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Indonesia

The Jakarta stage of Imperialism: Indonesia 1965, Singularity and Magnitude of a Model Catastrophe

- Features -

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The mass destruction that occurred in Indonesia from October 1965 onwards is certainly one of those "forgotten" disasters, making Indonesia itself - the fourth most populous country in the world and a treasure chest of raw materials, of labour - a kind of non-place.

There were many mass killings, exterminations and genocides during the 20th century. The extent of their recognition remains very contrasted, acquired for some, still contested and denied to others, while still others barely enter the historical field of vision. Holocaust denial, claiming to challenge the reality of the destruction of the Jews of Europe, is a persistent threat. This is all the more serious and dangerous because for various other disasters of the 20th century, denial, erasure and oblivion have indeed done their work. For example, it was only in May of this year - 2021 - that Germany, through its foreign minister, acknowledged the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples in Namibia between 1904 and 1908 ("We will now officially characterize these events for what they are from today's point of view: genocide"). Recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915 is still subject to the vagaries of the diplomatic balance of forces of various powers with Turkey.

The historical silence on Indonesia is probably the reflection of the sudden obliteration of whole sections of Indonesian society, of its political and cultural institutions, of whole forms of life during 1965-66. In recent years, however, documentary filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer has aroused the interest of a wide audience for this story with his stunning *The Act of Killing* released in 2012, followed by *The Look of Silence* in 2014.

A genocide with anti-communist aims

Using the pretext of the failed arrest and death of six Indonesian army officers opposed to the Indonesian president and charismatic anti-imperialist leader Sukarno, in October 1965 General Suharto launched an enterprise of systematic liquidation of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). At the time it was known to be the third largest communist party in the world after those of the USSR and China. All workers' and popular organizations (trade unions, feminists, cultural organizations) and individuals who had a real, distant or supposed link with the PKI were swallowed up. The death toll is frequently estimated at around one million deaths.

For many researchers working on genocidal experiences, the destruction of the PKI is indeed genocide. Now an essential reference on this episode, historian John Roosa observes in this regard:

The mass violence perpetrated in 1965-66 in Indonesia seems at first sight to be political. It was a purge of a political party, the elimination of a political tendency within the body politic, a political genocide. The targets of these mass arrests and killings were people affiliated with the Communist Party. The victims belonged to all kinds of sectors of society: peasants, middle-class liberal professions, artists, petty entrepreneurs, soldiers, students, teachers, bureaucrats, and housewives. They had in common their more or less close ties with the PKI and its mass organizations. [1]

For Roosa, however, if we can analyse this repression by looking at the state, the army, the militias, the Cold War, among others, these categories risk missing the economic dimension of the genocide: "The army's attack on the PKI was also an assault on the working class." The literature on mass murder has often remained allusive on this point.

However, Roosa recalls:

almost all anti-communist campaigns around the world have simultaneously been campaigns against workers' organizations. And the reverse is equally true: almost all massacres against workers' organizations were justified in the name of campaigns against communism, whether or not the trade union organizations had a link with a communist party.

Recalling many examples of the above, Roosa comes to the important conclusion that "it is possible to read works on genocide without ever finding a link with capitalism, and it is possible to read Marxist stories without finding a full-fledged analysis of the genocidal fact." For this author, one of the singularities of the Indonesian episode is this: "The story of the complete destruction of workers' organizations and the mass murder of workers in Indonesia in 1965-66 are at the intersection of the two": state violence and class violence, political violence and economic violence. [2]

If John Roosa is in no way unaware of and underestimates the assistance that the United States and Britain provided to this extermination enterprise and to the lasting consolidation of the (perfectly brutal and corrupt Suharto) regime that originated with it, his analysis is particularly enlightening in that it focuses first of all on the little known dynamics and relations of forces internal to Indonesian society itself: how was Indonesian communism characterized and what was its degree of presence in the army, already so omnipresent at all levels of Indonesian society? What were the sequences and geographical contrasts of the carnage? These are some of the questions Roosa explores.

