

# BOOK REVIEWS

DOUGLAS KAMMEN AND KATHARINE MCGREGOR, EDS.

## **The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965–1968**

Kyoto CSEAS Series on Asian Studies 7. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, in association with Kyoto University Press, 2013. 276 pp.

Despite its appalling magnitude, the 1965–1968 mass killings in Indonesia have been at the fringes of international historical imagination. While it has received an increased attention in the past years, particularly with recent Oscar nomination for Oppenheimer's documentary *The Act of Killing*, it pales in comparison with other gruesome cases such as Cambodia's "killing fields" and Rwanda's genocide, prompting some people to dub it as the "forgotten Holocaust." The number of serious studies has been very limited with Java and Bali as the main focus. The volume under review here is a very notable contribution to our understanding of this complex set of events and their lasting repercussions.

The volume, which grew out of a workshop in Singapore in June 2009, consists of ten chapters. In addition to the introductory chapter which clarifies the context and sets the parameter of the study, there are nine main chapters that address a number of themes: versions of official history, international contexts, perpetrators, regional dynamics, experience of victims, and, finally, contemporary resonances. Some chapters, or parts thereof, previously appeared in earlier publications. By putting them together, along with other chapters written originally for the volume, we have a valuable compilation of articles that significantly enhances our understanding of this tragic historical episode.

The editors, Kammen and McGregor, have done an admirable job in introducing the volume. Providing a succinct overview of the event and a strategically selective yet penetrating review of the problems and approaches in the existing corpus of relevant studies, they clarify the scholarly terrain within which each chapter in the volume may be located. They make a case for treating the mass violence during the period across the country as a “single attack . . . against . . . the ideals associated with Sukarno and Guided Democracy” (12). It was a counter-revolution, so they argue, to reintegrate Indonesia back into the capitalist fold.

The problematic and challenging nature of 1965–1966 killings as object of analysis is readily apparent in the first main chapter, John Roosa’s “The September 30th Movement: The Aporias of the Official Narratives.” Seeking to refine the monolithic depiction of the New Order’s official history which he portrayed in his book *Pretext for Mass Murder*, Roosa identifies three versions of the official narratives of the September 30th Movement and examines the inconsistencies therein. He argues that these inconsistencies reveal the lie or falsehood that the regime has tried to suppress or deny because it serves as the foundation of the regime’s rationale for existence. One can actually discern more versions of official history of this event. If only Roosa tried to examine closely the various editions of *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia*, including the version for high school (SNI, National History of Indonesia), rather than assumed too readily that Notosusanto and his group of military historians produced “three very similar publications” (31) and thus only one needs his attention, he would have realized that the overall picture was even more complicated. The cautionary note is hard to miss: If the official history, official as it is, is replete with several confusing versions, how much more baffling does it get when other more complicated aspects of the mass violence are analyzed?

For so long, the international contexts that helped enable the event and its aftermath to happen had been inadequately understood. Suspicions abound of the role of the United States and its allies and the Cold War politics more broadly, but incontrovertible pieces of evidence were lacking or indecisive. With the use of the hitherto underutilized archival sources like declassified U.S. intelligence files and diplomatic telegrams, the chapter by Bradley Simpson, “International Dimensions of the 1965–68 Violence in Indonesia,” which was adapted from his book *Economists with Guns* (2008), sheds considerable light on the direct and indirect roles of the United States in the tragic event. Not

only did United States provide encouragement, it provided logistical support in forms of weapons, training, communication equipment, and even list of thousands of allegedly PKI members drawn from CIA files. All these helped facilitate the processes that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the incarceration of over a million people.

The proactive roles in the mass killings of the military and religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) have also been talked about for long. Overall, however, much about the nature of these roles remained unclear. By providing rich details using old and new archival and oral sources, readers will find the chapters by David Jenkins and Douglas Kammen, "The Army Para-commando Regiment and the Reign of Terror in Central Java and Bali," and Greg Fealy and Katharine McGregor, "East Java and the Role of Nadhlatul Ulama in the 1965–66 Anti-Communist Violence," illuminating. These chapters demonstrate the deliberate and systematic efforts by the paramilitary group and NU-affiliated groups to eliminate the perceived enemies. Contrary to the tendency among NU functionaries to downplay their part, often claiming that they merely served subsidiary roles, Fealy and McGregor present strong pieces of evidence not only of willful involvement but leadership in many documented cases of mass killings in East Java. They also assert that it was the social, economic, and political interests of the NU leaders, rather than religion, that served as more critical factors in explaining the violent acts. The implications are dire, to say the least.

