

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

I have never concealed from you my belief that a little shooting would be an essential preliminary to effective change in Indonesia; but it makes me sad to think that they have begun with the wrong people.

—SIR ANDREW GILCHRIST, BRITISH AMBASSADOR TO INDONESIA,
OCTOBER 5, 1965

IN A LITTLE OVER SIX MONTHS, from late 1965 to mid-1966, an estimated half a million members of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, or PKI) and its affiliated organizations were killed.¹ Another million or so were detained without charge, some for more than thirty years, and many of them were subjected to torture and other inhumane treatment. Few, if any, of the victims were armed, and almost all those killed and detained belonged to what were at the time lawful political and social organizations. This was not a civil war. It was one of the largest and swiftest, yet least examined instances of mass killing and incarceration in the twentieth century.

The consequences of the violence were far-reaching. In less than a year, the largest nongoverning Communist party in the world was crushed, and the country's popular left-nationalist president, Sukarno, was swept aside. In their place, a virulently anticommunist army leadership seized power, signaling the start of more than three decades of military-backed authoritarian rule. The state that emerged from the carnage, known as the New Order, became notorious for its systematic violation of human rights, especially in areas outside the heartland, including East Timor (Timor Leste), Aceh, and West Papua, where hundreds of thousands of people died or were killed by government forces over the next few decades. The violence also altered the country's political and social landscape in



FIGURE 1.1. Suspected PKI member arrested by soldiers in Jakarta, November 1965.
(Rory Dell/Camera Press/Redux Pictures)

fundamental ways, leaving a legacy of hypermilitarism along with an extreme intolerance of dissent that stymied critical thought and opposition, especially on the Left. Perhaps most important, the events of 1965–66 destroyed the lives of many millions of people who were officially stigmatized because of their familial or other associations with those arbitrarily killed or detained. Even now, more than fifty years later—and some twenty years after the country began its transition to democracy—Indonesian society bears deep scars from those events.

In its sweep and speed, and its profound political and social implications, the violence of 1965–66 was comparable to some of the most notorious campaigns of mass killing and imprisonment of the postwar period, including those that occurred in Bosnia, Cambodia, and Rwanda, and it far surpassed other campaigns that have become iconic symbols of authoritarian violence in Latin America, such as those in Argentina and Chile. “In terms of the numbers killed,” the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) wrote in 1968, “the anti-PKI massacres in Indonesia rank as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders of the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s.”² And while there is still no consensus on the matter, some scholars have described the Indonesian violence as genocide.³ Yet half a century later, this violence remains virtually unknown

internationally. Thus, the World History Project website entry for the year 1965 includes the fact that “Kellogg’s Apple Jacks Cereal First Appears,” but fails to mention the killing of half a million people in Indonesia.⁴

Even inside the country, the events of 1965–66 are still poorly understood, having only recently become the focus of serious discussion by historians, human rights activists, and the media. The massive production of testimony, memoir, truth telling, and forensic investigation—to say nothing of reconciliation, memorialization, and justice—that has followed virtually every genocide in the twentieth century has scarcely begun in Indonesia. Moreover, in contrast to most of the great mass killings of the past century, these crimes have never been punished or even properly investigated, and there have been no serious calls for any such action by international bodies or states. In this respect, Indonesia is arguably closer to the Soviet Union, China, and the United States than to any other country.

This book aims to disturb the troubling silence. Its first aspiration is to clarify some basic historical questions: How many people were killed and detained? Who were the victims, and how did they die? Who were the perpetrators, and what motivated them? What happened to the hundreds of thousands who were detained and their families? These basic questions—testament to the significant gaps in our knowledge—need to be answered as a matter of urgency, especially as the number of reliable witnesses and participants declines with every passing year. The book also explores a number of deeper analytic puzzles elaborated below. Most important, it asks the following questions: How and why did this extraordinary violence happen? What have been the consequences of the violence for Indonesian society? And why has so little been said or done about it in the intervening years?

With a few exceptions, scholars have viewed the events of 1965–66 as distinctively Indonesian, explicable mainly in terms of Indonesian culture, society, and politics. The implication has been that the dynamics at play are somehow unique and not comparable to other cases. While there is certainly much that is distinctive about the Indonesian case, my sense is that it shares many features with other instances of mass killing and detention, and that a more broadly comparative approach would be productive, both for understanding Indonesia’s experience and enriching the general debate on such questions. And so while focusing substantively on Indonesia, this book also seeks to engage wider debates about the dynamic of mass killing and incarceration, about the long-term legacies of silence and inaction in the aftermath of violence, and about the history of

human rights. To that end it asks: Under what conditions are mass killing and incarceration most likely to occur? Why are some such serious crimes remembered, condemned, and punished, while others are forgotten and left unpunished? What are the political, social, and moral ramifications of such acts and silence—for victims, for perpetrators, and for a society as a whole? My expectation is that a close examination of the mass violence of 1965–66 in Indonesia will provide insights into all these questions.

The Story in Brief

The immediate trigger—by some accounts, the pretext—for the violence came on October 1, 1965. Early that morning, six senior Indonesian Army generals and one lieutenant were detained and then killed by a group of lower-ranking officers belonging to a group called the September 30th Movement (Gerakan 30 September, or G30S). The movement claimed that it had acted to prevent a planned coup d'état by a CIA-backed “Council of Generals” and that it remained loyal to President Sukarno. Ignoring those claims, the surviving army leadership, led by Major General Suharto, insisted that the movement had been masterminded by the PKI, and began a campaign aimed at destroying the party and forcing President Sukarno, whom they regarded as too sympathetic to the PKI, from power. By mid-1966 Sukarno's authority had been gravely diminished, the army had effectively seized power, the PKI and all leftist organizations had been decimated, and Marxist-Leninist teachings had been formally banned.

