

INTERVIEW

Anti-Communist Massacres Killed Indonesia's Hopes for National Liberation and Socialism

Friday 27 October 2023, by [BEVINS Vincent](#), [FOGEL Benjamin](#) (Date first published: 19 May 2020).

The mass slaughter of leftists in Indonesia was more than just another Washington-backed atrocity. It was the prototype for smashing the hopes and dreams of the Left in the developing world — for good.

With the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the post-Cold War global order has been shaken to its very core. The stark inequalities not only within nations but *between* nations has been laid bare.

For a generation shaped by the defeat of actually-existing communism and Third World nationalism, one of our difficulties has always been believing another world was ever truly possible. Our predecessors didn't have that problem. They believed that not only was a more just society possible, it was within their reach.

But it wasn't just failed economic experiments that put an end to those dreams. The defeat of socialist and reformist movements from Brazil to Indonesia was the result of an organized, global anti-communist campaign led by the United States and supported by other Western powers and local elites. And it was horrifically violent.

Journalist Vincent Bevins's first book, [The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program That Shaped Our World](#) is an insightful and original history of this violence inflicted by the United States and its allies during the Cold War. Bevins argues that our world today is one built by anti-communist violence.

The Jakarta Method is more than just another litany of Cold War atrocities, it's an empathetic engagement with the hopes and dreams of a generation that lived through these events. *Jacobin* contributing editor Benjamin Fogel spoke with Bevins about how anti-communism remade our world into the wildly unequal planet we live on today.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

What inspired you to write this book?

VINCENT BEVINS

I arrived in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2017, to cover all of Southeast Asia for the *Washington Post*. First, it became very clear right away that the ghosts of the 1965 massacre lurked right below the surface

no matter where I looked. It totally reshaped everything but was never spoken about candidly. And second, when I would tell people outside the region about what happened, they would invariably react with shock and interest. The mass killings in Indonesia were maybe the biggest “victory” for the West in the entire Cold War. It was, in fact, far more important for Washington to win here than in Vietnam. The United States assisted in the intentional murder of approximately 1 million innocent people. And third, I found out there were lots of unexpected connections to countries like Brazil, Chile, and Guatemala that I know well and where I could really add something. So I felt I had no choice.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

How exactly was the conflict in Indonesia more important than the Vietnam War?

VINCENT BEVINS

Indonesia is the fourth-largest country in the world by population. Within the “domino theory,” it was by far the biggest domino — it had nearly three times as many people as Vietnam. In the early 1960s, everyone in the US foreign-policy establishment recognized it was more important than Vietnam as a foreign-policy issue, as Sukarno was a founding leader of the Third World movement. The Vietnam War dominated US domestic politics for many years, but geopolitically, it achieved exactly nothing. Indonesia 1965–66 changed everything.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

The event at the heart of your book is a mass extermination campaign directed against the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), at the time the largest communist party outside of China and the Soviet Union. How was the party so successful and seen as such a threat to the United States’ interests?

VINCENT BEVINS

The PKI was the oldest communist party in Asia, founded before the Chinese Communist Party, and from the beginning, it was committed to collaboration with “national-bourgeois” forces. They were two-stage revolutionaries that only wanted to transition to socialism way in the future, after the full development of capitalism. It was very moderate compared to what English speakers think of when they hear “communist” today.

In China, the Comintern actually instructed Mao to collaborate with the Nationalists because Moscow wanted the Chinese to replicate the success Indonesian communists had working with Muslim groups. It didn’t work out so well for Mao, but the PKI stayed more or less on this path throughout its entire existence. After Sukarno and revolutionary forces expelled the Dutch in 1949, the PKI became one part of a new, independent multiparty democracy.

President Sukarno, the country’s independence hero and founding father, was not a communist. But he was a left-leaning anti-imperialist, governing in coalition with a lot of different forces. The Indonesian communists did not have weapons and didn’t even contemplate the possibility of armed struggle. Even American officials noted at the time that they were simply a really well-run organization — they had very popular cultural programs and peasant organizations and a huge feminist base, and they didn’t suffer from rampant corruption like everybody else. But they got more and more votes, which did not please Washington — so the United States tried two stop them in two ways, which both failed.

First, they started pumping cash into a more conservative Muslim party. Then, in 1958, CIA pilots

bombed Indonesia, killing civilians, in an attempt to break up the country. That year, British intelligence noted that the PKI would get first place in elections. But despite the Communists' protests, there weren't any more elections, and PKI stuck to supporting Sukarno as, at the other end of the political spectrum, there was the US-trained and US-supplied military waiting in the wings.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

Part of the story you are telling here is about how a generation dreamed of a better world. Can you talk a bit about what inspired this generation and the significance of these dreams today?

