

40 Years Later: The Mass Killings in Indonesia

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*One of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century.” That was how a CIA publication described the killings that began forty years ago last month in Indonesia. It was one of the few statements in the text that was correct. The 300-page text was devoted to blaming the victims of the killings — the supporters of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) — for their own deaths. The PKI had supposedly attempted a coup d’état and a nationwide uprising called the September 30th Movement (which, for some unknown reason, began on October 1). The mass murder of hundreds of thousands of the party’s supporters over subsequent months was thus a natural, inevitable, and justifiable reaction on the part of those non-communists who felt threatened by the party’s violent bid for state power. The killings were part of the “backfire” referred to in the title: *Indonesia 1965: The Coup that Backfired*. The author of this 1968 report, later revealed to be Helen Louise Hunter, acknowledged the massive scale of the killings only to dismiss the necessity for any detailed consideration of them. She concentrated on proving that the PKI was responsible for the September 30th Movement while consigning the major issue, the anti-PKI atrocities, to a brief, offhanded comment. [1]*

Hunter’s CIA report accurately expressed the narrative told by the Indonesian army commanders as they organized the slaughter. That narrative rendered the September 30th Movement a disorganized, small-scale affair that lasted about 48 hours and resulted in a grand total of 12 deaths, among them six army generals into the greatest evil ever to befall Indonesia [2]. The commander of the army, Major General Suharto, justified his acquisition of emergency powers in late 1965 and early 1966 by insisting that the September 30th Movement was a devious conspiracy by the PKI to seize state power and murder all of its enemies. Suharto’s martial law regime detained some 1.5 million people as political prisoners (for varying lengths of time), and accused them of being “directly or indirectly involved in the September 30th Movement.” The hundreds of thousands of people shot, stabbed, bludgeoned, or starved to death were labeled perpetrators, or would-be perpetrators of atrocities, just as culpable for the murder of the army generals as the handful of people who were truly guilty.

The September 30th Movement was Suharto’s Reichstag fire: a pretext for destroying the communist party and seizing state power. As with the February 1933 fire in the German parliament that Hitler used to create a hysterical, crisis-filled atmosphere, the September 30th Movement was exaggerated by Suharto’s clique of officers until it assumed the proportions of a wild, vicious, supernatural monster. The army whipped up an anti-communist propaganda campaign from the early days of October 1965: “the PKI” had castrated and tortured the seven army officers it had abducted in Jakarta, danced naked and slit the bodies of the army officers with a hundred razor blades, drawn up hit lists, dug thousands of ditches around the country to hold countless corpses, stockpiled guns imported from China, and so on. The army banned many newspapers and put the rest under

army censorship. It was precisely this work of the army's psychological warfare specialists that created the conditions in which the mass murder of "the PKI" seemed justified.

The question as to whether or not the PKI actually organized the September 30th Movement is important only because the Suharto regime made it important. Otherwise, it is irrelevant. Even if the PKI had nothing whatsoever to do with the movement, the army generals would have blamed the party for it. As it was, they made their case against the PKI largely on the basis of the transcripts of the interrogations of those movement participants who hadn't already been summarily executed. Given that the army used torture as standard operating procedure for interrogations, the statements of the suspects cannot be trusted. Hunter's CIA report, primarily based on those transcripts, is as reliable as an Inquisition text on witchcraft.

The PKI as a whole was clearly not responsible for the September 30th Movement. The party's three million members did not participate in it. If they had, it would not have been such a small-scale affair. The party chairman, D.N. Aidit, however, does seem to have played a key role. He was summarily and secretly executed in late 1965, as were two of the three other core Politburo leaders (Lukman and Njoto), before they could provide their accounts. The one among them who survived the initial terror, the general secretary of the party, Sudisman, admitted in the military's kangaroo court in 1967 that the PKI as an institution knew nothing of the September 30th Movement but that certain leaders were involved in a personal capacity. If the movement's leaders had been treated as the leaders of previous revolts against the postcolonial government, they would have been arrested, put on trial, and sentenced. All the members of their organizations would not have been imprisoned or massacred.

