

Who Knows? Oral History Methods in the Study of the Massacres of 1965-66 in Indonesia

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The massacres in Indonesia in 1965-66 must have numbered in the thousands but only a few have been studied in any detail. The scant literature about the massacres tends to focus on the historical context rather than on the massacres themselves. One reason for this lack of knowledge is that the massacres were designed to be mysterious. They were not public events; they were meant to be forgotten. To research them, one has to bore through decades of sedimented lies, legends, and silences. This essay reviews the contributions of oral historians to our understanding of the massacres. I argue many of the existing oral histories are flawed because their research methods are unsuited to a situation where the basic facts about the event being investigated are so poorly understood. Researchers have hardly known what to look for. Oral historians have focused their studies on local communities but have tended not to obtain information from a broad cross-section of "locals." Obtaining reliable information about any single massacre requires an unusual level of cross-checking of information with a variety of people. The preference for strictly local studies has left the main perpetrator, the army high command in Jakarta, out of the picture.

Who knows what the army did with them there – what was clear was that the trucks went off fully loaded and came back empty.
Pipit Rochijat, "Am I PKI or Non-PKI" (1985).

In his wonderful, now classic essay "The Death of Luigi Trastulli," Alessandro Portelli compares newspaper accounts of the police firing upon a crowd of street demonstrators in a small town in Italy in 1949 with the social memory of that killing. He finds the memories of the town's working class community, which has eulogized the victim of that shooting in songs and stories, to be in error. Instead of using oral history to figure out "what really happened," Portelli uses it to think about why people have misremembered the past.¹ Portelli's later book, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, follows a similar procedure. It relies on written records to establish the facticity of an event: German troops occupying Rome in 1944 massacred 355 people as a collective punishment for an attack by the resistance that claimed 32 soldiers.

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991): chapter 1.

He explains that he uses written records to “establish a problematic but plausible framework of events, against which the creative work of memory and narrative can be measured and tested.”² While Portelli draws upon the interviews to clarify certain details of the massacre and provide a richer historical context, he is particularly concerned with the “creative work” of misremembering. The Italian right-wing and the Catholic Church cultivated a blame-the-victims narrative that attributed responsibility for the collective punishment to the partisans of the resistance. Supposedly, they could have prevented the deaths of hundreds of their fellow Romans if they had surrendered to the Nazi occupiers. Even though the documentary record has consistently shown that the partisans were never given the chance to surrender, this incorrect version came to be widely accepted. Portelli notes that he is “specifically fascinated by the pervasiveness of erroneous tales, myths, legends and silences” and the question of what these “discrepancies and errors” reveal about the workings of social memory.³

In researching the massacres of 1965-66 in Indonesia, an oral historian is faced with a very different situation. The written sources are scant and do not allow a reliable narrative of events, or even a simple chronology, to be constructed.⁴ We know there must have been thousands of massacres throughout the country but clear, detailed evidence has been compiled for only one of them.⁵ The oral historian confronts the particularly challenging task of determining the most basic facts about these massacres, even the validity of categorizing the killings as massacres. There is much confusion among Indonesians and foreign historians of Indonesia over fundamental matters, such as the identities of the perpetrators and the victims, the methods the perpetrators used to kill the victims, and the total number of dead (estimated in the hundreds of thousands). One cannot think about oral history in this case as an exploration of the divergences of social memory from the

² Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and the Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003): 16.

³ Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, 16.

⁴ Consider the quality of the documents about the 1965-66 killings selected for an international collection of eyewitness testimonies. A leading historian of Indonesia, Robert Cribb, chose the three best primary sources he could find. One was anonymously written over 20 years after the event, another (Pipit Rochijat’s essay) was written almost 20 years afterwards by a man who was a youth at the time, and the third was written about a massacre in 1968. Samuel Totten, William Parsons, and Israel Charny, eds., *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts* (London: Routledge, 2008; third edition), chapter 7. Cribb’s chapter was not included in the fourth edition of the book but has been placed online by the publisher for public access:

http://media.routledgeweb.com/pdf/9780415871921/chapter7_the_indonesian_massacres.pdf

⁵ That one case is the Wonosobo massacre discussed below.

documentary record, or the analysis of the reasons for “the pervasiveness of erroneous tales”; we cannot yet tell the difference between what is true and what is erroneous. Oral history about the violence of 1965-66 cannot be the supplementing, revising, or reaffirming what is already known from written sources. We know little at the level of what scholars are calling the “micro-dynamics” of mass killing, and even less about the nationwide patterns.⁶ Oral historians in Indonesia are burdened with the responsibility of writing the history of the massacres almost from scratch.

Where we share common ground with Portelli is in confronting a social memory that is dominated by a blame-the-victims narrative. Elements of the Indonesian army, working with various civilian militias, massacred supporters of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) as part of their overturning of the entire political system and the consolidation of what they called “the New Order.” The resulting dictatorship of General Suharto (1966-98) made anti-communism the religion of the state. In the rare, fleeting moments when the killings were mentioned, the victims were blamed for their own deaths. The army-dominated Fact Finding Commission (FFC) concluded from its brief investigations in late 1965-early 1966 that outraged civilians ran amok; they could not control their rage in the face of such a heinous organization. Their “emotions explosively erupted (*emosi jang meletus setjara explosif*),” while the army did its best to stop them. Neither President Sukarno nor his successor, Suharto, released the report to the public; they preferred silence instead.⁷ But the FFC report articulated the army’s standard line that always remained on reserve, ready to be brought up whenever officers felt that they did have to offer an explanation of what happened.

According to the army’s standard line, the communists had made themselves so hated over the years prior to 1965 that “the people” attacked them as soon as they had the chance. There were no organized massacres, only rampages by frenzied mobs who slashed and shot their way through the streets. The killings were just natural, vengeful reactions by patriotic, god-fearing Indonesians to the aggressiveness of the atheistic, traitorous PKI.⁸

⁶ On the micro-dynamics of mass killing, see Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁷ One of the members of the FFC, Oei Tjoe Tat, included it as an appendix to his memoir published 30 years later. Pramoedya Ananta Toer and S.A. Prasetyo, eds. *Memoar Oei Tjoe Tat* [The Memoir of Oei Tjoe Tat] (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1995).

⁸ Notosusanto and Saleh presented the killings as the result of local political tensions that “exploded into communal clashes resulting in bloodbaths.” They did not venture any further details as to who killed whom, where, when, or how. One would assume from their description that many non-communists were killed as well in these so-called “clashes.” Nugroho Notosusanto and Ismail Saleh, *The Coup Attempt of the ‘September 30th Movement’*

They were also legitimate acts of self-defense against the threat of further PKI violence. One Harvard-trained Indonesian sociologist has suggested that this was a case of a “prophylactic genocide:” a genocide meant to prevent another genocide.⁹ Such is the perversity of the history written by the victors.

This essay will review the contributions of oral historians to our understanding of the massacres while exploring the reasons for the limitations affecting their work. I argue many of the existing oral histories are flawed because their research methods are unsuited to a situation where the event being investigated is so poorly understood. Researchers have hardly known what to look for. If one is to clarify what happened, one has to bore through the sedimented layers of lies, legends, and silences. Investigations require an unusual level of cross-checking of information with a variety of people: perpetrators, victims, and witnesses. Oral historians have focused their studies on local communities – villages, towns, or districts – but have tended not to obtain information from a broad cross-section of “locals.” Some have wound up affirming the absurd myths that the Indonesian army propaganda spread throughout the country at the time of the massacres.

Until the state’s documents become available, if any have been preserved from that time and will be released in the future, oral interviews will have to serve as the primary basis of our knowledge about the massacres. It is thus crucially important for researchers to think about oral history methodology. So far, oral historians have not made the most important contributions to our knowledge. Anthropologists, filmmakers, journalists, NGO activists, and professors at church-affiliated universities – researchers whose approach to the oral interview is usually different than that of oral historians – have been responsible for the real breakthroughs.¹⁰ This essay

in *Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pembimbing Masa, 1968), 77. Notosusanto was the Suharto regime’s main historian and Saleh was one of its leading prosecutors.

