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# The Organisation of the Killings and the Interaction between State and Society in Central Java, 1965

Mathias Hammer

**Abstract:** This article investigates how the Indonesian state organised the killing of approx. 100,000 communists and alleged communists in Central Java in 1965. It presents the argument that even though state institutions unleashed the killings and perpetrated much of the violence, the state’s control over this violence was limited. In particular, decisions by state institutions as to who would be targeted by the violence at the individual level were considerably influenced by civilian actors. Six theses develop this argument by reconstructing these events. They highlight the fact that the Indonesian army faced capacity constraints (thesis 1) and relied on improvisation (2). The army detained many of the victims in improvised facilities prior to their deaths (3). In these installations, the army’s capacity to identify and select those of the detainees it wished to execute was constrained by a lack of reliable men among their forces. Chaotic conditions in the detention facilities put further limits on the state’s capacity to select people for execution. To counter these effects, auditing and investigation teams were put into place to carry out these selections (4). In doing so, they had to rely on information from their victims’ social environments (5), which identified candidates for detention and supplied details that helped the selection teams decide what to do with detainees (6). This information was supplied voluntarily, often as a result of personal initiative.

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**Keywords:** Indonesia, Java, communism, PKI, 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement, massacres, detention facilities, state and society

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## Introduction

In October 1965 the self-styled 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement, a loose group of officers with whom the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) had developed clandestine connections, carried out a move against seven generals in the army's High Command (Roosa 2006: 209–220). This incident failed to advance the PKI's hold over the Indonesian government and instead led to the unexpected rise to power of Major-General Suharto, who presided over the killing of an estimated half a million followers or alleged followers of the PKI (Cribb 2001: 91).

The killings in Central Java were unleashed on Suharto's orders. Three weeks after the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement had taken place, he sent the RPKAD (Resimen Para Komando Angkatan Darat, Army Paracommando Regiment) to the province under the command of Colonel Sarwo Edhie Wibowo. Sarwo Edhie and his men entered Semarang on 19 October and reached Surakarta on 22 October via Yogyakarta and Boyolali (Kammen and Jenkins 2012: 85).

Put simply, my main argument is that unleashing political violence is not the same as controlling it.<sup>1</sup> In other words, even though the state institutions subjected to Suharto's authority implemented a campaign of mass persecution, they only had limited control over how the individuals targeted by it were chosen. Following Herriman's observation (2007) that state institutions in Indonesia can be subjected to control "from below", I suggest that the social environment of individuals who were arrested and detained by the army had an influence on the army's decisions as to which detainees would be selected for execution. Focusing on events in southern parts of the province of Central Java, I address the question of how the army decided whether given detainees must have been PKI followers who, in their minds, had to be executed and which of the detainees would be left alive. In doing so, I draw on my research findings from the district of Klaten; some of the patterns and dynamics I came across there can be generalised for other parts of Central Java to a degree.

During my field trip from January to June 2010, I conducted 47 interviews with respondents in Yogyakarta and Central Java, almost all of whom were former political detainees (so-called "Ex-Tapol") who requested anonymity. They included farmers, students, officials, members of the army, former PKI cadres, former PKI members who had been

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1 This article draws on research for my PhD thesis and I would like to thank my supervisor Robert Cribb for his comments on earlier drafts. However any mistakes in this text are my sole responsibility.

underground and former members of PKI mass organisations, including Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, the Indonesian Women's Movement), Pemuda Rakyat (the People's Youth) and BTI (Barisan Tani Indonesia, the Indonesian Peasants' Front). A small number of my respondents were civilian perpetrators, witnesses to executions or witnesses to circumstances surrounding the killings. In addition, I studied transcripts of seven interviews in the oral history collection of the Institute for Indonesian Social History (Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia, ISSI), Jakarta. These interviews were originally conducted by ISSI<sup>2</sup> researchers in Klaten in 2000 and 2001.

