

David P. Chandler

of command. This argument strikes me as sound but overdrawn. If the palpable tyranny of DK had historical precedents - in Angkor, for example - these need to be demonstrated in more detail, and Becker's insistence that Cambodia's kings enjoyed continuous, absolute power even at times when the country almost disappeared from sight/<sup>seems</sup> to run counter to evidence from the pre-colonial era.

Moreover, like many scholars and most Cambodians, she tends to over-emphasize the personalities, and influences of the five or six leaders of DK, without considering why so many people followed them, or Michael Vickery's observation that the revolution would probably have proceeded along the lines it did without the leadership of Pol Pot.

In fact, the roots of Cambodian radicalism are very difficult to disentangle. This is partly because Cambodian radicals talk so seldom about their antecedents. In the 1940s and 1950s, Vietnamese influence on the so-called Red Khmers, and Chinese influences filtered through Vietnam, need more emphasis than Becker has given them, while French components traceable to Robespierre and St Just, among others, might also be taken into account. Similarly, archival materials on the Issarak movement in the 1940s suggest that notions of republicanism, drawn from Thailand in the 1930s and 1940s, also influenced several Cambodian Communists at that time. More important, traditions of banditry, millenarianism and peasant rebellion, embedded in Cambodian rural society, have certainly provided the historical backdrop for such important DK figures as Ta Mok and Pauk, to name only two. This particular connection has been examined in detail by Vickery in Cambodia 1975-1982, which is cited in Becker's bibliography but nowhere in her notes.

A serious problem with Becker's decision to emphasize historical factors is that her understanding of the Cambodian past does not spring from particularly wide reading or research. In forming her opinions about pre-colonial times, and the Angkorean era, for example, she has relied largely on English-language

In When the War Was Over, Elizabeth Becker has attempted to write a full-scale study of the Cambodian revolution. Her subtitle suggest that she is writing at least in part from a Cambodian point of view. The strengths and weaknesses of her book flow to a large extent from the size of the task she has set herself, and from her own credentials.

The best parts of the book are those that benefit from Becker's experiences in Cambodia, and from her skill and persistence as a reporter. The freshest material springs from her interviews and recollections. Her talks with the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), refugees and others are particularly fruitful, and most scholars of Cambodia, and general readers, will benefit from her impressions of Cambodia in the early 1970s, when she was a reporter there for the Washington Post, and in December, 1978, when she was in DK for nearly a month, on the eve of the Vietnamese invasion. Her portraits of leading Cambodian figures are often psychologically astute; here style is fluent, and engaged; and to bring her narrative to <sup>Life</sup> ~~light~~ she has made telling use of confessions from the DK interrogation/extermination center in Tuol Sleng, including several that have not been discussed, as far as I know, by other writers.

Becker is correct, I think, to look for some of the roots of Cambodian radical ideology and practice inside Cambodian history, rather than abroad. She finds the "madness" of Pol Pot and his colleagues recognizably Khmer in its emphases on racial superiority, historical grievances, and the absolutism

\* Elizabeth Becker, When the War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and its People. 502 pp. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1986. \$19.95.

Becker suggests that the men pursued similarly "rational" lines in party conclaves. There is no evidence of this, except in the case of Hou Youn, although it is likely that Pol Pot and others on the Central Committee resented the popularity of the three. Becker, like Kiernan, whose work she follows fairly closely at this point, fails to stress the gap between the views of these men, reformist or otherwise, and the Party machinery which they would have needed to manipulate - outside the Central Committee of the Party, to which none of them belonged - to put their programs into practice.

In fact, the existence of such programs must be called into question, for neither Nu Nim or Khieu Samphan, who both served the DK regime, are known to have expressed any concern about the hundreds of thousands of less enlightened Khmers ushered to untimely deaths in 1975-1977. Indeed, speaking to an interviewer as recently as 1984, Khieu Samphan remarked that the major error of the regime was that it was "too slow to move against the enemies", a sentiment echoing one of Pol Pot's in 1981, when he regretted having put so much trust (sic) in other people!