⁹ Iwan Gardono Sujatmiko, “Kehancuran PKI Tahun 1965-1966 [The Destruction of the PKI 1965-1966]” *Sejarah* 9. (Jakarta: Masyarakat Sejarawan Indonesia, n.d., c. 2001).

¹⁰ Based on fieldwork in an upland area of East Java, the anthropologist Robert Hefner wrote one of the first local studies of the killings: *The Political Economy of Highland Java: An Interpretive History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 209-215. Another anthropologist studying a lowland region in East Java has briefly described the killings in one village there: Andrew Beatty, *A Shadow Falls in the Heart of Java* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009): 51-53. Robert Lemelson’s excellent film, *40 Years of Silence* (2009), delves into the often subtle, long-term psychological effects of the violence. The filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) is a stunning accomplishment based on seven years of filming in North Sumatra. It is a profile of a perpetrator as he tries to narrate, justify, and re-enact what he did. Inspired by the film, the journalists at the Indonesian weekly magazine *Tempo* interviewed perpetrators from many areas of the country for a special issue on the killings titled “Confessions of the Executioners of 1965 (*Pengakuan Algojo 1965*),” October 1-7, 2012. NGO activists have been active in publicizing testimonies from victims. See, for

will not discuss at any length the *differentia specifica* of oral history and its advantages and disadvantages in relation to other approaches. In selecting the literature to consider as oral history for the purposes of this essay, I have been guided by a definition of the field that need not be considered the standard, universal definition. I have chosen writings by people working within the discipline of history who have recorded interviews with individuals who lived through the events of 1965-66. A discussion of the ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue, that addresses both the commonalities and differences in the various approaches to oral interviewing, awaits another occasion.¹¹

I take it for granted in this essay that oral history interviewing *can* lead to worthwhile, reliable truth claims about what happened in the past. A great many oral history books have established that point well-enough by now, against the prejudices of both old-fashioned fetishists of documents and the self-proclaimed “postmodernists” who view the entire discipline of history as a literary enterprise, one incapable of venturing any truth claims.¹²

instance, the book that emerged from oral history research funded by the Ford Foundation: H.D. Haryo Sasongko and Melani Budianta, *Menembus Tirai Asap: Kesaksian Tahanan Politik 1965* [Piercing the Curtain of Smoke: Testimonies of the Political Prisoners of 1965] (Jakarta: Yayasan Lontar, 2003); and the pioneering book about disappearances published by a human rights organization in Jakarta: Elsam, *Pulangkan Mereka! Merangkai Ingatan Penghilangan Paksa di Indonesia* [Bring Them Back! Weaving the Memory of Disappearances in Indonesia] (Jakarta: Elsam, 2012). Academics affiliated to Christian universities have been active in interviewing victims: Antonius Sumarwan, *Menyeberangi Sungai Air Mata: Kisah Tragis Tapol '65 dan Upaya Rekonsiliasi* [Crossing the River of Tears: Tragic Stories of the Political Prisoners of 1965 and Attempts at Reconciliation] (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2007); Baskara T. Wardaya S.J., ed., *Suara di Balik Prahara: Berbagi Narasi Tentang Tragedi '65* [Voices from Behind the Tempest: Sharing Narratives about the 1965 Tragedy] (Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 2011); Mery Kolimon and Liliya Wetangterah, eds., *Memori-Memori Terlarang: Perempuan Korban dan Penyintas Tragedi '65 di Nusa Tenggara Timur* [Forbidden Memories: Female Victims and Survivors of the 1965 Tragedy in Nusa Tenggara Timur Province] (NTT: Yayasan Bonet Pinggupir, 2012).

¹¹ Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop Journal* 12:1 (1981), 96-107. Micaela di Leonardo, “Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter,” *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987), 1-20.

¹² On one extreme there is Keith Jenkins who has championed what he calls a “postmodern” perspective that condemns history writing for pretending to be about truth, even as it is wholly determined by aesthetic choices. *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991). He has called history an outdated discipline, one doomed to die off with the Enlightenment thinking that produced it, unless it can refigure itself as a branch of postmodern theory: *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2003). On the other extreme, there is Richard Evans who has reasserted the empiricist position, with little understanding of the postmodern ideas he wishes to demolish: *In Defense of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997). Transcending this stale dichotomy of postmodernism vs. empiricism are the writings of Dominick LaCapra who acknowledges “the importance of thorough research and accuracy” and rejects an “indiscriminate skepticism,” while

The “postmodern” trend has perhaps stalled by now: it met its limits when confronting issues such as Holocaust denial where facts obviously matter.¹³ In the Indonesian context, where various equivalent forms of Holocaust denial form the mainstream versions of history about the 1965-66 massacres, indifference to the evidentiary procedures of the historical profession seems obscene. In this essay, I foreground the practice of critically evaluating sources as a way of engaging with the critiques of empiricism while still striving to fulfill the old-fashioned desideratum of separating fact from fiction.¹⁴ A historian who is content to report the different narratives circulating in Indonesia (this person says that, that person says this...) and forego the task of evaluating their veracity is doing a disservice both to the dead and to the living. Enough is known already about Indonesian history to know that the people who carried out the extrajudicial killings and disappearances took state power in 1965-66, stayed in power for 32 years, and kept the bloody origins of their rule hopelessly obscure, as a “page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned” (as Himmler described the Holocaust in 1943).¹⁵

The Need For a Diversity of Sources

The fact that we know so little about the massacres today is partly due to the secretive way in which they were organized. The massacres were not daytime public spectacles in the centers of villages, towns, and cities. Very few people witnessed them. The people who ordered them did not come forward, announce their identities, and explain their reasons. The press, firmly under army censorship at the time, did not write about them. I do not know of a single photograph documenting a massacre in 1965-66. Reports exist from a

pinpointing the limitations of the empiricists’ paradigm. He highlights the need for historians to engage with the problems of signification in language, strategies of textual interpretation, the historian’s emotional relationship with the topic being studied, the historian’s “subject-position,” and emplotments of events in narratives: “History, Language, and Reading: Waiting for Crillon,” *American Historical Review* 100:3 (June 1995): 799-828.

¹³ Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ I appreciate Carlo Ginzburg’s preoccupations with evidentiary procedures, from his earliest writings to his most recent: *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive*, trans. by Anne Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). See also Perry Anderson’s endorsements and criticisms of Ginzburg’s methods: “The Force of the Anomaly,” *London Review of Books*, 34:8 (April 26, 2012), 3-13.

¹⁵ Heinrich Himmler’s speech in Posen, Poland on October 4, 1943. For commentary on the significance of the speech, see Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), chapter 1.

few towns of public executions of selected individuals, murders of an individual or a small group of people in the streets, even the display of body parts, but the large-scale killing tended to be discretely concealed.¹⁶ People knew that members of left-wing organizations were being massacred without knowing the specifics. They heard about the massacres by word of mouth and could not always be certain of the information they received second, third, or nth-hand. Some people can recall the corpses floating in a river, lying along a river bank, or partially buried in a field. The families of the detainees knew their loved ones had disappeared from custody but did not know for certain what had happened to them. The only people with direct knowledge were the perpetrators themselves, an occasional witness, such as a hapless villager dragooned into digging the mass grave, and the rare would-be victim who had the incredible luck to escape from the execution site alive. The massacres were open secrets, meant to be surrounded by an aura of mystery.

To research the massacres one needs to recognize the limited and fragmentary knowledge that people had of them. When I first began interviewing former political prisoners (*ex-tapol*) in 2000, I did not design the research as an investigation of the massacres. I knew some of the intellectuals among the *ex-tapols* in Jakarta, such as Pramodya Ananta Toer, Joesoef Isak, Oey Hay Djoen, Putu Oka, and Hardoyo, and envisioned the research as a matter of reaching the lesser known *ex-tapols* around the country. The book that came out of that research, conducted with a group of Indonesian scholars and NGO activists, was about the experiences of the *ex-tapols* and their families.¹⁷ It did not contain much information about the massacres because the *ex-tapols* did not know very much.¹⁸ Nearly all of them had memories of their fellow detainees being taken out at night, loaded onto trucks, and then never being heard from again. They were convinced from what they had heard from prison guards and friends on the outside that these detainees were being executed, but they did not usually know where the executions took place and who precisely was responsible.

