

Indonesia: Review of "The Act of Killing"

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"In terms of the numbers killed, the anti-PKI massacres in Indonesia rank as one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century". (CIA study in 1968)

In 1965-66 the right-wing military regime that seized power in Indonesia slaughtered up to one million people, mainly Communist party activists and supporters, in the most brutal manner. The "democratic" West not only did not protest, but in some cases, such as the US government via the CIA, actually handed over to the butchers lists of activists deemed dangerous. Joshua Oppenheimer has produced an amazing documentary/film in which the perpetrators of the butchery speak and re-enact what they did in the 1960s.

"Listen, if we succeed in making this film,

It will disprove all the propaganda about the communists being cruel,

And show that we were cruel,

We are the cruel ones, ha ha ha.

(...)

"It is not about fear.

It's 40 years ago, so our criminal case has expired.

It's not about fear. It's about image.

The whole society will say:

"We always suspected it. They lied about the communists being cruel".

(One of the killers)

The Act of Killing 2012 film

Don't expect to see a conventional historical documentary. Don't expect a long story of testimonies of the families of the victims of the 1965-1966 massacre of communists in Indonesia. With "The Act of Killing" you are not on familiar ground. Expect something more powerful, more compelling, more disturbing, more horrifying, and more fascinating even. Expect a documentary-fiction which will contribute – more than any other attempt until now – to demolishing the official propaganda about the genocide of one million communists. Expect something which will help to root out the lies and the fear about communism inculcated by systematic violence and terror over different generations. As an

activist once told me, this fear of communism was transmitted almost with the mother's milk. Be prepared to view a story where not the victims but the perpetrators take literally the centre of the stage. In the most astonishing way this film recreates the violence, the torture and the killings of the death squads in Indonesia from October 1965 on.

Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of *The Act of Killing*, has succeeded in something exceptional: winning the confidence of some of the killers and torturers of 1965 and convincing them to enact step by step and in detail, their activities at the original sites, describe their nightmares and to comment on it. The director makes them elaborate a script based on their experience and memories. This becomes then a film within the film. They do this with surprising candour in front of the cameras while dancing, singing and laughing. Instead of killers who deny their acts or who attempt to portray their victims as being guilty for their fate, here they claim openly responsibility for what they did. Worse even, they boast about it. In that sense this documentary does more to incriminate the perpetrators of the 1965-1966 bloodbath than any other documentary has succeeded in doing before.

The central figure is Anwar Congo, a young gangster in the 1960's, heading the traffic of illegal cinema ('bioskop') tickets in the city of Medan in North Sumatra. He and his criminal colleagues were fans of the Hollywood productions, dressed like James Dean and even organised a fan club of the actor. When the Communist Party called for a boycott of American movies the income of his lucrative business dropped rapidly. This fuelled his resentment and that of other criminals against the communists. When the military planned the physical annihilation of the PKI, they resorted to the help of those criminals and of the many lumpen elements in the cities. They are also the local leaders of the paramilitary political gang, called Pemuda Pancasila (Pancasila Youth). They become part of what the Indonesian historybooks describe as the "Patriotic campaign". It opened the gates to the most base feelings possible in a human being. Using their sick imagination, they explain how they continually invented new ways of torture and assassination. As they had so many people to kill and not enough time to kill them with their own hands they invented quicker ways to death. They also act out in rotation the part of their victims. This leads to astonishing conversations and reflections (see this extract).

It needs a special effort of imagination to understand the impact this mass massacre had on the consciousness of different generations of Indonesians. This impact was deliberately fed by the Suharto dictatorship and his generals through propaganda and continued repression.

National Trauma We asked one of leaders of the 1998 uprising which led to the fall of Suharto how his family and he himself felt about the 1965 massacre:

"I do not have direct experience with the mass murder of 1965, since I was born one decade later. But I feel it as a collective trauma.

My mom's brother, leader of the Communist Party at village level, was killed in front of my family. Everybody told me the way he was killed when I was a child. It is horror.

