

1965 to 1966: Indonesia's Red Slaughter

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From 1965 to 1966, the Indonesian military and its allies massacred hundreds of thousands of Communists — often with the active aid of Western, democratic governments.

Review of Geoffrey B. Robinson, *The Killing Season. A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

Contents

- [The Massacre](#)
- [Cold War in Indonesia](#)
- [The Year of Living Dangerously](#)
- [The Killing Season](#)
- [International Accomplices](#)
- [Catastrophe for the Left](#)

Before its destruction in 1965, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI, in its Indonesian abbreviation) was the world's third-largest communist party. But that year, hundreds of thousands of its members and supporters were murdered in one of the great crimes of the twentieth century.

In one of the most notorious cases, the Brantas River apparently became clogged with dead bodies; "Usually the corpses were no longer recognizable as human. Headless. Stomachs torn open. To make sure they didn't sink, the carcasses were deliberately tied to, or impaled on, bamboo stakes." Bodies "were stacked together on rafts over which the PKI banner proudly flew."

The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66 [[1](#)] by Geoffrey B. Robinson is a crucial book about the destruction of the Indonesian left and the formation of a new, authoritarian regime. This was a turning point not only for Indonesia, but for the whole South-east Asian region. The book gives as complete a picture of this period as is possible with the current state of research, adding to the possibility of a deeper reckoning with Indonesia's history of anticommunist slaughter than the country has engaged in thus far.

The Massacre

The situation in Southeast Asia in mid-1965 must have caused headaches in the US State Department and Pentagon. Despite pouring more and more resources into its war in Vietnam, the United States was unable to stop the Communists from advancing.

To the north of Vietnam, there was the People's Republic of China, calling for global revolution. To the South, there was Sukarno's Indonesia. President Sukarno was allied with the Indonesian Communists and talked about forming a new Peking-Jakarta axis in international politics to oppose imperialism and neocolonialism.

What would happen if Indonesia “went Communist,” as seemed likely to many US observers? Aside from Vietnam, between Indonesia and China, there were Thailand and Malaysia, both facing their own Communist rebels. If Indonesia would join the Communist ranks, these countries would probably follow. The Strait of Malacca, one of the most important sea-lanes in the world, would be blocked, isolating the Philippines, Japan, and Australia from their Western allies.

But one night, the whole setting started to shift. From September 30 to October 1, 1965, as most of the country slept, the top brass of the Indonesian army was wiped out by lower-ranking officers. Among the surviving top commanders were General Suharto and General Nasution, who was wounded. In confusing and contradictory radio broadcasts, a group called the *Gerakan September Tiga Puluh* (September 30th Movement, G30S) took responsibility, declaring that it had acted to prevent a right-wing military coup against Sukarno.

Some hours later, it also declared the formation of a new, “revolutionary” cabinet – but under the incumbent president. A number of members of the youth movement of the Communist Party cooperated with several units of the army in an attempt to occupy strategic locations in Jakarta.

The putsch was short lived. The following days, troops under the command of Generals Suharto and Nasution moved against the G30S, quickly defeating them.

At the funeral of the murdered officers, Suharto accused the influential PKI of their deaths and of preparing a coup to seize power. Soon, fantastic stories spread: the army-controlled media claimed the Communists had compiled death-lists; the names were written in a special ink on seemingly blank sheets of paper found in PKI offices; the Communists had throughout the country prepared holes with pointed bamboo sticks on the bottom in which to throw their victims.

Particularly singled out were women supporters of the PKI [2]. Stories about them grew even more bizarre: members of the PKI-aligned women’s organization Gerwani supposedly performed a seductive dance in front of the captured generals before castrating them, gouging their eyes out with razors, and joining an orgy with other PKI-members.

In the following months, the PKI and its allied mass organizations were destroyed. Between October 1965 and March 1966, hundred of thousands of supposed PKI-supporters were killed. The PKI and its associated organizations were banned, their offices burned down, and thousands imprisoned. Prominent leaders were sentenced to death. Others, like PKI-chair D.N. Aidit, had already been “killed while trying to escape.”

