

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution. by George C. Hildebrand and Gareth Porter

Review by: David P. Chandler

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Book Reviews

Nevertheless, Casiño has presented a first-rate anthropological study which should be studied with benefit by all interested in the literature of social change and of the fascinating peoples and cultures of the Philippines. The book is well-produced and well-illustrated (in color); it contains a necessary glossary, a useful working bibliography, and brief index.

Western Michigan University

CHARLES O. HOUSTON

CAMBODIA: STARVATION AND REVOLUTION. *By George C. Hildebrand and Gareth Porter. New York and London: Monthly Review Press. 1976. 124 pp. \$6.95/£3.50.*

THIS VALUABLE STUDY, written a year after the so-called liberation of Phnom Penh, suffers from being read in 1978, for some of the authors' hopes for the new regime, like my own in 1976, do not seem to have been fulfilled. Porter and Hildebrand contrast what happened in the countryside in 1975-1976 with what went on beforehand, in terms of co-operation, man-days, and productivity, but they tend to take Communist assertions of success on faith, and their analysis of pre-revolutionary rural conditions is sometimes patchy and doctrinaire. The reference on page 69, for example, to a "tradition of co-operative labor" in nineteenth-century Cambodia turns out to be some canal-digging sponsored by the *French*. The authors also minimize—as the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea do not—the pervasiveness of hierarchies, personal ties, and perceptions of "merit" in traditional Cambodia. In other words, they don't look for ways in which Cambodian society was different from society in China and Vietnam. These are small defects in a book written in hopefulness and anger so soon after the events which it describes, but they reduce its usefulness to historians of the future.

The book's major contribution, I think, lies in its first chapter, "The Politics of Starvation in Phnom Penh." Here the authors argue from a wide range of sources that humanitarianism was never part of the U.S. "game plan" for Cambodia, and was ideologically out of reach to the Lon Nol regime. Because of America's indifference hundreds of thousands of Cambodians—who had never seen or fired at an American—were bombed to death or made homeless in 1973. Thousands more, the same people in many cases, starved in the besieged capital in 1973-1975. The authors' brief is marred a little by their failure to suggest alternatives (should the U.S. have fed its victims and gone home?) but the indictment stands, and so does its documentation.

It is a fairly big step from this position, however, to the assertion that the Cambodian Communist party has earned the right to govern Cambodia as it sees fit. Certainly the Cambodian people deserve more from their leaders than Sihanouk, Lon Nol, or anyone since Jayavarman VII, perhaps, has been able to provide. They deserve different kinds of friendship than was thrown at them, in bombs and cash, by the United States. They deserve to raise their standard of living. They deserve their independence. But still, from the vantage point of 1978, why are diplomats in Phnom Penh forbidden to talk with ordinary people? Why does Democratic Kampuchea, unlike every other member of the United Nations, have no postal system?

Monash University

DAVID P. CHANDLER