

The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68. Douglas Kammen and Katharine McGregor, Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. Pp. 320. Paper.

In the first hours of 1 October 1965 something happened in Jakarta that was to prove devastating for hundreds of thousands of people associated with the Indonesian Left. In the midst of rising political tension and economic instability, a group of soldiers kidnapped and executed six military generals and a lieutenant. Calling itself the September 30th Movement, the group announced that it had acted to prevent a coup against President Sukarno. Sympathetic military units immediately took control of cities elsewhere in Java. The movement was to be short-lived however. The following day, a military faction led by Major General Suharto arrested or killed those involved, seized control of mass media and began an extensive campaign of propaganda that blamed the coup on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Suharto sent his special forces into the field initiating one of the largest mass killings in history. By the following year over 500,000 people associated with the Indonesian Left had been systematically and brutally slaughtered.

The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68 must surely be the best compilation of information on the killings. The exact reasons and masterminds behind the coup will perhaps always remain unclear. But this edited volume provides a detailed account and compelling explanation of the destruction that followed. Unlike many edited volumes, the book provides a coherent narrative and complimentary analysis that provide a comprehensive account of the killings. The violence was above all the result of a struggle between the two main aspirants to political power in Indonesia – the military and the political Left. By eradicating the Left, the military was to preclude any challenge to its power for the following three decades and place Indonesia firmly in the western capitalist bloc. Yet the volume never neglects to show that local motivations and dynamics involved in the killings were often labyrinthine. By collating the complexity of the events in a clear manner this book provides an invaluable resource for students of Indonesian history and politics and of mass killing and genocide.

Several chapters detail the central role played by the red beret Special Forces unit, RPKAD, later known as KOPASSUS. The military unit often led the killings or created and armed civilian death squads, in some areas forcing villagers to kill their victims. Yet while the military played the main role, the book demonstrates that civil society organisations led the killings in many locations. Greg Fealy and Katherine McGregor recount the central role played by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization in East Java, where the largest number of killings occurred. The NU, particularly the organisation's youth wing, Ansor, led the way, planning and conducting the rounding up and slaughter of PKI members. The organisation's militancy often faced opposition from local military units; by early 1966 the army was warning the NU in East and Central Java that any of its members who continued killing would be shot. The authors present compelling evidence that the killings stemmed from the threat that the PKI posed to the growing political and economic power of the NU. Indeed, clashes had occurred between the NU and the PKI before the 1965 coup as a result of the communists' attempts to expropriate land from wealthy landowners, many of whom were senior NU *ulama*.

Some of the most interesting information provided in the book concerns the support given to the killings by the western powers. The chapter by Bradley Simpson recounts how the US, the United Kingdom, Australia and other western governments had become increasingly concerned with

President Sukarno's growing leftism and the attempted nationalization of foreign oil and other interests. Declassified cables show that the US and other embassies provided aid and other support to the army as the violence accelerated. Indeed, western officials were concerned that the military and their collaborators from the NU would not go far enough. The British Embassy worried about apparent restraint, writing that the army might be "letting this opportunity slip through its fingers" (p58). The CIA feared that "there is danger the Army may settle for action against those directly involved in the murder of the generals and permit Sukarno to get much of his power back" (p40). To ensure that rank and file members of leftist organisations were also targeted, the US and British embassies distributed "early and carefully planned propaganda and psywar activity designed to exacerbate internal strife" and illustrate the "PKI's guilt, treachery and brutality". Western embassies sought to absolve their allies of blame. American diplomatic correspondence made the now deeply ironic claim that Major General Suharto "has a good reputation as incorruptible and lives modestly" (p60).

The book makes a substantial contribution to the study of mass killing and genocide by providing information of direct relevance to some of the main puzzles in conflict study. "What motivates ordinary people to become killers?" is one such question. The chapter by Fealy and McGregor shows that religious leaders would recruit people from other districts to conduct killings in their own area, to avoid reluctance on the part of locals to kill people they knew. Fear also emerges as a motivation, many respondents stated they believed they had to "kill or be killed". The commander of the special forces, Sarwo Edhie, was particularly motivated because his former mentor and friend had been murdered by the September 30 Movement. In accounting for the differing motivations of both elite and rank and file killers, this chapter and others in the volume (such as that of David Jenkins and Douglas Kammen) are reminiscent of Christopher Browning's groundbreaking study of the Holocaust, *Ordinary Men* (1992). The book also illustrates the various ways by which religion facilitated the violence. NU leaders informed their followers that the PKI was anti-Islam, creating disorder and it was therefore obligatory to wage war against the party's members (p121). Religious leaders also assisted perpetrators of the violence in overcoming trauma (p124), presumably so they could continue with their work.

As a student of Indonesian history and politics, there is one issue on which I would like further clarity. If the mass killings were the endgame of a major power struggle between the military and the PKI, then why did so many military battalions join the September 30 movement? What was the relationship between these many officers and personnel and the PKI? Did rebel officers believe they were resisting a coup or actively supporting a more Left-leaning Indonesia? The motives and goals of the PKI and its supporters in the military remain unclear. This gap in our knowledge is unsurprising given the severe restrictions imposed upon the Indonesian Left, and upon sympathetic portrayals of the PKI, over the past five decades.

This volume is an exceptional synthesis of local knowledge, insightful analysis, detail, and clarity of expression. I would recommend it highly to any scholar or student of the history and politics of Indonesia, to those interested in how the Cold War played out within frontline states and to those seeking to understand the dynamics and causes of mass killing and genocide.

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