¹⁶ Pipit Rochijat, whose essay on the city of Kediri is perhaps the most widely cited in the literature on the killings, noted that the road leading up to a nearby mountain was “decorated with PKI heads,” but he did not witness the executions. The army trucked detainees up the mountain and massacred them somewhere out of sight. Pipit Rochijat, “Am I PKI or Non-PKI,” translated by Benedict Anderson, *Indonesia* no. 40 (October 1985), 45.

¹⁷ John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid, eds., *Tahun Yang Tak Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65: Esai-Esai Sejarah Lisan* [The Year that Never Ended: Understanding the Experiences of the Victims of 1965: Oral History Essays] (Jakarta: Elsam, 2004).

¹⁸ The first chapter of the book, written by Rinto Tri Hasworo, discussed the patterns of the mass arrests and killings in Central Java on the basis of interviews with the *ex-tapols* there.

The methodological challenges to investigating the massacres are formidable. To investigate any single massacre one needs to locate the small number of individuals with some knowledge of it and then put their stories together. Different individuals hold different pieces of the puzzle. The best investigation so far has been carried out by the Foundation for Research into the Victims of the 1965/66 Killings (YPKP). The founders of YPKP were ex-tapols who wanted to prove that the massacres really occurred. Seeing the general public in Indonesia as skeptical, indifferent, and ignorant about the crimes, they searched for hard, undeniable evidence. For understandable reasons, the leaders of YPKP did not prioritize oral history: they wanted bones to show to the public, not cassette tapes. Still, they had to rely on oral statements to help make sense of the bones. In 2000, YPKP chose a mass grave in a forest near the town of Wonosobo in Central Java to excavate because there was good supporting evidence: oral testimonies from a former guard at the prison from which the men were taken at night, a local man ordered to dig the mass grave, and relatives of the prisoners who disappeared from the Wonosobo prison. Those oral testimonies, when combined with the forensic evidence from 24 skeletons, allowed for an unusually complete and convincing picture of a single massacre.¹⁹ YPKP was unable to arrange excavations elsewhere, partly because of threats of violence from the army and para-military groups, and partly because of internal disorganization.

From the new information that has emerged since 1998, historians have still been unable to gain a clear grasp of the spatial, temporal and sociological patterns of the killings. No scholarly monograph either in Indonesia or elsewhere has yet been published that is exclusively devoted to an analysis of the killings. No truth commission has been formed.²⁰ Robert

¹⁹ YPKP published its findings in its newsletter: Femi Adi, "Tentang Kuburan Massal di Hutan Situkup," *Suara Kita* no. 11 (January 2001), 15-16, and no. 12 (February 2001), 15-16. Katherine McGregor has written more about the Wonosobo exhumation and the attempt to rebury the skeletons: "Mass Graves and Memories of the 1965 Indonesian Killings," in *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68*, edited by Douglas Kammen and Katherine McGregor (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012), 234-262. The Australian-made documentary film about the killings presents footage of the Wonosobo exhumation: *Shadowplay: Indonesia's Year of Living Dangerously* (2003).

²⁰ Although a truth commission was never formed, two government commissions have investigated the violence of 1965-66. The Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) conducted an investigation into the full range of human rights violations committed in 1965-66 and wrote a 840-page report that it submitted to the Attorney General's Office (AGO) in July 2012. The full report has not been made public and the AGO has refused to follow up its recommendations for further investigations. The commission released a 25-page summary of the report which is available online: "Pernyataan Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia (Komnas HAM) tentang Hasil Penyelidikan Pelanggaran HAM yang Berat Peristiwa 1965-66," <http://www.stopimpunity.org/page128.php>. This poorly organized, haphazardly argued

Cribb's assessment in 1990 remains valid today: "Detailed information on who was killed, where, when, why and by whom, however, is so patchy that most conclusions have to be strongly qualified as provisional."²¹

One of the most influential sources about the killings was by an American journalist in Indonesia at the time, John Hughes. His account of the events of 1965-66, *Indonesian Upheaval* (1967), has served as a key primary source for historians. It contains a nine-page chapter about the killings in Java and a ten-page chapter about the killings in Bali.²² The former is quite informative since it is based on interviews with a great variety of people. Its rough depiction of the general pattern of violence is supported by later research, such as YPKP's Wonosobo exhumation. The chapter on Bali, however, is entirely unreliable since it is based solely on the stories of the anti-communists in Bali who either did the killing or supported it. Hughes faithfully reproduced their absurd slanders of the communists and their spurious justifications for the killing. More informed reports of the time and later research on Bali has overturned just about every claim in that chapter.²³

Hughes's book authorized a basic paradigm for understanding the collaboration between army personnel and civilian militias. In Java, Hughes claimed, the army played the dominant role, but in Bali, the militias carried out the violence on their own and had to be restrained by the army. Even though that characterization of the violence in Bali has been debunked, historians still give credence to the underlying idea that the relationship

summary does not inspire much confidence in the quality of the full report. The more polished report by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) about the victimization of women in the 1965-66 violence briefly discusses the killings: *Kejahatan Terhadap Kemanusiaan Berbasis Gender: Mendengarkan Suara Perempuan Korban Peristiwa 1965* (Jakarta, 2007), 69-72.

²¹ Robert Cribb, ed., *The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), 3. When Cribb returned to the topic in 2001 he restated the same assessment: "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." Robert Cribb, "Genocide in Indonesia, 1965-1966," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3:2 (2001), 219.

²² The book has been reprinted as *The End of Sukarno: A Coup that Misfired: A Purge that Ran Wild* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2002). The book's subtitle suggests that the killings were spontaneous and disorganized, while the contents of chapter 13 ("Punishment in the Paddies") suggests that the killings in Java were largely organized by the army. It is chapter 15 ("Frenzy in Bali") that paints a picture of wild killings by an exotic people with a mysterious Oriental culture.

²³ Soe Hok Gie, "The Mass Killing in Bali," in R. Cribb, ed., *The Indonesian Killings*, 252-258. Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

between military personnel and militias varied from region to region. A recent textbook on Indonesian history strikes a balance: “In many areas the army guided civilian groups as to who should be targeted or sponsored militias, but in other places vigilante action preceded the army.”²⁴



Members of a militia who worked with the army in attacking the left-wing movement in Bali, circa late 1965. National Library of Indonesia Photo Collection.

This formulation needs to be reconsidered. More attention needs to be given to the chronology, form, and effectiveness of the different types of violence. What I have provisionally concluded from my own research and the existing literature is that where “vigilante action” by anti-communist groups occurred, it resulted in very few deaths. It took the form of brawling between sides that were fairly equally matched, or the targeted assassination of one or two individuals. Left-wing organizations often resisted attacks by the musclemen of local anti-communist groups. Only once the army stepped in and threw its weight behind a campaign of repression, were people rounded up in large numbers. Members of left-wing organizations obediently surrendered to capture by the security forces of the state, reassured by the knowledge that Sukarno was still president and the PKI had many supporters among state officials. Civilian administrators and military personnel who would have otherwise protected the communists, out of loyalty to the PKI, President Sukarno, or just law and order, had to stand down. From among the massive numbers of detainees, the army and the militias selected people to be taken out of the detention sites, loaded onto trucks, and then transported to someplace where they would be executed *en masse*. The militias

²⁴ Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157-158.

accomplished very little when acting on their own, independent of army direction, but did play important roles in carrying out the violence when working with the army.

When considering the relationship between the army and the militias, an oral historian has to be aware of the usual tropes that each group employs. When interviewed, both groups of perpetrators have tended to deny killing anyone. Hughes noticed back in 1966 when talking to Javanese militiamen that they were reluctant “to admit that they themselves took part in any killings.”²⁵ The perpetrators have preferred to say little in public about the killings but when they have, they have tended to shift the blame: army personnel will blame civilians for running amok (as the Fact Finding Commission did), while former militia members will insist that they were only assisting the army.²⁶ It is only recently, with the public discussion prompted by Joshua Oppenheimer’s film, *The Act of Killing* (2012), about unabashed killers belonging to an army-affiliated militia in the city of Medan, that journalists and researchers have been pushing the civilian perpetrators to be more forthcoming and frank.²⁷ But once the former militiamen begin to speak, one has to wonder how much they are switching to their other mode of self-presentation, their longstanding, off-record braggadocio. In their villages and neighborhoods, they have often wanted to be known as killers. They have wanted to be feared by other members of their local communities. In *The Act of Killing*, the thugs of Medan appear to exaggerate their own roles and downplay the army’s for the sake of appearing as tough men of violence. Given the unreliability of perpetrator accounts, one has to cross-check the accounts of different perpetrators with the accounts from witnesses and victims to determine the facts of the events.