After providing some background information on the current state of research and more general discussions on the nature of the topic (section 1), I shall present the six theses which support and help develop the argument that the killings in Central Java unleashed a dynamic in which political persecution by the state became influenced by social configurations at a very local level. First of all, the army's potential to exercise violence was severely constrained (section 2). Second, the army deployed violence rapidly and arrested large numbers of people within a very short period of time, so the forces on the ground often had to improvise to carry out their tasks (section 3). Third, detention facilities, while not a ubiquitous feature of all patterns of violence known throughout the literature on the topic, were by and large necessary to carry out the killings in a way that would minimise the amount of chaos and hence the targeting of non-communists with violence unleashed by the state while at the same time maximising the state's potential to control the violence (section 4). Fourth, auditing and investigation teams were crucial in the state's attempt to overcome these constraints and played a central role in selecting the victims of the killings among the many detainees (section 5). Fifth, these teams relied on collaboration by local anti-communists in order to make their selections (section 6). And sixth, collaboration often took the form of denunciation, and denunciation by its very nature – as can be observed in the mass persecutions of the 20th century – opened the door for people to take personal action against undesired acquaintances. This phenomenon raises the question of how far the situation might have provided civilians with the scope to settle private disagreements that were not directly related to the official campaign of political persecution carried out by the state (also in section 6).

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2 I would like to thank the staff of ISSI for granting me access to this remarkable material and for their help and support in general.

By putting forward these arguments, I do not wish to discount the work of those who have identified ideological motives in the actions of the perpetrators. Although this article highlights the uncertainties and difficulties the army encountered in targeting and identifying its victims, I do not contest Cribb's point (2001: 91) that the killings as a whole were effective in wiping out the PKI's hard core of cadres and that most of those killed were indeed connected with the PKI. Neither do I claim that the pattern of violence under consideration here, namely army-organised executions of detainees, was the only one which occurred; the killing sprees undertaken by civilian militias, for instance, clearly played a role here as well. Nor would I want to suggest that control from below was total, because there were limits to how far individuals could go in their attempts to influence the selection process. However, the identification of social initiative in shaping some of the patterns of violence carried out by state institutions does shed light on one component of the killings in addition to other parts of an explanation that is being pursued by a growing number of researchers, activists and artists both within and outside Indonesia.

## 1 Current Debates about the Killings and the Relationship between State and Society in Indonesia

Explanations concerning the killings have often focused on the question of who the main perpetrators were and whether the violence was the result of social tension or of intentional action by the armed forces (Kammen and Zakaria 2012: 442). As the patterns of violence differed across Indonesia, different answers can be found for different provinces. The work of Fealy and McGregor (2012: 104), for example, offers compelling insights into the role of the religious and political organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (Revival of Islamic Scholars) as a driving force behind the violence in East Java along with the nature of its cooperation with the army. Columbijn and Lindblad (2002: 20) mention that the authorities relied on "semi-criminal vigilantes" in the form of the Pemuda Pancasila to kill PKI followers in North Sumatra, a pattern they trace back to the ubiquitous use of strongmen by the colonial state.

As for Central Java, a process of polarisation (Ricklefs 2007) between different segments of society (*aliran*), which featured different cultural and religious identities, has long been seen as a factor leading to the violence. Anderson and McVey (2009: 117) and Elson (2008: 125) point

out how the arrival of the RPKAD fanned the flames of violence in this province and triggered attacks between civilians. In contrast, Hasworo (2004: 59) finds that these clashes were engineered deliberately by the army, which played the different groups off against one another. Full army responsibility for all the patterns of violence is also Roosa's (2006) conclusion; this author emphasises the bureaucratic nature of the violence, reflecting findings by Hasworo (both participated in one of the most extensive research projects on the killings ever undertaken by a single team of investigators). He also suggested that the destruction of the PKI unfolded according to a "game plan" conceived by the army and carried out by Suharto (Roosa 2006: 200). Crouch (1978: 129) and Elson (2002: 180), on the other hand, recognise Suharto's responsibility as the central instigator and coordinator of the violence, but rather than portraying him as the executioner of a prefabricated game plan who manipulated both state institutions and social forces to follow this script in detail, they see him more as a driving force, reactive to a flexible and only finitely manageable political and social environment.