The army leadership used a variety of strategies—political, judicial, and military—in its assault on the Left. Within days of the alleged coup attempt, for example, it set in motion a sophisticated propaganda campaign blaming the PKI for killing the generals, accusing it of attempting to seize power by force, and calling on the population to assist the army in crushing the traitors “down to the very roots.” The most important strategy by far, however, was a campaign of violence that entailed outright killing as well as mass detention, ill treatment, torture, and rape. There were distinctive patterns to that violence that when taken together, point strongly to the army leadership's central role in its planning and implementation.

There were broad commonalities, for instance, in the manner of arrest, interrogation, and execution. Most victims were first arrested without warrant by the army, police, or local paramilitaries, and many were subjected to harsh treatment and torture while under interrogation. Following interrogation, they were sorted into three broad categories based on their alleged degree of involvement in the September 30th Movement

and leftist organizations. After screening, some detainees were released, some remained in detention, and some were selected for killing. Those targeted for killing were typically transported to execution sites by military vehicle, or handed over to local vigilante and paramilitary groups. Bound and gagged, they were then lined up and shot at the edge of mass graves, or hacked to pieces with machetes and knives. Their remains were often thrown down wells, or into rivers, lakes, or irrigation ditches; few received proper burials. Many were subjected to sexual abuse and violence before and after their killing; men were castrated, and women had their vaginas and breasts sliced or pierced with knives. Corpses, heads, and other body parts were displayed on roads as well as in markets and other public places.

There were also clear patterns in the identity of those arrested and killed. In marked contrast to many other cases of mass killing and genocide, the victims in Indonesia were not targeted because of their ethnicity, nationality, or religion. On the contrary, with only occasional exceptions, they were selected for arrest and killing primarily on the basis of their real or alleged political affiliations. Moreover, while those killed and imprisoned included a number of high-ranking PKI officials, the vast majority were ordinary people—peasants, plantation workers, day laborers, schoolteachers, artists, dancers, writers, and civil servants—with no knowledge of or involvement in the events of October 1. In other words, the attack on the PKI and its allies was not based on the presumption of actual complicity in a crime but rather on the logic of *associative* guilt and the need for *collective* retribution.

The perpetrators also shared crucial commonalities. While arrests and executions were frequently committed by the army and police, many were carried out by armed civilians and militias affiliated with political parties on the Right. In such cases, one or more individuals were selected as special executioners—sometimes referred to as *algojo*. The involvement of such local figures and groups has led some observers to conclude that the violence was the product of spontaneous “horizontal” conflicts among different social and religious groups. As I will elaborate below, that view ignores—and perhaps deliberately obscures—the fact that such groups and individuals almost always acted with the support and encouragement of army authorities. In the absence of army organization, training, logistical assistance, authorization, and encouragement, those groups would never have committed acts of violence of such great scope or duration.

Despite these broad similarities, there were significant variations in the pattern of the killing. Geographically, they were most concentrated



FIGURE 1.2. PKI members and sympathizers detained by the army in Bali, ca. December 1965. (National Library of Indonesia)

in the populous provinces of Central and East Java, on the island of Bali, in Aceh and North Sumatra, and in parts of East Nusa Tenggara. By contrast, they were relatively limited in the capital city of Jakarta, the province of West Java, and much of Sulawesi and Maluku. The timing of the killing was also distinctive. It began in Aceh in early October, and spread to Central Java in late October and to East Java and North Sumatra in early November. In December 1965, a full two months after the alleged coup attempt, the violence finally started in Bali, where an estimated eighty thousand people were killed in a few months. Meanwhile, on the largely Catholic island of Flores toward the eastern end of the archipelago, it did not begin until February of the following year. The violence started to slow significantly in March 1966, shortly after the army seized power, but continued intermittently in some parts of the country through 1968.⁵ As discussed below, one of the enduring questions about the violence has been how to explain these variations.

There was also significant variation in the levels of political detention in different parts of the country, and in the relative levels of detention and killing. For example, it appears that long-term detention was greatest where the levels of mass killing were lowest, such as in Jakarta, West Java, and parts of Sulawesi. The reverse was also true: where the killing was

most intense, as in Bali, Aceh, and East Java, the overall levels of long-term detention were relatively low. In other words, long-term political detention and mass killing seem to have been inversely related. One possible explanation for that pattern is that the military authorities in different regions adopted different strategies for implementing an overall order to destroy the Left. In some areas they opted for a strategy of mass incarceration, while in others they chose mass killing.⁶

Acute political and social tensions were a critical part of the story, too. Some of these tensions were shaped by the Cold War, which fueled and accentuated a bitter split between the Left and Right inside the country. On the Left was the popular and powerful PKI that had roots dating to the early twentieth century. After an impressive fourth-place finish in the 1955 national elections—the last national elections before the alleged coup—the party grew dramatically in size and influence over the next decade. By 1965, it had an estimated 3.5 million members, and 20 million more in affiliated mass organizations—for women, youth, peasants, plantation workers, cultural workers, and other groups. Arguably the most powerful and popular political party at the time, it also had the ear of President Sukarno, increasingly friendly ties with Beijing, and even some support inside the Indonesian armed forces, especially in the air force.

Ranged against the PKI were most of the Indonesian Army and a number of secular and religious parties. The most important and powerful of these were the Council of Islamic Scholars (Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU) and the right wing of the secular Indonesian Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia, or PNI). While these groups differed on many issues, they shared a deep hostility to the PKI. Like the PKI, moreover, the parties on the Right all had affiliated popular organizations that were routinely mobilized for mass rallies and street demonstrations—as well as armed militia groups that played a central role in the violence of 1965–66. In short, by 1965, Indonesia was deeply divided, largely along a left-right (or more precisely, communist–anticommunist) axis, and politics was increasingly being played out on the streets by rival mass organizations and their armed counterparts.

