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Anatomy of an Interrogation: The Torture of Comrade Ya at S-21

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Veteran revolutionary: Early in his career Ya (left, back) poses with Khmer Rouge leaders Pol Pot (far right) and Son Sen (with glasses). Rmah Hyuk, an ethnic Jarai cadre from Ratanakiri, sits in front of Ya

In early 1976, splits and mistrust began to increasingly emerge within the leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), particularly over accusations that “internal enemies” in the Party were plotting with the Vietnamese to sabotage the Khmer Rouge revolution, assassinate key leaders, and assimilate Democratic Kampuchea into a Vietnamese-controlled Indochina Federation.

“The charge that I systematically betrayed the Party makes my entire life’s work meaningless. I feel deep hurt and regret because during the war, I survived the enemy shooting, while now after liberation, in the time of construction and defense of the country, with the Party holding authority, I am charged with opposing the Party, which is clearly a deadly accusation. My death will thus have no meaning. All I can do is call on the Party to kindly seek justice for me.”

—S-21 victim Ney Saran *alias* Ya, in his first confession, September 24, 1977

In September 1976 Northeast Zone Secretary Ney Saran—known by the revolutionary name Ya—was arrested for allegedly plotting a coup d’état together with other “CIA agents” and “Vietnamese sympathizers.” He was sent to S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, where he was interrogated and tortured under the direct supervision of prison chief Kang Kech Ieuv *alias* Duch.

Ya was the first leading cadre in the Northeast Zone, and one of the first Central Committee members, to be arrested by the Khmer Rouge as they launched internal purges of accused saboteurs and traitors. A Communist Party veteran, Ya had played a pivotal role in building a popular base of support for the Khmer Rouge among indigenous tribal minorities in Cambodia's northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri, Mondolkiri, Kratie, and Stung Treng during the 1960s.

At that time the Party Center directly controlled the Northeast Zone, where its dense forests sheltered the headquarters and covert camps of the top leadership. During their time in the *maquis*, Ya and other CPK leaders, including Pol Pot, Son Sen, and Ieng Sary conducted operations from hidden bases in the Dragon's Tail area of Ratanakiri. As chief of military logistics for the Khmer Rouge, Ya oversaw the transport of weapons, ammunition, and supplies from Vietnam and Laos to Cambodia via the Sekong River in Stung Treng and other parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In 1971 Ya became secretary of the Northeast Zone, replacing former zone secretaries Son Sen and Ieng Sary.

The purge of Ya was connected in part to growing tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam over their 1200 kilometer border, and failed border talks in the first part of 1976—led by Ya—with Vietnamese delegations in Ratanakiri and in Phnom Penh.

In February 1976 the party Center had dispatched Ya to Ratanakiri to lead negotiations with a Vietnamese delegation to iron out border disputes. The border was a major preoccupation of the CPK leadership, with Pol Pot stating in a March 1976 standing committee meeting: "Negotiations with Vietnam to resolve the border problem is our current revolutionary task."

In May 1976 Ya went to Phnom Penh to participate in talks with a Vietnamese delegation about negotiating a new border treaty. The negotiations, which reportedly became tense at times, came to an impasse over whether to accept French-drawn maps and boundaries.

At Pol Pot's urging, the talks were broken off by the Cambodian side, although there are indications that Ya was somewhat reluctant to do so. Ya was later criticized for being too "soft" on the Vietnamese, allegedly agreeing to cede territory to them and advising that Division troops pull back from the border. These border talks were the last face-to-face negotiations between the Democratic Kampuchea regime and Vietnam before full-scale war broke out between the two countries.

Comrade Ya

As Northeast Zone chief, Ya was well-liked and had a reputation for fairness. Highlanders who came in contact with him described him as a tall, fair-complexioned man who was upright, honest, and kind. He had a good rapport with the highlanders; dressing simply, speaking some of the tribal languages, and eating with the people. "The ethnic minorities liked him very much," Ya's Khmer bodyguard said. "He taught them how to plant paddy rice and not cut trees for *chamkar* (swidden plots). Places with no place to make ricefield he let them still cut *chamkar*. He didn't forbid them from practicing their religion—it was up to them. But when they got sick there were doctors, so they didn't have to do their spiritual ceremonies."

Thy, a Lao-Khmer soldier who worked with Ya said, "Ya paid attention to the ethnic minorities. He trusted the minorities and had more confidence in them. He said that he could depend on the ethnic minorities like his own back."

