



## Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare (John MacRae Books)

By Philip Short

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**Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare (John MacRae Books)** By Philip Short

A gripping and definitive portrait of the man who headed one of the most enigmatic and terrifying regimes of modern times

In the three and a half years of Pol Pot's rule, more than a million Cambodians, a fifth of the country's population, were executed or died from hunger. An idealistic and reclusive figure, Pol Pot sought to instill in his people values of moral purity and self-abnegation through a revolution of radical egalitarianism. In the process his country descended into madness, becoming a concentration camp of the mind, a slave state in which obedience was enforced on the killing fields.

How did a utopian dream of shared prosperity mutate into one of the worst nightmares humanity has ever known? To understand this almost inconceivable mystery, Philip Short explores Pol Pot's life from his early years to his death. Short spent four years traveling throughout Cambodia interviewing the surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge movement, many of whom have never spoken before, including Pol Pot's brother-in-law and the former Khmer Rouge head of state. He also sifted through the previously closed archives of China, Russia, Vietnam, and Cambodia itself to trace the fate of one man and the nation that he led into ruin.

This powerful biography reveals that Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were not a one-off aberration but instead grew out of a darkness of the soul common to all peoples. Cambodian history and culture combined with intervention from the United States and other nations to set the stage for a disaster whose horrors echo loudly in the troubling events of our world today.

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## **Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare (John MacRae Books) By Philip Short Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #226103 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Henry Holt and Co.
- Published on: 2005-02-08
- Released on: 2005-01-13
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 10.12" h x 1.84" w x 6.06" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 560 pages

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Towards the beginning of this massive biography, Short cautions readers against dismissing the terror of Pol Pot's regime as the incomprehensible work of evil men. Instead, Short argues, the explanations for the Khmer Rouge regime, which resulted in the death of over one-fifth of Cambodia's population, or 1.5 million people, are "rooted in history." The book begins its search for these explanations in the early life of Saloth Sâr, a "mediocre student" whose political disengagement offered no hint of the ideological nightmare he would fashion under the name Pol Pot. As a student in Paris, Sâr's political philosophy slowly began to take shape, and the book deftly follows his political evolution abroad as a part of the "Cercle Marxiste" against the backdrop of the tumultuous history of Cambodia after the war. Short, a former BBC correspondent who has also written an acclaimed biography of Mao Zedong, moves between Sâr's personal story and the broader history with ease. By the time these two narratives converge in the lucid and harrowing description of the Khmer Rouge victory and subsequent evacuation of Phnom Penh city, the book has already laid the groundwork for the horrors that would follow. Occasionally, Short's attempts to understand Pol's psychology lapse into vast over-generalization, as when he attributes Pol's erratic behavior to "the perpetual Khmer tendency to take things to extremes." More often, though, Short expertly identifies the historical and ideological causes that generated the Khmer Rouge impulse to terror and that eventually led to the regime's collapse. Though daunting in length, Short's book offers a copiously well-researched and surprisingly accessible portrait of Pol that will prove indispensable to anyone interested in the subject.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Pol Pot once remarked that the Cambodian authorities in the nineteen-fifties "knew who I was; but they did not know what I was." Short, in his attempt to explain how a young man known for his bland amiability came to preside over the deaths of a million and a half people, follows the dictator from a childhood spent partly among palace concubines through his student days in Paris (where he read Stalin because Marx was over his head) to his imposition of a "slave state." Short does a good job on the political context of Pol Pot's rise, on his Buddhist influences, and on his gift for subterfuge. He remained almost invisible until the moment he took power. Later, busy killing his aides, he hid a Vietnamese invasion from his Army—then lived on for two decades, drinking whiskey and reading *Paris-Match* at his jungle base, before dying peacefully in his own bed.

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From [Booklist](#)

*\*Starred Review\** As the evil genius who presided over the political maelstrom that, from 1975 through 1979, killed 1.5 million of Cambodia's 7 million inhabitants, Pol Pot well deserves his place--alongside Hitler and Stalin-- in the bloody modern pantheon of ideological monsters. With this harrowingly detailed biography, readers come to understand how a once-obscure schoolteacher earned that spot in infamy. Surprisingly, the man who oversaw the torture and bloodletting on his country's notorious Killing Fields enters Short's narrative quite innocently--just one more Khmer village boy, playing with siblings and friends. But during the course of his education, first in Phnom Penh and then in Paris, Pot first changes his name (originally Saloth Sar) and then resolves to radically change his native land by pouring the grim amorality of Khmer mythology into the grimmer doctrines of radical egalitarianism. Thus, the boy once entranced by tales of menacing wizards and sorcerers becomes the man enamored of the edicts of Robespierre and Stalin. The chronicle becomes truly horrifying when Cambodia--long a pawn of Vietnam and France, China and the

U.S.--falls under the sway of this metamorphosed fanatic. With the willing assistance of a black-clad, communist army, Pot turns the entire country into a huge slave camp--and cemetery. Deeply unsettling, Short's probing analysis reveals how the loftiest of political ideals can become the justification for the cruelest brutality. A chilling portrait. *Bryce Christensen*  
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## **Users Review**

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