These internal divisions were exacerbated by the wider international conflict and heated rhetoric of the Cold War. Although it was an early proponent of nonalignment, by the early 1960s Indonesia was shifting markedly—and in the view of Western states, dangerously—to the left. Between 1963 and 1965, for example, President Sukarno sought increasingly cordial relations with Beijing, launched blistering attacks on US intervention in Vietnam, withdrew from the United Nations, and began a major

military and political campaign—called Confrontation (Konfrontasi)—against the new state of Malaysia, which Sukarno claimed had been created by the United Kingdom and other imperialist powers to encircle and weaken Indonesia. For all these reasons, the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies saw Indonesia as a major problem. Indeed, by summer 1965, US and British officials were convinced that Indonesia was set to fall to the Communists. As CIA director W. F. Raborn wrote to President Lyndon Johnson in late July 1965, “Indonesia is well embarked on a course that will make it a communist nation in the reasonably near future, unless the trend is reversed.”⁷

Such anxieties were not new. From the late 1940s onward, the US government had worked assiduously to undermine the PKI, and weaken or remove President Sukarno. It did so, for example, by covertly supporting anticommunist political parties in Indonesia’s 1955 national elections, through a covert CIA operation supplying arms and money to antigovernment rebels in 1957–58, and when that operation failed, through a program of military assistance and training designed to bolster the political position of the army at the expense of both Sukarno and the PKI. Under the circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that the United States and its allies welcomed the army’s campaign against the Left and Sukarno after October 1965. Nor should it come as a great surprise that these and others major powers eagerly assisted the army in that campaign and its seizure of power.

Capturing the heady mood of optimism of the period, *Time* magazine described the decimation of the PKI and the rise of the army as “the West’s best news for years in Asia,” and a *New York Times* story on the subject was headlined “A Gleam of Light in Asia.”⁸ The reason for these jubilant assessments is not hard to discern. In the context of the Cold War and against the looming backdrop of the war in Vietnam, the mass killing and arrest of hundreds of thousands of people was a small price to pay for the destruction of one of the world’s largest and most successful Communist parties. Thus, after noting that “at least 300,000 Indonesians were killed” in the violence, a US State Department postmortem from 1966 concluded that “all in all, the change in Indonesia’s policies has been a major ‘break’ in the Southeast Asian situation, and a vivid example to many other nations of nationalist forces rising to beat back a Communist threat.”⁹

Over the next few decades, the United States and its allies remained stalwart supporters of Major General Suharto’s New Order regime, lavishing it with economic and military assistance, and loyally defending it in the face of domestic and international criticism of its abysmal human

rights record. The US government also went to extraordinary lengths to disguise its own role in the violence. In 1968, the CIA wrote and published an account of the alleged coup, *Indonesia—1965: The Coup That Backfired*, which largely embraced the dubious army version of events. Likewise, a succession of former US government officials, including Ambassador Marshall Green as well as the Jakarta CIA station chief, Hugh Tovar, and his agency colleagues J. Foster Collins and John T. Pizzicaro, published memoirs and articles that sought to divert attention from any possible US role, while questioning the integrity and political loyalties of scholars who disagreed with them.¹⁰

Although the mass killings subsided in mid-1966, the campaign against the Left continued—most notably in the program of arbitrary mass detention. Of the estimated one million people detained following the alleged coup attempt, only a few thousand were ever charged with a crime, and they were sentenced in conspicuously unfair show trials. The rest were held without charge in appalling conditions—some of them in forced labor camps and penal colonies—with no idea when or whether they might ever be released. While many of those detained were released after a few months or years in custody, a fair number were subsequently rearrested, and some thirty thousand uncharged political detainees remained in prisons or work camps until the late 1970s. In the face of unusual pressure from a newly credible transnational human rights movement and the administration of US president Jimmy Carter, Indonesia finally released most of the remaining detainees in 1979. Even after their release, however, former detainees and their families continued to be subjected to egregious restrictions on their civil, economic, and political freedoms, and suffer an officially fostered social stigma. In addition, over the years hundreds of political prisoners who had been sentenced in show trials were executed or died in custody, while dozens remained in prison until President Suharto finally stepped down in May 1998.

Suharto's resignation in the face of widespread protests stimulated lively demands for investigation into the events of 1965–66, a reassessment of the history of the period, apologies and compensation to the victims, and reconciliation and justice. In the intervening years there has been some progress on all those fronts. In 1999, then-president Abdurahman Wahid, a former head of the NU, apologized for that organization's role in the killings and called for a revocation of the New Order law banning the PKI. In 2004, a bill was passed establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in 2012 the country's National Human Rights Commission issued a detailed report on the violence of 1965–66, calling on

the attorney general to conduct further investigations and bring charges against those deemed responsible. Unfortunately, these and many other initiatives have been met with angry resistance from members of the government, retired army officers, and civil society groups, and the most promising—including all the items mentioned above—have either failed to materialize or been rolled back. The backlash has made it clear that the New Order's dogmatic approach to the question of 1965 remains deeply entrenched not only in the Indonesian state but also in society as a whole. The same is true of the various mythologies that were the product of the army's anti-PKI propaganda campaign. Meanwhile, Western and other states that abetted the violence of 1965–66, and roundly supported the New Order regime, have remained predictably silent about their role or the need to remedy those crimes so many years later. As a result, the prospects for truth, justice, and reconciliation in Indonesia remain elusive, more than fifty years after the violence began.

Explanations and Puzzles

Those who have examined the events of 1965–66 in depth have offered a wide range of explanations for them, focusing variously on psychological and sociopsychological dynamics, cultural and religious divisions, socio-economic conflicts, army planning, and international meddling. Indeed, the available scholarship on these events is now so rich that it is possible to draw on it to develop a more comprehensive account of the violence and its legacies.¹¹ That scholarship is discussed in some depth in later chapters, but it may be helpful to outline here some of the main contributions, while also highlighting questions and puzzles that remain unanswered.