The soldier attended study sessions led by Ya at Office N-7 in Srekor, Stung Treng. "Ya taught us about political work and how to lead the people," he said. "He explained how we could help the people in the cooperatives, so they wouldn't fight each other but increase the economy."

Ya was known to bend rules when subordinates committed small mistakes, which elsewhere might well have resulted in imprisonment or execution. His approach was to use criticism or re-education as a disciplinary measure, rather than execution.

A Kreung man who worked as a courier (*niresa*) for Ya recounted how Ya didn't punish him when several trucks he was sending to the Northeast fell into a river. "If someone else had been my boss I would have been killed."

Others had a less rosy picture of Ya. An ethnic Lao who worked as administrator at Office N-7 said of Ya, whom he met in 1973 and 1974: "He was the leader. People died. Of course he knew what was going on."

Under Ya's tenure a prison system was set up in the Northeast Zone, with security chiefs dispatched to imprison and execute those who were connected with the former regimes or who rebelled against the current one. But Ya objected on at least two occasions to the Khmer Rouge's draconian policies.

In meetings of the Central Committee of the CPK, Ya voiced disagreement with the rapid pace of land collectivization, the evacuation of the towns, and the policy of execution as opposed to re-education. In late 1974 Ya sidestepped other Khmer Rouge leaders when he sent a warning to a subdistrict chief who was about to be swept up in a purge in Ratanakiri under then-Zone Secretary Um Neng (*alias* Vong). Ya also differed with the party's views on classes as far back as 1965, when he argued that Cambodian society was not divided into social strata.

Arrest

On September 20, 1976, Pol Pot stepped down as prime minister, ostensibly for health reasons, but also perhaps to throw off guard internal enemies he thought were trying to assassinate him. That same day, Ya—who had been called down from Kratie to Phnom Penh—was arrested and sent to S-21.

Ya's long-term Khmer bodyguard, who accompanied him to Phnom Penh, said: "I don't know why they called him. He told me that if within seven days his study wasn't over, that I should return to Kratie. He didn't say anything more than that to me—maybe he didn't realize what was happening."

After the bodyguard returned to Kratie, he received a telegram from Ya. "He said he could not come back to Kratie because he was moving to work as ambassador to Hungary. I stayed in the *munti* [office] with Ya's family. Then a boat came and took his wife and children away. I wanted to go with them, but the boat driver wouldn't let me. Two months later I heard the news that Ya had died."

Another of Ya's former *niresa*, a Kreung, was also stationed in Phnom Penh in September 1976. He had been assigned to Phnom Penh by Ya to work as chief of the Northeast Zone Commerce Department and was staying with other highlanders at Wat Ounalom: "When they called Ya to Phnom Penh, he stayed the first day at my place in Phnom Penh. The next day he went to the police, staying at the palace the next two days. I talked with him on the phone that day and the next day as well. On the third day there was no answer from Ya but from Vong [Ya's deputy], who said Ya had work to do in a far place, a new place."

Ya's First Confession: Denial

Duch, the commandant of S-21 prison, directly supervised the interrogation and torture of Ya in S-21, reporting each step of the way to *Angkar*. What he did not report, however, were Ya's written statements asserting that his confessions had been extracted after being severely tortured. Those statements remain in Ya's S-21 file to this day. Ya's confession, which he was forced to re-write several times after being tortured, together with written responses from Duch and S-21 chief interrogator Pon, comprise more than 100 pages.

On the evening of September 22, 1976, the *Santebal* (the Khmer Rouge's internal security apparatus) met in Phnom Penh and discussed alleged efforts by CPK insiders to destroy the Party from within, by launching a new party that was supposedly led by Ya, Koy Thuon, Chhouk and Keo Meas.

The following night, S-21 interrogator Pon told Ya about the meeting, and said that the Party had instructed the *Santebal* to temporarily detain Ya. Pon's note about this first night of interrogation

dryly lists the topics about which he had been instructed to extract information from Ya:

“1. Report in writing about activities of betrayal to the Party, [such as] organizing a new party to serve Vietnam... 2. [Describe] the contents of letters written to Chhouk, and how these letters were sent.”

Ya’s response that night, according to Pon’s note, was: “If [you] force me to answer, force me with torture, I will unwillingly have to make up random answers.”

The next day, September 24, Pon conveyed a message from the Party in response to Ya. In so doing, Pon rephrased Ya’s statement from the night before, changing it to: “If [you] force me to answer, I will answer carelessly and randomly.” Pon then added, “The Party allows you to answer the questions haphazardly if you so choose, as long as you hold your conscience responsible.”

