley, this book is a valuable read for those interested in modern Cambodia. The insightful presentation of the political and social context of present legal and political efforts to deal with the ongoing impact of the killings of the 1970s make this book a valuable resource for those concerned about the fates of the perpetrators and victims of the Cambodian genocide.