The events of 1965 have been obscured by time — and by the efforts of the new regime and the Indonesian army to cover up the murder of hundreds of thousands of people. The destruction of the once powerful Indonesian left was celebrated [3] in the West; it was “the West’s best news for years in Asia” according to *Time*. *New York Times* reporter Arnold C. Brackman spoke of a “new dawn.” His two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning colleague James Reston titled his article on the power shift “A gleam of light in Asia.”

In the weeks after September 30, Suharto emerged as the strong man of Indonesia. He drastically shifted Indonesia’s international alignment, breaking off relations with China, welcoming back Western investors, and cooperating with the IMF and World Bank to restructure the economy.

The 1965 massacres have long remained understudied. Initially, this seemed to change with the fall of Suharto in 1998 and the opening up of *Reformasi*, the period of reform. As part of the democratization of the country, the military’s grip on the writing of history was weakened and survivors of the massacres, for decades repressed, began to speak out. Human rights associations

were formed, and attempts to investigate the killings and give victims a dignified burial begun.

Many of the hopes of *Reformasi*, however, were disappointed in the following years. The army remains an important political force, elements of Suharto's New Order regime persist, and the anticommunism it instilled in Indonesian society continues to motivate attacks on progressive movements.

But the cracks in the official myths were not completely closed. Indonesian and international scholars and activists persist in attempts to uncover what happened in 1965, producing new books of history and memoirs. In 2012 and 2014, *The Act of Killing* [4] and *The Look of Silence* [5], two films by Joshua Oppenheimer, drew international attention. Robinson's *The Killing Season* is not only a synthesis of such recent research on these events, but also adds extensive original research essential to a full understanding of the continuing impact of the massacres.

Cold War in Indonesia

The first chapters of the book set the context, describing the landscape of Indonesian politics in early 1965. By this time, Indonesian president Sukarno had, under the system of "Guided Democracy," concentrated power in his own hands. Indonesia's first national elections had taken place ten years earlier. In those elections, the PKI had done surprisingly well, coming in fourth place with over 16 percent of the vote — 6 percent less than the largest party, the nationalist, pro-Sukarno Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI).

In the years after the 1955 elections, the PKI pursued a strategy of building up its mass organizations while allying closely with the popular president. The PKI tried to push Sukarno to give it more institutional posts, but the party was mostly kept out of power.

Aside from the president and the PKI, there was a third major source of power in Indonesia: the army. Since the war of liberation against Dutch colonialism, the army was a powerful factor in Indonesian politics and resisted attempts to keep its role restricted to defense of the country. Its influence grew further after it took control of Dutch enterprises that were seized during protests in 1956–8.

That same decade, Sukarno faced armed revolts in the outer provinces of the Indonesian archipelago. The army's prestige and political influence grew further thanks to its defeat of the rebels, who had been covertly supported by the US in an attempt to weaken or even overthrow the president. The attempt backfired. The rebels were defeated, and Sukarno moved closer to opponents of the US, especially China.

But US involvement in Indonesian politics did not end there. The US government now had even more reason to worry about Sukarno. The kind of populist nationalism he represented was seen as a serious threat to Western hegemony in the region.

Robinson describes how the US changed its approach to trying to win support among the army brass through providing training and military aid. The brass, a privileged social layer allied with landlords, businessmen, and conservative religious leaders, was seen by the US as the most reliable anticommunist force in the country. For the US, this new strategy would prove a success some years later.

The Year of Living Dangerously

In early 1965, Indonesian politics was entering a crisis. The army and the PKI were increasingly in conflict. Rumors about the president's ill health circulated, raising speculations about what would happen if the only figure able to unite the country's contradictory political forces under him would disappear.

In such a moment, a contest for power between the PKI and the army would be unavoidable.

Robinson describes how Western governments drew up contingency plans to prevent the PKI from translating its growing social weight into political power. *The Killing Season* includes a photo of an infamous British Foreign Office memo of December 1964 that read; "A premature PKI coup may be the most helpful solution for the West — provided the coup fails." A few months later, a very similar scenario took place with the putsch of the G30S.

The G30S is key to the events of 1965. It is around this movement that some of the most important questions revolve.