With so little public discussion and so little scholarly research about the 1965-66 mass killings, they remain poorly understood. Many people outside of Indonesia believe that the victims were primarily Indonesian Chinese. While some Indonesian Chinese were among the victims, they were by no means the majority. The violence targeted members of the PKI and the various organizations either allied to the party or sympathetic to it, whatever ethnicity they happened to be: Javanese, Balinese, Sundanese, etc. It was not a case of ethnic cleansing. Many people imagine that the killings were committed by frenzied mobs rampaging through villages and urban neighborhoods. But recent oral history research suggests that most of the killings were executions of detainees. [3] Much more research is needed before one can arrive at definitive conclusions.

President Sukarno, the target of the PKI's alleged coup attempt, compared the army's murderous violence against those labeled PKI to a case of someone "burning down the house to kill a rat." He routinely protested the army's exaggerations of the September 30th Movement. It was, he said, nothing more than "a ripple in the wide ocean." His inability or unwillingness to muster anything more than rhetorical protests, however, ultimately doomed his rule. In March 1966, Suharto grabbed the authority to dismiss, appoint, and arrest cabinet ministers, even while maintaining Sukarno as figurehead president until March 1967. The great orator who had led the nationalist struggle against the Dutch, the cosmopolitan visionary of the Non-Aligned Movement, was outmaneuvered by a taciturn, uneducated, thuggish, corrupt army general from a Javanese village.

Suharto, a relative nobody in Indonesian politics, moved against the PKI and Sukarno with the full support of the U.S. government. Marshall Green, American ambassador to Indonesia at the time, wrote that the embassy had "made clear" to the army that Washington was

“generally sympathetic with and admiring” of its actions. [4] U.S. officials went so far as to express concern in the days following the September 30th Movement that the army might not do enough to annihilate the PKI. [5] The U.S. embassy supplied radio equipment, walkie-talkies, and small arms to Suharto so that his troops could conduct the nationwide assault on civilians. [6] A diligent embassy official with a penchant for data collection did his part by handing the army a list of thousands of names of PKI members. [7] Such moral and material support was much appreciated in the Indonesian army. As an aide to the army’s chief of staff informed U.S. embassy officials in October 1965, “This was just what was needed by way of assurances that we weren’t going to be hit from all angles as we moved to straighten things out here.”[8]

This collaboration between the U.S. and the top army brass in 1965 was rooted in Washington’s longstanding wish to have privileged and enhanced access to Southeast Asia’s resource wealth. Many in Washington saw Indonesia as the region’s centerpiece. Richard Nixon characterized the country as “containing the region’s richest hoard of natural resources” and “by far the greatest prize in the South-East Asian area.” [9] Two years earlier, in a 1965 speech in Asia, Nixon had argued in favor of bombing North Vietnam to protect Indonesia’s “immense mineral potential.” [10] But obstacles to the realization of Washington’s geopolitical-economic vision arose when the Sukarno government emerged upon independence in Indonesia. Sukarno’s domestic and foreign policy was nationalist, nonaligned, and explicitly anti-imperialist. Moreover, his government had a working relationship with the powerful PKI, which Washington feared would eventually win national elections.

Eisenhower’s administration attempted to break up Indonesia and sabotage Sukarno’s presidency by supporting secessionist revolts in 1958.[11] When that criminal escapade of the Dulles brothers failed, the strategists in Washington reversed course and began backing the army officers of the central government. The new strategy was to cultivate anti-communist officers who could gradually build up the army as a shadow government capable of replacing President Sukarno and eliminating the PKI at some future date. The top army generals in Jakarta bided their time and waited for the opportune moment for what U.S. strategists called a final “showdown” with the PKI. [12] That moment came on October 1, 1965.

The destruction of the PKI and Sukarno’s ouster resulted in a dramatic shift in the regional power equation, leading *Time* magazine to hail Suharto’s bloody takeover as “The West’s best news for years in Asia.” [13] Several years later, the U.S. Navy League’s publication gushed over Indonesia’s new role in Southeast Asia as “that strategic area’s unaggressive, but stern, monitor,” while characterizing the country as “one of Asia’s most highly developed nations and endowed by chance with what is probably the most strategically authoritative geographic location on earth.” [14] Among other things, the euphoria reflected just how lucrative the changing of the guard in Indonesia would prove to be for Western business interests.

