Archipel

Études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien

101 | 2021

Varia

The 1965-66 Elimination of

Indonesian Communists: Two Recent Re-readings

John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-66 in Indonesia*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020. Series: Critical Human Rights. ISBN: 978 02 9932 730 9. Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2018. Southeast Asia Publications Series, Asian Studies Association of Australia. ISBN: 978-87-7694-257-1.

Mary Somers Heidhues

Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/archipel/2460>

DOI : 10.4000/archipel.2460

ISSN : 2104-3655

Éditeur

Association Archipel

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 30 juin 2021

Pagination : 255-258

ISBN : 978-2-910513-85-6

ISSN : 0044-8613

Référence électronique

Mary Somers Heidhues, « The 1965-66 Elimination of Indonesian Communists: Two Recent Re-readings », *Archipel* [En ligne], 101 | 2021, mis en ligne le 30 juin 2021, consulté le 02 juillet 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/archipel/2460> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.2460>

d'informations et permet d'aborder les guerres et conflits coloniaux sous un angle renouvelé. Il convainc en cela le lecteur qu'il y a encore des choses à dire, et beaucoup à écrire, sur deux sujets que l'on croyait pourtant connus.

Elsa Clavé

The 1965-66 Elimination of Indonesian Communists: Two Recent Re-readings

John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-66 in Indonesia*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020. Series: Critical Human Rights. ISBN: 978 02 9932 730 9.

Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2018. Southeast Asia Publications Series, Asian Studies Association of Australia. ISBN: 978-87-7694-257-1.

These two authors have added significantly to accounts of the bloody aftermath of the alleged communist coup attempt of 1965 in Indonesia. Roosa is known for his study of the events of October 1965 and the swift retaliation of General Suharto and other army leaders against the Indonesian Communist Party, PKI,¹² that ended with the replacement of President Sukarno's Guided Democracy with a military-led New Order. Here, the narrative deals with the retaliatory violence of 1965-1966 against the party and its purported sympathizers, when hundreds of thousands were murdered, often by politically-aligned civilian militia groups, while even more were arrested, interrogated, tortured and incarcerated without trial. The account profits from Roosa's years of investigations. In addition to contemporary documents and official accounts, he cites memoirs (many unpublished), interviews and other new sources that became available as former prisoners were released after 1979 and especially after 1998 and the fall of Suharto's New Order. Many of these accounts have been collected by Indonesian researchers, archived at the Indonesian Institute of Social History in Jakarta. Regional experiences varied and the military itself was far from united in its attitude toward Sukarno or the PKI. For this reason, it is important that Roosa names names and specifies dates; in addition, many of his interviewees have since died, closing off important oral testimony.

The core of the book are four regional studies: Surakarta, Bali, South Sumatra and Riau that show carefully how the Indonesian Army, and the regional commanders in particular, were responsible for provoking and organizing the deaths of suspected adherents of the PKI or its front organizations—or not. In Java and elsewhere, military commanders and special units incited youth organizations or militias of various backgrounds—Islamic parties, the Nationalist Party, even urban toughs, depending on local conditions—to massacre suspected sympathizers of the PKI.

12. John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

The cases of South Sumatra and Riau, both of which involved reprisals against oil industry laborers aligned with their PKI-affiliated union Perbum (Persatuan Buruh Minyak), illustrate how local commanders differed. In South Sumatra-Palembang, the local military arrested union members and activists, incarcerating them. Unable or unwilling to provide food for such a large number, they gradually removed groups of prisoners for execution until, finally, the rest were left to die of neglect and hunger on an island in the River Musi. In Riau-Pekanbaru, in contrast, the military commander was sympathetic to Sukarno and, although there were arrests and some executions of union organizers and others, there were no killings on a similar scale as long as he remained in charge.

Roosa builds his case carefully, underlining the culpability of the military and individual military commanders. Yet the armed forces, who even now, after the end of the Suharto era, permeate all levels of administrative responsibility. An entire chapter discusses the use of torture against detainees, showing how little information such cruelty brought to light. Roosa suggests that killings on such a large scale deserve the epithet of genocide, even though they do not fulfill the classic definition of the term, that it is directed to ethnic, religious, or national groups. Would “politicide” be more appropriate or could communism be, in the broadest sense, a religious conviction, thus meeting the definition?

Such an impressive work deserves a longer discussion than is possible here, but there is one minor error: the name of Oei Tjoe Tat, member of Sukarno’s last cabinet, appointed to a fact-finding commission charged with investigating the first massacres of October-December 1965, political prisoner and author of an important memoir, is consistently misspelled.

Roosa ends with “Afterlives,” a short recounting of a meeting in Jakarta in 2016 that attempted to open efforts toward reconciliation and a new picture of 1965-66 that differs from the official version that ascribes the blame for the purported coup to the PKI and attributes the massacres of the left to a spontaneous outbreak of violence in an atmosphere of “kill or be killed.” Roosa and others show how helpless the PKI really was, unable to organize more than small pockets of resistance; most of its adherents were caught completely off guard by the events, many even sought safety by turning themselves in to the police, only to face retaliation and death. This explanation had little effect on the few official participants in the meeting, most of whom were from the military and who stubbornly held to the official version still propagated in public displays and in education. In fact, most of them left the conference after their own lectures on the opening day.

Vanessa Hearman’s book deals with a more limited, but important, region of the PKI’s activities, East Java, parts of which province strongly supported the party from the 1950s and even during the struggle for independence. The study moves from published sources about the history of the PKI, its policy of peaceful cooperation with the Sukarno government under Chairman D. N. Aidit, and the explosion of violence against its supporters in late 1965, to the region of South Blitar, where remnants of the PKI tried to establish a rural base for resurrecting the party and its front organizations. Like Roosa, Hearman profits from first-hand accounts that became available after the end of the New Order. She conducted extensive interviews with participants and, as far as possible, people in South Blitar.