"My father was almost killed as well, but he survived. There was one night a debate amongst the murderers to discuss whether my father would be killed or not, while he saw with his eyes many people who had already been killed. At the end, he was not killed. But his mental state has remained fragile to this day. He became mentally ill in 1998 when the military was hunted for me.

"I think, to put it briefly, that the 1965 mass killing became a collective trauma for almost everyone, not only those who had direct experience but also those who know the story."

But that fear is crumbling. As new generation has grow up and awoken politically, and interest in communism and the history of the PKI is on the increase. New layers of workers and youth who have not been fed with anti-communist propaganda or lived in an environment where communist taboos were present in all aspects of their life, are now looking for new historical explanations

A special attention is given in the documentary to Pemuda Pancasila, a paramilitary youth movement and its relation to the state. Pemuda Pancasila (PP) is a million strong (3 to 5 million) militia composed of gangsters ('preman'), petty criminals and youth of the informal sector and organised crime (extortion of Chinese traders). Pemuda was an attempt to create a mass organised base for reaction against the youth of the PKI, Pemuda Rakyat (People's Youth) in the 1960's. They were particularly active in North Sumatra (Medan and Aceh) in slaughtering communists. It is linked to the party of the dictatorship, Golkar. This movement still exists today as you will be able to see from the documentary. What is their role then today? Jusuf Kalla, the vice president of Indonesia, gives a straightforward answer in a speech shown in the documentary. In front of a meeting of cadres and political supporters of PP he explains:

"The spirit of Pancasila Youth, that some people accuse of being gangsters. Gangsters are people who work outside of the system, not for the government. The word gangster ('preman' in Bahasa Indonesia) comes from 'free men'. This nation needs 'free men'. If everyone worked for the government, we'd be a nation of bureaucrats. We'd get nothing done. We need gangsters to get things done. Free, private men, who get things done. We need gangsters, who are willing to take risks in business. Use your muscles! Muscles aren't for beating up people. Although beating people up is sometimes needed. [laughter and applause in the hall]."

On another occasion, at a mass gathering of PP, the chairman of PP, Yapto Soerjosoemarno, delivered a speech in front of thousands of PP members and government officials, and once again highlighted the basis of the PP's existence:

"All members of Pancasila Youth are heroes, from exterminating the communists, to fighting neo-communists and left-wing extremists, and those wishing to break apart the nation."

It would be a mistake to think that PP is a militia made of lumpen elements from top to bottom. The leaders of PP are mostly highly educated people, with political and business ties. Yapto is a lawyer who finished his education in the Netherlands. He also owns a number of companies. His father, a retired Major General, is a member of the Javanese nobility. Here we see how gangsterism, militarism, capitalism, and feudalism in Indonesia form a complex interdependent network.

PP is a state and private business sponsored private militia of thugs taking over sometimes security issues in cities where the police is 'ineffective', a network for organised crime and a political militia used to intimidate opponents or left-wing people in general. They complement the other organs of state repression. Indonesia is rife with militias of all kind. Also active in 1965-66 were Islamic fundamentalist groups killing the "godless atheists". Although dangerous and a clear threat to the workers and peasant movement and the left in general, they are less impressive once the masses come out on the streets.

November 1998 witnessed the second upsurge of the students and the urban masses after the fall of Suharto. His political clone Habibie was put in power to give the impression of change while trying to guarantee the preservation of the system. The rallying cry in the capital Jakarta was then "down with Habibie, the clone of Suharto". At the highpoint of the mobilisations one million people filled the streets of the city. The army deployed 30,000 soldiers, 16 warships arrived in the harbour including one submarine and one missile launcher. Moreover the regime had deployed 125,000 thugs from all over the island in the city to act as a battering ram against the demonstrators. They failed, as the poor people and the workers from the popular neighbourhoods rose up against them, with machetes, sticks and knives. So after a few days the military (the real masters of the thugs) withdrew them so as not to provoke a greater revolt in the city. This is a good indication of the limits of the engagement of such militias in the class struggle. Nevertheless loosely organised masses on the streets are not enough to confront the right-wing Islamist militias. The steps taken by the metal workers' union to establish their own "Garda Metal" (Metal Guard) to protect their demonstrations is a good step. It needs to be generalised to other unions and used to protect all left-wing meetings from physical aggression.

