

# Thailand, October 6, 1976 : An English-Language Guide to the Thammasat University Massacre

Saturday 21 November 2020, by [Pan Siripark](#) (Date first published: 28 August 2020).

**For many, learning about October 6, 1976 is a jarring and thoroughly disconcerting experience, particularly for those using the event as a gateway into understanding Thai history and politics.**

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However, apart from Thongchai Winichakul's seminal and highly personal book, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok*, recently published this year, English-language works remain thin on the ground. It's especially a shame given the English pieces that are few and far between are themselves like Winichakul's book, highly personal and touching, certainly deserving of a wider readership.

Here is a brief historiography of the October 6 event.

## Background

It's crucial to remember the atmosphere of anti-Communist paranoia that permeated through Thai society and was ultimately a primary factor in dictating the brutality of government forces as they opened fire on the campus. With half of Thailand's neighbouring countries falling under Communist regimes in 1975, Mong Palatino's piece in *The Diplomat magazine* [1] offers a great overview of the regional turmoil and the Communist threat that Thai authorities thought of as existential.

In terms of the massacre itself, the presence of huge mobs that took part in the violence might give rise to the misconception that the event was a largely spontaneous affair. Not so, says prominent Thai historian Nidhi Eoseewong [2]. His analysis comes to the conclusion that 'the brutality on October 6 was neither spontaneous nor natural' in a statement translated by another professor, Tyrell Haberkorn.

## The events on the day

Perhaps no work of writing can fully capture the sheer horror of that day. Certainly not for the faint of heart.

This Youtube video, simply called 'documenting the events of October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976' [3] ("๖ ตุลา ๒๕๑๙ 6 ตุลาคม 2519"), shows the original footage of the massacre in all its horror. The editors have even engaged in a display of withering satire, setting the final shots of troops rounding up terrified students against the tune of victorious marching music. Needless to say, this video is age-restricted.

A harrowing account of the day's events, also translated by Tyrell Haberkorn, comes from Suchada Chakpisuth. A veteran journalist who has long been known for her anti-corruption exposés, was also part of the theatre group that staged the mock hangings, tragically misconstrued as portraying the hanging of the then-Crown Prince. Her escape and poignant reflections can be found in this article in the *LA Review of Books* [4].

Finally, a great article comes from a newsletter of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Alumni Association, focusing on the experiences on the day Thongchai Winichakul, then a student leader, and Neal Ulevich, the Associated Press photographer who took the famous Pulitzer Prize-winning picture of 'chair guy'.

This would also be the ideal moment to introduce the work of [www.doct6.com](http://www.doct6.com), the website responsible for preserving the previous article. Overseen by professor Puangthong Pawakapan of Chulalongkorn University and aided by a team of exceptionally dedicated volunteers, the project aims to preserve the evidence of the massacre in the form of a widely accessible digital archive. It's also worth another reminder to get a copy of Thongchai Winichakul's book as a part of the proceeds are used to help fund this worthy cause.

## The Aftermath

While much of the focus has been placed on the contrast between the official statistics and what is believed to be higher and more realistic numbers, significant efforts have been devoted in humanising the victims.

Professors Puangthong and Winichakul have written one of the most disturbing, yet essential contributions to understanding the massacre — a *New Mandala* publication on the desecration of the bodies of the murdered students [5]. Readers should be warned that this article also contains highly graphic imagery, more so than the other pieces.

Hand in hand with the appalling fate that lay in store for the victims, came the grief of their families and friends, serving as living reminder of the trauma that have layed dormant in Thai society until relatively recently.

Two documentaries with English subtitles come from Pattaraphon Phoothong, a filmmaker and a key force behind the doct6 archive. Containing testimonies from those closest to the students killed on the day, the first under the name 'Silenced' [6], recounts the stories of two parents who lost children during the event. Meanwhile, 'Respectfully Yours' [7] offers a general overview of the massacre and the aftermath by the friends and siblings of the slain students. A heartbreaking watch, this is made all the more sobering in the deliberate omission of footage of the massacre, a nod to resist the temptation to fixate on the event and focus instead on the process of healing long-forgotten wounds through remembrance.

Much is still to be established regarding the evidence on the massacre, and from that, even more inevitably requires translation into English to reach out to a global audience. However, this is hopefully an adequate starting point for those who are interested in understanding one of the

darkest chapters in Thai history.

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• Thai Enquirer. October 28, 2020:

<https://www.thaienquirer.com/20144/an-english-language-guide-to-the-thammasat-university-massacre/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://thedi diplomat.com/2015/12/1975-the-start-and-end-of-conflict-in-southeast-asia/>

[2] Available on ESSF (article 55481), [Thailand: The 6 October 1976 Massacre and the Present](#).

[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=YwNiekqpFwY&feature=youtu.be&t=618>

[4] Available on ESSF (article 55730), [October 6, 1976 - Unforgettable, Unrememberable: The Thammasat Massacre in Thailand](#).

[5] <https://www.newmandala.org/the-desecration-of-corpses-on-6-october-1976-who-how-and-why/>

[6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAbgvsDvkT4&list=WL&index=527>

[7] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig2DCytG8\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig2DCytG8_Y)