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Genocide in Indonesia, 1965-1966

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Between October, 1965 and March, 1966, approximately 500,000 people were killed in Indonesia. The killings received little international attention at the time and have seldom been studied in detail since then. The number of people killed and the precise circumstances of most deaths remain uncertain, and mistaken opinions on the identity of the victims and the motivations of their killers remain common, even in scholarly literature. One early polemical account of the killings rather implausibly described them as “the second-greatest crime of the century,”¹ but the killings received little attention in comparative literature on mass killings until the 1990s. The aim of this article is to summarize what can be said of the killings from primary and secondary literature and to suggest ways in which the Indonesian massacres can be considered within the broader discipline of genocide studies.

General considerations: genocide and the problem of political killings

One of the continuing problems for scholars of genocide is to determine the boundaries of the phenomenon. Genocide is at the same time both an analytical term for a complex set of political actions and consequences and a legal–moral term for what is often regarded as the worst of all human crimes, one of the few for which an appeal to state sovereignty and sovereign immunity is not an adequate defence. Although the United Nations General Assembly originally defined genocide as “the denial of the right of existence of entire human groups” and specifically mentioned racial, religious and political groups,² the term has come to apply primarily to planned (and largely successful) attempts to eliminate an ethnic or ethno-religious group by violent means, whether by massacre, by promotion of epidemic disease or by creating conditions which greatly accelerate death rates from “natural” causes such as exposure.

Political murder was excluded from the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide on the grounds that political groups were inherently mutable and more difficult to define than ethnic and religious groups. Many scholars, too, perhaps shared a feeling that the killing of people only because of their ethnicity had a horror which transcended the crime of killing people for their political views and activities: those who chosen to play politics and had lost, it seemed, were in a different category from those whose political status had been thrust upon them. Scholars and politicians may have feared that broadening the definition of genocide would risk weakening the sense of abhorrence, which the phenomenon
should arouse. There was a danger that the recognition of genocidal killing might become hostage to political considerations, rather than being condemned immediately for what it was. Thus the Weberian ideal type of genocide became the elimination of an ethnic group, with the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews acknowledged as the paradigm.  

Several factors, however, have worked to relax this narrow definition. Most important has been the gradual and uneven easing of Cold War tensions, especially from the 1970s, which allowed scholars to consider Stalinist repression as a genocide comparable to Hitler’s without becoming immediately entangled in Cold War antagonisms. The risk that perpetrators of genocide will be exonerated because of their political affiliations still exists, but it has diminished over the last 50 years. The Stalinist repression was especially important in this respect because many of his ostensibly political victims were precisely as innocent as the victims of Nazi genocide: they were killed not for what they had done or what they believed but for who they were related to, or even just for the sake of sustaining the terror. To regard them as less innocent than the victims of Nazism or to regard Stalin’s motives as less execrable than Hitler’s was a difficult (though admittedly not impossible) position to hold. In addition, the supposedly tight United Nations definition has proven unequal to dealing with the problem of scale. By defining genocide to include attempts to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group “in part” and by including “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” as one of the acts which characterizes genocide, the United Nations makes it difficult to distinguish between genocide and many forms of racial and religious discrimination. This weakness, it must be said, was partly intentional, because there have always been powerful reasons for seeing the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe as a culmination of centuries of less drastic discrimination. The looseness of the United Nations definition seems to have been intended, in part at least, to allow genocidal intention to be identified well before large-scale killing actually took place.

During the 1970s, moreover, many academic disciplines, especially history and sociology, developed a strong interest in uncovering the lives of and restoring voices to the weak and powerless in history and society. Rather than focusing only on the victors, academics sought to understand the losers and those who had not made a lasting mark on the world. Even if ethnic genocide, and more specifically the Jewish experience under the Nazis, remained the main point of reference, there was a growing feeling that, if genocide is the worst of all human crimes—and one which transcends state sovereignty—then no set of victims of mass killing should be denied recognition of their victimhood and no perpetrators should escape indictment by virtue of quibbling over the precise conceptual boundaries of the phenomenon.  

This relaxation, however, is still under way, and has given rise now and then to puzzling anomalies. Since the early 1990s, the Indonesian massacres of 1965–1966 and the Khmer Rouge killings in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979—both of them cases in which ethnic antagonism was a relatively marginal

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element—have been accepted as cases of genocide in its broad sense, whereas it appears that the 20 or 30 million deaths in China caused by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s, deaths which were inflicted in peacetime and mainly on people who were ethnically identical to their tormentors, are not. The Chinese case presents major practical problems of analysis because of the paucity of Western language sources and because the killings have not been repudiated by the Chinese authorities, but it is also likely that China has been ignored because the enormous scale of the killing there—more deaths altogether than under Nazi Germany—would change the intellectual balance of power in genocide studies if China were to be admitted, as it were, as a full member.

Nonetheless, precisely because the ethnic element in these three Asian cases is marginal, they have the potential to shed light on the phenomenon of genocide. In particular, they highlight difficulties with the concept of race and ethnicity in mainstream genocide studies. The principal reason for excluding political killing from the United Nations Genocide Convention was expressed at the time as being the fact that political groups were mutable and difficult to define. The obverse implication—that ethnic groups are fixed and easily defined—was a matter of common political and scientific wisdom at the time. The term “race” was a respectable one in academic analysis and there was a general consensus that each ethnic group was derived from its own distinct ancestral stock, although most scholars accepted that all human races had diverged from a single ancestral people, now largely lost in the mists of prehistory.