In contrast, national-level explanations which blandly attribute responsibility for the violence to society often do so by portraying Indonesia as a country prone to outbursts of "amok runs" and hence locate the explanation in the mentality of its population (Roosa 2006: 27–29 offers the best overview of these approaches). And as Cribb (1991: 1–43) demonstrates, the search for specific historical conditions that can explain such a phenomenon is far more complex and requires attention to problems of evidence, philosophical implications of the nature of violence, and interpretation of the political trajectory of the nation as whole – which had reached a historical crossroads in a world shaped by the Cold War – in connection with more particular trends such as social conflicts at the sub-national level. However, a serious argument can be found in the work done by Herriman (2007), who convincingly lays bare the weak nature of the state, emphasising its limited capacity to enact violence on a supposedly passive populace, and who sees the killings as largely influenced by "the parameters set down by the state both overtly and covertly, for the tolerance of certain sorts of violence and not of others" (Herriman 2007). He also emphasises that the search for explanations of the killings is connected with wider debates on the relationship between state and society.

These debates question how far the Republic of Indonesia had the capacity to make or "unmake" social conditions on the ground and how far it only had limited influence on the dynamics of society at a local level (Herriman 2007). The search for an answer has gained particular

impetus in recent studies. Aspinall and van Klinken (2011: 6), for instance, point out that the way in which the Indonesian state operates vis-à-vis society in reality is different from the way its own constitutional order suggests it should function – and is therefore different from how the functioning of modern states has often been understood. Herriman (2007) argues that the state only has limited responsibility for violence in Indonesia as state institutions are often controlled by society “from below”. Van Klinken and Barker (2009: 23) emphasise that the Indonesian state is still “spread thin” and “fragmented, overwhelmed and ineffective”. One of their most illuminating arguments is that the actual taxation rate and the rate of investment in human capital (both measured as a percentage of GDP) as well as the rate of civil servants and army personnel per population is less than half of what can be found in industrial nations (van Klinken and Barker 2009: 33–35).

Taking into consideration that such a state has been identified as the cause of genocidal violence with bureaucratic characteristics – in this case, the killings claimed hundreds of thousands of lives – the relationship between state and society in the Indonesian killings becomes a challenging conundrum: on the one hand, the Indonesian state asserted itself over society through the use of force, while on the other hand, it relied on society so that it could exercise this force comprehensively in the first place. Moreover, we know that the killings took place because Suharto began to take control of state institutions after 1 October 1965, starting with the security forces, and then actively triggered the outbreak of the violence and presided over its exercise by the army and its civilian auxiliaries. But we are faced with capacity-constrained state institutions which unleashed violence that took on different manifestations across the archipelago, according to “a host of local factors” which “in each region determined the scope and scale of each bout of killing” (Cribb 1991: 21). In contrast to, say, the Cultural Revolution, the Cambodian Killing Fields or the Holocaust, all of which were crimes committed by totalitarian regimes driven by fanatical party ideologies, so far, no integrated, overarching explanation has been found that can identify a single social force which applies to the Indonesian killings as a whole. For instance, even though Kammen and Zakaria (2012: 456) propose a novel framework of analysis that accounts for the ratios of detentions and deaths in a number of key provinces, thus allowing for more profound inter-regional comparisons of the intensity of violence and the connection of social forces to Suharto’s policies, they also contend that the current state of research does not yet provide “a full explanation of provincial variation”. Against this backdrop, the remainder of this article makes a contribution

to our knowledge of events by investigating the situation in the province of Central Java rather than the nation as a whole.

