

“Unmarked Graves”: The 1960s Indonesian Counter-Revolution in East Java

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Review of Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia* (National University of Singapore Press, 2018).

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The Indonesian genocide was one of the great crimes of the twentieth century. Its victims were leftists who struggled against colonialism and fought for Indonesian self-determination.

In late 1965 and early 1966, a wave of violence swept Indonesia, directed at the country’s powerful left. Before it was over, half a million people lay dead and Suharto, a right-wing general who would rule the country for decades, had moved closer to power.

Vanessa Hearman’s *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia* describes the impact of this mass slaughter and the little-known history of leftists’ attempts at resistance. Drawing on dozens of interviews, she shows the persecuted not just as faceless victims or representatives of abstract ideologies but living, breathing human beings. We learn what motivated them to join the movement, how they developed survival strategies — and how they tried to fight back.

The Death and Rebirths of the PKI

In the early 1960s, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) counted some 2 million members. Millions more were organized in allied mass organizations. In the 1955 elections — the last national contest before the massacres — the party finished with over 16 percent of the vote, and a few years later, it won almost 30 percent in East Java. The PKI and the movement around it was an important ally of Indonesia’s president, Sukarno, who combined fiery anti-imperialist rhetoric with autocratic rule.

The PKI of the sixties grew out of the Indonesian struggle against Dutch colonialism. After failed revolts in 1926–27, the Dutch exiled some 1,300 suspected communists to the infamous Boven Digul prison camp, devastating the party. Vestiges of the PKI took operations underground and began working through front organizations. Then on August 17, 1945, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared Indonesia’s independence. From October of that year on, the PKI started operating openly again.

Leftists played a significant role in the continued military and political struggle against the Dutch, which — despite Sukarno's declaration — was attempting to recolonize the country. But in the middle of fighting Dutch colonialism, the party was almost destroyed for a second time. In September 1948, as tensions between the Indonesian left and right mounted, leftist forces seized control of the East Javanese town of Madiun. The Indonesian government, led by Hatta and Sukarno, swiftly crushed the movement. Government forces killed PKI leaders, and the party again found itself driven underground.

Beginning in the early fifties, the party went back to rebuilding. A new, younger leadership was formed, with Dipa Nusantara Aidit acting as chairperson and Njoto and Lukman as deputies. Forged in the movement against Dutch colonialism, this generation saw their involvement in the PKI as a continuation of the Indonesian struggle for self-determination. With Dutch colonialism repelled, Western imperialism in general was now the main enemy. Overthrowing it was the prerequisite for realizing the dream of a prosperous, just Indonesia.

At the time, Indonesia was a relatively open, parliamentary democracy, and the new leadership argued that to avoid the kind of repression that had almost destroyed the party, it needed to drastically grow in size and influence. It decided to operate as an open, legal party.

In 1957, President Sukarno introduced a new political regime: "Guided Democracy." According to Sukarno, parliamentary democracy produced political instability and squabbling political parties. Under Guided Democracy, the role of parliament and parties was diminished while that of the "guide," Sukarno, was augmented to ensure unity. Hearman describes the model as "at its core an authoritarian system with Sukarno at the centre."

The PKI found Guided Democracy to be, in Hearman's words, a "double-edged sword." As an ally of Sukarno, the PKI hoped the president would use his power to boost the party's influence in government (while also protesting against some of the regime's authoritarianism). Seemingly, this wasn't an unfounded hope. The president adopted an increasingly leftist posture, allowing the PKI to present itself as the most consistent fighter for the popular president's "Indonesian socialism." And it also won support as a comrade-in-arms in Sukarno's campaigns against colonialism and imperialism.

But there was another side to Guided Democracy — one that proved deadly for the PKI. The army's role mushroomed under the new arrangement, and it army used its powers to narrow the democratic space available to the Communist Party. The PKI's alliance with the president, who increasingly relied on the movement as a counterweight to the army, provided it with only limited protection.

Writing in 1962, US academic Donald Hindley concluded that the party was stuck:

Today, after five years of the close alliance, the PKI seems as far as, or further than, ever from winning power. Two basic and related reasons account for this: the strengthening and entrenchment of the army, and what I term the domestication of the PKI. The strengthening and entrenchment of the army has been a process that Sukarno has been unable to prevent, and one which his policies have indirectly encouraged.

Guided Democracy, Hindley wrote, created "effective blocks to the PKI's possible assumption of power, so that the Party provides Sukarno with support but cannot exploit the alliance towards its own major goal, which is governmental power."

Faced with an impasse, the PKI attempted to chart a new path forward by launching campaigns for land reform. While previous elections had registered the party's relative weakness in the

countryside, the PKI hoped to stimulate rural class struggles and gain support among poor farmers. This new approach heightened the conflict with landlords and their allies, including the army and religious organizations. Political polarization spiked.