VINCENT BEVINS

I put quite a lot of time and effort into making this a real story, with actual human beings and the ups and downs in their real lives, rather than just analysis or a body count. The people I ended up meeting drove the book for me and totally changed it.

And one thing that was really unexpected was the world they opened up for me, just by remembering what they once thought the future would be like. I was born in the 1980s, and for my generation, it all seems so obvious that the world would be like *this*, that you'd have crony capitalism everywhere except a few rich countries, and white people being able to fly to any of the poor brown countries and essentially buy and sell people there with money we got just by being born in the First World.

For my generation, it seemed clear that "communism" would lose and be swept off the face of the earth, and you'd have to maximize your value in an economy you know is kind of bullshit. That the most powerful country on Earth would just always be conducting wars with several countries at once that are mostly inscrutable to most people. All this seems like it had to happen.

And just from speaking to these people, spending months gaining their trust and understanding how they saw the world unfolding in the 1950s and the 1960s, it became very clear that it did not.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

What happened in Indonesia in 1965, and what led up these events? Could you also give us an idea which US actors were involved and for what reasons?

VINCENT BEVINS

The short version is that the US-backed military used a rebellion as a pretext to launch a grotesque anti-communist propaganda campaign, round up and murder approximately 1 million leftists or accused leftists, and put another million in concentration camps.

But the long version is: first, John F. Kennedy is murdered. That totally changes the US approach to Indonesia, and 1965 might be the most important consequence of JFK's death. Lyndon Johnson has far less time for Sukarno's anti-imperialist antics, specifically a confrontation with Britain over the creation of Malaysia and switches in a new ambassador. The CIA and MI6 stepped up their propaganda and clandestine activities, and a lot of this is secret to this day. I called up the CIA and asked what they did and why this is still classified, but guess what, they wouldn't tell me.

What we do know is that, in secret, Western officials said repeatedly that the best thing that could happen would be an "abortive Communist coup" that could be used as justification to crush the PKI. Very mysteriously, something exactly like this happened. The various theories as to what the uprising really was could fill a gripping fifty-part podcast, but suffice to say there was a rebellion of

low-level army officers that claimed a group of generals were planning a right-wing coup. Six of those generals ended up dead.

Very soon after that, reactionary general Suharto took control of the entire country, shut down all media except his own, and the military started overseeing mass murder. Citizens were told to kill or be killed. The United States provided critical material support, encouraged the military to kill *more* people, and provided lists with names of people to be executed. Regular leftists had no idea any of this was coming. Many I met had no prior conception that being “communist” was even a bad thing. The unimpeded slaughter was over by early 1966, and American corporations set up shop in the country soon after.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

The other major event in your book is the 1964 military coup in Brazil that led to twenty-one years of military rule. What was the significance of the coup, and how does it relate to the events of 1965 in Indonesia?

VINCENT BEVINS

The Brazilian coup happened first, of course. And to me, the propaganda story peddled by Suharto in 1965 looks eerily familiar to the anti-communist legend that motivated the Brazilian military one year before. But more broadly, what you have here is two countries that go through the same process at the same time and produce the same kind of societies. Both countries have US-backed military coups that create anti-communist, authoritarian capitalist social structures that mostly remain in place to this day.

The armed forces in both countries were trained at the same base in the United States and had a lot of opportunity to learn from each other, and they were certainly studying under the same American teachers. One major character in the book, an amazing man I was very lucky to meet, told me all about the way those men lived in Kansas in the 1950s.

The coups were enormous victories for the global right — these are huge countries, after all — and the resulting regimes embarked on a kind of anti-communist mini imperialism in their respective regions.

Then, in the early '70s, as Brazil is in the most brutal phase of its dictatorship and helping the Chilean military to prepare the ground for their own coup, we see right-wing actors in both countries looking to Indonesia for inspiration, and that is the birth of the “Jakarta” terror meme that I trace across the world in the book.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

Terror meme?

VINCENT BEVINS

Right, the use and reuse of “Jakarta” afterward around the world to signify the mass murder of leftists. Painted on walls, sent in postcards, used to name secret terror operations, etc.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

How did these interventions differ from earlier Cold War interventions, such as the ones took place in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954?

VINCENT BEVINS

I draw a kind of distinction between the first phase of Cold War interventions in the Third World — Iran 1953 and Guatemala 1954 are the best examples — and these quieter and ultimately more successful 1960s interventions. In Iran, you had the CIA hiring strongmen and circus performers to do fake protests. In Guatemala, you had planes dropping bombs on the capital, and the government negotiating its surrender directly with the US ambassador. It was just entirely obvious that Washington was orchestrating things, even if the US press did not tell Americans that.