One question is what the goals of the movement actually were; another is what its relationship to the PKI was. Robinson largely agrees with the view of the movement described in John Roosa's *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia*. Roosa argues that the G30S was an attempt to strike a preventive blow against right-wing generals in a context of continuing rumors of a coming right-wing, military coup. The movement consisted of pro-Sukarno military officers as well as PKI chair Aidit and the mysterious Sjam, a PKI member who was responsible for its *Biro Khusus*, a clandestine PKI organization that tried to organize support for the party inside the army.

Roosa [6] concluded that "the chairman of the PKI and a select handful of Politburo members — not even the full Politburo — were the leaders of the movement. They believed, however, that their allies in the military would be able to organize a military action on their own; they saw themselves as merely the political advisors to 'progressive revolutionary' officers. The dual structure of the movement's leadership, the split between the PKI leaders and the military officers, combined with the lack of clear communication between the two sides, resulted in a strange action on October 1, 1965, that was highly vulnerable to counterattack."

The plan was to abduct generals that were known to be right wing and force them to resign. For this, the G30S counted on support from Sukarno: the movement would abduct the generals, and in name of the Indonesian nation demand that they be sacked. Sukarno would then use this opportunity to get rid of some of his most powerful rivals by acceding to the demand of the movement. For unknown reasons, the G30S ended up not abducting the suspected generals, but killing them. Roosa makes a strong case that the killings were unplanned, and the result of miscommunication and incompetence.

After the killings, Sukarno made clear he would have nothing to do with the movement. Panicked, the movement tried to declare a new government. In Max Lane's words, "the conspiracy this swiftly escalated from a mutiny hoping to win Sukarno's support to a coup against Sukarno himself." Contrary to army propaganda, the PKI as such was not involved in the group — not even its central committee was informed by Aidit. There never was a Communist conspiracy to seize power.

This explanation has the benefit of explaining the chaotic, strangely incompetent nature of the movement. It answers the question of why, if there had been a plan to seize power, the PKI failed to mobilize its millions-strong base in support of the G30S.

What happened instead was that the army successfully exploited a botched action of a small group of pro-PKI officers and leaders to tar the whole leftist movement. The army had almost complete control over the press and used it to whip up fear and anger against the Communists. Next, it organized the murder of hundreds of thousands. The Indonesian army went on the offensive to annihilate the PKI, its mass organizations, and even the left-wing of the PNI — in short, the entire Indonesian left.

The Killing Season

Robinson describes how, according to a very conservative estimate, in 1965–66, half a million of people were killed.

Supposed leftists were usually rounded up and imprisoned in makeshift camps before being executed in groups. In some cases, whole villages that were supposed to be pro-PKI were slaughtered. Often, the killing was done by soldiers. More frequently, the murders were committed by right-wing militia composed of members of religious and nationalist groups, who were organized, trained, and equipped by the army.

This means that tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands, were involved in the killings. This diffusion of guilt across society proved very effective in blocking later attempts to find justice.

Robinson shows the crucial role of the army in organizing the massacre. The killings did not follow the same pattern all over the country nor did they start at the same time. Killings were worse in the central island of Java and on Bali. In some regions, including Bali, large-scale killings were late to start, beginning only weeks after the G30S. Robinson discusses different explanations for this variation, such as preceding local histories of social conflicts, especially over land.

Once again, crucial element in explaining this variation is the army. In Bali, it took weeks before Sukarno-loyalists were forced out of power — only after their removal did the army have a free hand to organize the systematic killing. Elsewhere, army commanders organized the mass detention of people accused of supporting the PKI. Sometimes this meant fewer people were killed; other times, it was only a delay of their death as the commanders decided that killing prisoners was more convenient than keeping them alive.

Robinson concludes in the crucial sixth chapter of the book that “the mass killings of 1965–66 were set in motion by the army itself ... It was the army leadership, under Major General Suharto, that introduced the idea that the political crisis of October should and could be resolved through violence, and provided the means through which that intention was achieved.”