Suharto’s clique of army officers took power with a long-term economic strategy in mind. They expected the legitimacy of their new regime would derive from economic growth and that growth would derive from bringing in Western investment, exporting natural resources to Western markets, and begging for Western aid. Suharto’s vision for the army was not in terms of defending the nation against foreign aggression but defending foreign capital against Indonesians. He personally intervened in a meeting of cabinet ministers in

December 1965 that was discussing the nationalization of the oil companies Caltex and Stanvac. Soon after the meeting began, he suddenly arrived by helicopter, entered the chamber, and declared, as the gleeful U.S. embassy account has it, that the military “would not stand for precipitous moves against oil companies.” Faced with such a threat, the cabinet indefinitely postponed the discussion. [15] At the same time, Suharto’s army was jailing and killing union leaders at the facilities of U.S. oil companies and rubber plantations. [16]

Once Suharto decisively sidelined Sukarno in March 1966, the floodgates of foreign aid opened up. The U.S. shipped large quantities of rice and cloth for the explicit political purpose of shoring up his regime. Falling prices were meant to convince Indonesians that Suharto’s rule was an improvement over Sukarno’s. The regime’s ability over the following years to sustain economic growth via integration with Western capital provided whatever legitimacy it had. Once that pattern of growth ended with the capital flight of the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the regime’s legitimacy quickly vanished. Middle class university students, the fruits of economic growth, played a particularly important role in forcing Suharto from office. The Suharto regime lived by foreign capital and died by foreign capital.

By now it is clear that the much ballyhooed economic growth of the Suharto years was severely detrimental to the national interest. The country has little to show for all the natural resources sold on the world market. Payments on the foreign and domestic debt, part of it being the odious debt from the Suharto years, swallow up much of the government’s budget. With health care spending at a minimum, epidemic and preventable diseases are rampant. There is little domestic industrial production. The forests from which military officers and Suharto cronies continue to make fortunes are being cut down and burned up at an alarming rate. The country imports huge quantities of staple commodities that could be easily produced on a larger scale in Indonesia, such as sugar, rice, and soybeans. The main products of the villages now are migrant laborers, or “the heroes of foreign exchange,” to quote from a lighted sign at the Jakarta airport.

Apart from the pillaging of Indonesia’s resource base, the Suharto regime caused an astounding level of unnecessary suffering. At his command, the Indonesian military invaded neighboring East Timor in 1975 after receiving a green light from President Gerald Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. The result was an occupation that lasted for almost 24 years and left a death toll of tens of thousands of East Timorese. Within Indonesia proper, the TNI committed widespread atrocities during counterinsurgency campaigns in the resource-rich provinces of West Papua and Aceh, resulting in tens of thousands of additional fatalities.

With Suharto’s forced resignation in 1998, significant democratic space has opened in Indonesia. There are competitive national and local elections. Victims of the “New Order” and their families are able to organize. There is even an official effort to create a national truth commission to investigate past atrocities. Nevertheless, the military still looms large over the country’s political system. As such, there has not been a thorough investigation of any of the countless massacres that took place in 1965-66. History textbooks still focus on the September 30th Movement and make no mention of the massacres. Similarly, no military or political leaders have been held responsible for the Suharto-era crimes (or those that have taken place since), thus increasing the likelihood of future atrocities. This impunity is a source of continuing worry for Indonesia’s civil society and restless regions, as well as poverty-stricken, now-independent East Timor. It is thus not surprising that the government of the world’s newest country feels compelled to play down demands for justice by its

citizenry and emphasize an empty reconciliation process with Indonesia. Meanwhile in the United States, despite political support and billions of dollars in U.S. weaponry, military training and economic assistance to Jakarta over the preceding four decades, Washington's role in Indonesia's killing fields of 1965-66 and subsequent brutality has been effectively buried, thus enabling the Bush administration's current efforts to further ties with Indonesia's military, as part of the global "war on terror." [17] Suharto's removal from office has not led to radical changes in Indonesia's state and economy.