In the five decades that have passed since the promulgation of the Genocide Convention, however, research and analysis have shown how enormously malleable ethnic identity can be. Rather than seeing ethnic groups as quasi-biological entities shaped by evolution over the course of millennia, we have come to appreciate how rapidly ethnic groups can emerge, alter and disappear. This realization has two implications for genocide studies. First, it makes problematic any identification of genocide by cultural suppression where no change in the death rate is involved. Whereas the Convention on Genocide appeared to assume that culture would be lost only under hostile external pressure, we now appreciate that culture is always in flux, as a dynamic phenomenon characterized by change and exchange. The loss of a species from nature is an indubitable loss to the world, but the case for preserving all cultures as they now are is less clear. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that Japan’s policy of forbidding Koreans to speak their own language during the Japanese colonial period was an attempt at cultural genocide, but it is not so clear that teaching tribal peoples of Borneo a language which will enable them to take part in the modern world is also cultural genocide or rather an act of liberation. There is a strong case to be made for preserving smaller cultures against the unequal competition of larger ones which enjoy the backing of states and access to a vast range of media, but there is a powerful counter-case that to insist on preserving people as anthropological exhibits demonstrating human diversity is an infringement of their rights.
of free choice. Preserving a traditional culture becomes rather more problematic when one recognizes that preservation make also involve shoring up the position of authoritarian institutions in that culture, especially the authority of men over women and of the elderly over the young.

Second, and more important in this context, recognizing that contemporary ethnic identity may have rather shallow historical roots draws our attention to the fact that ethnicity can be shaped by political and economic factors as much as by ancestry and inherited culture. Current scholarly analysis of nationalism is divided between those who see national identity as primordial and ethnic and those who see it as a construction intimately related to the rise of the state as the dominant institution in modern society. For the latter, the “constructionists,” the power of the state generates a sense of national identity, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately, sometimes making the most of existing ethnic similarities, sometimes deliberately disregarding them. Sometimes of course the power of the state generates a reaction which leads to a separate sense of national identity and hence to separatist aspirations. But for constructionists, nationalism is primarily a consequence, not a cause, of the global configuration of states and for them nationalism is best understood as a political project whose aim is not just to preserve the existence of an ethnic group but rather is shape the character of that ethnic group—always for the better in the eyes of the shapers, of course—gaining control and making use of state power.

Even if the “constructionist” analysis in only partly true, it provides a firm bridge between “classical” ethnic genocide and political genocide. Genocide, particularly in the classic cases of Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union, was intimately associated with broader plans for social and cultural engineering. We will come closer to understanding the reasons for genocide if we can understand why social and cultural engineering seemed to demand wholesale slaughter. In this context the case of Indonesia is important not because of the scale of killing—Indonesia does not make it onto Rummel’s list of the fifteen most lethal governments of the twentieth century—but because the nature of Indonesian national identity shows with unusual clarity how political cleansing can also be ethnic cleansing.

Nationalism, ethnicity and the idea of Indonesia

More clearly than in most countries of the world, Indonesian nationalism is based on a political aspiration rather than on ethnic identity. For Indonesians, their nation has been above all an institution, which can deliver them modernity and prosperity. In this respect Indonesia resembles both the United States and the former Soviet Union, whose core national aspirations (respectively, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and the “dictatorship of the proletariat”) are or were similarly devoid of specific ethnic content. This rather materialist orientation does not mean that Indonesians think of their nation only in instrumentalist terms, as a sterile tool with no symbolic meaning; on the contrary, the patriotic affection of Indonesians for their country is as striking as that of
Americans. It means, however, that the political, rather than the ethnic, character of Indonesia has been at the core of nationalist politics since the early twentieth century.

The aspiration of people in the Indonesian archipelago for prosperity and modernity long predates any sense of Indonesian identity. The archipelago has played a key role in long Asian trade routes for over 2000 years, both as a producer of spices and forest products and as a staging post on the route between China and the West. The peoples of the archipelago have a strong tradition of mobility, commercial engagement and openness to external cultural influences. The reluctance to acknowledge any kind of external cultural debt which one often finds in China and India is rare in maritime South East Asia. The cultural history of Indonesia is one of constant innovation and recombination of new elements, and most scholars emphasize the selectiveness of the peoples of the archipelago in choosing some elements of foreign cultures and rejecting others.\(^9\)

In the colonial era, the archipelago’s access to the outside world was gradually constricted. With a combination of military force and superior shipping technology, the Dutch East Indies Company gradually excluded the indigenous trading networks of the islands and strangled the once-powerful port cities. As they established their rule across the archipelago, gradually and piecemeal, they relegated Indonesians to the role of labourers and supervisors on their plantations and in their mines. With a misplaced respect for indigenous traditions, they devoted considerable energy to recording what they saw as the pure traditions of the archipelago’s many people, and they devoted political energy to preserving and strengthening the status and standing of the archipelago’s many traditional elites as long as those elites were willing to put themselves at the service of Dutch colonial interests. They limited access to Dutch, and still more so to major European languages such as English, French and German, and they made little effort to introduce extensive educational facilities in their colony. Of course the archipelago could never be cut off completely from outside influences, but the people of the islands who thought about such things could see that the horizons of their world had narrowed and that their prosperity had declined. Java in particular, once the economic and political powerhouse of the region, appeared to many in the early twentieth century to be mired in poverty and ignorance. The Dutch tended to blame this state of affairs on fecklessness and torpor in the Javanese character, but most indigenous people blamed their plight on colonialism. Nationalism therefore became a vehicle, not to recover the cultural state which had been lost when the Dutch took over—that would have been long discarded anyhow—but to reopen the possibility of change and development, to give people the chance to take what they saw as the best of Western culture, as they had previously taken what they saw as the best of Indian, Chinese and Middle Eastern culture and to create a society that was modern and prosperous.

They decided, too, almost from the start, that this society would encompass the whole of what was then the Netherlands Indies. It was an imaginative decision. The archipelago, which now comprises Indonesia, stretches 5000
kilometres from the northern tip of Sumatra to the great island of New Guinea, presently divided between the independent state of Papua New Guinea and the Indonesian province of Papua (formerly Irian Jaya). The region is ethnically enormously diverse: some 400 languages are spoken and the ancestry of the people includes both dark-skinned Melanesians, who predominate in the eastern part of the archipelago, and paler-skinned Austronesians, who dominate the west. Islam, Christianity and Hinduism all have significant followings, and there are smaller communities of Buddhists and animists. The island of Java, with its fertile volcanic soils, and the Strait of Melaka, a key choke point on the ancient trade routes between China and the spice islands on the one hand and India, the Middle East and Europe on the other, have traditionally been the two main centres of power in the region. Both regions exercised a powerful cultural influence within and beyond the area, which is now Indonesia, but neither of them was ever the centre of an empire covering more than a tiny proportion of the archipelago.