## 2 The State's Capacity to Exercise and Control the Violence

The mass arrests and executions began in Central Java three weeks after the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement had taken place when the RPKAD entered Semarang on 19 October. It moved speedily across the province, reaching Surakarta on 22 October via Yogyakarta and Boyolali (Kammen and Jenkins 2012: 85). One factor which shaped the way in which the killings in Central Java were organised and carried out was time, as “the military forces around Suharto felt entirely uncertain of success when they launched the massacres” (Cribb 1991: 196) and had “to regain the political, military and psychological initiative in Central Java as soon as possible” (Jenkins and Kammen 2012: 75). Sarwo Edhie not only had little time, but also very little manpower. The RPKAD itself was a small force of fewer than 1,000 men (Jenkins and Kammen 2012: 81). In addition, the army's Central Javanese command, the Diponegoro division, consisted of three brigades. One of these, the 6<sup>th</sup> brigade, was unreliable because it had come out in favour of the PKI when it briefly supported the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement, so it was sent away from the province. Conversely, the 4<sup>th</sup> brigade, though reliable, was on duty in Sumatra and needed some time to redeploy to Central Java. The only remaining brigade in the division was the 5<sup>th</sup>, which had around 1,200–1,500 men (confidential interview no. 28 with a former Diponegoro staff member, Solo, 21 May 2010), so altogether a total of 2,200–2,500 fighting troops were at the disposal of Sarwo Edhie when the operation started.

Furthermore, the development of territorial command structures in Central Java had been slow and was hampered by the attitude of the Diponegoro command (Sundhaussen 1982: 141–142, 175–176).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the brigades of the Diponegoro division and the RPKAD, which were units in *tempur* (combat-ready) formations, the territorial commands had been established at every level of government with the explicit intention of reining in the PKI, down to the village level. But in Central Java, the Diponegoro command found it hard to find politically reliable staff and was reluctant to establish a presence in communist-dominated areas. Not until late 1964 did they attempt to establish any command posts at

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3 I would like to thank Gerry van Klinken for drawing my attention to the problem discussed in this paragraph.



the subdistrict level (namely KORAMIL, which stands for Komando Rayon Militer, or Subdistrict Military Command) and begin to organise sympathisers in the villages (Sundhaussen 1982: 175). Although the organisational drive managed to reach the subdistrict level, some staff there who were supposed to suppress the growth of the PKI in the months before the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement actually ended up providing military training to the communist militias (Sejarah Militer Kodam VII/Diponegoro 1971: 184).

In addition, the police force and military police would be used to facilitating arrests, detentions and interrogations in the following weeks and months. At the time, the population of Central Java and the Yogyakarta Special Region was more than 20 million people (PPSK UGM and Biro Pusat Statistik 1980: table 466; table 490). Sarwo Edhie's forces intended to identify, locate and arrest large numbers of PKI followers and then select specific people for execution. The precise number of those who were arrested is not known, but it appears that at one point in time towards the end of 1965, there were at least 70,000 detainees in the province (Kammen and Zakaria 2012: 451). Overall, about 100,000 people were reportedly exterminated during the killings in Central Java (Gavi 1969: 35; Kammen and Zakaria 2012: table 1). Practical and bureaucratic steps were necessary since the decision was made to target the wider support base of the party and destroy it "down to its roots" (*sampai pada akar-akarnya*), as the Suharto group put it in their propaganda (Roosa 2006: 30).

### 3 Improvisation and the Rapid Use of Violence

Given the limited amount of time available and the constraints on manpower, the killings in Central Java were initiated as an act of improvisation. Mass arrests were made rapidly and with a minimum of verification as to the identity of those arrested or their involvement in the PKI. The detainees were crammed into makeshift facilities which quickly became overcrowded. Improvisation meant that the operations began with next to no standard procedure and that answers to questions such as how to verify a suspect's identity and degree of involvement in the PKI, whether or how to interrogate suspects and on what basis one should decide whether to kill them or not varied from place to place and depended on the people in charge. In the various military districts, the killings were usually set off by visits from highly mobile RPKAD units. Spending only a few hours a time at any particular place, the RPKAD would carry out a

mass execution of its own as a “demonstration” for the local forces. After the local army troops had seen “how it was done”, the task of carrying on with these executions at their own discretion was handed over to them (confidential interview no. 28, Solo, 21 May 2010). Guarantees of impunity were given to the perpetrators, for instance by announcing that “the laws [had] been lifted” for them – *legalitasnya dibebaskan* (ISSI: transcript 3.13). The RPKAD could move into and out of a place in a short time this way.