Inside Indonesia, the history of the months-long massacre that enabled Suharto to seize power was manipulated. Decades of propaganda spread a still-influential myth: the violence against “Communists” had been an eruption of popular anger against the treacherous PKI after it had tried to seize power. It was perhaps regrettable that it had gone so far, but the violence was essentially self-defense.

The Indonesian army, so the story continues, had tried its best to contain it while acting decisively to save the nation from the Communist conspiracy. In Western accounts of the violence, pontifications about “Indonesian culture” served as an additional explanation for the massive bloodletting. The normally “peaceful” and “placid” Indonesians had “run amok.” But now, under the rule of Suharto, the country was peaceful and advancing.

As Robinson shows, this falsification of history was facilitated by Western officials and journalists who repeated the army line. A particular egregious example is *Indonesia: Crisis and Transformation 1965-1968*, a book from 1990 by the US ambassador to Indonesia at the time, Marshall Green — someone who, Robinson shows, was in a good position to know much more about what actually happened. The book repeats all the myths; the PKI and the army had been engaged in “a prolonged armed struggle,” a “life-and-death struggle” even, during which Suharto emerged “as the man who could save Indonesia from communism and chaos.”

But even those eager to prove the myth of a “life-and-death” struggle cannot point to any significant armed clashes between the army and the PKI. Apart from Jakarta, it was only in Central Java, the heart of the PKI, that there were significant attempts by lower-ranking officers to support the G30S. Only in one city, Yogyakarta, did this rebellion lead to killing; two officers were killed.

The violence following the G30S was not a two-sided civil war — it was a one-sided, bloody, class war. As Dutch Indonesia expert W.F. Wertheim already wrote in 1966, it was “class struggle by machete.” It was not only the PKI that was destroyed — a whole stream of progressive thought and culture, one that had been a central part of Indonesian society, was ripped out.

The victims were labor organizers, teachers, writers, women’s rights activists, painters, poets, peasant leaders, traditional puppeteers. Independent unions and parties were banned, as was the propagation of “Marxism-Leninism.” Women’s organizations were among the prime targets of the New Order in its attempt to reassert patriarchal authority.

Robinson does not enter deeply into this aspect of the aftermath, but Suharto’s “New Order” regime was a remarkably successful attempt at social engineering. The New Order regime worked consistently to depoliticize society and isolate the popular masses from any kind of political activity. The goal was to turn them into what New Order ideologue Ali Moertopo called a “floating mass”; a formless mass of atomized individuals that would dedicate themselves to working for the “development” of the country instead of engaging in politics and shaping their society.

The fate of the famous novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer [7] shows something of the immense loss the country suffered. Several of his manuscripts were destroyed, and he was imprisoned under terrible conditions for fourteen years. He spent years in the infamous prison camp on Buru Island [8]. There, he wrote his masterful *Buru Quartet* [9]. These books were subsequently banned by the Suharto regime under the pretext that they contained “communist propaganda.”

Even though Toer was a supporter of the pro-PKI association of cultural workers LEKRA, he could hardly be called a Communist. He was an anti-colonialist nationalist and humanist who believed history is made by the people. His books convey that worldview. For the Suharto regime, that was reason enough to ban them.

International Accomplices

Indonesia’s “New Order” came to power through massive bloodshed. This crime was aided by Western states who were eager to see a change in Indonesia’s political trajectory. For decades there has been speculation of direct involvement of Western intelligence services in the G30S.

Suharto’s own precise role also remains unclear. One of the leaders of G30S, Colonel Abdul Latief, was a friend of Suharto. He met Suharto on September 29 and again just a few hours before the botched abductions. Latief was tried in court only thirteen years later, where he declared that he had in fact mentioned the coming action to Suharto. Latief stated, “Having reported to him, I

obtained moral support because there wasn't any reaction from him."

Robinson also points out how, immediately after the coup and before the systematic crackdown on the Left, the PKI newspaper *Harian Rakyat* (People's Daily) was allowed to publish an editorial praising the G30S — although merely as an internal affair of progressive officers. This article of course provided useful ammunition for the army's propaganda offensive.