Many accounts of the Indonesian violence, both scholarly and popular, emphasize the personal and psychological motivations of the perpetrators.¹² Like Christopher Browning in his seminal study of the “ordinary men” of a German reserve police battalion and Alexander Hinton in his work on the Cambodian genocide, they stress factors like peer pressure, fear, compliance with authority, and cultural norms in motivating participation and acquiescence.¹³ Such motives were undoubtedly important in Indonesia; it would otherwise be difficult to explain why so many people took part in the violence. They may also help to explain the extraordinary societal silence that followed the violence; few were prepared to risk speaking out against it. But as we know from other cases, and as the Indonesian experience confirms, such personal motivations alone cannot

account for the onset and trajectory of mass violence. Crucial as personal motivations are in understanding those dynamics, they are necessarily shaped by other structural conditions, especially at the national and international levels.

Other accounts seek to explain the violence of 1965–66 by reference to ostensibly distinctive features of Indonesian cultural and religious life. The most persistent of these interpretations suggests that the killings were rooted in exotic cultural patterns like “running amok.” An article in *Time* magazine from mid-1966 was typical: “Amok is a Javanese word, and it describes what happened at the collapse of the Communist coup. In a national explosion of pent-up hatred, Indonesia embarked on an orgy of slaughter that took more lives than the U.S. has lost in all wars in this century.”¹⁴ This sort of explanation is favored by Indonesian officials and their closest allies, but it is generally not taken seriously by scholars—or at least it shouldn’t be.¹⁵ Apart from its problematic cultural reductionism and the way it fudges the vital question of responsibility, it does not account for even the most rudimentary facts of the case. Perhaps most obviously, it offers no explanation for the program of mass arbitrary detention that lasted more than a decade; by definition, a program of detention that extends across a vast country and lasts for years cannot be the product of spontaneous or pent-up rage. Nor does it offer any plausible explanation for the long years of silence and impunity that followed the mass detention and killing.

More sophisticated analyses stress the importance of deeply rooted cultural and religious differences—for instance, between more pious (*santri*) and less pious (*abangan*) Muslims in Java—in laying the foundations for the violence.¹⁶ Such accounts provide insight into the kinds of grievances that may have driven enmity and conflict in certain areas, and help to explain why some of the language and symbolism of the violence varied as it did from one place to the next. At the same time, like most accounts that locate the origins of genocide in long-standing conflicts and tensions, they do not really explain why such tensions should have suddenly escalated to mass killing when and where they did. If the differences between the groups were so bitter and intractable, why had they not led to more than a few isolated instances of violence before the alleged October coup? Why was there such a long delay before the onset of violence in some of the most conflict-ridden areas? And why did comparable tensions elsewhere in the country not also result in mass killings?

Some authors locate the root of the violence mainly in the socioeconomic conditions that gave rise to bitter conflicts among Indonesians in

different parts of the country.¹⁷ Such tensions do appear to correlate with observed patterns of violence, with some of the worst violence occurring in Central Java, East Java, and Bali, where the conflict over land (and land reform) had been most intense in the years before the alleged coup, and the plantation belt of North Sumatra, where tensions between labor and capital had reached a critical peak in 1965. Still, like analyses that seek to explain mass killings by reference to deeply rooted cultural and religious tensions, those based on underlying socioeconomic conflict fail to explain why such tensions should have escalated to the point of mass killing and incarceration. Nor do they offer a satisfactory account of the distinctive temporal patterns of the violence.

A handful of scholars have argued that the mass killing should be understood as the result of planning and coordination by army and political leaders. Jess Melvin has recently made that case for Aceh on the basis of a rare trove of Indonesian Army documents, and I have elsewhere made the argument for Bali.¹⁸ Other scholars, including Douglas Kammen, John Roosa, and Robert Cribb, have likewise stressed that earlier studies overstated the importance of local social and cultural conditions, while underplaying the role of the army in fomenting and organizing the violence.¹⁹ Others, however, have resisted this assertion, mainly on the grounds that significant geographic and temporal variations in the violence make it impossible to generalize. While accepting that the army may have played a significant role in some areas, they point to the variations as evidence that in other areas, horizontal social and cultural conflicts were the primary drivers of violence.²⁰ As elaborated below, my own view is that this latter interpretation is mistaken—and that the marked temporal and geographic variations actually point to a wider national pattern.

Finally, a number of authors have contended that the killings were mainly the result of a conspiracy, masterminded by foreign intelligence agencies like the CIA and the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), in coordination with a handful of Indonesian Army figures like Generals Suharto and Abdul Haris Nasution.²¹ While there is no doubt that foreign agencies encouraged the army to act against the PKI and Sukarno before the supposed coup, and facilitated the violence after it (arguments I will discuss in some detail in this book), there are reasons to doubt that the entire affair was the result of a foreign conspiracy. Perhaps most important, that scenario probably attributes too much importance to a handful of CIA and MI6 operatives of doubtful competence, while ignoring the ample motives and capacities of Indonesian actors, chief among them the Indonesian Army leadership. As such, it perpetuates a

simplistic, neocolonial narrative in which crucial political changes in the non-Western world, whether good or bad, are routinely attributed to the influence of the United States and other powerful outside actors. In any case, as I will elaborate later, the most careful studies on the subject do not support the claim of international conspiracy.