On the night of September 30, 1965, a group of lower-ranking officers, calling itself the “September 30th Movement,” killed several high-ranking army officers in Jakarta. The movement’s stated aim was to remove powerful right-wing officers, and it claimed to be acting to prevent a military coup against Sukarno.

But their botched operation — which involved a small number of PKI members — backfired horribly. For the Indonesian army and its allies, it was the perfect opening to exterminate the Indonesian left.

The Bloodshed Begins

The Indonesian army took the lead in creating what Hearman terms “perpetrator blocs.” Joined by right-wing and religious organizations (especially the NU, Nahdlatul Ulama — Indonesia’s largest Islamic movement), the army meted out violence and created a climate of fear that incited mob violence against PKI members.

Although most PKI supporters were Muslims themselves, NU and army propaganda described them as enemies of religion and claimed the party had been planning to attack believers. Hearman quotes one Islamic religious leader as declaring that “the PKI’s blood was halal.” Bodies were cut up and left in public. After the mob violence came the systematic killing of political prisoners. In East Java, the army and its allies killed some two hundred thousand people.

As the army under Suharto consolidated power, it broadened its attack to destroy not just the PKI but the base of Sukarno’s populist nationalism, the left wing of the Indonesian Nationalist Party, and progressive ideas and movements in general. Sukarno was increasingly isolated. In March 1966 he was pressured into signing an order that effectively handed power over to Suharto.

In recent years, several important books have detailed the scope of the violence in 1965–66, the crucial role of the army in perpetrating it, and the ways in which the bloodshed paved the way for a new political regime, Suharto’s “New Order.” Unmarked Graves builds on this scholarship. Through the use of oral history, Hearman gives readers an idea of how the party worked on the local level and how it became so influential. Hearman’s interviews with surviving PKI supporters show that, like the party’s leadership, many cut their teeth in the anti-colonial movement and considered their struggle an extension of the struggle for Indonesian self-determination.

It is striking how many of the activists were teachers or were otherwise engaged in educational activities. Hearman writes that the PKI and allied mass organizations came to represent modernity through their educational and campaigning activities — so much so that “whole families and neighbourhoods observed loyalty to the party and its linked organizations.”

Gerwani, a women’s organization, was an important player in this work. It reached out to women to discuss equality and women’s rights, dispensing political education while giving members a chance to be active outside the household and learn about Indonesia and the world. “In our conversations,” Gerwani activist Putmainah says in an interview with Hearman, “we told women that they were left with an unequal burden compared to men. We encouraged them to suggest that they should play more of a role in the family.” Gerwani also campaigned on international issues, including the atomic bomb and the trial of accused Soviet spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

But the PKI and its allies were unprepared for the army's campaign of violence. Even after the bloodshed began, many held out hope the party's alliance with Sukarno would save the movement. Instead, the slaughter continued. Many decided to flee their villages for the anonymity of bigger cities. In places like the port city of Surabaya, where the PKI enjoyed substantial support among workers and squatters, exiled leftists formed entire communities.

For a time, it seemed they might escape death. But after purging pro-PKI officials and military commanders, Suharto's administration moved on to pro-Sukarno officials, who had offered some measure of protection for the refugees. The systematic hunt for leftists in cities had begun.

A Defeated Resistance

"The killings and imprisonment of 1965-66 . . . exacted a heavy price on the PKI," Hearman writes. Prominent leaders like D.N. Aidit, Lukman, and Njoto were all killed in late 1965.

The PKI was a party with deep roots, however, and "remnants of the . . . leadership tried to salvage what was left of the party." In the second half of 1966, a number of underground publications sprung up, bearing names like Front Anti Fasis (Anti Fascist Front) and Suara Demokrasi (Voice of Democracy). In the border area between Malaysian and Indonesian Borneo, local PKI members joined Malaysian communist insurgents.

As part of their efforts to resurrect the party, various PKI leaders started analyzing what had led to the massacres. Statements came from surviving PKI leaders in China and the Soviet Union, which echoed the views of the ruling parties in those countries. The most influential analysis was written by a group still inside Indonesia and led by a surviving member of the Politburo, Sudisman.

In September 1966, the group published a document called "Build the PKI along the Marxist-Leninist Line to lead the People's Democratic Revolution in Indonesia" — commonly known as the "Criticism and Self-Criticism" (Kritik Otokritik). The document critically analyzed the policies of the Aidit leadership.