The same day, Ya responded to the CPK permanent committee in a five-page letter. He said that he did not mean to speak so “randomly” and “irresponsibly” and that what he actually meant to say was: “I do not betray the Party; I would like to frankly answer about the truth to the Party. But if you comrades want me to say [things] that are different from the truth that I know, if you comrades torture me, I will answer in line with what you comrades tell me [to say]. But speaking like this is meaningless and useless.”

In his letter, Ya listed charges in addition to those noted by Pon the previous night. He expressed his shock because “those charges meant that my revolutionary life ended right there, without meaning.” He rejected the charges and stated that he had always been true to the Party. It hurt him beyond belief, he said, to be accused of betrayal. He had never formed an alliance with the Vietnamese, he stated, but only contacted them with the Party’s approval and under its guidelines, for example receiving shipments from the Vietnamese in 1972 or conducting the border talks with them in March 1976.

Duch’s Letter to Ya

On September 24, Duch wrote a four-page letter to Ya in response. Unctuously titled “To Older Brother, with Anticipation,” Duch alternated between praise and pressure in an effort to persuade Ya to confess. Duch acknowledged that Ya had done much for the revolution and told him that as one of its most senior cadres, Ya was someone in whom *Angkar* had placed the greatest confidence. The information Ya would provide was unimportant; the point was that after confessing to his misdeeds, the high-level comrade would be able to continue with the revolution, abandoning materialism and the “traitorous individuals” who had exerted influence over him. The Party did not need to make more enemies and would forgive those who respected truthfulness, Duch cajoled.

In a change of tone Duch then threatened: “*Angkar* has clear views about those who are stubborn. The Party needs to increase its friends, and reduce its enemies.” Independence, mastery and self-reliance were core Party principles to be defended, he stated. As the “highest tower of proletarian truthfulness,” the Party considered Vietnam and Russia as “bones stuck in the throat, which needed to be removed.”

Duch continued the menacing tone. He told Ya that the fate of his case would depend on two scenarios: either he could report everything to *Angkar*, including the entire internal structure of Ya’s counter-revolutionary party, or he could report nothing. The trap—and Ya’s dilemma—was that he would have to accept the accusations and underlying assumption that he had been part of a counter-revolutionary party.

Duch pressed on, rejecting Ya’s profession of innocence and claiming to have proof to the contrary: “Our Party makes absolutely no mistakes,” he said. “*Angkar* knows who is good and who is bad.” Duch added that it was regretful that Ya had denied his relations with the Vietnamese, as well as with traitors such as Chhouk and Keo Meas. He closed the letter by telling Ya that he must confess as soon as possible; he was not allowed to lie or blame other people as he had already done.

“Hot Measures”

On September 25, 1976, Duch authorized Pon to proceed with torture. Pon started the morning's session by interrogating Ya on points extracted from other people's confessions while beating him with whips of thin rattan. In the afternoon he intensified the thrashing, lashing him thirty times with tripled electric wire. Ya finally gave a verbal confession, according to a one-page memo from Pon to Duch written that day.

The next morning (September 26), Duch entered Ya's cell and consoled him. He then instructed Pon and the other interrogators to chat with Ya about the medicines he used, to ask whether his wife knew where he was being sent when he was taken away, and to inform him that his family had now been arrested.

Later that day Pon reported in writing to Duch that with Duch's approval that afternoon to use both “hot measures” and “cold measures” against Ya, he had successfully forced Ya to confess. In the early evening Pon had gone into Ya's cell to threaten him. He asked Ya whether he had known he was going to be detained and inevitably tortured if he did not confess. He told Ya to be ready to be tortured at 8 or 9 p.m. Around 10 p.m., when Pon was about to carry out torture with his bare hands, Ya agreed to confess and asked Pon what he was to report.

Pon responded, “Please write up a systematic account of your traitorous activities from beginning to end.”

Second Confession: Admits to Vietnamese Contacts

The next day, September 27, Ya outlined in eight pages how he had allegedly been co-opted by the Vietnamese. The confession described how the Vietnamese influenced the activities of the *Pracheachun* Group, which primarily consisted of old-hand resistance fighters from the *Issarak* period, and at the Chamroen Vichea School in Phnom Penh, where many Cambodian communists taught in the late 1950s and 60s. When Keo Meas fled to the *maquis*, Ya replaced him at the *Pracheachun* Group, where he and Chhouk

allegedly continued to advance Keo Meas' pro-Vietnamese agenda: “I see [now] that Chhouk and I had been directly influenced by Keo Meas. At that time, I respected Keo Meas. I did what Keo Meas told me to: contact the Vietnamese, translate Vietnamese documents; that is, all of us were partial to the Vietnamese.”

