

Unmarked graves: death and survival in the anti communist violence in East Java, Indonesia

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Unmarked graves: death and survival in the anti-communist violence in East Java, Indonesia, by Vanessa Hearman, Singapore, National University of Singapore Press, 2018, 288 pp., \$38.00 SGD (Paperback), ISBN: 9789814722940

In *Unmarked Graves*, Vanesa Hearman, a historian of Southeast Asia, explores the political tensions and the political tyranny that took place in Indonesia in 1965. She argues that these events left deep wounds in Indonesian society. Particularly, she notes that the victims and their families still suffer from unhealed wounds. The book begins by reviewing the background of 1965, noting the domestic cold war between the two great powers in Indonesia at that time, namely the pro-revolutionary communist party and the conservative army. President Sukarno, who was very popular at the time, tried to balance the two great powers, but it did not run smoothly (Hearman2018f). Problems arose when the issue of stability of Sukarno's leadership surfaced, and rumours spread that there might be a coup, either by the army or the communist party. If either faction rebelled, there would be serious implications for President Sukarno. Tensions between the two forces steadily increased until in the early hours of 1 October 1965, when a group of mid-level officers who were pro-Indonesian Communist Party members kidnapped and killed six generals and a lieutenant. The group, which called itself the *Gerakan 30 September* (September 30 Movement, G-30-S), stated that they were taking action to prevent what they thought was a covert plot by CIA-backed military leaders against President Sukarno. This event changed Indonesian history.

After the coup was crushed, there was a rapid purge within the security forces of those who sympathized with the G-30-S movement, followed by the complete annihilation of the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia). The army, led by Major General Suharto, accused the PKI of masterminding the 'failed coup'. The subsequent bloody repression resulted in the deaths of 500,000 to a million communists, leftists, and others caught up in the violence. Those killed by the army and army-backed paramilitaries were buried in mass graves or thrown into the sea. Many bodies have not been found. Suharto's New Order was founded on these unmarked graves.

Since Robert Cribb edited a pioneering anthology (Cribb 1990), there have been several studies of the 1965–1966 killings. The fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 brought in a limited freedom to discuss past atrocities. A wave of memoirs, testimony, and evidence enabled a new round of research. Without a doubt, Hearman's work is a very important and unique contribution to the study of the regional dimensions of this most perplexing part of Indonesian history.

In the second part of this book, the author describes how brutality and violence were perpetrated by the anti-communist camp against anyone accused of being a member or sympathizer of the communist party. Two storylines run in parallel, focusing on local PKI activists and mass organizations in East Java. One of the storylines is the anti-communist violence that occurred in the province in 1965–1968 following the October 1 coup. Here we find answers to questions about how violence was orchestrated. Hearman describes how the army's

Operation Trisula crushed the weak resistance of the communists in South Blitar in 1968. This is the first comprehensive study of repression in South Blitar from the point of view of the oppressed.

The second storyline is the experience of the activists who went from open and successful political activism in the years before 1965, through life on the run during the purges, to the attempt to build a new resistance base, before finally being destroyed by the army. This book offers rare stories about the stigmatization, discrimination, and abuse experienced collectively by villagers in South Blitar during and after the Trisula operation. Hearman presents the history of idealism and dedication, but also the trauma, of people who aspired to be the 'voice of the oppressed'.

In the third part ³ of the book, Hearman explains how the coup began, namely on the anniversary of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in May 1965. At that time, Aidit, chairman of the PKI, claimed that his party had more than 27 million members and was ready to fight the arbitrariness of the landlords against the working class. Arguably his speech was not merely empty rhetoric, but in fact triggered a crucial moment in Indonesia's dark history. Hearman quotes a military source that claimed there was a group of soldiers in East Java who expressed their support for *Gerakan 30 September*. The Regional Head of the PKI Special Bureau had been present at the group meeting before the event. This was a secret section under the party secretary in charge of establishing relations with soldiers sympathetic to the party. When the *Gerakan 30 September* turned out to be a fatal failure, leftist movements in East Java were confused by ambiguous or even contradictory instructions that came from their leaders in Jakarta.

In the fourth part of the book, Hearman describes how anti-communist groups in Indonesia reacted to the failure of the PKI plan immediately taking advantage of the confusion experienced by PKI activists after the failure of the movement. She describes in detail how violence increased in East Java. In early October, attacks on Chinese shops began. In mid-October Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the most popular traditional Islamic organization in East Java, staged a demonstration in Kediri, after which participants attacked the party headquarters and killed 11 members. Other cities follow the same pattern.

Hearman further shows that NU was part of a well-organized anti-PKI campaign. Several army commanders in East Java coordinated closely with local NU leaders even before the regional army commanders decided to ban the PKI and left-leaning mass organizations at the end of October 1965. Soldiers also approached Catholic youth to warn them that 'their names are on the PKI death list'. One former Catholic student recalled: 'The officer lit our fuse'. These commanders then provided a list of PKI activists and supporters to the NU paramilitary Ansor, which led to an 'extensive operation' of arrest and detention. Many of those detainees have never been seen again. At the end of the year, the death toll in the province swelled to tens, or even hundreds of thousands. Estimates vary from 54,000 to 300,000.

In the fifth part of this book, Hearman describes how several PKI figures who managed to escape and save themselves tried to reorganize their lives

and rebuild the strength of the party, but this was all in vain. The last chapter of this extraordinary period of Indonesian history was the suppression in South Blitar in 1968. PKI members who escaped the crackdown gathered in South Blitar, lived in isolation and fell into extreme poverty, and finally were caught by the army.

In the sixth section, Hearman describes the situation in Blitar during the Trisula operation carried out by the army in its attempt to crush PKI sympathizers. There were many tragedies affecting not only people who were proven PKI cadres, but also ordinary people who were only suspected of being PKI sympathizers. Hearman explains that the soldiers looked at all civilians with suspicion. Soldiers carefully watched even the villagers who carried out murders or help bury the bodies.

In the conclusion, Hearman expresses her sympathy with the victims of the anti-communist purge in Indonesia. She holds that many innocent victims of this tragedy have had their histories erased from memory. Even though more than five decades have passed since these traumatic events, and Suharto's authoritarian regime disappeared more than two decades ago, survivors of past atrocities still fear intimidation, discrimination and stigmatization. That is why many of the interviewees in this book had to use pseudonyms. Hearman concludes by noting that until their suffering is recognized and justice is served, the struggle must continue, a struggle that requires solidarity from the international community.

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