In the late 1980s, it seems to me difficult to assert, as Becker appears to do, that the revolutionary movement in Cambodia, however conceived and led, ever served the interests of the Cambodian people more fully than it served those of the Party's leaders or, at different stages, those of the Vietnamese. One reason why the revolution "failed", I think, and why, in a sense, survivors of the revolution have "won" (at enormous cost to themselves) is not because it needed fine tuning or some kind of "liberalism" to become appropriate, but because Cambodians of all social strata were so indifferent to the rewards it offered and unduly eager, from a revolutionary point of view, to hold onto what they had.

Becker's comments on the Cambodian peasantry struck me, occasionally,

materials, many of them overtaken or qualified by recently published work. This shortcoming carries over into her account of the colonial period (1863-1954), and her failure to consult monographic material about Cambodia composed since independence, most of it in French, may lead some readers to assume that such studies do not exist. Even her political analysis of the Sihanouk period (1941-1970) is relatively sketchy, except for the pages that trace the development of Cambodian radicalism, where she draws heavily on what she calls the "pioneering" work of Ben Kiernan and Stephen Heder.

Like these two scholars, and to a lesser extent Michael Vickery, Becker is at pains to argue that the radical movement in Cambodia, in her view responsive to rural and working class needs, took a wrong turn at some point in the 1960s after a promising start. Whereas Kiernan sees the wrong turn as connected with Pol Pot's rise to power within the Cambodian Communist Party, and the more or less simultaneous distancing of Party policies from those of Vietnam, Becker takes the position that the Party would have been more successful had its leaders paid more attention to three intellectuals in its ranks who had, publicly at least, tended to favor reform rather than violent revolution. These three - Hou Youn, Hu Nim and Khieu Samphan - were revered by segments of Phnom Penh society after they disappeared into the maquis (and were presumed dead by many) in the 1960s. There is some evidence that Youn resisted some of the more radical policies instituted by Pol Pot and his colleagues in 1975. He was probably executed at that time. Hu Nim was executed two years later, when he was Minister of Information in DK, on what appear to have been trumped-up charges. Khieu Samphan remains important in what is left of the regime, on the Thai-Cambodian border.

Becker praises the doctoral dissertations of these three men, which were published in the Sihanouk era, when all three were clandestine members of the <sup>5\*</sup> Communist Party. Because the theses suggest reform rather than revolution,

.5

patronizing (e.g. p. 152) because, as an intellectual herself, she seems to assume that the peasants not only lacked, but needed some kind of intellectual direction from the "left". In fact, while tens of thousands of Cambodia's rural poor, particularly those under seventeen years of age flocked to the DK regime, and filled its fanatical army, millions of others, worked to the bone so that the Party could be "independent", paid no attention to radical ideas, in spite or perhaps because of the inequalities and injustice of pre-revolutionary Cambodian society.

Becker is impatient with conservatism. Elections in which Cambodians voted for relatively conservative candidates (e.g. 1947, 1951, 1955, 1958, 1962 and 1966) were "rigged" (except for the votes for progressives), and the idea that Cambodia's rural poor (like China's, or universally) longed for guidance from the left is one that dies hard, or survives as wishful thinking. This is not to say that Cambodia's peasants were particularly happy, but the revolution provided them, collectively, with nothing.

Becker's attempt to trace the development of Cambodian radicalism in the 1950s and 1960s draws heavily on the work of Kiernan, Vickery and Heder, and does not represent original research. Instead, it seems to me to be an attempt to save the phenomenon of radical optimism which was so infectious in the United States and elsewhere in the early 1970s. Saving the phenomenon in 1986, in the face of so much disastrous praxis in Cambodia at least, is a difficult thing to do, and it might have been more fruitful to pay more attention to Cambodians - surely the vast majority in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary times - who had unrevolutionary, or even counter-revolutionary points of view.