Perpetrator Memory in East Java

One of the earliest attempts to investigate the massacres through oral history interviews was by the Indonesian historian Hermawan Sulistyio. His book, *Palu Arit di Ladang Tebu: Sejarah Pembantaian Massal yang Terlupakan* [The Hammer and Sickle in the Cane Field: The History of a Forgotten Mass

²⁵ Hughes, *The End of Sukarno*, 167.

²⁶ A perpetrator from a civilian militia appeared on a TV talk show in 2006, wearing a mask to conceal his identity, and explained that the army asked him to help arrest, interrogate, and kill detainees back in 1965. He stated that he did nothing more than “loyally serve the government (*mengabdikan pemerintah*).” *Kick Andy*, Metro TV, August 17, 2006.

²⁷ See *Tempo*’s special issue on the killings titled “Confessions of the Executioners of 1965 (*Pengakuan Algojo 1965*),” October 1-7, 2012.

Killing], garnered much attention when it was published in 2000.²⁸ It is a case study of the killings in two neighboring districts in East Java, Kediri and Jombang, where many peasants cultivated sugarcane to sell to the large sugar mills. The title of the book is slightly misleading: most of the book is about the political economy of the sugar industry; the description of the killings themselves occupies only one chapter (chapter five). Sulistyó's brief account of the killings was in some ways a revelation: the literature available to Indonesians by 2000 had tended to avoid the gory details. The chapter discusses how members of the Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) worked with army personnel to attack trade unionists at the sugar mills and peasants in the cane fields. It describes the decapitations by swords and the blows by iron bars. That one chapter helped Indonesians to see the killings as cold-blooded executions of unarmed people who had not resisted capture.

A major problem with Sulistyó's account lies in the narrowness of its sources. It is largely based on interviews with three perpetrators – NU leaders who led militias of young men – and one victim who survived a massacre by pretending to be dead. Thirteen other interviewees are cited in the chapter concerning relatively minor points. The three NU leaders interviewed (one in Jombang and two in Kediri) appear to have been key organizers of the violence and their statements give us some idea of the behind-the-scenes plotting. In the absence of corroborating statements from witnesses and victims, however, it is difficult to trust some of their claims. Besides, their stories, as presented in the chapter, are so sketchy that the reader remains puzzled about the very issues that Sulistyó is trying to clarify.

Sulistyó's account of the events in Kediri is more extensive so, for the sake of brevity, I will focus on the Kediri interviews. According to these accounts, the NU leaders in Kediri discussed with the highest-ranking army officers in the district a plan to attack communists in early October 1965. The army officers asked the local head of the NU, Syafii Soleiman (one of Sulistyó's two main informants in Kediri), to organize a rally that could serve as a show of force of the anti-communist organizations. The NU held the rally in the central square of the town of Kediri on October 13. With tens of thousands of people in the square, not all from the NU, the PKI was denounced as a traitorous organization that had to be "crushed." The NU leaders then led the crowd on a four-mile march to the local PKI headquarters where they proceeded to kill anywhere from 15 to 24 people who were supposedly defending the office. After the rally, "the military moved

²⁸ The Indonesian language book was a translation of his 1997 Ph.D. thesis. For the sake of convenience for English language speakers who may wish to consult it, the citations here will be from the original thesis: "The Forgotten Years: The Missing History of Indonesia's Mass Slaughter (Jombang-Kediri, 1965-66)," (Arizona State University, Ph.D. thesis, 1997).

decisively...they arrested 40,000 alleged PKI members within the next two days.”²⁹ On October 17, the district-level army commander (the Dandim), a lieutenant colonel, called Syafii to his office to discuss what to do with so many detainees. The army did not have enough money to buy food for them. Syafii recommended executing the detainees, and that was the policy the army adopted. Out of the 40,000 detainees, 15,000 were taken out in batches during the nights and executed, largely by men drawn from NU militia (Ansor), while 25,000 were released. The quickest and easiest method of disposing of the corpses was to dump them in the Brantas River. The army and the NU called these actions “orderly operations,” as opposed to the “disorderly operations” that involved militiamen, either following army directives or working on their own with the army’s consent, attacking neighborhoods and villages and slaughtering people on the spot. These “disorderly operations,” according to one of Sulistyoy’s sources, resulted in far fewer casualties.³⁰

Sulistyoy’s account, while probably accurate on many points, would be more convincing if it was based on more than just the statements of two NU leaders in Kediri. It is impossible to believe that the army, police, and NU personnel in Kediri district were physically capable of arresting 40,000 people in two days. Either the numbers of detainees or the time period within which they were arrested is incorrect; perhaps both are incorrect. One can understand that the author was unable to locate and interview the former high-ranking military officers stationed in Kediri; they regularly rotate to different posts around the country. But it is odd that he could not find any lower-ranking soldiers to interview or any survivors from among those thousands of detainees who were released. They would have had stories about when, where and how they were arrested, held captive and then set free. And they would have had stories about the detainees being taken out at night to be executed. Sulistyoy does not cite any witness of those “orderly operations,” though many people in the district must have caught a glimpse of at least a part of those hundreds of massacres, apart from the corpses in the river that just about everyone saw. Anti-communist politicians from other organizations besides the NU would have known about the massacres, or been directly involved as perpetrators.

Sulistyoy’s account is perplexing in its lack of specificity. No information is provided on which groups carried out the arrests, how the mass round-up was organized, where the detainees were held captive and how decisions were made to kill some and release others. The chronology of this

²⁹ Sulistyoy, “The Forgotten Years,” 185.

³⁰ Sulistyoy, “The Forgotten Years,” 187.

series of massacres in Kediri is left ambiguous. The account is also unclear on the different levels of culpability of the army and the NU militias. Sulistyo presents the decision to kill prisoners as stemming from Syafii. But then that is according to Syafii, who seems eager to highlight his role. Still, even if we accept his version, the decision to kill them was ultimately made by the army commander (the Dandim). So it is pointless to raise the question, as Sulistyo does, as to whether the army personnel guarding the detention camps invited the NU militia to remove the prisoners for execution or relented to the militia's insistent demands for the prisoners to be handed over.³¹ The army commander had already ordered his men to hand over the prisoners for execution. The more important issue that Sulistyo leaves unexplored is the methods by which decisions were taken as to which prisoners to kill, which to imprison, and which to release. In these decisions, the local militias probably played a more important role than the army.

Sulistyo presents the army personnel as following NU initiatives without considering the policymaking procedures inside the army itself. An intelligence report on East Java from late November 1965 (one of the few primary source documents about the killings), notes that the army commanders in Kediri were "very firm" in keeping the arrests and executions under their control, even while working with "the people" (meaning militias like NU's Ansor) for "joint actions."³² The commander in Madiun, Colonel Willy Soedjono, at one level above the district commander in Kediri, was also "firm." The report noted that "in regions where the PKI was strong," such as Kediri, actions taken "by the people" without coordination with the army were "rare."³³

Ultimately, the value of Sulistyo's account lies in adding further details to what was already known in broad outline. The November 1965 army intelligence report noted that many prisoners in Kediri were taken out of confinement, put in trucks, and then given to "the people" to be executed.³⁴ The American journalist Stanley Karnow reported for the *Washington Post* in 1966: "The prisons of East Java are emptier [than those of Central Java] since fewer captives were allowed to live... military commanders gave free rein to a 'silent army' of black-shirted Ansor youth... Thumbs tied behind their backs, captives were unloaded from army trucks into villages. The youth undertook to kill them."³⁵ A more recent journalist's report from East Java, based on

³¹ Sulistyo, "The Forgotten Years," 194.

³² Benedict Anderson, trans., "Report from East Java," *Indonesia*, no. 41 (April 1986), 141.

³³ Anderson, trans., "Report from East Java," 137.