From a completely different but complementary perspective, US journalist and researcher Vincent Bevins recently investigated the place occupied by the Indonesian political genocide in the global war against communism. In his book, he traces in a very impressive investigation how this "successful" liquidation - alongside the coming to power of the Brazilian military dictatorship - served as a model and direct inspiration for strategies to eliminate left-wing movements in Latin America. [3] A detail as sinister as it is revealing followed by Bevins throughout part of the book: "Operation Jakarta" and "Jakarta is coming" were the code names and expressions used by the torturers in preparation for their passage to the offensive. Bevins thus shows the global aura acquired by the bloody elimination of the PKI, whose meaning was therefore in no way limited to Indonesia alone, or even to Southeast Asia alone. Bevins explains, for example, that in the early 1970s:

as part of the collaboration between the Brazilian government and right-wing forces in Chile, the word "Jakarta" acquired a new use. In both countries, the capital of Indonesia now had the same meaning. Operação Jacarta... was the name of a secret stage of an extermination plan, according to documentation collected by Brazil's Truth Commission. Testimonies collected after the fall of the dictatorship indicate that Operação Jacarta was probably part of Operação Radar, which aimed to destroy the structure of the Brazilian Communist Party. Operação Jacarta intended to carry out the physical elimination of the Communists. It called for mass murder, just like in Indonesia.

Although Brazilians did not begin to hear about Operação Jacarta until three years later, the word "Jakarta" quickly made its public appearance in Chile: "In Santiago, especially in the eastern districts of the city, in the hills, where the well-to-do families lived, someone began to put a message on the walls, in several forms: 'Jakarta is coming', 'Jakarta will be bitter'. [Yakarta viene. Jakarta se acerca.] Or sometimes, simply: 'Jakarta'." According to Bevins, the events in Indonesia had already been present in right-wing discourse in Chile for years. [4]

A shock strategy

Roosa reflects the complexity of the internal dynamics of Indonesian society and the class dimension of political genocide. Bevins shows the aura acquired by the events of 1965-66 and the true model of political extermination that the Indonesian army came to represent elsewhere in the world. But a third study, just as recent, adds an element of singularity which is quite considerable concerning the Indonesian episode. For Singapore-based historian Wen-Qing Ngoei, to summarize one of his important analyses far too quickly, the Indonesian massacre was for the United States and its British ally an inverted picture of Vietnam, a successful Vietnam with lasting regional implications. [5]

In Indonesia, the army under Suharto's command was responsible for almost everything. There was no need for direct military involvement: intelligence, lists of PKI members to be eliminated, various forms of logistical support, weapons were enough. Thanks to the "reign of terror against the PKI" (in the words of a US consul on the spot), a possibility deemed disastrous was eliminated, that of seeing the "PKI energize and unite the Indonesian nation" with the risk of an Indonesia "offering a powerful example to the underdeveloped world, thereby enhancing the reputation of communism, and causing a setback to the prestige of the West." [6]

Thus, following the victory of the British in Malaya after twelve years of war (renamed a "state of emergency") against a Communist insurrection (between 1948 and 1960), and after the invention of a new "independent" country (Malaysia) with borders designed for the post-colonial and neo-imperialist needs of Britain, Indonesia completed, as a centrepiece, the regional entrapment of Communist Asia: a succession of US allies - Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines - now formed a "containment arc" for revolutionary Vietnam and encircled China (as far as Japan and Korea). In this, while the imperialist defeat in Vietnam was certainly very real, the Anglo-American victory on a regional scale, less known and recognized, according to Ngoei, was just as real. The consequences would be profound and lasting.

This is certainly illustrated today by the serious tensions currently in the South China Sea where Chinese expansion means perhaps primarily the questioning of a historic Anglo-US regional order in Southeast Asia, resulting from the strategies of annihilation of the independence struggles of the Sino-Malay peasantry and the anti-communist mass graves of Sumatra, Java or Bali (before the same disasters fell on East Timor).

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[1] In his third book on the subject: *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-66 in Indonesia*, Wisconsin U.P. 2020.

[2] Roosa, *Buried Lives*, p.214, 216.

[3] *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World*, Public Affairs, 2020.

[4] Bevins, *The Jakarta Method*, p. 193-94.

[5] *Arc of Containment: Britain, The United States and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia*, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2019.

[6] Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World*, Vintage Original, 2003.