

***Jungle Heart of the Khmer Rouge: The Memoirs of Phi Phuon, Pol Pot's Aide-de-Camp, and the Role of Ratanakiri and Its Tribal Minorities on the Cambodian Revolution.* By Henri Locard. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2023. Softcover: 374pp.**

Jungle Heart of the Khmer Rouge is really two books in one. The first is the story of Phi Phuon, a revolutionary from northeast Cambodia and a member of the Jarai upland ethnic minority, who joined Cambodia's communist revolution in the early 1960s and served as a bodyguard and aide to the Khmer Rouge's leaders. Phi Phuon's story is presented as a first-person narrative, occupying the first substantive section of the book (pp. 43–202). The second section—a contextual analysis by Henri Locard which includes the Introduction and the final 125 pages or so—proposes to offer some context to Phi Phuon's narrative and to explain its significance to the existing literature on Democratic Kampuchea (DK), the formal name of the state ruled by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 until 1979. It purports to present a new understanding of the Khmer Rouge regime by suggesting that the highland minorities played a far greater role in its creation than has been previously assumed.

Those interested in the Khmer Rouge era or Cambodia's highland cultures—distinct from the lowland Khmer, the largest ethnic group in Cambodia—will find Phi Phuon's narrative particularly interesting. Among other things, he recounts his enlistment in the revolutionary cause; the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975 and the expulsion of the capital's inhabitants; his own role in overseeing security and logistics at Office B-1, the regime's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; accompanying Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge leader, on a secret tour of China in 1976; the murder of journalist Malcolm Caldwell (Phi Phuon was responsible for Caldwell's safety at the time and blamed the murder on a quarrel over a woman between two guards under his command); the looming Vietnamese invasion/liberation of Cambodia in December 1978; and his command of military forces during those last days of the regime. Along the way, Phi Phuon provides some interesting anecdotes, places individuals at the scene of various events and describes, in sometimes humorous detail, the habits of Khmer Rouge leaders. All in all, it is a story of the regime from the perspective of a relatively minor player, albeit one who enjoyed access to important meetings and events.

However, in this portrayal of Phi Phuon as a minor player the book becomes bogged down in its own complexities. By viewing the revolution through his eyes, one might almost forget that your guide was an accomplice to genocide and someone who was in a position to be able to see the horror of what was happening. The narrative serves to explain and justify the actions of the memoirist. Although not an architect of the Khmer Rouge's crimes, Phi Phuon was a willing participant in one of the worst atrocities of modern history, one which resulted in the deaths of over 1.5 million Cambodians. Thus, readers should treat Phi Phuon's narrative with caution.

They should tread with even more care when approaching Locard's revisionist history of the DK regime. His relationship with his subject is a compromised one. During his attendance at the wedding of Pol Pot's daughter—which he describes as a “singularly elegant” affair (p. 312)—he became acquainted with Phi Phuon's brother, Rochoem Tveng. A former commune leader during the Khmer Rouge regime, Tveng introduced Locard to Phi Phuon. Locard quotes him as saying that in the commune he directed, at a certain point, “killings within the commune started” (p. 286). The phrase avoids assigning agency to the deaths, which Tveng himself is widely suspected of having ordered or sanctioned. (Locals with whom this reviewer spoke stated that Tveng's commune was the deadliest in upper Sesan District, and they accused him of incompetence, brutality and wanton disregard for the value of human life.) The failure to comprehend such details results in an uneven presentation of the Khmer Rouge project in the highlands.

Locard's thesis is that the revolution's formation in the northeast highlands, before the Khmer Rouge came to power, had a lasting influence on its leaders' policies. This is a genuinely interesting question for scholars, although Locard overstates its significance. For instance, he tells us that Democratic Kampuchea “took the indigenous way of life as a model” (p. 298) and that highlanders from Ratanakiri Province “spearheaded the KR revolution” (p. 309). It is true that the inhabitants of Cambodia's northeast provinces played a formative role in the birth of the Khmer Rouge. However, none were among the leadership's inner circle, and there is little evidence to suggest the Khmer Rouge's leaders seriously considered highlander livelihood practices or forms of social organization as models for the society they sought to build. At best, they romanticized the “primitive communism” of the highlanders, a point Locard also makes. But the Khmer Rouge were national chauvinists, and

much like every other national government that has intervened in highlanders' lives, they sought to impose a Khmer way of life on the highlanders, not the other way around.

The book is based on a series of interviews Locard conducted with highlanders in 1994 and the 2000s. Locard did not speak Khmer, the national language, and relied on Khmer to French translators (p. 229). However, a linguistic survey by Gerard Diffloth (in *The Indigenous Minorities in Cambodia and the Elections: Report for the Electoral Component of UNTAC*, 1993) found that almost no one in Ratanakiri Province spoke Khmer at the time. Locard also appears to have a poor command of the highland *milieu*. For instance, a photo of a woven basket is mislabelled as a rice mortar (p. 203), and he erroneously suggests that women had little role in decision-making in highland societies (p. 230). As a result, Locard makes several errors, some directly contradicting Phi Phuon's own narrative. For example, he asserts that "the KR leadership was not at all racist against the minority groups of the periphery" (p. 10), an assertion that is partly true even though Phi Phuon goes to great lengths to explain that the Khmer Rouge's Deputy Prime Minister Son Sen and his wife, Yun Yat, as well as military chief Ta Mok, "despised him because he was an ethnic minority" (p. 209).

A far graver error involves Locard's view of the "Khmerization" campaign launched by Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's political leader from the early 1950s until 1970, in the highlands during the 1960s. This campaign involved the establishment of a large rubber plantation on indigenous land and a military colonization scheme by Sihanouk's soldiers and their families that led to the resettlement of hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of highlanders. According to Locard, the plantation was embraced by the ethnic minorities; it was "a well-established undertaking that was living in harmony with the local population" (p. 31). Based on this assertion, Locard takes issue with the now-substantial historiography on the subject, which contends that rather than being welcomed, the Khmerization campaign played a crucial role in radicalizing highlanders against the Sihanouk regime. In rebuttal, Locard tells us: "the [highland] people did not resent at all the establishment of the plantation" (p. 241). This Panglossian notion is expressly contradicted by first-hand interviews conducted by scholars such as Ian Baird, Sara Colm and Mathieu Guérin. While Locard cites these accounts, he never seriously engages with them. In the numerous interviews this reviewer conducted on the subject, highlanders recounted

stories of rape and indiscriminate killings carried out by Sihanouk's soldiers. Or, as Phi Phuon himself puts it (in Locard's own book): "They came to oppress us. They came to destroy us, to subjugate us. I had to join the fight. I entered the *maquis* because of rubber plantations" (pp. 53–54).

In summary, *Jungle Heart of the Khmer Rouge* presents an interesting view, as an insider's account, of the catastrophe of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge. Although Locard's use of this material to support his thesis that highlanders were "the heart" of the revolution falls flat, the questions he raises are interesting. We may never know the extent to which the Khmer Rouge's time in the *maquis* among the mountain minorities influenced its leaders' ideas about a revolutionary society; those discussions might never have taken place and were not recorded nor analysed in depth by the leaders. But for those interested in this question, this book serves as a point of entry into a complex set of issues.

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