³⁴ Anderson, trans., "Report from East Java," 142.

³⁵ Stanley Karnow, "Leaders Deserted Reds in Indonesian Misfire," *Washington Post*, April 18, 1966.

interviews with four perpetrators from the NU militia and one witness, confirms the pattern Karnow identified. Quoting the witness, the journalist wrote: “He says he saw people taken in trucks from the local prison for mass killings in the evening. About 60 people were shoved to the ground and butchered as they screamed, he says. Then the bodies were dumped in a freshly dug trench, some of the victims apparently still alive.” The soldiers sprayed the trench with gunfire.³⁶

In interviews, the civilians who served as the *algojo* (the executioners) have usually emphasized their subordination to the army, that they were just following orders and loyally serving the state. Depicting themselves as such is, however, humiliating. They received a batch of tied-up prisoners, as defenseless as sheep, and then stabbed, shot, or bludgeoned them, doing nothing more heroic than what butchers do at slaughterhouses. An eyewitness to the killings in Kediri, Pipit Rochijat, recalled how his friends who served as executioners described how they became accustomed to the work: “‘It’s just like butchering a goat,’ they’d claim.”³⁷ In other contexts, in front of other audiences, some have pretended as if they were all-powerful, as if they were brave warriors confronting the dangerous PKI on their own, with little help from the army. One can see this style of narration in Joshua Oppenheimer’s film *The Act of Killing*, about the *algojo* in Medan, and in an article he co-wrote about the *algojo* in the plantation belt just outside of Medan.³⁸ Sulistyó’s determination to sideline the role of the army appears to be the result of his decision to only listen to the boasts of the NU *algojo*.

When Professional Historians Conduct Oral Interviews

Sulistyó’s book came out at the height of the interest in the 1965-66 events, when the press was extraordinarily free and was regularly reporting new exposés. The fall of Suharto in 1998 resulted in a boom in publications about the triggering event for the killings (the September 30th Movement), the experiences of the political prisoners, and the massacres. Many people

³⁶ Anthony Deutsch, “Indonesians recount role in massacre,” Associated Press, November 16, 2008. The article was published in a variety of newspapers, such as *USA Today* and the *Boston Globe*.

³⁷ Pipit Rochijat, “Am I PKI or Non-PKI,” 45.

³⁸ The *algojo* in the plantation belt executed batches of detainees delivered to them by the army: “Clichéd invocations of massacre as ‘heroic’ and ‘historic’ frame the killing as part of an epochal battle against an enemy of mythic proportions.” They depicted “themselves as heroes rather than people who committed the cowardly deed of executing those with no power to resist.” Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, “Show of Force: A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt,” *Critical Quarterly* 51: 1 (2009): 94.

welcomed Sulistyono's book for its contribution to breaking the silence about the killings. It helped remind people about a neglected – “forgotten,” as the book's title puts it – episode in Indonesia's recent history. What went largely unnoticed in the book reviews was the way Sulistyono reproduced the Suharto regime's justification for the killings. Even if the regime had made public discussion of the killings taboo and had rarely made the justification explicit, it provided the framework through which people could interpret whatever they did happen to find out about the killings. The regime's incessant propaganda about the evils of the PKI led people to believe that the killing of communists must have been the morally correct thing to do. Sulistyono's book presents the killings as understandable responses to the aggressiveness and militancy of the PKI in the years before 1965 and to its allegedly incipient rebellion in early October 1965. Nothing in the book indicated that the massacres should be considered horrific crimes, or even that the relatives, friends, and comrades of the victims in East Java have considered them horrific crimes. It is an indication of the widespread acceptance of the Suharto regime's blame-the-victims narrative that an author could describe many extrajudicial executions, without condemning them as criminal.

The professional historians of Indonesia, those teaching history in the universities or working at the state's research institute (*Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia*, LIPI), realized after Suharto's fall that they needed to respond to raging controversy over the 1965-66 events. The Minister of Education, Abdul Malik Fadjar (in office 2001-2004), requested the country's most prominent historian, Taufik Abdullah, to lead a large research project to investigate those events. The hope was that the historians could solve many of the mysteries. Abdullah brought together historians from all over the country, the “best and the brightest” as it were, for a series of seminars. Ultimately, after nearly a decade of work, he and his associates published their papers in two thick volumes in 2012. The first volume covers the event that triggered the crisis, the September 30th Movement, and the second volume addresses what it calls “local conflicts.”³⁹ Seven of the ten chapters in the second volume, in the course of surveying the history of the political conflicts of the 1950s-60s, discuss the massacres of 1965-66. Sulistyono's book served as a model for the authors.⁴⁰ As a government-funded, semi-official publication,

³⁹ Taufik Abdullah, Sukri Abdurrahman, and Restu Gunawan, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965 Dalam Belitan Krisis Nasional, bagian 1: Rekonstruksi dalam Perdebatan; bagian 2: Konflik Lokal* [The Disastrous Night of 1965 in the Tangles of the National Crisis, part 1: Reconstruction amid the Debate, part 2: Local Conflicts] (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor, 2012).

⁴⁰ Abdullah et al, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965, bagian 2*, xviii-xix, xxviii.

written by historians who pride themselves on “objectivity”, this book speaks with the voice of authority.

The authors, in writing their separate chapters for the book, drew upon oral interviews that they had conducted in their respective regions. In one sense, this represents an advance for oral history in Indonesia since the historical profession there has tended to regard it as unprofessional. This book legitimizes oral interviewing. This step forward, however, does not go very far. Like Sulisty, the authors do not discuss their methods in contacting people, interviewing people, and critically evaluating their stories. The issues of recording, transcribing, and archiving the interviews are ignored. Oral history continues to be understood in simplistic, unproblematic terms.

Since the authors wrote their essays on the broad theme of “local conflicts,” they did not write very much about the massacres of 1965-66. The ten essays focus on the pre-1965 political conflicts between the communist party and anti-communist parties, on the assumption that the mass murder in each locality grew directly out of those local conflicts. One essay, written by someone who belonged to the NU militia in East Java at the time of the killings, Aminuddin Kasdi, only discusses the pre-1965 period and avoids addressing the massacres.⁴¹ The authors conducted little research on the massacres and the information they present about them is brief and imprecise. Usually, they rely on several individuals from “localities” that comprised millions of people. The book’s first essay on Aceh, a province with a little under two million people in 1965, does not even mention the massacres there, though we know from other sources that some did indeed occur.⁴² The author, relying on an already published work, only mentions the targeted killing of particular PKI leaders. Those killings are casually listed, with no specifics of time, place, or human agency; they just happened.⁴³ The essay on the

⁴¹ Aminuddin Kasdi was the main speaker at an Anti-Communist Front book burning in Surabaya on September 2, 2009. The book whose copies he turned to ashes had been written by Soemarsono, a former member of the PKI. Kasdi later justified the burning as a legitimate act of protest, a “form of expressing dissatisfaction, the society’s objection [to the book] (*bentuk ketidakpuasan, ketidaksetujuan masyarakat*).” See his interview with the website Indonesia Buku, “Prof Aminuddin Kasdi Menjawab,” September 7, 2009, <http://indonesiabuku.com/?p=1597>. The burning was widely publicized and many intellectuals signed petitions condemning it. That the editors of *Malam Bencana 1965* saw fit to include the work of an avowed book burner provides some indication of their ethical commitments.

⁴² Rusdi Sufi, “Serambi Mekah Bergolak,” in Abdullah, et al, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965, bagian 2*, 1-22. On the killings in Aceh, the best source so far is by a precocious B.A. honours student who carried out original research: Jessica Melvin, “A Silent Massacre: The Indonesian Communist Party and the 1965 Mass Killings in Aceh,” Honours thesis, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2009.

⁴³ Sufi, “Serambi Mekah Bergolak,” 17.

