

How Kaing Guek Eav became "Duch"

Written by

Wednesday, 08 April 2009 03:00

When Kaing Guek Eav was young, he admired a character in one of his schoolbooks. The fictional boy, named "Duch," always stood straight and spoke clearly, the former torture chief explained to judges at the Khmer Rouge tribunal Monday.

"I wanted to be a well-disciplined boy," he said, "who respected the teachers and did good deeds."

When Kaing Guek Eav joined the Khmer Rouge revolution and had to choose a *nom de guerre*, he was immediately drawn to the name that had inspired him as a child.

He became "Comrade Duch."

And somewhere along the way -- though it's hard to comprehend exactly how -- that diligent student and well-behaved boy became a meticulous torturer and executioner.

Duch's trial resumed Monday, and he has spent the better part of two days carefully and thoroughly answering questions about his early life and first detention center, M-13. The portrait that has emerged so far is at once contradictory and disturbing.

Like his fictional namesake, Duch has a natural desire to serve authority figures, and a great respect for accuracy. While answering judges' questions, he listened to the semi-simultaneous French translation via headset, correcting any errors that arose. He has a tendency to nod to himself after making a statement, as if to say, "yes, that's correct."

And considering his age and the amount of time that has elapsed since the Khmer Rouge period, Duch's memory is phenomenal. His ability to recall exact dates and the intricate hierarchy of a long-dead regime can be startling at times.

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When asked why he was chosen to lead M-13, Duch responded: "In my entire life, if I do something, I'll do it properly."

How this dedication was eventually channeled into such abhorrent activities is hard to understand.

"I sacrificed everything for the revolution," Duch said Monday of the decision to join the Khmer Rouge. He gave away all his savings and spent time working as a laborer, to "see how difficult it was." Between 1968 and 1970 he was imprisoned by Sihanouk's police, and was only freed after Lon Nol came to power.

Duch maintained that he always wanted to serve the regime as a teacher and that, early on, "I did not even think about going and doing what I did."

But in 1971, he was chosen to head M-13. Although he claims he did not like interrogating and "smashing" alleged enemies -- he said he used to recite a French poem to comfort himself -- Duch insists that he had no choice.

He repeatedly told judges that such activities were "inevitable," and that he feared challenging authority figures would cost him his life.

Yet, even given his meticulous nature, how could Duch have gone so far in the name of loyalty to the party? Especially when he admits that many of the [interrogations and confessions were a sham](#) ?

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I think everyone who has observed him these last couple days is wondering this. And while we may never be able to truly understand his psyche, certain fascinating personality traits have begun to emerge.

Historian Alex Hinton [told the Post yesterday](#) that, during questioning of Duch, a "motif of schoolteacher" came to the fore.

"The way he either wants people to obey him, or him to obey them," Hinton said. "A teacher is a figure of authority. When they say something, people listen. In a way, today, he was speaking like a history teacher. It puts him in a position of authority, being able to tell the story."

Hinton's statement made a lot of sense to me. As Duch answered the judges' questions, I could imagine him in his youth as something of a "teacher's pet."

This would fit with the [psychological assessment of Duch](#) included in the Co-Investigating Judges' indictment.

The defendant "is meticulous, conscientious, control-oriented, attentive to detail and seeks recognition from his superiors," according to court-appointed psychiatrists. He is also "influenceable and impressionable" and shows "a strong presence of obsessive traits."

In order to better understand Duch's personality, I have started reading [The Gate by Francois Bizot](#), who was imprisoned at M-13 and developed "a fondness and respect for his tormentor," John Le Carre writes in the book's Foreward.

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I also plan to re-examine [Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*](#), reading for any similarities between Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann and Duch. Arendt first coined the term "banality of evil," describing Eichmann as a relatively unremarkable man who claimed he was "just following orders" in enacting his murderous duties. It seems that Duch may be more innately intelligent than Eichmann (or at least Eichmann as portrayed by Arendt), but I believe some parallels may still be drawn between the two men.

If I come across any passages with relevance to Duch's character, I will be sure to note them on the blog.