The political unification of the archipelago had been the work of Dutch colonialism. Beginning with a toehold established in the spice islands in the early seventeenth century, the Dutch established first commercial dominance, then political hegemony and finally full colonial rule over archipelago in a process which involved many wars and which was not completed until the second decade of the twentieth century. Although power in the Dutch colony centred on the governor-general in Batavia, the legal and administrative structure of the Netherlands Indies was immensely complicated. First, there were distinct administrative regimes for the densely populated islands of Java and Madura on the one hand and the so-called “outer regions” (buitengewesten) on the other. There was also a major distinction made between indirectly and directly ruled regions, some of them in Java, most in the outer regions. In the former, called zelfbesturen or self-governing territories, indigenous rulers who had signed some form of treaty with the Dutch were left in possession of at least some of their former powers, though they were extensively “guided” by Dutch officials; in the latter, the administration was more closely controlled by Dutch officials, though the European administrative corps meshed in each region with a distinct indigenous administrative corps, generally drawn from the local former ruling elite. During the first four decades of the twentieth century, the Dutch both introduced varying degrees of local democracy in “advanced” regions under their control and formally boosted the power of indigenous rulers in other regions under a so-called “detutelization” programme. The Dutch also maintained a complex and changing system of ethnic classification which in turn determined both the civil law under which people lived and the criminal procedure under which they could be prosecuted in the early twentieth century. The law distinguished primarily between Europeans, “Natives” and “Foreign Orientals,” mainly Chinese and Arabs, though the latter category came under great pressure as first the Japanese and later the Siamese and Turks were reclassified as legal Europeans. For family law and various cultural purposes, indigenous subjects
of the Dutch were also classified into local ethnic groups—Javanese, Balinese, Ambonese and so on.

This vast complexity meant that there were few immediately compelling borders along which the archipelago might have been divided. In addition, however, there was a positive reason for creating a single nation: within any of the regional cultures there could be found important conservative forces, old aristocracies who were likely to work to retain their power and privileges after independence. On an archipelagic scale, however, these aristocracies and the deferential traditions they relied upon were far less significant: the old elites had little experience of cooperation with each other and their standing, as local figures in a vast polity, would be marginal. The nationalist movement was convinced, almost from the start, that whatever could be made of the island's would best be made on a large scale. To represent this idea of modernization on a grand scale, they chose the name Indonesia, a nineteenth century European anthropological coinage meaning "islands of India." The point to the name, however, was not its meaning, but the fact that it represented an idea, which transcended all the complicated and interlocking regional identities of the archipelago.

In fact, not quite all the identities in the Netherlands Indies were encompassed. Many nationalists questioned whether residents of Chinese descent could be included in the Indonesia project. At first glance this suspicion is peculiar, because the idea of Indonesia did not and continues not to exclude residents of other foreign ancestries. Indonesians of part-Arab and part-European descent were prominent in the nationalist movement and for the most part have faced no formal or informal discrimination since independence. The reasons for this special suspicion were complex, but two factors seem to be especially important. First, in many parts of Indonesia, Chinese were overwhelmingly and obtrusively dominant in commerce and money-lending. Alongside the Dutch, therefore, they appeared to be agents of the colonial oppression and exploitation of Indonesians. Many Arabs occupied a similar role, but their numbers were much smaller. Eurasians tended to be concentrated in junior administrative and clerical positions; they were often part of the colonial apparatus, but they did not visibly profit from colonialism in the way of the Chinese or Dutch. Second, many Chinese retained an identification with China: they regarded Chinese civilization as superior to anything in the archipelago and they were more engaged by the Chinese nationalist movement—which emerged before its Indonesian counterpart—than by the aspirations of local politics. Whereas both the West and the Muslim world offered currents of thought which were interesting and appealing to Indonesian nationalists, there was nothing at all in the chaotic Chinese politics or the self-occupied Chinese political thought of the first half of the twentieth century to recommend itself to Indonesians. The political and cultural orientation of many Chinese towards China, therefore, tended to put all Chinese—even those who regarded Indonesia as their home and who had no significant connection with China—outside the idea of Indonesia in a way that interest in Western or Muslim thought did not.
The historian A. B. Shamsul has coined the term “nation-of-intent” to describe nations which exist more in the minds of aspiring leaders than in the hearts of the mass of the people. “Indonesia” was for many years just such a nation-of-intent: nationalist ideas took some decades to spread widely through the indigenous communities and needed the additional impetus of the Japanese occupation of 1942–1945 to become a truly national, and thus irresistible, phenomenon. More important, however, Indonesia was not so much one nation-of-intent as three. Within the nationalist movement were three streams of thought, each of them envisaging an independent, modern and prosperous Indonesia, but giving very different content to that nation. These three streams can be labelled Islamic, communist and developmentalist. In the early days of the nationalist movement they were thoroughly intertwined, but they gradually drew apart. The Islamists envisaged an Indonesia whose modernity would come from the eternal prescriptions of Islam, and the communists imagined an Indonesia whose modernity would be an expression in socialism, as the historical stage beyond capitalism and colonialism, while the developmentalsists imagined simply turning the formidable apparatus of state which the Dutch had created in Indonesia to the benefit of Indonesians, rather than foreigners. All three basically envisioned a country which would enable its people to share in the prosperity and human equality which Westerners seem to arrogate to themselves. None of the three streams presented a single, coherent vision of the future. The communists were the most disciplined, but they had a sprinkling of left-wing allies who rejected the party’s discipline, while the Islamists were split into a wide variety of parties on doctrinal, regional and personal grounds. The developmentalsists were least united of all, because many of them drew from either Islam or Marxism or both in formulating their ideas and distinguishing themselves from the painfully slow developmentalisn of the late colonial state. Each of the three streams shared, moreover, a broad consensus that ending Dutch colonialism was a necessary first step to achieving anything at all, and this tactical sense of unity remained powerful until 1948, three years into the war of independence against the Dutch which followed Japan’s surrender in August 1945.