Sukarno used to indict Dutch colonialism by saying that Indonesia was "a nation of coolies and a coolie among nations." Thanks to the Suharto years, that description remains true. The principles of economic self-sufficiency, prosperity, and international recognition for which the nationalist struggle was fought now seem as remote as ever. It is encouraging that many Indonesians are now recalling Sukarno's fight against Western imperialism (first the Netherlands and then the U.S.) after experiencing the misery that Suharto's strategy of collaboration has wrought. In his "year of living dangerously" speech in August 1964 a phrase remembered in the West as just the title of a 1982 movie with Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver Sukarno spoke about the Indonesian ideal of national independence struggling to stay afloat in "an ocean of subversion and intervention from the imperialists and colonialists." Suharto's U.S.-assisted takeover of state power forty years ago last month drowned that ideal in blood, but it might just rise again during the ongoing economic crisis that is endangering the lives of so many Indonesians.

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Notes

1. A former CIA agent who worked in Southeast Asia, Ralph McGehee, noted in his memoir that the agency compiled a separate report about the events of 1965, one that reflected its agents' honest opinions, for its own in-house readership. McGehee's description of it was heavily censored by the agency when it vetted an account he first published in the April 11, 1981 edition of *The Nation*. *Deadly Deceits: My 25 Years in the CIA* (New York: Sheridan Square, 1983), pp. 57-58. Two articles in the agency's internal journal *Studies in Intelligence* have been declassified: John T. Pizzicaro, "The 30 September Movement in Indonesia," (Fall 1969); Richard Cabot Howland, "The Lessons of the September 30 Affair," (Fall 1970). The latter is available online: http://www.odci.gov/csi/kent_csi/docs/v14i2a02p_0001.htm

2. In Jakarta, the movement's troops abducted and killed six army generals and a lieutenant taken by mistake from the house of the seventh who avoided capture. In the course of these abductions, a five year-old daughter of a general, a teenaged nephew of another general, and a security guard were killed. In Central Java, two army colonels were abducted and killed.

3. John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid, eds. *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65; Esai-Esai Sejarah Lisan* [The Year that Never Ended:

Understanding the Experiences of the Victims of 1965; Oral History Essays] (Jakarta: Elsam, 2004). Also consider the massacre investigated in Chris Hilton's very good documentary film *Shadowplay* (2002).

4. Telegram from the Embassy in Indonesia to Department of State, November 4, 1965, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. 26, p. 354. This *FRUS* volume is available online at the National Security Archive website: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB52/#FRUS>

5. Telegram from the Embassy in Jakarta to Department of State, October 14, 1965. Quoted in Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 283.

6. Frederick Bunnell, "American 'Low Posture' Policy Toward Indonesia in the Months Leading up to the 1965 'Coup'," *Indonesia*, 50 (October 1990), p. 59.

7. Kathy Kadane, "Ex-agents say CIA Compiled Death Lists for Indonesians," *San Francisco Examiner*, May 20, 1990, available online at <http://www.pir.org/kadane.html>

8. CIA Report no. 14 to the White House (from Jakarta), October 14, 1965. Cited in Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise*, p. 283.

9. Richard Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs* (October 1967), p. 111.

10. Quoted in Peter Dale Scott, "Exporting Military-Economic Development: America and the Overthrow of Sukarno," in Malcolm Caldwell (ed.), *Ten Years' Military Terror in Indonesia* (Nottingham (U.K.): Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation for Spokesman Books, 1975), p. 241.

11. Audrey R. Kahin and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 1.

12. Bunnell, "American 'Low Posture' Policy," pp. 34, 43, 53-54.

13. *Time*, July 15, 1966. Also see Noam Chomsky, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), pp. 123-131.

14. Lawrence Griswold, "Garuda and the Emerald Archipelago: Strategic Indonesia Forges New Ties with the West," *Sea Power* (Navy League of the United States), vol. 16, no. 2 (1973), pp. 20, 25.

15. Telegram 1787 from Jakarta to State Department, December 16, 1965, cited in Brad Simpson, "Modernizing Indonesia: U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1961-1967," (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Northwestern University, 2003), p. 343.

16. Hilmar Farid, "Indonesia's Original Sin: Mass Killings and Capitalist Expansion 1965-66," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (March 2005).

17. For information on U.S.-Indonesia military ties, see the website of the East Timor Indonesia Action Network at <http://www.etan.org/>

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