With Indonesia and Brazil, it was different. In Indonesia in 1958, the CIA tried to replicate the success of the 1954 Guatemala playbook. It didn't work. They had US pilots dropping bombs on tropical islands and killing civilians, and they got caught. So they shifted to a different strategy, of aligning themselves deeply with a strengthened military — something similar to what had been happening between Brazil and the United States since World War II.

So when you actually had the coups in 1964 and 1965, you had local actors leading events to a large extent, even if US officials were involved behind the scenes, constantly informed and giving their approval and advice, making it clear to the Brazilians and Indonesians what they should and should not do. To the average citizen in Indonesia and Brazil, it appeared that it was a segment of their own country that had seized power. To some extent, that was true.

And I think it's no coincidence that the regimes established in Brazil and Indonesia were a whole lot more successful at creating a stable, lasting legacy than the governments created in Iran 1953 and Guatemala 1954.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

What exactly is the Jakarta Method, then?

VINCENT BEVINS

The Jakarta Method is rounding up and killing huge numbers of unarmed leftists, in the service of establishing a specific type of social order. By eliminating these people, this potential opposition, you clear the way for authoritarian capitalism at home and the creation of a geopolitical actor that fits into a growing, US-led system.

Indonesia 1965 was the deadliest and most consequential time this "method" was employed, though it wasn't the first. Because of its fame and importance, countries in Latin America started using "Jakarta" to signify that exact kind of extermination program.

The reason they did this, and the reason this is such a shocking moment in twentieth-century history, is because the Jakarta method absolutely *worked*. And the reason it worked so well was the posture of the world's preeminent power, the United States. The global right saw what happened in Indonesia, and saw that Suharto was quickly accepted into the constellation of respected US allies. The global left saw, too, and reacted in ways that would have long-lasting consequences for socialist movements.

But "Jakarta" was put into place effectively in South America and Central America, as well as parts of Asia (though they didn't use that name), and these regimes ended up constructing the world we are sitting in today. The list is exhaustive: Chile, Brazil, Guatemala, and Argentina, to name a few. The major building blocks of a new globalized system, especially in the "developing world" — i.e., the vast majority of the planet. So, I think to a really large extent, we live in a world created by anti-communist massacres.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

I think what is striking about these events is that, with some exceptions, the cases that anchor your book — Brazil and Indonesia, along with the later example of Chile in 1973 — were reformist and communist projects that sought to pursue change democratically rather than revolutionary means. Do you think there are lessons here for today's Left?

VINCENT BEVINS

Definitely. By and large, and especially in the case of the Indonesian Communist Party, it was the nonviolent, gradualist movements that were killed. The simple explanation is that it wouldn't have been so easy to kill them if they were armed, or even expecting this at all. Even in the countries where you did have violent guerrilla movements (as in Central America), the bulk of the dead were usually not the hardened fighters up in the hills, but peasants who were taken entirely by surprise when the military death squads arrived.

I spent some time in a Guatemalan village where this occurred, and it's just impossible to communicate the depths of the depravity here, not to mention the burning injustice of the life that was left after the violence was over. Compared to their plight, I feel guilty for saying this, but this was a very emotionally difficult book to write. What I found really throttled me, threw me entirely off balance, and made me question a lot of things. Though I made sure not to make the actual book violent or horrible, I was swimming really deep in some dark stuff, and it was difficult.

Perhaps for that reason, I may not be the best person to draw the lessons out. I definitely think there are lessons there. I just think they aren't one hundred percent clear. They require some careful consideration. I think, for example, enthusiastic supporters of the Bernie Sanders campaign may find some resonance with their current moment. More directly, readers living in the "developing world" could find, I think, that it sheds some light on the contemporary situation. And the story certainly tells us a lot about the nature of US hegemony. What I would really like is for other people to take the whole book in and tell me what they think the lessons are.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

You argue in the book that anti-communist violence destroyed the potential for alternative experiments in development for the so-called Third World, leading to our current age of global inequality. Can you expand on what this meant, for instance, in Bandung or the New International Economic Order, in the sense that it was blood that ended these experiments more than economic errors?

VINCENT BEVINS

One of the things that was especially moving, perhaps more so than the violence, was sitting down with these elderly people and talking at length about how they understood the world in the beginning of the 1960s.

The Third World — used in the entirely optimistic and triumphant original sense — had just achieved independence from European imperialism. The peoples of the formerly colonized nations were coming together to take their place on the world stage. *Of course* they would change the rules of the global order. *Of course* they would catch up to the West. *Of course* they would advance toward socialism. It wasn't just leftist militants who believed this — in Indonesia, this was basically the national ideology, and all across Asia and Africa and Latin America, it just seemed obvious. You get rid of colonialism, so now you get to be equal to the white countries. I could just see their eyes light

up when they remember this dream.

