

No more excuses - The genocide of Indonesian leftists in 1965-66

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Fifty years of denials, evasions, and silences. Among the genocides of the twentieth century, the Indonesian genocide is perhaps the least understood. It remains shrouded in obfuscations and mystifications, such that the identities of the perpetrators and victims have become wildly confused in both popular memory and scholarly literature. Historians have a clearer understanding and greater level of documentation about the genocides of a century ago - of the Herero (1904-07) and the Armenians (1915-16) - than the more recent genocide of Indonesian leftists in 1965-66.

One cannot help but laugh at the irony of demands in Indonesia today for the forgetting of the mass killings in the name of social harmony. When did Indonesians ever gain knowledge of them? We need to be told what to forget before being able to forget it. It is equally pointless to call for reconciliation before citizens acknowledge and understand the crimes about which they are supposed to reconcile.

The Suharto regime never permitted an open discussion about the mass killings and never instructed students in the rudiments of what happened. The six-volume *National History of Indonesia* contains one sentence that mentions killings: "Only in East Java and Bali arose the chaos of abductions and killings, which were successfully brought under control again." [1] Even this hopelessly vague and factually incorrect sentence did not make it into the school textbooks, which were completely silent on the massacres.

Instead of inculcating the population with an official storyline about the genocide, the Suharto regime just kept silent, treating it as non-event, unworthy of consideration. When the subject came up, officials had to improvise. Thus, one finds all manner of inconsistent statements.

The army-led Fact-Finding Commission sent a report to President Sukarno in January 1966 that concluded that anti-communist civilians killed 78,500 people on their own, spontaneously, outside of the army's control. The commission whose job was to hide the facts, not report them, blamed the Indonesian people for being overly emotional, for being unable to contain their fury towards the PKI. Neither Sukarno nor Suharto ever made the report public. The regime's leading propagandists, Notosusanto and Saleh, argued along the same lines, presenting certain unspecified killings of PKI members as the result of vigilante justice. A rare statement by Suharto in 1971 on the killings reiterated this idea: "Thousands of victims fell in the regions because the people acted on their own." [2]

While the perpetrators initially narrated the massacres as the result of popular vengeance, at some point their dominant narrative shifted to one of self-defense. Their standard line has been that it was a time of "kill or be killed." It has been hard to reconcile the storyline about popular vengeance with this storyline about self-defence. In one story, the killers are the aggressors whose righteous fury is regrettable but justifiable; in the other, they are fearful and anxious, killing only to save their own lives.

In nearly all the stories from the perpetrators, from 1965 to the present, one finds a careful evasion of the specifics of the killing that claimed hundreds of thousands of people. The nationwide pattern was for suspects to be detained first and then led, thumbs or wrists tied behind their backs, to a relatively secluded place away from the sight of the general public, such as a field, forest, riverbank, cemetery or beach. The detainees were shot, stabbed or garroted in cold-blooded executions and then their bodies were dumped in mass graves, caves, or rivers. The army, through its territorial commands, sometimes backed up by the shock troops of the RPKAD, organized the massacres and recruited anti-communist civilians to carry out much of the dirty work. Evidence from a variety of provinces, from Aceh to Flores, confirms this pattern.

Most of these killings were disappearances: the detainees just disappeared, without the army ever providing their loved ones with an accounting of what happened. The army did not admit to being responsible for the executions. How many families were left wondering for years whether their loved ones were still alive? When researching the events of 1965-66, I have felt no greater pain than listening to the stories of women spending years going from one prison to another searching for their lost husbands.

The term “killings” is a euphemism when these were disappearances. The fact that the perpetrators have not been open and forthcoming is indicative of their awareness of the atrocious nature of their actions. The film *The Act of Killing* should not be interpreted as evidence of the brazen frankness of the perpetrators; the film demonstrates the opposite point: Anwar Congo spectacularly breaks the taboo on speaking about the executions, against the advice of his peers, and spectacularly fails to find a narrative in which the executions can be justified.

In response to the film, *Tempo magazine* did what it had never done since it started in 1971: it interviewed civilian perpetrators from around the country, men like Anwar Congo, and asked them to describe the specifics of the cold-blooded executions. In reading their stories, one clearly sees the falsity of all of these claims of ‘popular vengeance’ and ‘self-defense.’

The reaction from officialdom was all-too predictable. A top-ranking intelligence official, As’ad Said Ali, who is affiliated to the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), organized a group of NU writers to reassert the old, obviously specious apologetics. Their book, *Benturan NU-PKI 1948-1965* (2014), carefully avoided delving into the details of the massacres and instead retold the story about the PKI “going on the offensive” and NU standing up “in self defense.”

This story has as much validity as the Nazis’ story about the Jews representing an existential threat to the German nation. The fact is that the PKI members were passive in the wake of the September 30th Movement’s failure. That movement collapsed within 24 hours. There were no follow-up actions by the party and the PKI leadership was in complete disarray. Only a small group of the top leaders knew that the party had a connection to the movement. If civilian anti-communists like the NU members thought they were under threat then one has to take into account the Army’s propaganda campaign and psy-war tactics intended to make people think the party was indeed on the warpath. The falsity of the Army’s propaganda has by now been well-documented. But many perpetrators and their supporters today refuse to let go of the myths through which they have alleviated their consciences.

One should note that As’ad Said Ali’s book doesn’t necessarily represent the NU’s official position. Previous publications from even the same authors involved in this project emphasized that the NU was just following orders from the army. If there is one lesson from listening to perpetrators’ stories, it is they have a hard time sticking to a consistent story; after all, the main task of their stories is to divert attention from the horrible reality of their cowardly extra-judicial executions of prisoners. Any story, no matter how absurd, will do.

Today we can see the results of fifty years of diversionary tactics and blaming-the-victim narratives. Indonesians born after 1965 hardly know anything about the massacres of 1965-66, even about the mass graves that lie in their own villages and towns. With widespread ignorance has come total impunity. The main criminals responsible – Suharto and his clique of army officers – are all dead. They stayed in power long enough to achieve the magical transformation of a powerful, all-important event into a non-event.

The urgent task now, I think, is to clarify what happened for those Indonesians who care about their national identity and want to know their national history. Every mass grave should be marked. Stories about the massacres from the perpetrators, bystanders, and families of the victims should be recorded. More archives should be searched for documents.

We have had enough excuses. The massacres are inexcusable. Nothing can justify the disappearances and mass executions of unarmed civilians.

John Roosa

Associate Professor, Department of History, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

P.S.

* “No more excuses”. DECEMBER 16, 2014: <http://1965tribunal.org/no-more-excuses/>

Footnotes

[1] “Hanya di daerah Jawa Timur dan Bali timbul kekacauan culik-menculik dan pembunuhan-pembunuhan, yang dalam waktu singkat berhasil ditertibkan kembali.” (hal. 403-404).

[2] “Ribuan korban djatuh didaerah2 karena rakjat bertindak sendiri.”