Taking advantage of the sudden Japanese surrender, nationalists declared independence on August 17, 1945, creating an Indonesian Republic which was dominated from the start by the developmentalsists. The communist party was still piecing itself together after more than a decade of Dutch and Japanese repression, and the Islamists let themselves be persuaded that declaring an Islamic state, or even giving specific recognition to Islam, would drive religious minorities into the arms of the Dutch, who aimed to restore their authority after the war. The developmentalsists, by contrast, had emerged relatively unscathed from Dutch and Japanese repression and they benefited from increasingly bitter antagonism between the Islamist and communist streams.

The sources of this antagonism were partly cultural, partly social, partly ideological. Although close to 90% of Indonesians were classified as Muslim, the Islam of many, especially in Java, was highly syncretic, incorporating many elements from the older Hindu, Buddhist and animist traditions of the island, as
well as mystical Sufi traditions from the Middle East. Their beliefs put considerable emphasis on spirits and on magic, and they generally paid little attention to central Islamic practices such as regular prayer, fasting or attendance at the mosque. The followers of such beliefs, often called *kebatinan* or Kejawen in Java, were diverse and did not have a clear sense of common identity, but they did have a strong sense of being different from the so-called *santri*, more orthodox Muslims, who often constituted the village elite. Many *santri* despised and feared the followers of Kejawen as practitioners of black magic and followers of beliefs so heterodox that they could barely be considered Islamic. The followers of Kejawen, for their part, feared being forced into the more rigid practice of orthodox Islam. Although followers of Kejawen and its other local equivalents were most prominent amongst regional aristocracies, they were most numerous amongst the poor and powerless, the group to which the Communist Party especially appealed. Amongst *santri* Muslims and amongst university graduates, by contrast, the communists found little following. This cultural antagonism, overlaid with class hostility, was reinforced by ideological contradictions: not all communists followed the official atheism of the party, but they all rejected religion as a source of authority over social life, and this put the Communist Party in direct and irreconcilable conflict with the Islamists.

Even if the sharp antagonism between communists and Islamists made them willing to compromise in the short term and accept the dominance of the developmentalists, both streams remained determined to come to power in the long term. In 1948, when it was clear to both Islamists and communists that their aspirations were being edged off the political agenda, they separately launched armed struggles against the developmentalist-dominated government, even though that government was still engaged in the independence struggle against the Dutch. The communists were quickly defeated, but the Islamist revolution, generally known as the Darul Islam, continued long after the Dutch capitulation in 1949 and was only suppressed in the early 1960s, after a long and brutal military campaign. Both communists and Islamists also pursued their aspirations through the democratic institutions set up after 1949: they competed in the 1955 national elections and argued their cases vigorously in the Constituent Assembly which assembled to draft the country’s permanent constitution. Their bitter mutual antagonism effectively prevented either from having its way, leaving the developmentalists still more or less in charge; but throughout this period it seemed to most people that the decision over Indonesia’s future had been merely postponed, not taken for good.

Indeed, despite the initial dominance of the developmentalists, both the Islamists and the communists had good reason for confidence for their futures. Development policies in the 1950s had made some progress in improving the conditions of life of the people, but those improvements fell far short of expectations, and successive governments appeared to be hobbled by continued dependence on foreign investment. The developmentalist stream had by no means proved itself. The Islamists, moreover, believed that Islam’s standing as the religion of nearly 90% of the population would eventually deliver them
power, and many of them were patient enough to put their primary emphasis on strengthening the Islamic character of society rather than grasping immediately for power. The communists for their part were confident that their rapport with the impoverished majority of Indonesians would in time make them an irresistible political force; this confidence, along with a realistic assessment of the meagre prospects for successful guerrilla warfare, confirmed the party in what was then the novel strategy of abjuring revolution and seeking power by parliamentary means.

In retrospect, however, we can see that there was little chance of either side coming to power on a wave of overwhelming public approval. The cultural divisions described earlier set powerful natural limits to the potential for any stream to win over wide support amongst the Indonesian people. In fact, during the 1950s, Indonesia underwent a process of political “pillarization.” In other words, the relatively strong correlation between political and cultural identity was institutionalized, so that each of the identifiable cultural divisions within society was represented not only by its own political parties but by a whole range of separate social institutions. Indonesian society came increasingly to resemble what the British colonial analyst J. S. Furnivall had described as a “plural society.” Furnivall coined the term in 1948 to describe societies in which different ethnic groups “mix but do not combine”:

Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit.

Furnivall drew a portrait sharper than any reality and even his own life contradicted his conclusion (he married a Burmese woman), but his broad analysis sums up not only the relations between ethnic groups in colonial South East Asia but the relations between political forces in independent Indonesia during the 1950s. Three nations-of-intent still contested the idea of Indonesia.

**Guided Democracy and the ascendancy of the Indonesian Communist Party**

In 1957 President Sukarno stepped into an increasingly bitter political standoff between the three streams and suspended parliamentary rule. Then, in cooperation with the firmly developmentalist army, he installed a more authoritarian system which he called Guided Democracy. Sukarno believed that the three streams of aspiration in Indonesian politics were not contradictory forces bound to battle each other to the end, but were instead complementary expressions of different elements in Indonesia’s make-up. He was a superb ideologist, and he was able to weave the three streams into a formulation he called NASAKOM—nationalism (which stood for developmentalism), religion (standing for Islam) and communism. His Guided Democracy was an attempt to construct a political order in which none of the streams would prevail. Not a man for administrative detail, he attempted to achieve this result by focusing politics on himself and
balancing political actors in a way which led many to describe him as a master-puppeteer. His construction also involved a narrowing of the political field: the price of participation in Guided Democracy was public acceptance of NASAKOM and those who refused to accept it were excluded.20

Most Indonesians, however, saw Guided Democracy as no more than a holding operation. Relatively few people truly believed in NASAKOM and all were aware by the early 1960s that Sukarno’s health was in decline. The central but unspoken issue under Guided Democracy was how it would influence the relative prospects of the three streams, which competed for Indonesia’s soul.