After Ya became secretary of the Northeast Zone in 1971, Ya wrote, he received letters from Vietnamese officials requesting permission to transport goods and war materiel by way of the Mekong, Se Kong, and Se San rivers and Highway 19. While Ya said that he did not meet the Vietnamese at that time, he stated that he had not



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Ya (center) and Son Sen (far right) escort a Vietnamese delegation arriving at Pochentong Airport in Phnom Penh, in May 1976.

done enough to remove the Vietnamese who were

stationed in Stung Treng and who shot people's pigs and cows. He permitted the immense transport of commodities and ammunition from Cambodia to Vietnam, but the Vietnamese did not transport international assistance to Cambodia, he wrote.

Ya closed his second confession by stating: “I live and conduct activities of the struggle in accordance with the line and the organization of only one CPK. I do not have a second, or a third traitorous party.” He ended the letter with a line of high respect to Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, and So Phim from “a real communist soldier, ready to die.”

Third Confession: Alleged Accomplices

On September 28, 1976, Ya wrote three pages describing his allegedly subversive relations with Chhouk, secretary of Region 24 in the East Zone, starting with their first meeting at the Party congress in July 1971.

On September 29, after reading what Ya had written about Chhouk, Duch ordered Pon to get more details on Ya's conversations with Chhouk. In response to written questions from Pon, Ya added several small points, for example that during their first meeting in July 1971, he and Chhouk talked about building the counterrevolutionary force. Ya was then asked to sign his name on Pon's question sheet to certify his answers: "I read and answered [the questions] this morning. There was no force [on me] as I was writing." Duch signed his name on this third confession set, with a note: "Already sent three copies to *Angkar*, both originals and carbon copies."

Fourth Confession: Internal and External Co-Conspirators

Following another order from Duch, Pon wrote up a new list of questions, asking Ya to elaborate on his co-conspirators inside the country other than Chhouk, as well as foreign allies outside the country. Ya first wrote about East Zone Secretary So Phim, stating that in early 1976 Phim told him that the Vietnamese had provided weapons for a traitorous force created by Chhouk, Chakrei and Phim.

That night Ya wrote on Pon's cover sheet of questions that he had read and answered Pon's questions without being forced. He added, "But please note that my answers from September 28, 1976 on, were after I had already been severely tortured." The next morning, September 30, using a pen with red ink, Duch crossed out the reference to torture and wrote in the margin of Ya's note: "Do not write these words that I have crossed out in red. You don't have the right to report on such issues to *Angkar*. I have the right. I already reported. I reported clearly. Do not play tricks and deny this." Duch marked up the rest of Ya's eight-page confession, crossing out large sections, and writing

neat but emphatic comments in the margins. Pon quickly rewrote a new cover sheet to the confession, this time without Ya's comment about having been tortured and Duch's reprimand in red. Pon pre-dated the cover sheet to September 29, 1976 and had Ya sign only his name to affirm its authenticity.

September 30: Reasserts Innocence

On September 30, 1976, Ya withdrew statements in earlier confessions in which he had "admitted" that he was guilty of traitorous links with the Vietnamese. In this statement, he re-asserted his innocence in regard to all contacts he had with the Vietnamese, explaining these contacts were made only with approval from *Angkar*. This clearly angered the *Santebal*. Duch rejected Ya's explanation and told Pon that he would not report Ya's denials to *Angkar*. Since "cold measures" were not working on Ya, Duch again authorized Pon to use "hot measures" against him.

The next day, October 1, Duch re-affirmed that Pon could use "the hot method for prolonged periods" and even beat Ya to death: "I already reported to *Angkar* at ten minutes before 9:00 this morning about the contemptible Ya with the documents you provided and with your report about his feelings. *Angkar* decided that if this contemptible Ya still hides his traitorous network and activities, *Angkar* will kill him. Do not allow him to play games with us anymore. He says one word and then denies an entire book. *Angkar* considers this as looking down on the Party, not only on our state's *Santebal* committee. Thus, with this contemptible Ya, you can use hot and severe measures for prolonged periods. Even if you slip and kill him, you will not be guilty of violating *Angkar*'s discipline."