Yogyakarta region, on the basis of interviews with two witnesses, briefly discusses the killing of detainees in one village on the coast. The village was apparently a favorite location for the army to dispose of detainees from all over the region. The villagers heard the trucks bringing the detainees and then the screams of the victims as the soldiers threw them off cliffs down onto the rocks and rough surf below.⁴⁴

One of the essays in the book that goes furthest in discussing the massacres is by Yenny Narni.⁴⁵ In writing about West Sumatra, a province with about four million people in 1965, she suggests that the massacres were concentrated in one district in the province, Padang Pariaman, where many of the residents had been PKI supporters. Citing data from the local chapter of YPKP, Narni states that 277 people were killed in that district. She notes that killings also took place in at least three other districts. The pattern, she claims, was for the army, police and militias to hunt for people whose names they had already written down on a list of targets. They would kill the person soon after capturing him or her, rather than detaining them first at a jail or military office. But she also quotes one ex-tapol in the Pesisir Selatan district who told of the execution of ten people after they had been detained and interrogated in a jail. Some of those hunted sought refuge in the hills and they were pursued and killed there. Although Narni draws on interviews from seven individuals for information about the killings, their stories are presented in such a disconnected and abbreviated manner that one is not quite sure what the patterns were, in terms of who the perpetrators were and where, when, and how they did the killing.

By contrast, the essay on Blora, a district in Central Java, is more clearly organized and written.⁴⁶ It uses five oral interviews to good effect by combining information from ex-tapols with that from civilian militiamen. While the essay is certainly suggestive of the general pattern in Blora, its limited sources make its conclusions tentative. The author, Singgih Trisulistiyono, argues that the local army base (the Kodim) used a civilian militia that it had already created prior to October 1965 to carry out the crack-down on members of left-wing organizations. From interviews with three ex-tapols, he finds that the arrests began in November after an army-organized rally in the central square, and that the detainees were held in the local prison and military bases. From among these detainees, some were selected to be

⁴⁴ Julianto Ibrahim, "Goncangan Pada Keselarasan Hidup di Kesultanan," in Abdullah, et al, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965, bagian 2*, 123-124.

⁴⁵ Yenny Narni, "Ketika Negeri Adat Bersendi Sarak Merasa Terancam," in Abdullah, et al, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965, bagian 2*, 23-50.

⁴⁶ Singgih Trisulistiyono, "Lembaran Hitam Dalam Sejarah Hutan Jati," in Abdullah, et al, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965, bagian 2*, 170-221.

executed. An estimated several thousand detainees disappeared. One of his interviewees was the principal of an elementary school named Suwondo:

According to Suwondo's narration, his older brother who was arrested with him was among those who were "borrowed."⁴⁷ He was a farmer and the head of the local chapter of the Indonesian Farmers' Front (*BTI*). One afternoon, some members of Blora's civilian militia (*Hansip*) took his brother from the place where he was being held and since then he has never been found. He strongly suspects that his brother was killed somewhere around Blora, in an unknown location.⁴⁸

The historian J. Krisnadi, who wrote the book's essay about the eastern region of East Java (*Tapal Kuda*), found the same pattern of executing prisoners. He interviewed a truck driver who worked for the district-level army base (Kodim) in Pasuruan. The driver described carrying soldiers and militiamen out to the villages to roundup PKI supporters and then depositing the captives at a large building owned by the government-run Sugar Plantation Research Center. At a later time, he would return to the building and drive selected detainees out to a nearby river where they would be executed.⁴⁹ In Jember as well, where the town's prison was filled with detainees, the army took batches of them out at night and executed them in the countryside. Krisnadi, on the basis of an interview with a witness, wrote: "At first the villagers thought that the gunshots were from a military training exercise. But then the next day they found corpses by the side of the Jember-Banyuwangi road with gunshot wounds. Eventually, the villagers of Pal Kuning became accustomed to hearing the gunfire at night. A total of about 100 people were killed there."⁵⁰

What emerges from these various essays on "local conflicts" is a nationwide pattern of the army organizing massacres of prisoners. The pattern would be even clearer if the essays were of better quality and if other regions

⁴⁷ As many researchers have found, the common euphemism used at the time for taking detainees out of the detention sites for execution was *dibon*. It seems to refer an exchange of the detainee for a receipt (*bon*), suggesting some paperwork was involved in the process. Benedict Anderson has translated the term as "pawned." Anderson, trans., "Report from East Java," 141. It was also used when taking prisoners out for forced labor or interrogation at another site. The prisoners were "borrowed." Hersri Setiawan, *Kamus Gestok* [Dictionary of the October 1st Incident] (Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 2003), 36-37.

⁴⁸ Trisulistiyono, "Lembaran Hitam Dalam Sejarah Hutan Jati," 201.

⁴⁹ J. Krisnadi, "Tapal Kuda Bergolak," in Abdullah, et al, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965, bagian 2*, 324-325.

⁵⁰ Krisnadi, "Tapal Kuda Bergolak," 355.

had been covered. It is hard to imagine that army personnel and civilian militias in each locality arrived at the decision to massacre prisoners on their own. The essay on Bali is particularly weak, not least because it misses a point already established in the literature on Bali: the massacres of prisoners did not begin until the shock troops (the RPKAD) were sent from Jakarta by the army high command in December 1965.⁵¹ The longstanding conflict between the PKI and other political parties on the island was not enough to provoke large-scale massacres.

There must have been orders from the high command, perhaps only via oral communications, to army units around the country that the members of the PKI and left-wing organizations should be identified after capture and then executed in secret. After all, that is precisely what the army high command did to four of the five top PKI leaders: Aidit, Lukman, Njoto, and Sakirman. All four disappeared after being taken into custody and the army has never acknowledged that it killed them, much less when and where it killed them.⁵²

Another nationwide pattern that emerges from this book is the use of a mass rally (*apel akbar* or *rapat akbar*) in an urban center to initiate the attacks on PKI offices and homes. Again, it is difficult to believe that people in so many different localities hit upon the same course of action independently of each other, especially when researchers have found that the army was involved in organizing the mass rallies.

The editors of this semi-official history of the 1965-66 events, by deciding to focus on “local conflicts,” refused to analyze the role of the army.

⁵¹ I Ketut Ardhana dan A.A. Bagus Wirawan, “‘Neraka Dunia’ di Pulau Dewata,” in Abdullah, et al, eds., *Malam Bencana 1965, bagian 2*, 360-411. The authors casually ascribe responsibility for the killings in Bali to “the non-communist masses” whose anger could not be restrained. They claim that the arrival of the RPKAD, for which they provide the incorrect date of December 12, 1965, resulted in more orderly methods for continuing the massacres already begun. Without referring to dates, citing “some informants who did not wish to be named,” they write: “The detainees were transported by truck to execution sites and shot” (400-401). These massacres of prisoners, however, did not begin until mid-December. From newspaper reports, we know that one company of RPKAD troops arrived on December 7 and more arrived on December 10. “Panglima Brigdjen Sjafiudin: ‘G 30 S’ harus dipatahkan,” *Suara Indonesia*, December 10, 1965; “RPKAD bantu penerbitan [sic] di Bali,” *Suara Indonesia*, December 11, 1965. See Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise*, 295-303; David Jenkins and Douglas Kammen, “The Army Para-commando Regiment,” in *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68*, edited by Douglas Kammen and Katherine McGregor (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012), 99-102.

⁵² The officer responsible for Aidit’s capture and execution bragged about his deeds to journalists years later, but the army has never issued an official statement as to what happened to Aidit. *Tapol Bulletin*, “The Trial of D.N. Aidit,” no. 41-42, September-October 1980.

The conclusions of their book were built into the assumptions with which they began their research project. Following in Sulistyono's footsteps, they decided at the start that there was no nationwide pattern to the killing, the army high command had nothing to do with the killing, and there was no point investigating the army. The main perpetrators were locally-based anti-PKI militias. Yet nearly every essay shows that district-level army officers played key roles in the killing. The involvement of these officers raises the question of what orders they were receiving from the higher levels.

By neglecting the role of the army, the book says nothing about the psychological warfare campaign that the high command in Jakarta waged against the PKI starting in early October 1965 – a campaign designed to incite people to violence. Some of the lies were known at the time: President Sukarno himself, on numerous occasions, denounced the media for reporting absurd, made-up stories depicting PKI supporters as depraved and sadistic. By now, the existence of the army's propaganda campaign is a well-known fact.⁵³ The army fully controlled the media: it published its own newspapers, shut down ones supportive of the PKI and Sukarno, and carefully monitored the ones it allowed to publish. PKI supporters were said to be stockpiling specialized eye-gouging implements and rifles secretly imported from China; they had drawn up typewritten hit lists and even had the foresight to dig ditches all across the country to hold the corpses of the people they planned to slaughter.