To most observers there appeared no doubt that the main beneficiary of Guided Democracy was the Indonesian Communist Party. Although regional army commanders effectively banned the party in several outlying provinces, the party was able to canvass freely for support in Java, and its numbers grew rapidly. By 1965, it claimed three million members and was said to be the largest communist party in the non-communist world. Millions more were members of peasant associations, labour unions and other organizations affiliated with the party. Until 1957 it had been excluded from government,21 but under Sukarno party members began to hold a range of bureaucratic and political posts. From 1957, several cities on Java had communist mayors and several provincial governors were close to the party. Communist influence was growing in the powerful armed forces, especially the air force, and in 1965 the party backed the creation of a so-called “fifth force” of workers and peasants which would operate under its influence alongside the army, navy air force and police. In Indonesian society, moreover, the party was increasingly assertive. Through its cultural affiliates, it sought to establish the hegemony of socialist ideas of art over what it considered to be bourgeois aestheticism, while in the countryside of Java, its peasant organizations sought to implement land reform laws. In most cases, this “direct action” involved seizing land from its santri owners and distributing it to poorer Communist Party supporters.22 The party supported the interests of plantation and industrial workers in North Sumatra, and of Javanese migrants in North and South Sumatra. It supported followers of Hinduism against the ascendant santri elite of East Java, and it backed opponents of Hindu religious authority in Bali. For the opponents of communism, these campaigns appeared to give a foretaste of the policies, which the party would follow if it were to come to power. For all its renunciation of armed struggle, neither the party’s rhetoric nor its practice gave the enemies of communism hope that communist party rule would be generous or inclusive towards its antagonists.

In the countryside, the communist campaign was resisted—and with considerable success—by the santri, but the main obstacle to the party’s success at the national level appeared to be the army, whose high command was dominated by developmentalist unsympathetic to Islamism and hostile to the Indonesian Communist Party. With its weapons and a powerful grip on important government posts, including cabinet positions, governorships and directorships of state-owned companies, the army was a formidable opponent for the communists. Other opponents of the communists, moreover, notably the Islamists,
came to see the army as their best hope for halting the communist advance and put aside their former antagonisms in a coalition of desperation. The army’s strength, however, was compromised by political division. Sukarno was a master of the art of playing his subordinates off against each other, and no one in palace circles had the luxury of knowing precisely where he or she stood in the political constellation from day to day. Below the level of the high command, there was much support for Sukarno and even considerable sympathy for the communists, as well as a long-standing tradition of independent action by junior officers. The most common view of Indonesia’s political prospects, therefore, was that the Communist Party had a real chance of coming to power if Guided Democracy could be sustained long enough and if the army could somehow be prevented from seizing power itself.

The widespread feeling that Indonesia was approaching the most decisive moment in its history was exacerbated by catastrophic economic decline. Under Guided Democracy, Sukarno had pushed the developmentalists out of macro-economic management, giving rein instead to a loose vision of opposition to neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism (and thus to foreign investment). Standards of living declined, inflation took off, infrastructure decayed, government fell into disarray and even famine began to loom. The mainly developmentalist army remained the most powerful government institution, but it did not have access to the levers of economic power at the centre and in an environment of economic decay it concentrated its efforts on securing its own interests by developing its own business enterprises and maximizing its share of the limited revenue available from the state. Economic decline would have had serious political effects anywhere, but in Indonesia, where prosperity and modernity were the central political aspirations, it was deeply disturbing. In contrast with the colonial period, however, when public and intellectual opinion was virtually united in the conclusion that colonialism was the primary cause of Indonesia’s malaise, under Guided Democracy the analyses of Indonesia’s problems ran in sharply contrasting directions. For Sukarno, the causes of Indonesia’s difficulties were external: although politically independent, Indonesia was still the victim of what he described as neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism and its plight would only improve, he argued, if Indonesia were able to join with other newly emerging countries to create a new and equitable international order. The Indonesian Communist Party accepted much of this analysis, but placed much more emphasis on internal factors: they identified the most serious obstacles to prosperity as what they called “capitalist–bureaucrats” in the administration and “village devils” such as landlords in the countryside. For the developmentalists and the Islamists, however, the main cause of Indonesia’s problems appeared to be Sukarno and the communists. Sukarno was partly to blame, in their eyes, because of his neglect of proper economic management, but they reserved their chief opprobrium for the communists, whom they saw as the ideological engine behind Sukarno’s rejection of a commercially oriented economy.

Yet there was no longer any capacity for the serious public discussion of these problems. Although Guided Democracy was not cruelly repressive, Sukarno
imposed an ideological orthodoxy on public discussion, which meant that political information and opinions was passed on by rumour and in half-shrouded codes. For vast numbers of Indonesians from all political streams, Guided Democracy was a time of terrible uncertainty. Daily existence was uncertain because of crumbling institutions and failing markets, but still more perplexing was the political uncertainty: no one knew for certain who would rule Indonesia in the future, and those who were not irrevocably committed to one side or the other tried as far as they could to speak and act safely, so that they could hope to survive in whatever order was to rule them. And for all Indonesians, the causes of the economic decay and the biting political tensions were so entangled in shrill rhetoric that the true causes of Indonesia’s plight remained obscure.

The 1965 “coup” and its aftermath

Early in the morning of October 1, 1965, this atmosphere of enormous tension and expectation was shattered by what appeared to be a communist coup in Jakarta. Left-wing troops raided the houses of seven leading anti-communist generals, including the army commander General Ahmad Yani and the defence minister General A. H. Nasution. Three were shot on the spot and three were hauled off to an air force base south of Jakarta where they were killed. Nasution escaped under fire, but his young daughter was killed. The leader of the action was Lieutenant–Colonel Untung, commander of Sukarno’s presidential guard. After a brief delay, he declared that he had acted to forestall a military coup by an alleged “Council of General” and that state power was now in the hands of a Revolutionary Council. Whether or not the plotters had originally intended to kill the generals, their actions after dawn on October 1 showed little sign of careful planning. The Revolutionary Council appeared to have been composed in haste, without any attempt to consult those named as members, and the plotters did not take serious measures to seize the important points of control in Jakarta or to neutralize potential opponents. As a result, forces from the army’s Strategic Reserve, headed by Lieutenant–General Suharto, were able to take the initiative and to put an end to the “coup” within a couple of days.