Some observers of Indonesian politics drew the conclusion that the whole affair had been a trap, organized by Suharto himself, possibly with help from foreign intelligence services. Considering the long history of Western intelligence services attempting to subvert Sukarno's government, and the pro-Western shift of Suharto's New Order, some form of foreign involvement seemed likely.

Robinson refrains from such conclusions, only pointing out open questions. Direct involvement of either Suharto, Nasution, or foreign intelligence services in the G30S itself has never been proven. It is likely that Suharto was the shrewd opportunist already that he showed himself to be the following decades. He was probably aware a clash was coming, and instead of committing himself to one side, he waited for the moment he could seize the opportunity.

Similarly, foreign intelligence services, not only from the US, but also from Western Europe, did seize the opportunity provided by the botched G30S operation to spread propaganda against the PKI and stimulate the generals to destroy the Left.

As Western governments, especially the US and Australia, became more aware of the scale of the mass murder, they increased their support to the army. What worried them was that the Indonesian army would not make the most of this opportunity to get rid of the PKI and of president Sukarno — in other words, that not enough people would be killed. It is clear that Western powers did much to stabilize the new Suharto regime by giving it support and economic aid that was withheld from Sukarno.

Recent work by scholars like Brad Simpson [10] and Jess Melvin [11] has shown that not only were Western intelligence services and governments aware [12] of the mass murder, they also provided support [13] to the army's bloody campaign. Robinson describes how the Indonesian army generals were assured of the political support of foreign powers and discreetly supplied with resources, such as equipment and cash, and probably ammunition and small arms as well. The CIA provided lists with names of PKI members to the army, probably signing their death warrant by doing so.

Sukarno was unable to stop the annihilation of his allies. Political power increasingly shifted to the military. Pressured by the army, on March 11, 1966, Sukarno effectively transferred power to general Suharto, who then ruled the country for the following three decades.

By this time, there were thousands of prisoners. The prisons were hell; overcrowded with people who received too little food and barely any medical attention. Torture and sexual assault were common. Prisoners were exploited by the authorities, forced to work for free. Many of the prisoners were released in the late seventies but others remained imprisoned even until the collapse of Suharto's regime in 1998. Most were never even formally charged with any crimes.

Catastrophe for the Left

Robinson devotes several chapters to the fate of political prisoners in the years after the coup. He describes how the Indonesian authorities classified them differently based on their supposed level of involvement with the Communist movement. In the prisons and camps, they were forced to attend

religious sermons and lectures on the virtues of *Pancasila*, the ideology of the Indonesian state.

Even when they were released, their suffering did not end. Their passports were stamped with the letters "ET," indicating they were former political prisoners. They were excluded from many jobs and remained social pariahs, often required to regularly report to the police.

Robinson, a former researcher for Amnesty International, describes how an international campaign by human rights groups played an important role in securing the release of many political prisoners. One story he shares illustrates the depths of anticommunist paranoia of the New Order regime.

In 1993, Robinson met Indonesia's former foreign minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, who told him "that Amnesty International's head of research for Indonesia was a card-carrying member of the PKI." Writes Robinson, "As it happened, I held that post at the time, and so I took the opportunity to tell him that he was mistaken. The minister insisted that he was right, declaring that the person in question was someone much more important than me." Robinson rightfully gives human rights groups credit for their work on behalf of the prisoners, but of course one important reason the regime eventually released many of them was their movement had been so thoroughly defeated.

For socialists looking back at the destruction of the PKI, it is striking how little resistance there was to the anticommunist campaigns, considering the large support for the party. Remnants of the party did call for armed resistance. Inside Indonesia, there were attempts to salvage what was left of the movement and reorganize underground. As Vanessa Hearman [14] has shown, even the most significant of those attempts, in South Blitar, East Java, was hardly a military threat to Indonesia's new rulers. The destruction of the PKI base there in 1968 "closed an important chapter in the history of Indonesia's left movement" [15]. Some years after 1965, leftists outside Indonesia were still writing about the people's war supposedly growing there — basing themselves on not much more than their own wishes and Indonesian army propaganda that still had an interest in pretending the PKI was a threat.