These explanations clearly offer important insights, and without them we could scarcely begin to make sense of the violence that followed the alleged coup. Still, as I have suggested, they leave some key questions unanswered: What accounts for the distinctive geographic and temporal patterns and variations in the violence? That is, why was it concentrated in certain regions—Bali, Aceh, Central Java, East Java, North Sumatra, and parts of East Nusa Tenggara—and why did it begin and end at markedly different times in different parts of the country? Why, despite those variations, did the violence take broadly similar forms across the country? Why, for instance, did vigilantes or death squads everywhere play such a central role, why did the violence so often seem to pit one social, cultural, or religious group against another, and why were methods like disappearance, bodily mutilation, corpse display, and sexual violence so common? How and why did deeply rooted cultural, religious, and socioeconomic tensions escalate to mass killing and incarceration? What was the relationship between the mass killing and program of mass detention? Who was ultimately responsible for the violence? What role, if any, did foreign powers play in it? And finally, what have been the consequences of the violence for Indonesian society, and why has so little been said or done about it over the past fifty years?

Wider Perspectives

In answering these questions, I have found it fruitful to think of Indonesia's experience in a comparative way, by contemplating the events and legacies of 1965–66 in light of the wider literatures on genocide, mass violence, human rights, and the Cold War. Considering the near absence of Indonesia from much of that literature, moreover, it seems to me that the Indonesian example might also help to refine and enrich those discussions.

A number of insights from the wider literature are especially germane to the Indonesian case. Among the most significant is the argument that genocide and mass killing are inherently political acts, initiated by actors (people but also institutions) with political motives and objectives. That is to say, genocides do not simply happen—they are not the “natural” by-product of socioeconomic or cultural conflicts—but instead are the result

of deliberate and conscious acts by political and military leaders. This insight, compellingly argued by Benjamin Valentino, Scott Straus, Helen Fein, and others, usefully shifts the focus away from purely psychological and social dynamics that explain popular participation and acquiescence in mass killing, to the intentional political acts of those in positions of authority who set mass killings in motion, and provide the encouragement and means through which they can be carried out.²² That shift helps to train our attention on the structural conditions that permit mass killings to happen, and the vital question of legal and political *responsibility* for such acts.

A related observation is that the capacities and character of states and state institutions are vital in creating the conditions for, and carrying out, programs of mass killing and incarceration. State capacity in the fields of logistics, propaganda, administration, and control over the means and organization of violence arguably mark the difference between isolated outbreaks of violence and sustained, geographically dispersed programs of mass killing and incarceration.

Although it may seem self-evident, among the most important of these is the existence of institutions—such as armies, police forces, paramilitaries, and militias—with the logistical wherewithal and inclination to organize and carry out systematic violence.²³ A critical feature of such bodies is what I call their “institutional culture,” shorthand for their internal norms and patterns of behavior, which depending on their historical experience and training, may be more or less violent. An important dimension of an institution’s culture is its “repertoire of violence,” by which I mean the routines of violence learned and employed by all of those associated with the institution.²⁴ I believe that such institutional cultures and repertoires help to account for certain distinctive patterns of mass violence that are not easily explained by reference to personal psychology or peer pressure.

The wider literature also points to the importance of ideology in fueling genocide and mass violence. Eric Weitz has argued, for example, that a unique conjuncture of mass politics, ideas of racial purity, and revolutionary utopian ideologies fueled four of the twentieth century’s worst genocides.²⁵ Other scholars have similarly highlighted the significance of ideologies rooted in racism, nationalism, and modernity—together with fears of an existential threat to the state—in explaining the onset and dynamics of genocide.²⁶ While the importance of state ideology can scarcely be denied, the Indonesian case raises some doubt about the significance of revolutionary utopianism and racial purity as the key elements in the

equation. The ideology of Indonesia's New Order could hardly be characterized as utopian or revolutionary, and it was not in any obvious way rooted in ideas of racial purity. The existential threat to the nation imagined by the army leadership and its allies did not come from a particular racial or ethnic group but rather from a political group and ideology—the PKI and communism. And the remedy lay not in racial purification or even revolutionary transformation but simply the excision of the offending political category through execution, incarceration, reeducation, repression, and propaganda. Thus, if any ideology can be said to have driven the mass violence in 1965–66—and the later violence in Aceh, East Timor, Papua, and elsewhere—it was an ideology of strident, even hysterical anti-communism and militarism, informed by a narrative that portrayed the Left as an existential threat to the state and nation.

Another insight from the literature on genocide is that local conditions—along with the relationship between local and national actors—influence the trajectory of mass violence and genocide in significant ways. As Straus has argued, for example, local actors play a crucial role in implementing the plans and orders initiated by national leaders by identifying, detaining, categorizing, and killing designated enemies.²⁷ Mass violence may accelerate or slow depending on the willingness and ability of those local allies to carry out national plans, and the capacity of national leaders to mobilize and manage local allies and networks. Meanwhile, local socioeconomic and political conditions matter because they shape what kinds of tensions—for instance, land, political office, wages, or religion—become politically salient, and supply the language, symbols, and relevant collective memories through which such conflicts may be escalated or restrained.

Existing studies also point to language and visual representation as crucial in setting the stage for genocide and other kinds of mass violence.²⁸ Depictions of a targeted group as less than human, threatening, treacherous, immoral, or sexually depraved—together with explicit or implicit incitement to violence against members of the group—effectively serve to place it, in Fein's apt phrase, "outside the universe of obligation of the perpetrator," and make mass violence far more likely.²⁹ Whether in the context of mass rallies, print and electronic media, religious edicts, works of art, or carefully devised propaganda and psywar campaigns, pejorative representations of a target group help to create frameworks within which acts of violence against it are seen as justifiable, legitimate, and even necessary. The association between language and violence appears to be especially strong where the negative portrayals resonate with preexisting perceptions of the group, and where they are voiced or clearly condoned

by powerful military, political, or religious figures. By removing the moral restraints on violent action, such representations help to forge the social consensus or at least popular compliance that is an essential component of mass violence.