One expects that the experience of violence of this scale, spread out in various localities and happening within the period of about three years, is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Mary Ida Bagus's chapter offers a textured and probing analysis of the "complex and arbitrary nature of the . . . purges and their repercussions" (226). Based largely on oral interview data gathered from hundreds of informants from Jembrana, a community in west Bali, not only does the chapter highlight cases that conform to or confirm the long standing views on the matter. It also offers, and this where a major contribution of this chapter lies, valuable insights on other aspects such as the rehabilitation of perpetrators. In contrast to Muslim perpetrators whose guilt over their participation in the killings proved difficult to assuage, for example, some Hindu perpetrators managed to do so by drawing from the repository of Hindu religious beliefs and practices.

Other than religion, many people believe that ethnicity also played an important role in setting a differentiated terrain where

violence materialized. Yen-ling Tsai and Douglas Kammen's chapter, "Anti-communist violence and the Ethnic Chinese in Medan, North Sumatra," seeks to dispel the popular belief that the Chinese, because they were Chinese, were a primary target of violence in the aftermath of the 1965–1966 event. However, they point to three distinct phases when they in fact proved very vulnerable and they suffered greatly, but these happened because of the confluence of various factors, and not primarily because they were Chinese.

Some aspects of the multifaceted experience of those who managed to survive the purges are recounted in different fashions in Taufik Ahmad's and Vanessa Hearman's chapters. Ahmad, in a rather clinical manner, describes, in the chapter titled "South Sulawesi: The Military Prison Camps and Forced Labor," the experience of political prisoners in Mongcongloe Prison Camp in South Sulawesi. These prisoners were virtual slaves who did the back-breaking work in and out of the camp to serve the business and other interests of the military officers. Reaching out beyond the narratives drawn from well-known prison camps such as Buru island, this chapter is important for providing another set of details that help make the complex picture of the prisoners' experience less incomplete. For her part, Hearman, in the chapter titled "South Blitar and the PKI Bases: Refuge, Resistance and Repression," offers an engaging narrative and a nuanced analysis of the experience of PKI members and sympathizers who, seeking security, retreated to an isolated place in Blitar. By providing rich details showing that Trisula Operation amounted to the crushing of the fledgling "nest" of PKI resistance in 1968, it offers a refreshing counterpoint to the New Order regime's packaging of the event in official histories as a decisive and heroic military victory.

The volume fittingly closes with a chapter by McGregor on the contemporary politics of remembering the mass killings. Entitled "Mass Graves and Memories of the 1965 Indonesian Killings," the chapter focuses on a project initiated by NGOs to exhume a mass grave in Java. By shedding light on the shifting socio-political contexts that enabled such an undertaking to proceed initially, only to be met soon after by a strong, even violent, oppositions from certain quarters, it offers a compelling and penetrating analysis of the clashing memories of the 1965–1968 violence. Sidestepping the common tendency in area studies to be parochial in scope and approach, a reader easily appreciates the effort to locate the case of Indonesia within the broader field of memory studies and historical

injustice, and compare its outstanding features with those in other parts of the world.

The scale of the 1965–1968 killings is astounding. It is like a giant jigsaw puzzle that has thousands of pieces and only a small proportion of those pieces have so far been pieced together. This volume has contributed more than a fair share to the jigsaw-solving efforts, and in so doing continues the momentum unleashed since the demise of the New Order regime. One hopes that this momentum would be kept until most important parts of the puzzle takes shape to see even more clearly the contours of this tragic event.

**ROMMEL A. CURAMING**  
University of Brunei Darussalam  
<racuraming@gmail.com>

KAH SENG LOH, EDGAR LIAO, CHENG TJU LIM,  
AND GUO QUAN SENG

## **The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya** Tangled Strands of Modernity

Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013. 347 pp.

The main thesis of the book is this: There are “tangled strands” of modernity between the state (Malaya, but more of Singapore/People’s Action Party) and the socialist groups in the post-colonial Malaya and Singapore. The contest and convergence for being “modern” in the aftermath of independence (or separation of Singapore from Malaya) directs the book’s narratives and description for an alternative Malaysian historiography. The authors’ frame of analysis is clear: Most, if not all, political actors—whether they are the British, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Lee Kuan Yew, Dr. Poh Soo Kai, Lim Ching Siong, or many others—were engaging in a politics of nation-building in its most rationalist sense, a *realpolitik* using strategies and apparatuses for power. Power in this aspect refers to both the structural construction of the state in lieu of Singapore’s quest for industrialization, as well as the making of Singapore’s history (a power relation at the discursive level). Modernity is conceptualized as a quest for upgrading the quality of life of citizens within the nation, based on “post-Enlightenment and rationalist principles”