Pon gave Ya a copy of Duch's letter, and noted in the margin: "Brother Ya, please read this and think it over carefully." At the same time Pon asked for more details of the relations between Ya and Chhouk, such as their first meeting and his reasons for betrayal. Pon also asked Ya to clarify who was leading who in the traitorous network.

Fifth Confession: Admits to “Traitorous Networks”

On October 1 Ya came up with more pages, although they did not contain much substantive information. After submitting this confession, he signed Pon’s letter again and wrote: “I read and answered. When I wrote, there was no force.” Ya repeated events he had already described, but added to each event a likely made-up side story to make it look traitorous, in compliance with his torturer’s instructions.

For example, Ya wrote that in 1964 two Vietnamese agents persuaded him to oppose and undermine the CPK, by allowing the liberation of Vietnam to happen before Cambodia. Ya claimed that in 1970 Vietnamese stationed along O Tang stream in Ratanakiri convinced him to support the idea of an Indochinese Federation. In 1973 when he received Prince Sihanouk in Siem Pang, Ya claimed to have made time to see a Vietnamese agent who convinced him that the Vietnamese liberation should happen first. In the border negotiation of March 1976, Ya said that he secretly met a Vietnamese official who offered to support Ya on his own. Duch sent this confession to *Angkar* the following day.

No Judge, No Trial

While it has never been proven that Ya and others were plotting a coup d’état—the charge may have been fabricated as a way to eliminate popular leaders who had reputations for being fairly lenient—at least one of Ya’s *niresa*, a Khmer from Takeo, believed the accusations. His explanation of why Ya was executed is a classic example of adopting the torturers’ mentality—believing someone is guilty because they have been arrested, or forced to confess: “Ya was an ordinary guy. I worked with him for many years; many people liked him. He was trained by the United States and served the CIA—North Vietnamese officials knew about that and complained to Pol Pot who arrested him. When Hu Nim and Hou Yuon were arrested he was not yet arrested but they worked with him.

“Maybe Ya was [part of a] U.S. network—he used to joke with me about the US. I knew for sure

when Pol Pot arrested him and he made a confession. I didn’t read his confession but when the Khmer Rouge caught Ya, Khieu Samphan read it in Olympic Stadium for Khmer Rouge cadre to listen to. Khieu Samphan read it from 7 a.m. until 11 a.m. and said he still wasn’t finished. He said we could make our own conclusion. We don’t know if Ya was forced to answer but at the time I believed it. For three days Khieu Samphan read confessions of all the people who’d betrayed Pol Pot. “Ya’s confession was very important—the others were not so important and were shorter.

“Ya had a plot to overthrow Pol Pot. He’d organized special soldiers to overthrow Pol Pot. They were caught by Khmer Rouge soldiers, who questioned and tortured them. After they caught Ya and tortured and interrogated him, they got his confession.

In a 1997 interview shortly before he died, Pol Pot told reporter Nate Thayer that certain people had infiltrated the ranks of the Khmer Rouge leadership with the aim of overthrowing Pol Pot: “These men joined and led the Democratic Kampuchea Party but they weren’t real members....[I]n 1976 and 1977 this group hatched a plot to carry out a coup and topple me, the party leader, and kill me. This group was involved with the Vietnamese. I don’t remember everything, but I have documents to prove the plot.” He paused to remember some of the names of these alleged traitors and added: “There was... someone called Ya. Ya had been a Vietnamese agent since 1946.”

Ya’s Kreung *niresa* believes that Ya was set up by his deputy, Vong. “They didn’t get along. Vong reported that Ya had relationships with Vietnam because at that time Ya was on the border, solving the problem on the Vietnam border. Vong went to Phnom Penh one day before Ya for a meeting at the palace. The next day Ya arrived.”

Ya’s Khmer bodyguard said he did not know why Ya was arrested: “They said he had joined the CIA, the KGB. I don’t know about that, if he was or not. I never heard him say anything [indicating that he was an agent].”

Ya was executed a week after his last written confession. Of the arrests of Ya and Keo Meas, David Chandler has written that it is unlikely that the two Party veterans were plotting against Pol Pot: “It is more likely that Pol Pot moved against the two defenseless senior Party figures to terrorize the clients they had built up over the years. ... In [S-21 Chief] Duch’s mind—and probably in Pol Pot’s—Keo Meas and Ney Saran fitted into a pattern of conspiracy stretching back to the 1950s.”

Ya’s execution was followed by the arrests of other key figures in the Northeast Zone. Most of those named in Ya’s confession followed him to S-21, where they eventually met the same end.