Turning to a wider canvas, several scholars have made the case that genocide and other kinds of atrocities tend to emerge in the context of war, offering a variety of explanations for that connection.³⁰ Some have argued, for example, that the experience of modern war results in a general brutalization of both soldiers and society at large, and the emergence of a culture of violence that makes the turn to mass violence more likely. Others have stressed the way in which the binary “us versus them” mentality of war, together with the fear of an existential threat to the nation, lays the rhetorical and political groundwork for mass violence and killing. While recognizing the importance of war in the logic of genocide, historians of international human rights have taken a somewhat broader view, showing how international legal regimes, normative environments, and transnational networks can serve both to facilitate and to constrain mass violence.³¹ These contributions show, in other words, that war is only one of many ways in which international actors and context can contribute to genocide and mass violence. In addition to explaining why genocides may happen, moreover, they offer clues as to how they may be prevented, ended, or remedied once the violence has ceased.

Likewise, historians of the Cold War have highlighted the many ways, short of all-out war, in which powerful states have historically helped to create the conditions for mass violence. Crucially, the best of this scholarship does not claim that Cold War calculations determined the course of events in other countries in a linear fashion, or that the military coups, wars, and rebellions of those years were solely the product of foreign conspiracy.³² They show instead that the overthrow of neutralist or leftist leaders, and the rise of military regimes and violence that often followed, were shaped by a complex array of local interests and by the interplay of those interests with regional and international objectives and developments.³³ These findings suggest that there is a need for caution in attributing outbreaks of mass violence directly to foreign states and covert agencies. Still, as Greg Grandin has argued so powerfully for Guatemala, Cold War logic and interventions did have real, sometimes-grievous consequences for governments and populations in these years. That was certainly the case in Indonesia, where foreign intervention formed a crucial element of the wider context within which politics took shape in the years before and after 1965.

Finally, genocide scholars have underscored the pivotal role of historical processes, events, and contingencies in understanding the onset, dynamics, and end of genocide and mass violence.³⁴ They show, for example, how historical experiences, particularly as they are recalled in collective and official memory, may either encourage or constrain mass violence. They also argue that genocides and mass killings unfold in response to historically specific and changing conditions on the ground. This historically contingent and process-driven understanding of genocides is vital in explaining their geographic and temporal variations as well as how they end. One might add that historical memory along with official histories can have an especially profound effect on the ways in which mass violence is remembered, memorialized, and remedied. Where those responsible for the violence remain in power, they are in a strong position to write its history, and thus to construct a social memory that diverts blame, obscures responsibility, and obstructs all efforts at redress.

A New Account

Based on these insights and building on the rich body of existing work by Indonesia scholars outlined earlier, I want to suggest here a new approach that addresses many of the questions posed above—and accounts for the variations and particularities of the Indonesian case—while also making possible its comparison to other instances of mass killing and detention. That approach entails three broad claims, each of which is spelled out briefly below and which together form the basis for the discussion in the remainder of this book.

THE ARMY

My first claim is that the violence of 1965–66—its patterns and variations—cannot be properly understood without recognizing the pivotal role of the army leadership in provoking, facilitating, and organizing it. I do not mean that the army single-handedly carried out all the killings or acted alone; that was not the case. It faced pressure from a variety of social, religious, and political groups for “firm action” against the Left, and the success of its campaign depended on the often-willing collaboration of a great many Indonesians. What I am arguing, rather, is that the resort to mass killing and detention was neither inevitable nor spontaneous, but was encouraged, facilitated, directed, and shaped by the army’s leadership. In other words, without the army leadership, those pressures—and

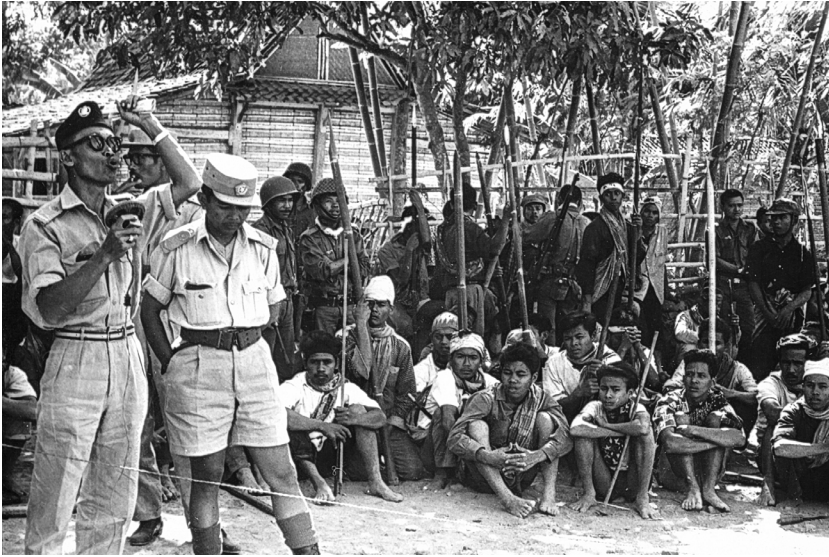


FIGURE 1.3. Army officer briefs soldiers and local militia members about the campaign against the PKI in a village in Central Java, ca.1965. (National Library of Indonesia)

the personal, socioeconomic, religious, and cultural tensions that fueled them—would never have resulted in mass killing or incarceration on such a wide scale, and would not have been followed by five decades of silence and inaction.

The army's decisive role had five crucial dimensions. First, in the immediate aftermath of the alleged coup attempt, the army developed and disseminated a discourse of existential threat to the nation that provoked and valorized acts of violence against real and alleged leftists. Through a carefully crafted media and propaganda campaign, it demonized and dehumanized the PKI and its affiliates, and called for them to be “destroyed down to the very roots.” In doing so, the army leadership gave license to the party's enemies to do the same, and provided an essential ingredient in transforming underlying tensions and conflict into actual violence.