Impunity A question that haunts the documentary is: how was Joshua Oppenheimer able to convince the 1965 killers to speak so freely in front of the camera? Partially it is a question of having won their confidence over a period of seven years. Then there is the feeling of impunity. But this is not necessarily related to the expiration of their criminal cases. More importantly, this feeling of being untouchable is due to their powerful protectors in the state apparatus (governors, newspaper editors, military officers, politicians including at the highest level of

the system even today) and their status of national heroes in official history.

As you can expect this movie is not being shown at local cinemas in Jakarta, Medan or Surabaya. The “democratic” government does not authorize its circulation. Nevertheless, in the past months, youth across Indonesia have been actively organizing viewings – many of them underground viewings – of the documentary. The enthusiasm with which these youth watched and responded to this documentary is a clear symptom of the changes in the minds of the youth, both students and workers. They are less burdened by the “New Order” propaganda and more sympathetic to communism. The anti-communist fear and taboos are breaking down rapidly.

“The Act of Killing” did an immense service towards restoring the historical truth and helping to reconquer the memory of the massacred communists. As another activist told me: “I was really impressed by the scope of the conspiracy behind the massacre of the PKI.”

Nevertheless, the documentary leaves out something very important if we want to really understand what happened in 1965-1966. How was it possible that the biggest Communist party outside the Stalinist world was annihilated in this way without significant resistance? The PKI had three million members and 15 to 20 million supporters in its different mass organisations. It was very powerful.

The answer does not lie in the detailed preparation of the systematic, almost industrial, scale killings, or in the fact that they were more “cruel” than us (which is always the case), or in the logistic support given by British and US imperialists. Nor was it true that the state was too strong (the PKI commanded a lot of support inside the army not only from ordinary soldiers but also from NCO’s and higher officers, up to 40% of the army was PKI minded). The explanation is not the lack of arms in the hands of the communist members or the absence of organised worker and peasant self-defence groups. The PKI had arms.

The answer is political. The PKI and its cadres were politically disarmed in the face of the brutal attack of the state and the gangs at their service. The explanation is to be found in the policies of the PKI leadership itself (for a more thorough analysis of the political reasons read Alan Woods’ article [here](#)).

The PKI was a Stalinist party whose political strategy was inspired by the “two stage” theory. This “theory” claimed that the working class in countries like Indonesia is not ready for socialism. Its first priority consisted in consolidating capitalism and establishing an alliance with the so-called nationalist bourgeoisie, i.e. the president Sukarno. This alliance, which confused and paralysed the PKI at the moment of truth, was to prove fatal.

During the first days and weeks of the beginning of the massacre, the PKI leaders tried to reassure the masses that supported them with the hope that “Bung Karno” (Brother Sukarno) was going to protect them. No protection would be forthcoming. In wars, as in class struggle, numbers are not the only determining

factor. The initiative for the offensive, the dedication with which the objectives are fought for are factors which weigh more than numbers. The determination was on the side of the ruthless class enemy. Political vacillation and hesitation was on the side of the leadership of the PKI.

“It has seldom happened that a party as large as the PKI has held a class fraction, the ‘national bourgeoisie’, in such high esteem, placed so many hopes upon it and accommodated itself to it, while knowing so little about it,” writes Rex Mortimer in *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno - Ideology and Politics 1959-65*. We know what the consequences of this submission of the PKI to the so-called national bourgeois were to be.

Those lessons have to be learned through the systematic study of genuine Marxism (not its Stalinist caricature) and with the development of real solid cadres rooted in the movement. The Indonesian class struggle will give different opportunities in the future for the working class to take power and overthrow capitalism. The success of the struggle for a socialist Indonesia will be the best homage and revenge for the communists who died almost 50 years ago.