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The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines

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Book Reviews

THE HUK REBELLION: A STUDY OF PEASANT REVOLT IN THE PHILIPPINES. By Benedict J. Kerkvliet. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1977. xvii, 322 pages.

Professor Kerkvliet sets out to understand the Huk movement from the point of view of its participants and sympathizers, arguing that this is a perspective other social scientists have tended to ignore. In viewing the movement through the eyes of those who rebelled, he seeks answers to the following questions:

1. Were changes in relations between local elites and villagers significant in explaining why people revolted?
2. What did they want?
3. What were their reasons for rebelling?
4. Were they led by local leaders or by outsiders such as urban intellectuals?
5. How important was the Communist Party in the movement?
6. Was the rebellion part of a long struggle or did it flare up suddenly in 1946?
7. Why did it die down after 1951?

In answering these questions, he first shows how the traditional system (characterized by close personal patron-client ties between landlord and peasant which provided "a kind of all-encompassing insurance policy" for the latter) was breaking down in the 1920s, thanks to rapid population growth and a concomitant scarcity of land in Central Luzon. Tenants of big landlords began to respond to the growing insecurities by seeking to force their oftentimes absentee-landlords to "live up to their obligations as patrons." The movement thus began small, in villages dotting the Central Luzon plain. But in the 1930s peasants became increasingly well-organized, and, after trying more traditional solutions, many turned to collective action in peasant unions such as the KPMP (Kalipunang Pambansa ng mga Magbubukid sa Pilipinas) and AMT (Aguman ding Maldang Talapagobra). While incidents of unrest escalated in the thirties, peasant demands remained essentially moderate (i.e., to improve the tenancy system principally by returning to low interest or

interest-free loans and by obtaining a crop-sharing arrangement in which they would receive from 50 to 75 percent of the crop). Their motivation was to regain the security lost in the change-over from a patron-client system to an exploitative business arrangement; they sought agrarian reform within the system rather than overthrow through revolution, and this was true in 1950 as much as in 1940.

The Hukbalahap were a wartime outgrowth of the prewar peasant movement, and virtually all Huk leaders had been active in the peasant unions of the thirties. Yet the Hukbalahap were not purely a continuation of the earlier movement. The Japanese occupation resulted in some qualitative changes in Central Luzon in that it served to push peasants and local elites farther apart, encouraged mass involvement which in turn convinced peasants of their ability to rule themselves, and raised the specter of civil war between the Huks and USAFFE guerrillas.

Events in 1945–46 served to alienate peasants in Huk areas all the more from local elites. They were discriminated against by the United States army which disarmed Huks while recognizing USAFFE guerrillas who subsequently became civilian armed guards for landlords seeking to regain control of their lands. And because the peasant movement had become better organized during the occupation, government authorities and local elites became more repressive after the war. Left with few other options, peasants turned to armed rebellion in late 1946. Even then, however, their movement remained decentralized, and their goals continued to be agrarian reform rather than overthrow of the system. Not only were the PKP (Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas) people on the periphery of the movement until 1948; they actually joined only after first disapproving it, and they advocated changes more radical than those sought by most peasant participants and their local leaders. Thus when the government finally reduced military abuses and began some agrarian reforms in the early fifties, peasants were very receptive and the rebellion petered out. As one woman said in Talavera: "Once the landlords and government showed they would stop abusing us, we [in the rebellion] were ready to put aside our guns."

In seeking to capture the peasantry's perspective, Kerkvliet begins analyzing each period in the history of the movement by focusing on the municipality of Talavera, Nueva Ecija, and particularly on San Ricardo barrio within that municipality. In these sections, which I feel are the most successful of the book, the struggle and its participants are brought vividly to life. There are no abstractions here. His numerous short biographies of local participants awaken us to the very human dimension of the struggle. We see how tenants respond when Manolo Tinio cuts off their interest-free loans, how their leaders emerge from among them, how they govern themselves during the war, and how they come to hate the local USAFFE guerrillas who become armed guards for landlords in 1945. We not only see all this, we hear it, thanks to the numerous

quotations which Kerkvliet supplies from his interviews. What is more, we hear both sides, for the author has interviewed the local landlord Manolo Tinio too. Tinio damns himself with his own words, and by doing so gives all the more credence to the peasants' point of view.

Kerkvliet's account is much less compelling when, in each chapter, he expands his focus to encompass the movement across Central Luzon rather than just in Talavera. Here he relies heavily on interviews with Huk leaders and on captured documents from the rebellion and the Philippine Communist Party. He makes little attempt to assess the accuracy of the documents which he uses for information on individual Huk leaders. Too often he accepts the Huk point of view uncritically, as in the case of the massacre of squadron 77 in Malolos (p. 113). I share Professor Kerkvliet's desire to understand the perspective of participants in the movement. But in stating their views, Huk leaders and supporters make damning accusations about their enemies. Kerkvliet can and does substantiate these accusations in the context of Talavera. But, to take one example, were anti-Huk USAFFE guerrilla units really so rapacious as they are portrayed on page 72? Is not Kerkvliet doing to them exactly what previous writers have done to the Huks? At the very least his argument in defense of the Huks would be a much stronger one if he had examined the extent to which the USAFFE unit in Talavera under Carlos Nocom was actually representative of other anti-Huk guerrillas.

A number of other less general things in the book concern me. For one, we learn on page 42 that maximum peasant demands for a share of the harvest escalated between 1933 and 1939 from 50 to 75 percent. While their demands certainly remained very moderate throughout the movement, Kerkvliet might have addressed himself to the question of why they were demanding so much more in 1939 than in 1933. On another issue, the author says that "a United States military study . . . agreed" with Peregrino and Luis Taruc that recognizing a few Hukbalahap but excluding the rest was "an attempt to divide and conquer" (p. 114). In fact this military study does not agree with the Tarucs. It states very clearly that the Huk leaders were the ones to make this claim, saying: "They intimate, but do not attempt to emphasize, that the distinction made between Banal's forces and the other forces of the Hukbalahap was made in an attempt to divide and conquer." Kerkvliet uses this as evidence in support of the Tarucs' opinion that the American military was employing divide-and-rule tactics, yet, here again, the evidence turns out to be nothing more than the opinions of the Huk leaders themselves.

Despite these points, I find this book to be a very persuasive and at times deeply moving account of the agrarian movement in Central Luzon between the 1920s and 1950s. It is a most welcome contribution to our understanding of peasant participation in recent Philippine history, and it offers valuable insights into peasant movements generally.

Ronald K. Edgerton