The nature of the “coup” remains uncertain. It may have been the initiative of junior army officers unhappy with the lifestyles and political conservatism of the High Command and was perhaps intended to do no more than humiliate and intimidate the senior officers. If so, the action got badly out of hand. On the other hand, the junior officers may themselves have had more far-reaching intentions, or they may have been the dupes of other political forces with broader intentions. Both the Communist Party and President Sukarno had good reason to want the removal of the army High Command. Indeed, it is unlikely that the junior officers would have taken action against their superiors in the military hierarchy unless they felt sure of some political protection. Whether they assumed they would get such protection or were promised it remains uncertain. It is known that a special bureau of the Communist Party was in routine contact
with some of the coup plotters as part of the party’s general aim of winning support in the ranks of its most powerful opponent. Also possible is that the coup was to some extent prompted or planned by enemies of Sukarno and the communists in order to compromise them. There is inconclusive but not entirely negligible evidence implicating both Suharto and the American Central Intelligence Agency in this respect.25

Whoever may have been responsible for the “coup,” however, most Indonesians and most outside observers assumed at once that it was the work of the Communist Party. Indeed, many members of the party seem to have made the same assumption: if the coup were a party initiative, it could hardly have been announced in advance to the three million members scattered across the country. Still more important, most Indonesians interpreted the evident failure of the “coup” as a profound defeat for the party. In the hothouse world of Guided Democracy the communists seemed to have a chance of coming to power by dominating discourse and annexing the important instruments of government. When the killing of the generals failed to cement an immediate communist seizure of power, everyone knew that the party’s chances of taking power in the short term had disappeared. The tense balance of Guided Democracy was shattered and the army would not permit the communists to come to power. The party and its three million members were suddenly helpless.

Still more seriously for the communists, their opponents were able to exploit the circumstances of the “coup” to demonize them. To begin with, murdered generals were Indonesia’s first significant victims of political assassination since the chaos of the revolution against the Dutch in the 1940s. In resorting to such violence the plotters had taken the tense confrontations of Indonesian politics to another level of bitterness. The killing of Nasution’s daughter, moreover, marked communists as conscienceless child-killers, even though it had clearly been accidental. The real vilification of the party, however, began with the exhumation of the bodies of the murdered generals. Wild stories began to be circulated of the events at the air force base: members of the women’s organization Gerwani, generally seen as a communist affiliate, were said to have tortured and mutilated the generals sexually before abandoning themselves in a lustful orgy with senior communists and air force officers.26 Before long, rumours began to circulate that party members had prepared pits—cunningly disguised as rubbish pits—to receive the bodies of their slain enemies. Newspapers published accounts, sometimes graphically illustrated, of how communists had been trained to turn simple implements such as rubber-tapping implements into gruesome eye-gouging tools. This demonization of the communists in turn made it easier for people to believe that the party was the prime cause of Indonesia’s economic malaise, that the communists had deliberately created hardship and suffering to serve their own political ends. In a matter of weeks, by skilful exploitation of rumour and propaganda in an environment of enormous uncertainty and tension, the opponents of the Communist Party were able to turn it from being a recognized, if somewhat feared, element in the Indonesian political system into a pariah.
The killings

The massacre of communists began in early October in the strongly Muslim province of Aceh in northern Sumatra. The local branch of the party was small, and the initiative for the killings seems to have come from local Muslim leaders, and Acehnese Muslims had a long-standing reputation for using violence against their enemies. Elsewhere, there was a longer delay, as both sides assessed the situation. In most cases, the killings were triggered by the arrival of anti-communist special forces, especially the RPKAD para-commandos, or when local armed forces made it clear that they sanctioned the murder of communists. In some regions, military units themselves took a major role in the killing, but more commonly they used local militias. All of Indonesia’s political parties had youth affiliates whose activities shaded into intimidation, protection and small-scale violence, but the army, jealous of its monopoly of armed force, had never permitted them to develop beyond a limited scale. In the aftermath of the 1965 “coup,” however, the military began to provide weapons, equipment, training and encouragement to these youth organizations, especially the Muslim Ansor in Central and East Java. These organizations typically moved systematically from village to village using lists and local informants to identify party members, who were then taken away for execution. In some cases, entire villages were wiped out, but for the most part, the killers were selective, taking only those that were identified as “guilty.” Teachers and other village intellectuals were especially common on the lists of victims. The killing was largely done with knives or swords, but some victims were beaten to death and some were shot. Sometimes the bodies of the victims were deliberately mutilated, an act which, for Muslims, damages the spiritual integrity of the victim’s soul. In some cases, the victims were forced to dig their own shallow, mass graves in secluded places, or the bodies were dumped in rivers, or concealed in caves. There are some reports of mass graves beneath the main square in towns in central Java. In a few cases, the bodies, or body parts, of victims were put on display, sometimes laid out on rafts, which were floated down rivers.

The regions most seriously affected by the killings were Central and East Java, Bali and North Sumatra, where the party had been most active, but there were massacres in every part of the archipelago where communists could be found. No reliable figures exist for the number of people who were killed. A scholarly consensus has settled on a figure of 400–500,000, but the correct figure could be half or twice as much. Indonesia had a population at the time between 100 and 110 million, too many for even a million deaths to show up incontrovertibly in the decennial censuses. Although official figures seem to have been compiled in many regions, there are many reasons why figures might have been over- or understated by those responsible for their collection.27

As in many cases of genocide, many of the victims went passively to their deaths. There are reports that victims in one place in the province of North Sumatra formed long, acquiescent lines at a river’s edge while they waited to be decapitated. In Bali, party members are said to have gone placidly to their deaths
wearing traditional white funeral clothes. In parts of central Java, predominantly communist villages set up palisades in a futile attempt at self-defence, but even such measures were rare. One reason for the apparent passivity of the victims may be that they simply did not expect such ferocious retaliation for events in Jakarta to which they could not possibly have contributed. It is likely, however, that the explanation is partly cultural–historical: for most of human history, Indonesia has been relatively sparsely populated, a consequence of tropical disease and, possibly, of the relatively high standing of women, whose role in society was always far more than just the production of children. Wars of conquest in early times, therefore, generally aimed at capturing people, rather than territory. Battle by proxy or champion—a way of minimizing casualties—was reasonably common and there was no tradition of wholesale massacre such as was found, for instance, in densely populated China. Peoples, however, still had to be conquered, and conquered peoples had to be ruled; an important part of the political repertoire of conquerors and rulers, therefore, came to be intimidation. A cultural convention arose in which the correct and safe response to fearsomeness was timidity: those who showed themselves suitably in awe of new power-holders were spared. This cultural convention probably sapped the will of the communists to resist in 1965–1966.