Suharto's seizure of power had revealed the PKI to be in many aspects a giant with feet of clay. A history of the destruction of what had been the world's largest nonruling Communist party remains to be written. Part of the explanation must be sought in its approach to the Indonesian state. In the words of PKI leader Aidit, this state had two contradictory aspects, and it was the PKI's task to strengthen its "pro-people aspect" — which included the president himself. The party went as far as to adopt Sukarno's ideological statements as their own. Although it sometimes criticized authoritarian measures taken by the Indonesian government, measures that often ended up strengthening the position of the army, the PKI avoided criticism of Sukarno himself.

Instead, the PKI tried to profit from his popularity by presenting itself as the most dedicated supporter of Sukarno. But in the socioeconomic field, the PKI had already run up against limits. In early 1965, PKI leader Njoto complained that the only real accomplishments of the party were the eight-hour working day and May 1 being a national holiday. The PKI tried to gain more power through increasing its positions in the institutions of the state. But in the Guided Democracy system, the few government posts given to PKI leaders meant little anyway.

In 1965, the PKI attempted a new tactic by mobilizing its peasant base in order to implement land-reform laws that were being resisted by landlords: the so-called *aksi sepihak* or "unilateral actions." But the party was defeated by the landlords, right-wing militia, and their military allies.

In conflicts with the army before September 1965, the PKI had relied on Sukarno's support. If necessary, the party retreated in the face of army attacks until the president would feel the need to

intervene and restrain the army in order to maintain a balance between the two. The failure of the *aksi sepihak* made clear that without the president's support, the PKI was no match for the army and the conservative bloc that it led. When Sukarno fell, the party fell with him.

After the G30S, Sukarno was unable to save his leftist supporters. The army prevented Sukarno's calls not to attack the PKI from spreading through the media; Sukarno, "the tongue of the Indonesian people," was silenced. His remaining support was being eroded by student protests that were facilitated by the army. In late 1966, Sukarno refused to cooperate with loyal police and military officers that wanted to him to rally his remaining support and confront Suharto. Sukarno, who had dedicated his life to the unity of Indonesia, refused to support such a desperate plan that would probably have meant civil war.

Sukarno was essentially put under house arrest in a remote village and isolated from the outside world. To one of his several wives, he bitterly complained that even the Dutch colonists "had left him the means to communicate and discuss in my place of exile"; his own countrymen did not. He died at sixty-nine years old, on June 21, 1970.

The destruction of the Indonesian left, meanwhile, was not lost on the international right: in the early seventies, the phrase "Jakarta is coming" started to appear graffitied on walls in Santiago, Chile.

Many of the worrying trends in Indonesia today — an increase in chauvinist religious fundamentalism, anti-Chinese racism, a violent and arrogant elite and political caste — can only be understood by looking back at 1965. The horror stories about the supposed crimes of the PKI and the taboo on leftist ideas persist, continuously reinforced by the Indonesian ruling class and their thugs who attack gatherings of survivors and human rights activists. Robinson ends his book with the conclusion that it is unlikely that we will see justice. The last survivors of the 1965-66 massacres are dying without having seen the guilty parties being punished, or even judged.

For leftists outside Indonesia, the 1965-66 slaughter should be a warning. To maintain their power, the Indonesian military and its allies organized the massacre of thousands. But they did this with the at least silent support, but often also the active aid, of Western, democratic governments. They cooperated with Indonesia's new rulers in committing this crime. In turn, they were aided by respected journalists who, in return for good relationships with government officials and access to sources, repeated and gave credibility to New Order propaganda.

The Killing Season is clearly and elegantly written, the prose often driven by a controlled anger. A historical awareness of the period it covers is indispensable to the current attempts to rebuild, from scratch [16], a left in Indonesia — and in this way, achieve a measure of redemption for the lives that were crushed in 1965.

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<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/06/killing-season-geoffrey-robinson-indonesia-communist-party-massacre>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/11135.html>
- [2] https://www.atria.nl/epublications/IAV_B00103570.pdf
- [3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/world/asia/indonesia-cables-communist-massacres.html>
- [4] <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3084>
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- [15] <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3812-1968-a-crushing-defeat-for-the-indonesian-left>
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