Second, the army leadership took a series of decisions and gave orders to detain, transport, categorize, register, interrogate, and prosecute vast numbers of people. To implement those decisions, it had to build and manage a network of local allies, and then sustain that network over an extended period of time. In the absence of such central planning, and without the army's unique organizational and logistical reach, the mass violence could not have extended to so many different areas of the country and could not have been sustained for so long. The army's central role

also helps to explain the distinctive features of that campaign; disappearance, bodily mutilation, corpse display, sexual violence, and torture were elements of the army's repertoire of violence, shaped by its institutional culture.

Third, to carry out its plans, the army leadership mobilized an extensive network of civilian militia groups—like the NU's Banser and PNI's Pemuda Marhaen—and encouraged them to do the essential groundwork for the campaign of mass violence, such as identification, detention, transportation, and killing. While it is true that some groups occasionally acted without explicit army sanction, notably in East Java, such instances were localized and limited. In the vast majority of cases, militia forces operated with the full knowledge, and usually under orders from, local or regional army commanders. As a consequence, they were deeply influenced by the army's institutional culture, and the violence they committed drew on the army's standard repertoire. It was through these officially sanctioned militia groups, moreover, that long-standing tensions were transformed into mass violence, that violence was sustained for long periods over wide stretches of the country, and that so many people became complicit in the crimes committed.

Fourth, while the army alone had the unique organizational and logistical capacity to implement this plan, its capacity was not unlimited. In some areas, it was unable to mobilize local allies or even met resistance from local authorities, thereby delaying or derailing the implementation of the plan. In Bali, for instance, the central army leadership met resistance from the governor and regional military commander, resulting in a two-month delay in the onset of killings. By contrast, in Aceh, where the local civilian and army leadership were united in their support of the central army command's plan, the violence began almost immediately. Thus, the army leadership's uneven capacity to mobilize local allies helps to explain both the geographic and temporal variations in the violence.

Finally, by virtue of seizing power, the army leadership was able to write and disseminate its own history of the violence while silencing alternative versions. The army used various methods to do that, including public rituals, show trials, popular education, films, and other propaganda that evoked the "latent threat of Communism" and reminded potential critics of the dire consequences of being labeled a leftist. The result has been a profoundly misleading, but also remarkably resilient, account that has been crucial in enforcing the more than fifty years of silence and inaction that has followed the violence.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

My second principal claim is that the actions of powerful foreign states—especially the United States and the United Kingdom—together with aspects of the international context were instrumental in facilitating and encouraging the army’s campaign of mass violence in 1965–66. I am not suggesting that the United States or other foreign powers plotted the supposed coup or violence in advance. The evidence does not support such a claim. But I think it can be shown that in the absence of support from powerful states and in a different international context, the army’s program of mass killings and incarceration would not have happened. An account that highlights the international context, and the acts and omissions of powerful states, also explains better than most others how the army got away with it, and why there has been such deafening silence and inaction over the five decades since it ended.

This claim is based on five main observations. First, contrary to blanket denials that the United States and its allies played any role in toppling Sukarno and destroying the PKI, there is now abundant evidence that they did. In fact, for more than a decade before the alleged coup, the United States and other Western powers worked assiduously to undermine Sukarno and the PKI through the provision of covert assistance to anticommunist parties and military backing to anti-Sukarno rebels. After 1958, moreover, they encouraged anticommunist elements in the army to act forcefully against the PKI and to play a leading role in politics by providing them with increased military assistance as well as secret assurances that they would support such a move. And in the final year before the supposed coup, the United States and its allies carried out a covert campaign designed to tarnish the reputation of the PKI and Sukarno, and supply a pretext for the army to act against them.

Second, the available evidence shows unequivocally that in the weeks and months after the alleged coup, the United States and United Kingdom encouraged and facilitated the violence that followed. They did this through a covert campaign of disinformation and propaganda designed to further “blacken the name” of the PKI, a policy of deliberate silence in the face of what they knew to be widespread army-instigated violence against civilians, and the provision of covert economic, military, and logistical assistance to the army leadership. These interventions, set in motion within days of the purported coup, provided vital assurance to Suharto and his allies that they could move against the PKI without fear of criticism, and buttressed the army’s violent campaign at a critical juncture.

Third, the violence was crucially shaped by the broad international political context and more specifically the Cold War. As noted above, that context dominated the Indonesian political scene and helped to create the highly polarized left-right division that was arguably a precondition for mass violence. The Cold War was also essential in influencing the substance and style of Indonesia's international relations, especially after 1963, driving it ever closer to China while alienating it from the United States and other Western powers as well as the Soviet Union. It was Sukarno's drift to the left, after all, that led the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies to view Indonesia as a major problem, and therefore to support the army leadership's move against the PKI and Sukarno, regardless of the cost in human lives. And it was Indonesia's (and the PKI's) decision to side with China after the Sino-Soviet split that led the Soviet Union to do so little to protect the PKI once the killing began.

Fourth, I think it can be shown that the violence was facilitated by the prevailing weakness at the time of international norms, institutions, and networks related to human rights. Perhaps most important was the near absence in 1965–66 of the transnational human rights and civil society networks that from the mid-1970s began to play an important part in efforts to prevent or stop mass violence. In the absence of such networks, the United Nations took no notice of the violence, most states expressed satisfaction or said nothing at all, and the mass media largely parroted official views. By contrast, the rapidly growing credibility of international human rights organizations and discourse in the 1970s, and the brief conjuncture of that new authority with the administration of US president Carter, help to explain the anomalous success of the campaign on behalf of Indonesia's political prisoners leading to the release of most by the end of 1979.

Finally, powerful international actors facilitated the Indonesian Army's work of rewriting the history of the violence. Through their economic, political, and military support for the regime that came to power in the wake of the killings of 1965–66, and their almost-total silence about them ever since, Western governments have helped to ensure that the official version of events prevailed, and have prevented the proper investigation and prosecution of what, by any measure, were among the worst crimes of the twentieth century. These conditions have also meant that unlike the survivors of some genocides—most notably the Holocaust—the survivors of 1965–66 have had neither the opportunity nor power to generate world attention about those events in the half century since they happened.