Remarkably little primary evidence exists concerning the detail of the killings. The military-dominated regime of President Suharto, which had presided over the killings and which ruled Indonesia for more than 30 years afterwards, strongly discouraged any investigation of the events, though it has never denied that they took place. Indeed, the nearest thing to an official estimate of the number of dead is one million. The fact that the killings took place, moreover, at the height of the Cold War meant that there was little interest in the West in investigating the past misdeeds of what was to become one of the West’s most important allies in Asia. As a result, several misconceptions about the nature of the killings have become common. Some observers, for instance, have suggested that many of the killings were apolitical, that people took advantage of the turmoil to settle private grudges unrelated to politics. The reality was, however, that the Communist Party had been so successful in taking sides in social conflicts across the breadth of the archipelago that most grudges had a political dimension. All the evidence that we have indicates that the killings were precisely directed against the broad category of people whom the army identified as enemies, that is, the members and close associates of the Communist Party. Also sometimes heard is the suggestion that the killings were a form of “running amok” (amok being after all an Indonesian word). It was argued that traditional Indonesian (especially Javanese) peasant society was inherently peaceful, but that under conditions of extreme tension that natural patience of the Javanese suddenly shattered in a blind frenzy of killing. Apart from overstating the peacefulness of traditional Indonesian society, however, this argument has the weakness that it was highly targeted. Furthermore, psycho-cultural studies of amok have shown that it is most commonly a response to humiliation and defeat and often works as a form
of indirect suicide.\textsuperscript{32} Little in the detail of the 1965–1966 killings fits with this pattern.

Also surprisingly common is the perception that most of the victims were Chinese. For the reasons outlined above, Chinese Indonesians have been subject to discrimination, harassment and occasional pogroms for at least the last 250 years. In 1965–1966, however, few Chinese were targeted. This was partly because discriminatory measures a few years earlier had removed most Chinese from the countryside where the vast majority of killings took place, partly because Chinese, as outsiders, were not immediately involved in the massive resolution of issues which was taking place. “They [the Chinese] were not involved,” commented a non-communist leader years later, “it was a matter between Javanese.”\textsuperscript{33}

Perhaps the most intractable difficulty, however, lies in determining the relative importance of army initiative and local tension in accounting for the scale of the killing. At first glance, the army’s role seems clearly secondary to that of the broader social and political tensions outlined above. The hatred between Islamists and communists was ancient and deep-seated and had been exacerbated by the deep political uncertainty and enormous political tension of late Guided Democracy. The army, on the other hand, had the luxury of knowing that it had won: the failure of the October, 1965 “coup” meant that the Communist Party would not come to power under Guided Democracy. Imprisonment or execution of a few thousand leading communists would have been ample to guarantee the army’s victory. The commander of the RPKAD was widely reported at the time as claiming that his troops had sought to curb the killings in Bali.

Nonetheless, several factors point to a greater direct military role. As we have seen, the killings tended to take place when anti-communist army units arrived in a region, and the militias who did much of the killing received weapons, equipment, training and encouragement from the army. More significant, the militias seem to have vanished as soon as their bloody work was done. The autonomous militias which had emerged after 1945 to fight for independence against the Dutch proved to be a stubborn and persistent obstacle to the army’s claim to a monopoly of armed force and one of the most important lessons which the army learnt from this period was not to allow that monopoly to be breached. Even during the early 1980s, the military had to resort to extensive violence to suppress semi-criminal gangs who had been used as paramilitary enforcers in the larger cities.\textsuperscript{34} The rapid and peaceful disappearance of militias who were ostensibly linked to Muslim forces suspicious of the army’s developmentalism strongly suggests that they were in fact creations of the military.

If the army did indeed want a full-scale massacre of communists, three reasons seem plausible. First, although we can see in retrospect that the army’s victory was sealed by the failure of the October, 1965 “coup,” this fact was by no means clear at the time. In particular, the army was aware of a kind of “shadow war” with the communists which involved placing sympathizers, agents and double-agents in key positions. The army did not know just how far
the communist penetration of society and of government institutions had proceeded, and it therefore made certain of delivering the party a death-blow by killing a vast number of its followers. In this atmosphere of suspicion, moreover, people who feared that they might be identified as communists often took part in killings to prove their anti-communist credentials. As mass killings, too—killings by masses as well as of them—the massacres also had the purpose of forcing all Indonesians to make an unambiguous choice for or against the Communist Party. Just in case the communists were to recover and mount a counter-offensive, the military needed to be sure that blood was on as many hands as possible. Thus there are many stories of forcible recruitment into the militias and even of family members being forced to take the first step in killing their relatives. Communists from one village were sometimes delivered to another for killing, and the whole village was thus implicated in the murders, regardless of which hands actually held the murder weapons. The hesitant fence-sitters of Guided Democracy who had done everything possible to make sure that they would survive, whoever came to power, were to have that luxury no longer. This strategy still works: when Indonesia’s new president, Abdurrahman Wahid, recently suggested that an inquiry be made into the massacres of 1965–1966, an inquiry which would certainly have added to the opprobrium currently being heaped on the armed forces, Muslim leaders from his own party moved very quickly to prevent the inquiry from going ahead. Youth groups from this party had been active in the killings in many parts of Java. Third, whether or not it was intended at the time, the killings hugely reinforced the army’s political position once it was in power. For those who recognized the military role in the killings, the army was a force which had shown its willingness to kill on a vast scale, and it gave no reason to doubt that it would do so again if action seemed to be needed. For those who saw the killings as a product of internecine strife between rival Indonesians, military rule, whatever its shortcomings, seemed to be a guarantee against a repetition of that terrible time. The massacres placed a curse on open politics, which was not lifted for more than three decades.