Of course, it is easy to berate such nostalgia in the 1980s, but things were certainly not so clear in Phnom Penh in the early 1970s, or to people like myself observing Cambodia from afar. Many of us, like tens of thousands of Cambodians now dead, were appalled by the corruption and

.6

incompetence of Lon Nol, by the seemingly endless killing, and by the sheer weight, and the irrelevance of American intervention. We hoped for an American defeat so that Cambodia, in some way, could return to "normal". Many in Phnom Penh hoped that somehow Hou Youn, Hu Nim and Khieu Samphan, thought by some to be leading the revolution - for the real leaders kept themselves in hiding - could lead it along equitable paths. None of us knew what would happen "when the war was over", even though evidence of Communist brutality was filtering through, as early as 1973. Nearly everyone in Phnom Penh and elsewhere (members of the Communist Party excepted) was taken by surprise and for many, at a distance, the clean break with Cambodia's past that emptying the cities seemed to represent signalled an excellent opportunity for Maoism, discredited to an extent in China, to prove itself, at last.

The extent of the surprise, and the need to understand what happened after 1975 to turn Cambodia into the place Becker visited in 1978 are sufficient motivation for a book about the Cambodian revolution. The one Becker has written is too long, however, and its impact is vitiated a bit because the people Becker has chosen as "voices" often regret the failure of the revolution, instead of celebrating the survival of so many ordinary people.

This does not make their voices less harrowing. In fact, a major virtue of When the War Was Over is the way that Becker, by letting people talk, demonstrates how the revolution attracted them to its flames before consuming them. Chapter Seven, "Most Respected and Beloved Party", is a heart-breaking account of such people "smashed to pieces" at Tuol Sleng. Becker also makes use of the chilling notebooks found in the extermination center that set out procedures for interrogation and torture, as well as the extensive research of David Hawk, and others into Pol Pot's hounding of minority populations in 1976-79.

7

For general readers, these chapters (pp. 175-298) are a fluent and frightening introduction to the horrors of living under DK. The most indispensable pages of the book, however, for specialists at least, are 406-436, which describe Becker's own time in DK in December, 1978. The picture she puts together, the first by a Western journalist (and also, with Richard Dudman's, the last, for DK collapsed a month after Becker and Dudman left) provides invaluable insights into the atmosphere of DK, particularly among the handful of people at the top. The gourmandise and family-orientation of the DK leadership, which had starved the country to its knees and officially decreed the end of "family-ism" (for others) are sharply etched, and so is the distance between their fantasies, expressed in very gentle voices, and the living conditions of ordinary people. These pages, to me at least, were far more valuable than Becker's earlier attempts to locate keys to Cambodian history and behavior either among the leaders of DK, in a national psyche, or in secondary sources.

Becker's discussion of the DK-Vietnamese conflict takes her outside the boundaries of the revolution into an area that has been covered more ably, to my mind, by Nayan Chanda's recently published Brother Enemy and, three years ago in Evans and Rowley's Red Brotherhood at War. These pages, and those dealing with U.S. relations with Vietnam, pad out the end of the book, and lessen its impact.

In fact, here and elsewhere, I found the book loosely edited and written. Throughout the text, and particularly in the allegedly historical sections, Becker's lack of fluency in Cambodian trips her up, and while the work of other scholars is mined extensively to provide the framework for her judgements, their names occasionally disappear from Becker's notes. References to Michael Vickery, for example, should have appeared at several points in the text (e.g. pp. 109, 134, 250 and 254) where Becker appears to be paraphrasing his "pioneering" work.

8

These complaints, admittedly from a specialist, should not lessen the value of the Cambodian voices which resonate inside the book. Becker's own voice, talking about the Lon Nol period and the end of 1978, joins the others and is a valuable primary source for people wondering what these two ends of the 1970s were really like.

But what is valuable in When the War Was Over is often smothered inside a 500-page book that fails to live up to the promises that Becker makes on page 15, where she claims to have been able to answer "the crucial questions about the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia". This is a tall order for someone who cannot read Khmer, and who has failed to immerse herself (for six years at least) in a wide range of accessible, but highly contradictory primary and secondary sources. Such an immersion would have shown Becker, I suspect, that answers to the "crucial questions" were still elusive. Ironically, had she claimed to have done less, and written a book half as long as this one, she would have accomplished a great deal more.