HISTORICAL CONDITIONS

Lastly, this account highlights the role of historical conditions and antecedents in understanding the dynamics of the mass violence of 1965–66. More specifically, I argue that in addition to the underlying cultural, religious, and socioeconomic tensions that shaped the violence, five crucial historical conditions related to Indonesian political life made the mass killings in Indonesia much more likely to happen. They did so by influencing political ideas and conflicts, shaping key political institutions and structures, and providing the basis for politically powerful historical reconstructions and memories.

The first of these conditions was a colonial and anticolonial history that made bitter ideological differences between the Left and Right a key fault line of Indonesian politics after independence. Notwithstanding its enormous linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity, by the 1920s Indonesia's anticolonial politics had begun to crystallize as much along ideological lines as on the basis of ethnic or cultural identities. Within that political constellation, the Left was unusually strong, and the PKI held an especially prominent position. The position of the Left was repeatedly challenged, however, not only by those who favored colonial rule but also by those who saw it as antithetical to Islam, and some who believed it represented a threat to national unity and stability. Those lines of tension survived into the postindependence period and laid the foundations for the deepening left-right conflicts that culminated in 1965.

The second condition was the emergence of a perception within the army and the political Right more generally that the PKI represented an existential threat to army unity and to the nation. That perception dated back at least to September 1948, when an armed group supported by the PKI, sought to establish an autonomous political command around the provincial town of Madiun in East Java. Alarmed by this apparent threat to their authority, the army and the national (Republican) leadership acted quickly to crush the movement, detaining and executing its principal leaders. From that point onward, the army and its allies on the right portrayed the events in Madiun as an armed rebellion by the PKI, and evidence of the party's essentially treacherous inclinations. As such, they became a rallying point for the goal of suppressing the PKI, especially after October 1, 1965, when the army and its allies repeatedly invoked the memory of Madiun as a reason to crush the PKI once and for all.

The third crucial historical condition for the violence was a process of state formation in the context of war and revolution that gave rise to a

conservative and politically powerful army along with a highly militarized state after independence. If the idea of an Indonesian “nation” had already been articulated in the 1920s, the sinews of a new Indonesian state only began to form in the course of Indonesia’s wartime occupation by Japan (1942–45) and in the four-year fight for independence from the Dutch known as the National Revolution (1945–49). Notwithstanding certain outward concerns with democracy and human rights, and a nominally civilian leadership, the state that emerged during these years was underpinned by a national army whose commitment to civilian rule and democracy was superficial at best. In the postindependence period, the army repeatedly asserted its right to be directly involved in political life, and with the president’s declaration of martial law in 1957, it secured both substantial political and economic power that it was reluctant to relinquish. Over the same period, the state itself became increasingly militarized, both in style and substance.

The fourth condition was the early development of an army doctrine and practice of mobilizing civilian militia forces to combat domestic enemies. Influenced by the Japanese occupation forces with whom its members had trained during the wartime occupation, and in response to the challenges of fighting returning Dutch and Allied forces on Indonesian territory after 1945, the army relied to a great extent on the support of local populations and their “struggle organizations” known as *lasykar*. That strategy was eventually formalized into a doctrine of “total people’s defense,” which in essence called for the mobilization of local militias to fight domestic and foreign enemies. The strategy was used to considerable effect not only against the Dutch and their allies but also against domestic groups that in the army’s view, threatened its preeminence or the nation. The strategy as well as the particular tactics and repertoires that were used in that campaign were employed again after independence, and formed an essential foundation for the mobilization of militia groups to detain and kill leftists after October 1, 1965.

The final condition was the consolidation by the early 1960s of a politics notable for its militancy and high levels of mass mobilization. That condition was accelerated by the polarizing logic of the Cold War, the compelling but sometimes-bellicose language of Sukarno’s anticolonial nationalism, and the often-obnoxious behavior of the United States and other powerful states both in Indonesia and elsewhere. US support for regional rebellions in the late 1950s and its armed intervention in Vietnam were especially provocative; British support for the newly formed state of Malaysia over Sukarno’s objections did nothing to relieve tensions.

On the other side, increasingly strong ties with China in these years encouraged militancy on the left, while heightening anxieties on the right. Together, these factors accentuated existing left-right divisions inside Indonesia, and a growing sense of crisis in which rumor, suspicion, and hostility flourished, providing a crucial backdrop and stimulus for mass political violence.

In short, the account presented here, and elaborated in the rest of the book, stresses the critical role of the army leadership, the influence of international actors and context, and the impact of historical conditions in shaping both the mass violence and the long silence that followed. In making these arguments, I do not mean that personal motives, social psychology, cultural and religious tensions, and socioeconomic conflicts were unimportant in generating mass violence—only that their significance was always shaped and circumscribed in decisive ways by the broader historical and political context.

Similarly, in stressing here certain “structural” conditions for the violence of 1965–66, and referring to the intentional acts of the army leadership, I do not mean to suggest that the mass killing and incarceration were preordained, or planned from start to finish. On the contrary, it is worth emphasizing that the violence emerged and changed in response to conditions on the ground. That is to say, this account leaves room for contingency and mere happenstance as essential parts of the explanation. The most important of these contingencies, though certainly not the only one, was the alleged coup of October 1, 1965, itself. Whoever the architects of that action were, the killing of the six generals provided a crucial opportunity for the army and its allies to move forcefully against the Left. In the absence of that event, and without the army leadership’s decision to turn it to its political advantage, one cannot say with any certainty that the political tensions in Indonesia, profound as they were, would ever have resulted in violence on such a massive scale.