A final likely reason why the army wanted the mass killings brings the genocide in Indonesia still closer to the ethnic genocides, which dominate traditional analysis of the term. Even after the killings subsided, the army appeared to show an especial vindictiveness towards communists. During the 10 years which followed the killings, over a million and a half people passed through a system of prisons and prison camps on the grounds of their communist connections. When they were finally released, their lives were blighted by continuing discrimination, they were banned from government jobs, they were not permitted to vote and they faced difficulties in day-to-day dealings with the authorities. In the late 1980s, the authorities introduced a new concept, bersih lingkungan (“environmentally clean”), under which government employees and workers in education, the media and law, as well as economically important sectors such as the oil industry and public transportation, were expected to come from a family and social environment untainted by communism. In other words,
communism was treated as a permanent, semi-hereditary condition which might afflict even people born after 1965.\textsuperscript{36}

All these generalizations must be read, however, in the light of the enormous variation in circumstances from province to province across Indonesia and from district to district within provinces. The few local studies to have been published show a complex interaction between long-standing local political tensions, varying responses to events in Jakarta, and different personalities in local institutions. In some districts the killing was truly collective; in others the military did most of the killing; in still others local men of violence emerged to glut themselves on slaughter.\textsuperscript{37}

The Suharto regime was not Stalin’s Soviet Union or even Hitler’s Germany after 1943. The so-called New Order did not feed on a widening circle of terror, sucking innocent and guilty alike into graves and gulags for the sake of terrifying effect.\textsuperscript{38} It was brutal in its treatment of enemies, real and presumed, and sometimes erratic in identifying them, but the last pogroms against communists were in 1969. Thereafter the only communists to die at the hands of the state were an unfortunate handful who had been sentenced to death in show trials in the late 1960s and from whom the government occasionally picked a few victims for execution.

But the Indonesian killings of 1965–1966 were a successful exercise in national obliteration. They were a concerted attempt to transform the nature of Indonesian society by destroying one of the three ideological and social streams which had competed for domination of the idea of Indonesia since the early twentieth century. We should not suppose that the communists would necessarily have been less brutal or that they would have ruled better if they had come to power rather than the army. But the killing of half a million communists was not merely an intense political conflict, it was the impoverishment of a national ideal, the extermination of a nation as it has existed in the minds of millions of Indonesians.

Notes and References

3. Alan S. Rosenbaum has edited a volume entitled, \textit{Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide} (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998) which measures the Nazi persecution of Jews against several other cases of massive killing. It is hard to imagine the possible uniqueness of any other phenomenon in the broad field of genocide being set up as an analytical problem in this way.
4. See, for instance, Israel W. Charny, “How to avoid (legally) convictions for crime of genocide (a one-act reading),” \textit{Social Science Record}, Vol 24, No 2, 1987, pp 89–93, which assumes that figures such as Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot would have a special interest in avoiding being convicted for genocide, and his “Toward a generic definition of genocide,” in George Andreopoulos, ed., \textit{Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimensions} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp 64–94, where he argues that all mass killings warrant the recognition which comes with the term genocide.
not the Chinese killings. In fact the Chinese killings, because they contained a strong element of ethnic cleansing in areas such as Inner Mongolia, might qualify better as genocide in the narrow sense than the Indonesian case.

6. The problem is made still more complicated by the links between religion and culture: the main world religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism—have been directly responsible for the destruction of indigenous cultures around the world on a massive scale, and within each religion there are strong pressures for cultural homogenization. Yet to restrict their activities would infringe the fundamental human right of freedom of religion.

7. In the vast literature on the construction of nationalism, it is particularly worth mentioning Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), which argues that the state was so powerful in creating a framework for the lives and the thoughts of its subjects that it also created their identity as members of a nation.


9. See, for instance, the opening chapters of the most influential general text on Indonesia during the 1970s and 1980s, J. D. Legge, *Indonesia*, 3rd edn (Sydney: Prentice—Hall of Australia, 1980).


13. The sole unambiguous exception is a provision in the constitution which required that the president be “native.” Although this provision may originally have been intended to ensure that that president was born in Indonesia (the United States Constitution has a similar provision), it is now interpreted as barring Indonesian citizens of foreign descent from the position.


17. One of the classic statements on these cultural divisions is Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).


21. Except for two years at the start of the revolution against the Dutch when clandestine party members played a prominent role in government as members of the Socialist Party.


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CIA played a role in provoking the October “coup,” there is strong evidence that they assisted the Indonesian army in developing stories of communist depravity which fed the subsequent killings.

27. I have discussed some of these reasons in “Problems in the historiography of the killings in Indonesia,” in Robert Cribb, ed., The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), pp 1–43.


30. See, for example, Damien Kingsbury, The Politics of Indonesia (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), p 63.


36. On the demonization of communists in late New Order Indonesia, see Rob Goodfellow, Api dalam sekam: The New Order and the Ideology of Anti-Communism (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1995). In 1997, the Indonesian minister of home affairs, Syarwan Hamid, claimed that he could smell a communist from the other side of a wall. This bizarre comment is reminiscent of nothing so much as the widely held prejudice that certain ethnic groups have a distinct smell.


38. In this analysis, I have deliberately left aside Indonesia’s treatment of the independence movements in East Timor, West New Guinea and Aceh. Indonesia’s occupation of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor between 1975 and 1999 was brutal and destructive. The Indonesian invasion forces killed many people and many more died in a poorly managed concentration of people into settlements where they could be closely guarded by Indonesian troops. Some observers have claimed that as many as 200,000 people, about one third of the population at the time of the invasion, may have died as a result of the occupation, but this figure is almost certainly inflated. The best overall account of East Timor’s history is John G. Taylor, East Timor: The Price of Freedom (New York: Zed Books, 1999). West New Guinea was incorporated into Indonesia in 1963, having been artificially separated from Indonesia at the time of independence. Indonesia has promoted settlement from outside and has endeavoured to “modernize” the indigenous cultures of the province, while suppressing an independence organization, the Free Papua Movement. The fate of the indigenous Papuans is analogous to that of indigenous people in many parts of the world. See West Papua: The Obliteration of a People, 2nd edn (London: Tapol, 1984).