Since Taufik Abdullah and his colleagues decided not include consideration of this propaganda, they are incapable of judging how important that propaganda was in motivating the killers at the local level. The killers' understanding of the PKI was mediated by the information they were reading in the newspapers and hearing from army officers. An issue that deserves careful attention is the ability of information coming from the state to overwhelm or cancel out knowledge derived from direct experience. Some Indonesians will remark that they did not know the communists were so dangerous until learning from official sources about the party's secret plans; the communists otherwise seemed rather normal. Since the information was coming from people who should know – officials who had access to reports from the police and intelligence agencies – people gave it credence. Anyone committed to the "local conflicts" explanation of the killing has to be able to show that the army's propaganda played no role in shaping the perceptions of locally-based anti-communists. One should pose the counterfactual question:

⁵³ On the propaganda campaign, see Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, "How We Destroyed Sukarno," *The Independent*, December 1, 1998.

would the massacres have occurred without the steady stream of hysterical propaganda from the central state that presented all PKI supporters as dangerous, evil people who needed to be killed for the sake of public safety?

Oral History Outside the Historical Profession

It is a sad reflection on the sclerotic state of the historical profession in Indonesia that the most revealing work so far done on the events of 1965-66 has come from researchers from other disciplines. The legacy of the Suharto years – the underfunding, the domination of military-aligned historians, the setting of low scholarly standards – has been too much for the profession to quickly shake off.⁵⁴ Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, NGO activists all over the country have been publishing oral histories of the victims of the violence of 1965-66 and memoirs of the ex-political prisoners.⁵⁵ These numerous publications, representing the voices of people who had been excluded from public discourse during the Suharto years, have opened up new perspectives and done much to democratize history writing.

Most of the victims who have been interviewed have been ex-tapols; they were the ones who were passed over, who were not selected to be executed. We know much about their suffering in prison, especially the intense hunger they experienced. In a silent form of violence, many prisoners died of malnutrition and disease when the prisons (on Java especially) were at overcapacity from 1966 to 1969. We know much about the torture inflicted upon them during interrogation sessions. We also know much about the decade-long struggle for survival of the some 11,000 political prisoners sent in internal exile to Buru Island. We do not know much about the massacres outside the prison walls.

One of the most interesting investigations into a massacre was done by a group of ex-tapols in the Central Javanese city of Solo. When they were inside the prisons and detention camps back in 1965-66, they had heard about people being executed at night on a bridge and their bodies being dumped into the Solo River below. Many years later, after Suharto's fall in 1998, they

⁵⁴ On the militarization of the historical profession, see Katherine McGregor, *History in Uniform: Military Ideology and the Construction of Indonesia's Past* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007). The one professional, state-employed historian who has been courageous in writing revisionist accounts of the 1965-66 events is Asvi Warman Adam. One of his more significant books is, *Soeharto Sisi Gelap Sejarah Indonesia* [Soeharto: The Dark Side of Indonesian History] (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2004).

⁵⁵ I would be unable to list all the NGOs that have been active in publishing histories of the 1965-66 events. To list some: the activists at the Ultimus Bookstore in Bandung, the now-defunct Institute for the Study of Information Flows (ISAI) in Jakarta, the NU-affiliated Syarikat in Yogyakarta, and the human rights organization in Jakarta, Elsam.

had the chance to investigate. Although the ex-tapols of Solo did not join YPKP, preferring instead to align themselves with another organization, Pakorba (Community of Victims of New Order), they supported YPKP's goal of investigating the massacres. Instead of attempting the exhumation of mass graves, they turned to oral interviews. After all, for this case of the killings on the bridge, there was no mass grave to dig up: the corpses had disappeared somewhere downstream. A filmmaker from Jakarta, Yayan Wiludiharto, built upon their investigation when working on his documentary film titled *Jembatan Bacem* (Bacem Bridge, 2013) – a film produced by a human rights NGO in Jakarta, Elsam, which has been involved in many efforts to help the victims of the 1965-66 violence.

In the oral history book they published about their life histories, *Kidung Untuk Korban* (A Ballad for the Victims), the ex-tapols of Pakorba in Solo included a profile of a man who had not been a tapol.⁵⁶ The man, Bibit, was identified as a witness to executions on the Bacem Bridge. His life history, however, reveals that he was an unusual combination of witness, victim, and perpetrator. Only 17 years old in 1965, he was a member of the communist party's youth organization. His singing and dancing performances for PKI-related events made his political affiliation fairly well-known in his neighborhood. When the mass arrests began of PKI supporters in late 1965, he hid for months. Eventually, he decided to turn himself into a civilian militia. He agreed to become an informant for the militiamen, helping them find and interrogate other PKI supporters still in hiding. As an honorary member of the militia, he managed to avoid being incarcerated and executed: "I was no longer a fugitive, except from my own conscience."⁵⁷ Some nights in 1966, when out with his fellow militiamen, he witnessed them shoot detainees on the Bacem Bridge. His knowledge of the executions also came from living near the bridge and hearing the gunshots at night. He lost count of the times he was asked by soldiers around daybreak to push the corpses into the stream with a stick so that they would float downstream. The soldiers did not want the general public passing over the bridge to see the corpses in the full light of day.

The story of Bibit is particularly compelling, given that he embodies multiple perspectives, as a victim, perpetrator and witness. But one would

⁵⁶ Hersri Setiawan, *Kidung untuk Korban: Dari Tutur Sepuluh Narasumber Eks-Tapol Sala* (Sala: Pakorba Sala, 2006). The writer of the book, Setiawan, is another ex-tapol who directed an oral history project in the Netherlands in the 1990s that interviewed the men and women of the 1965 generation living in exile in Europe. Indonesian Exiles of the Left Collection, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, the Netherlands: <http://www.iisg.nl/archives/en/files/i/ARCH01996.php>.

⁵⁷ Setiawan, *Kidung untuk Korban*, 230.

like to hear more testimonies from people in Solo about the executions on the Bacem Bridge. The chronology of the executions on the bridge remains imprecise, as does the identity of the victims. Which neighborhoods and which places of detention were the victims from? The book *Kidung untuk Korban* was not meant to be a study of the killings, and that reflects a persistent problem in the literature. Information about the killings crops up within texts that are not focusing their attention on the killings. The result is a lack of sustained, detailed research on a single massacre or series of massacres within a particular locality.

The bits and pieces of information that have come to light suggest that the practice of executing prisoners at night and disappearing them was nationwide. It is a practice one finds described in an insightful, informal study written in 2010 of the massacres on Flores, an island in eastern Indonesia.⁵⁸ The journalist and travel writer, Ahmad Yunus, famous for his cross-country motorcycle trips, was in Flores visiting an NGO representing local artisans, including handloom weavers of traditional cloth. Through that organization, he met a folk singer who had composed a song mourning a massacre that he witnessed in his village when he was 17 years old. According to this singer, 33 men, with their hands tied behind their backs, were decapitated in a soccer field in November 1965. Yunus was appalled and surprised to hear about this massacre. It was in a small village; if it happened there, many other massacres must have occurred on the island. He had never heard of massacres on Flores. He had read some scholarly books on the topic, such as Robert Cribb's 1990 edited volume, but had not encountered any mention of the violence on Flores. Even after searching for information through internet searches and sending emails querying historians, he did not find any written work about it. He proceeded to investigate on his own, without any written documentation to guide him and without any academic affiliation.

In another village outside of the capital city Maumere, Yunus met the family of a man killed in a massacre of February 1966 and one of the executioners. The latter told him that he had been recruited, along with nine other youths, by the army which had formed something called KOMOP to direct the slaughter of communists in Flores. This executioner claimed that he had been forced by KOMOP to do the dirty work; army officers had supposedly threatened to kill his family if he did not cooperate. He described how a truck came to the village at night, carrying 20 individuals from places outside the village. A ditch had already been dug to hold their bodies. The army ordered him to kill ten of the prisoners. Yunus quotes him recalling that

⁵⁸ Ahmad Yunus, "Senandung Bisu 1965 [The Silent Humming of 1965]" posted on the IndoProgress website on June 1, 2010: <http://indoprogress.com/tag/ahmad-yunus/>.

night: “I received a batch of 10 people. I don’t know why they were killed. They (the army) just said that those people were involved in the PKI ... The whole scene was really dark. The sounds were horrifying. We didn’t know those people (the victims).”