Rebounding from its defeat in the Madiun Rebellion of 1948, the PKI expanded its influence at many levels, participating in the elections of 1955 and 1957, utilizing

auxiliaries like Gerwani, the women's organization, SOBSI, the labor federation, Barisan Tani Indonesia, the peasants' union, and HSI, the union of intellectuals, to multiply its supporters and expand its influence across the archipelago. East Java was an important area of its successes.

In the northern parts of East Java, however, people adhered to a stricter Islam, there, the NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), with its base in the rural *pesantren*, was the strongest political force. The harbor city of Surabaya, with its large contingent of laborers, many organized in SOBSI, was a stronghold of the left, as were Blitar and other regions in the south. After 1957, with the abolition of elections and Guided Democracy, the party leadership under Aidit saw some of its political rivals eliminated, while it gained new opportunities to extend its influence. In particular, Sukarno's "Nasakom" ideology opened opportunities for the PKI to participate widely in administration and politics. At the same time, the new situation gave much more power to the armed forces, which were predominantly, but not entirely, opposed to communism. Navigating the new situation gingerly, the party greatly expanded its membership and that of its subordinate organizations, growing ever closer to Sukarno himself.

Following Mortimer,¹³ Hearman shows how the party began in the mid-1960s to expand its rural activities with *aksi sepihak* (one-sided action), seizing land from larger owners and claiming to implement Indonesia's long-dormant land reform legislation. This aroused the opposition of landowning groups, who in East Java often adhered to the NU. In 1965, the party also proposed arming peasants and workers as a fifth armed force, threatening the military's monopoly of violence. From October to December 1965, an estimated 100,000 supposed PKI supporters were slaughtered (some estimates are as high as 200,000), often by youth and militia of the NU, armed and encouraged by army leaders. Some escaped, only to be arrested and imprisoned, brutally tortured and mistreated. In the following months, the first-rank leadership of the party was wiped out.

The most important contribution of Hearman's account is in its last two chapters, where she describes how surviving second-echelon leaders from the PKI and front organizations like Gerwani and BTI attempted from early 1967 to reconstitute the party using the model of China's Yan'an. This final bastion in Java was short-lived. While its isolation seems to have spared the area from the orgy of violence in 1965-1966, a new commander of the region's Brawijaya Division began a campaign to wipe out these last pockets of resistance within a few months. The Trisula campaign¹⁴ between May and September 1968 used overwhelming military force and counter-insurgency tactics inherited in part from colonial times, refined in the anti-guerilla battles in Malaya, Vietnam and elsewhere during the 20th century.

Like Roosa, Hearman profited from the changed climate for researchers, especially after 1998, to build her account of how the Brawijaya Division and its auxiliaries moved against the rebels. With an enormous advantage in men and arms, the military overwhelmed the former leaders of the party and mass organizations. Having attempted to assimilate into the rural population, they were hunted, sometimes

13. Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959-1965*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

14. Trisula is a kind of three-pronged spear.

denounced, and forced to flee to the forest, surviving in caves and raiding garden plots near the edges of settlement, isolated and starving, before finally being captured. Unlike the victims of the 1965 massacres, those captured were usually arrested, imprisoned and even tried in a semblance of legal retribution, an attempt to present the New Order as controlled and orderly. Some survivors, finally released from about 1979, were Hearman's informants.

Hearman then turns to the cruel effects of the counter-insurgency campaign on the villagers themselves, a few of whom also testified, anonymously, to Hearman years later. The army extended strict control over the population, recruiting spies, turncoats and informers. In the name of development, it built roads and compelled villagers, whose houses had been dispersed near their fields, to move near the roads. There, they had opportunities for better mobility and even cash incomes, but concentration meant military and administrative supervision and isolation—villagers were mingled with settlers from other villages in the new settlements. Land tenure became an issue as well. In an area of largely nominal adherence to religious practices, the military promoted both Pancasila and Islam, building or repairing mosques and prayer houses, enabling religious instruction, hoping to counteract the supposedly atheistic core of communism. Its campaign did not, in contrast to the practice of late 1965, cooperate with NU or its adherents. If anything, the officers kept their distance from what was the most influential religious organization in the province.

If the military's operation succeeded in wiping out the last remnants of the PKI in Java, it also succeeded in suppressing the population. Visiting the area even several years after the dissolution of the New Order in 1998, journalists and researchers noted the reluctance of the villagers to speak, not only with outsiders, but with each other.

Mary Somers Heidhues
Göttingen, Germany

Elke Papelitzky, *Writing World History in Late Ming China and the Perception of Maritime Asia*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, East Asian Maritime History 15, 2020, 240 p., Index, 38 Tables, 14 Figures. ISBN 978-3-447-11309-0

In this ten-chapter book (based on her dissertation), Elke Papelitzky examines in great detail how certain late Ming scholars became interested in foreign countries and their relations with the Middle Kingdom after the lifting of the ban on maritime trade in 1567, i.e. at a time when the empire was threatened on its northern border¹⁵ and the tributary relations with the various Asian countries were undermined by the new situation of the global trade system. In order to do this, the author explains in the introduction (Chap. 1), how she selected seven works, some better known than others, from the 1570s to the first three decades of the 17th century, which she considers to be "world histories" although the term is hardly used by those concerned. These are, in chronological order, the *Shuyu zhouchi lu* 殊域周諮錄 or "Records of the Dispatches Concerning Various Regions" the *Xianbing lu* 咸賓錄 or "Records of all Guests,"

15. The Ming dynasty was to be overthrown by the Manchus in 1644.