Aidit had argued that the state of Indonesia had two elements: one that "represents the interests of the people (manifested by the progressive stand and policies of President Sukarno that are supported by the PKI and other groups of the people)" and another that "represents the enemies of the people (manifested by the stand and policies of the Right-wing forces or the diehards)." According to Aidit, the "people aspect" had already become the main and leading aspect of the Indonesian state. The Otokritik countered by quoting Lenin: "the state is an organ of the rule of a definite class which cannot be reconciled with its antipode (the class opposite to it)." In other words, it was impossible for Indonesia to be jointly ruled by the people and the enemies of the people.

Aidit, the document argued, had overestimated the alliance with Sukarno and underestimated the power of the right-wing. Despite differences and disagreements in Indonesia's ruling class (as well as between Sukarno's camp and the right-wing generals), the Indonesian state remained an organ of the capitalist class — and its weapon against its enemies.

Seeking to put that analysis into action, the party adopted a Maoist strategy — reorienting toward the countryside and building base areas from which it could launch an armed struggle against the New Order regime. The second part of Unmarked Graves describes the most significant attempt at constructing such a base area, in South Blitar, East Java, and dispels the myths around the military operation that ultimately wiped it out.

Among the local population in this extremely poor and isolated area, many supported the PKI. Party cadres began to move there and a new leadership was set up. Adapting to life was initially difficult for many of the refugees, but the local population accepted them and for a short time they felt relatively safe. Survivors of the PKI were joined by a number of Sukarno supporters, among them soldiers and officers.

But although the refugees tried to stay below the radar, the army started to notice new people were moving into the area. And then small-scale attacks on people who had taken part in the massacres began to occur. These attacks attracted the military's attention long before the party was ready to seriously engage in armed struggle.

This time around, the whole anti-PKI operation was firmly under military control. Although its alliance with religious groups like NU had been useful, the army worried that such groups were growing too powerful and sidelined them.

It also reached out to the Western media. News of a successful military operation against what the army claimed to be a serious Communist threat would be helpful in the New Order's attempt to gain more Western support, and military sources informed the New York Times that no less than five thousand soldiers and three thousand "militia and vigilante" auxiliaries would be used in the operation.

The operation resembled more a hunt than a counter-insurgency campaign. The army systematically combed through the area, forcing the local population to assist them. They captured key PKI leaders and got some to turn traitor, leading to further demoralization. Some, like Putmainah, sought shelter in a nearby cave. She describes her desperate situation: "I didn't know the day, didn't know daylight, didn't know the month. I didn't write anything down. Didn't mix with people. I just ate leaves while in the forest for maybe three months. Only at night did I dare to leave the cave." Eventually, she too was caught.

At the end of the four-month operation, the army and the New Order regime implemented a drastic program of social engineering to prevent a resurgence of resistance. Villagers were forced to live close together so they could be more easily supervised. A strict program of ideological indoctrination was instituted, with required classes on Pancasila, the official ideology of the Indonesian state. New mosques, Islamic schools, and prayer facilities were built, with soldiers in charge of spiritual matters.

Bragging again to the New York Times, the military claimed they'd killed around two thousand party members. Yet since only about two hundred refugees had found shelter in the area, the casualty figure must have included many local inhabitants as well. A few dozen soldiers and militia members were killed in the operation, and only thirty-four firearms were seized. As Hearman writes, the army operation "succeeded because the so-called guerrillas were poorly armed and no match for the army's troops and firepower." The prisoners who were lucky enough not to be killed right away ended up spending years in prison in grueling conditions.

Victimhood and Survival

The episodes of injustice and oppression Hearman relates make *Unmarked Graves* a difficult read at times, but the book also shows how victims of the army's violence found ways to resist.

One harrowing story: the husband of Suginem (a pseudonym) was killed, and she was forced to have sex with the soldier appointed to supervise the village head. Suginem still fought to maintain some

control over her life. She prevented her young son from mixing with the soldier and refused to accept any material goods or food from him. When the soldier met with the village head, Suginem listened in on their meetings so she could warn villagers who would be affected by their decisions. Suginem told interviewers she was not stigmatized for her forced relationship with the soldier — “the people all understood, because you could say that we all had the same fate, even if some were not directly affected.” After seven years, the soldier finished his deployment. Suginem stayed in South Blitar to continue her life.

The remaining survivors of 1965 are old, and many are still hesitant to speak out. They have good reason to be cautious: as Hearman points out in her conclusion, the Indonesian state, especially the army, continues to harass suspected “communists,” and meetings about 1965 are frequently broken up by groups calling themselves Islamic or anti-communist, often in collusion with the security forces.

In such an environment, it is all the more important that Hearman rescues the stories of some of the victims. Unmarked Graves not only helps us understand one of the great crimes of the twentieth century. By relating the life stories of different activists, Hearman resurrects a group of people whose contribution to Indonesian society its rulers have tried to erase.

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P.S.

• Jacobin, 01.02.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/01/unmasked-graves-review-indonesia-genocide-communist-party>