Yunus’s investigation was not extensive. He met one witness to one massacre and one victim and one perpetrator (a coerced one, at least according to his self-description). But his simple procedure of interviewing a variety of people was very effective. Yunus wrote, “Verifying the data, tracking down documents and witnesses, excavating the mass graves of the victims, will prove what the facts are about what happened at that time.”

After Yunus posted his brief account, a Catholic priest from Britain living in Flores since 1973, John Prior, published two scholarly articles about the killings in Flores.⁵⁹ Prior based his articles on the written records of the church and its missionaries. Flores, with about 1.8 million people today, is predominantly Catholic. This island, considered a backwater by many people in Java, contains a much better documentary record of the massacres than Java does. The church kept some records (though most are missing) and several church officials, disturbed by what had happened, wrote about the events in later years. Prior’s account confirms what Yunus had heard: there was an army operation named KOMOP, an acronym for *Komando Operasi*, and the massacres it organized indeed began in February 1966. What Yunus had not learned was that the killings continued until April 1966 and claimed from around 1,000 to 2,000 people.

Upon comparing the accounts of Yunus and Prior, the November 1965 massacre of 33 individuals as recalled by the folk singer appears anomalous. Prior only finds evidence for large-scale massacres (as opposed to sporadic killing of one or two people) occurring from February to April 1966. Was the folk singer mistaken about the dating or does Prior’s story have to be revised?

The army officers in Flores, Prior writes, “instigated” the killings in February 1966, even threatening clergy members who tried to prevent the killings, while the local elite “implemented” them, following the army’s lead.⁶⁰ The local elite used the violence for its own purposes, selecting the victims from among the people who had been challenging their local

⁵⁹ John Prior, “The Silent Scream of a Silenced History: Part One: The Maumere Massacre of 1966,” *Exchange* 40 (2011): 117-143; “The Silent Scream of a Silenced History: Part Two: Church Responses,” *Exchange* 40 (2011): 311-321. Gerry van Klinken, a researcher at KITLV in the Netherlands, will soon be publishing the results of his research on the killings in Flores. He uses both oral interviews and some of the documents used by Prior to construct a detailed analysis of how the army-organized killings figured into the pre-existing political dynamics in Flores.

⁶⁰ Prior, “The Silent Scream, Part One,” 117.

dominance, whether they were part of the PKI or not. Catholics killed Catholics. Some of the civilians collaborated with the army “eagerly,” some “fearfully.”⁶¹ The fact that the army was organizing massacres in February-April 1966, when there was absolutely no sign of a PKI rebellion in Flores, suggests that the local conflicts did not on their own produce the massacres. Prior presents compelling evidence that the army commander of KOMOP, Major Soemarno (a Javanese), pushed the non-communist organizations in Flores to follow the army plan for murdering suspected communists. It is unlikely that Soemarno was proceeding on his own; either he received direct orders to organize the slaughter or received the approval of his superiors when he proposed it to them.⁶²

These events in Flores thus prompt us to think about the decision-making processes within the army. Prior assumes that Major Soemarno was “simply following orders from Jakarta.”⁶³ Maybe he was. We do not know where the orders originated. How did Major Soemarno become the head of KOMOP? What was the role of his superiors one level up the chain of the territorial command in Bali (in Kodam Udayana)? To answer these questions, one has to turn from church sources to army sources. Many army personnel became political prisoners and their stories are important for reconstructing the internal shake-ups inside the army that allowed for the killings to proceed.⁶⁴ Perhaps some ex-political prisoners from the army are still alive in Flores. From late 1965, the army was purging personnel suspected of being sympathetic to the communists and President Sukarno.⁶⁵ The slightest suspicion was enough to warrant imprisonment. The timing of the violence in some regions appears related to dismissals or arrests of officers reluctant to organize massacres and the installation of new officers willing to carry out the dirty work. Suharto dispatched RPKAD troops to Central Java, East Java and Bali because he could not rely upon the locally-based troops; some officers and soldiers were partial to the PKI and could not countenance mass killing.⁶⁶ It appears that officers felt compelled to organize massacres to prove their loyalty to the new army commanders in Jakarta and ensure they would not be suspected of being a communist or Sukarnoist. Our

⁶¹ Prior, “The Silent Scream, Part One,” 118.

⁶² Prior, “The Silent Scream, Part One,” 126.

⁶³ Prior, “The Silent Scream, Part One,” 130.

⁶⁴ J. Bronto, a former army intelligence officer in Solo, has provided a remarkable testimony. Setiawan, *Kidung untuk Korban*, 14-44.

⁶⁵ A rough account of the purges within the military can be found in Harold Crouch, *The Army and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, revised edition 1988), 228-241.

⁶⁶ Jenkins and Kammen, “The Army Para-commando Regiment,” 75-103.

understanding of how the army's internal dynamics determined the pattern of the massacres remains rudimentary and speculative.

Conclusion

The editors of *Malam Bencana 1965* and Hermawan Sulistyono, against their own intentions, have helped to make one point clearer through their oral histories of localities: the execution of prisoners was a nationwide pattern. A great variety of writers, over many years, independently inquiring into events in different regions of the country have all described the removal of political prisoners from detention camps, the trucking of them to a riverbank, mountain, forest, or deserted road, the tying of their thumbs or wrists behind their backs, the execution of the defenseless captives either by soldiers or civilians working with the soldiers. This was not the only manner in which people were killed. But it appears to have been the most common manner and the one that accounts for most of the deaths.

Oral historians, when beginning any new investigation in a particular region, should expect to find this type of killing. They should design their research project in a way that matches the requirements of investigating it. Since researchers have tended not to focus on the massacres themselves, they (and I include myself here) have been unable to write detailed accounts that can answer many of the questions surrounding this process of executing prisoners. In investigating any single case of a massacre, some of the questions that arise will be: How were mass roundups organized? Where were the detainees held? How long were they held before they were executed? Who determined the procedures for selecting which detainees to execute? Where did the executions take place? Who ordered the executions? Who were the executioners? Knowing that a diversity of sources is needed to get a well-rounded and well-founded understanding of the event, researchers can strategize on how to contact a variety of witnesses, victims, and perpetrators (both civilian and military), instead of resting content with information from one or two people.

Any investigation into the massacres will have to dig for information about what was going on inside the army at the time of the killings. The major failing of the "local conflicts" paradigm has been its inability to pursue leads about the culpability of the army, a nationwide institution. Local militiamen, from their dealings with army personnel, learned much about army policies and can also be valuable sources of information. Also, the army personnel who were imprisoned on the suspicion of being sympathetic to the PKI can provide quite a lot of information too about what was happening inside the army before they were purged.

It is necessary for researchers to delve into the specifics of the massacres if the epistemic fog blanketing them is ever to be dispelled. In the absence of written records, except in some unusual cases, such as Flores, historians will have to turn to oral history to clarify the events. Once we have a better sense of the basic facts we can then adopt Portelli's approach and explore the workings of "misremembering." As it is now, historians can hardly distinguish between remembering and misremembering. The perpetrators, both civilian and military, have thoroughly muddied the waters. They have enjoyed honour for their role in "crushing the PKI," even as they have kept a public silence on the details of their butchery or have shifted blame to others, knowing at some level, whether conscious or subconscious, that the act of killing men and women with their hands tied behind their backs was entirely dishonourable. They have habitually justified the killings by claiming that it was a time of war ("either kill or be killed") and many historians have been willing to give credence to the claim. Such a justification might be understandable if there had been a war with two sides fighting each other. But the massacring of prisoners reveals the falsity of this justification. If the perpetrators are serious about the claim about that they were at war, then they will have to admit that they committed war crimes. The first Hague Convention of 1899, and the ancient moral codes of just about every major religion, including Islam, forbids the killing of prisoners of war. Once one attends to the specifics, such as the exact timings and procedures of the detentions and executions, one will be better able to analyze the various levels of responsibility of the militias and the army.