It didn't happen, of course. And I try to demonstrate in this book that a significant part of the reason for that, a constituent element of the "globalization" that we did get, was a new type of violence. And if you look at the people who were killed simply for their beliefs in that progressive future — the feminist Gerakan Wanita in Indonesia, for example — you found they stood for things that almost every good liberal in the English-speaking world now defends.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

One of the arguments you make is that anti-communism is a founding ideology or even religion in countries like Indonesia and Brazil. What does this mean, and how does it continue to shape contemporary politics? Do you think this is true to an extent in the United States as well?

VINCENT BEVINS

Well, it is uncontroversial that anti-communism was the foundational ideology for the regimes created in 1964 and 1965. But what I think is really interesting is that no one pays much attention to what that actually means. I feel as if it's like the fish trying to describe water. We live in a world where it is so obvious that the anti-communists won that we don't see how that affected our trajectory.

And what it meant for twentieth-century anti-communist dictatorships is that any kind of criticism of the social order, any bottom-up pressure, any give and take between capital and labor — the kind of thing most everyone recognizes as being essential to functioning capitalism — can be dismissed as "communism" and cast aside. Which generates the deeply corrupt form of capitalism you see now basically everywhere except for Western Europe and, perhaps, North America.

But in Brazil and Indonesia, the anti-communist legacy is especially obvious. To this day, it is still illegal to defend "communism" in Indonesia, which leads to absurd stories of clueless tourists wearing a T-shirt from a communist country and getting arrested, or much more seriously, my friends and roommate getting threatened and terrorized any time they meet to talk about their country's history. In Brazil, when I started working on this book in 2017, I said that the ghost of violent anti-communism had never been exorcised and could return to terrify the country. Now that Jair Bolsonaro is president, I take no pleasure in being proven much more right than I ever expected.

Coincidentally, his son, congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, wants to make "communism" illegal in Brazil, and he has cited the Indonesian law as inspiration.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

These events have been recast according to the victors in Brazil, for instance, as a revolution in defense of democracy against communism. In both cases, to varying degrees, a type of mass amnesia prevails. How do you think this revisionism shapes contemporary politics?

VINCENT BEVINS

It's important to stress two things at the same time. On the one hand, there was no communist threat in Brazil. On the other hand, there was a real threat to the social order that Brazilian elites and the military and the United States wanted to maintain. That order was very fragile and needed top-down violence to be sustained.

President "Jango" Goulart was a liberal reformer at most, the Communist party was fairly small, and

Moscow had no interest in trying to provoke Washington by fomenting revolution in South America. However, if he had been allowed to run again, he would have likely won. If he had implemented some of his basic reforms — allowing everyone to vote, basic land reform, mass literacy — that would have changed the country, including for the elites. Brazil is a violent settler colony largely defined by elite terror of slave rebellions or revolution from below, and once more, the ruling class saw red and attacked first. The 1964 coup stopped social evolution in its tracks, and froze that mid-century social order in place, largely to this day.

Of course, everyone in Brazil fights over defining and redefining history, and Bolsonaro has been remarkably victorious in the last two to three years. We now often see a version that is more virulently anti-communist and distorted than that which the generals were presenting in 1968.

BENJAMIN FOGEL

What do you believe is the legacy of this anti-communism in American politics?

VINCENT BEVINS

Well, I think there are two things. On the one hand, we did not build up the social-democratic structures that Western Europe did in the postwar years, and I think a bit of that — not all of it — can be blamed on that anti-communist impulse. I'm not sure if that is what stopped us from expanding our welfare state in recent years, because that kind of expansion hasn't happened basically anywhere in the developed world since the Berlin Wall fall and the "neoliberal" world-historical era began. But I think it's likely not a coincidence that the only rich country without socialized medicine was also the "global fortress of anti-communism," as Brazilian historian Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta put it.

And second, that muscle memory is just very obviously still there. I think Russiagate was probably a good example of that. I didn't follow the stuff closely, but I think historians will probably look and conclude, "Well, it seems liberals had a kind of freak-out, went into denial that their countrymen elected Donald Trump, and slid in an old Cold War baddie because it was easier than looking at themselves," leaving aside, of course, all the ways that Vladimir Putin was actually a bad actor in 2016.

This is not really what you asked, but I think the real legacy of our "anti-communist crusade," as I put it, is not so much domestic as it defined our geopolitical position, our relation to the rest of the world. And for that, it was everything. I think Odd Arne Westad is right to say that much of the global system was hammered out in "Cold War" conflicts, and this is probably the most extensive and robust global system in planetary history.

P.S.

• Jacobin. 05.19.2020:

<https://jacobin.com/2020/05/anti-communist-massacres-indonesia-brazil-communism>

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