To reinforce local command structures struggling with being given such a task, army units were temporarily deployed to certain locations. What is known of these deployments suggests that they concentrated on PKI strongholds where combat-ready troops were necessary to break the PKI's potential to resist the mass arrest operations. In Klaten, for instance, witnesses remembered that a “Jon F” or battalion F under the command of Captain Mugiati, which had about 400–500 soldiers and belonged to the 4<sup>th</sup> brigade of the Diponegoro division, was stationed there for a few months to carry out arrests (confidential interview with a former official, no. 15, Klaten, 30 March 2010). The two remaining battalions of the 4<sup>th</sup> brigade, “E” and “G”, were sent to Boyolali and Solo respectively, thereby leaving the 5<sup>th</sup> brigade (battalions H–J) and the RPKAD to cover the rest of the province (Sedjarah Militer Kodam VII/ Diponegoro 1971: 212; 237). In the subdistrict of Jatnom in Klaten, a mountainous area at the foot of Mount Merapi where the PKI enjoyed such strong support that the area is still remembered as a “PKI base”, the RPKAD had a small detachment stationed for about a week which was then replaced by a company (about 100 men) of the aforementioned battalion F (confidential interview with a former Gerwani member, no. 31, Polanharjo, 24 May 2010).

Since it was well equipped with vehicles, the RPKAD had the capacity to keep two thirds of its manpower on the road while another third took eight-hour breaks at its field headquarters in Kartasura. This way the unit could maintain a constant, 24-hour presence on the roads of Central Java throughout its deployment, a tactic referred to as “rolling-rolling” by a former Diponegoro member (confidential interview no. 28, Solo, 21 May 2010). The RPKAD could therefore act as military “troubleshooters” who were available around the clock to check on any local problems and ensure that the arrests and killings were going ahead as planned. An example of such an intervention was when the RPKAD sent a jeep with a mounted machine gun to Tulung near Jatnom to disperse a mass meeting violently after Muslim leaders had alerted Kartasura that several thousand local PKI members had gathered there in an

attempt to resist the arrests collectively and suggested they were even making preparations for a guerrilla campaign (confidential interview no. 39 with a perpetrator, Tulung, Klaten, 3 June 2010).

When it arrived in southern Central Java, the RPKAD had been confronted with numerous forms of open resistance, but by November 1965 followers of the PKI had stopped their attempts to stand up to the army and its civilian allies in the villages (confidential interview no. 1 with two witnesses, Klaten, 17 February 2010; Hasworo 2004: 35–37; Centre for Village Studies 1991: 121–158). Reports suggest that the will of the population to carry out any acts of defiance was broken rapidly and with great brutality: twelve striking railway workers at Klaten train station were shot, workers at the bag factory in Delanggu, which had been an icon of PKI-led unionism in Indonesia, were flogged on the open road, and in Boyolali, captured party leaders were forced to slide along the streets on their knees (Gavi 1969: 13, 34; ISSI: transcript 3.16). A grim story narrated by Hughes (1969: 150) of how Sarwo Edhie had cold-bloodedly ordered a group of villagers who had greeted him with insults to be machine-gunned on the spot and that he had then also had those who protested about the violence shot in the same way acquires new credibility in light of this evidence. Public executions of prominent party and union leaders were carried out at traffic junctions, with passers-by being forced to halt and witness their deaths. It was made known that anyone who wished to avoid sharing such a fate should hand themselves in to the authorities voluntarily. Sheer terror therefore put a halt to hostile mass actions and strikes. In the areas thus subdued, the arrests followed distinct patterns which most often involved a large group of civilian militants with makeshift arms and a handful of policemen or members of the army to lead and oversee these auxiliaries (Hasworo 2004: 57–58). Often they would gather beforehand, enter a given village or hamlet and, by force of numbers and the threat of violence against anyone who dared to resist, arrest those identified as targets. A survivor remembered the moment of his arrest in the first week of November:

It was four or five in the morning when I was woken up. I opened the door and saw a soldier standing there. There were some vigilante youths in front of him who [...] were armed with spears of various kinds, but I didn't know who they were. The soldier said: "Sir, your presence is required by the government. Follow me." I followed them and we were assembled at a sports field. Many of my friends were already there; they came from everywhere, all over the village. There were 58 people, boys and girls, old and young, including [...] a pupil from primary school who had also

been arrested. His father, his elder brother and himself – three people from one house [...]. [He's] still alive. There were women there, too – my aunt was arrested as well. We were gathered on the field, asked for our addresses and then driven to Klaten in a truck. At the police station we were registered again and then sent to the prison in Klaten.

(confidential interview no. 35 with a former detainee, Klaten, 26 May 2010)

On 26 October 1965, the participants at a meeting chaired by Sarwo Edhie in Solo decided to involve anti-communist village guards who the army had fostered before October 1965 in the operations. However, because Sarwo Edhie felt unable to control the areas outside Solo with these forces, it was also decided to augment the existing village guards with newly recruited formations (Sedjarah Militer Kodam VII/Diponegoro 1971: 210; Crouch 1978: 150–152). Once Suharto had given his approval, the RPKAD began to provide brief training sessions for the new auxiliaries (Jenkins and Kammen 2012: 88–91). It can be assumed that the aforementioned “demonstration” exercises carried out by the roving RPKAD squads went hand in hand with the training of militias. The RPKAD, a battalion with a combined strength of fewer than 1,000 men, thereby initiated a monstrous mass arrest and killing operation in Central Java within the span of just a few days.

## 4 Chaos and Arbitrariness in the Detention Facilities

Kammen and Zakaria (2012: 442) rightly highlight that many of those killed had been detained by the army for various lengths of time prior to their deaths, a statement also made by Roosa (2006: 31). While Kammen and Zakaria focus on the connection between detentions and killings on a national scale and also pay attention to the system of classifying detainees, this article deals with evidence from one province and traces the circumstances under which one particular type of flow of information from society to the state became relevant in the process that led to the execution of detainees. This section shows how putting detention at the centre of historical investigation allows us to investigate the chaotic circumstances under which the state attempted to maximise its control over the application of violence. The findings presented in this section follow the pioneering work of Hasworo (2004), to whom I owe the insight that this disorderly situation actually led to a huge scope for the army to make

mistakes in identifying targets among the detainees, and in a magnitude that has often been overlooked. The conclusions reached by Hasworo in this regard are corroborated by findings from my own fieldwork.

To begin with, the thinly stretched local army forces not only organised and facilitated the mass arrests, but also guarded, selected and executed (or arranged for the execution of) the detainees. This selection process, which became known as “screening”, would decide on the lives or deaths of hundreds of thousands of Indonesian citizens. In the detention camps, where tens of thousands of people were awaiting their fate, unimaginable conditions took hold as a result of the overcrowding, lack of preparation and lack of resources to supply the detainees with basic necessities:

Just imagine, in one place there were 3,000 prisoners, and then there were four of these places [in Klaten town], so that would make 12,000. Imagine how a building the size of a primary school hosts 3,000 people – there was no space [and] we weren’t given any food; we weren’t given anything. Just imagine that. [...] They didn’t even give us any food. And if it was raining, people were rained upon. Try to imagine a classroom in a primary school: there are seven classrooms at most in a primary school, and if there are 3,000 people who want to sleep in an area that’s clogged up like that, it’s impossible. But that’s how it was back then.

(confidential interview no. 5, Klaten, 11 March 2010)

Mistaken identities were commonplace. There is evidence that people were not “registered” for several days or more after their arrest and that the identity of prisoners was unknown to those who guarded them:

Q: So then you were taken to the police office in Jogonalan?

A: Jogonalan, for five days, then transferred to LP [Klaten prison].  
[...]

Q: And your name was only recorded at LP?

A: Yes, they only wrote down my name there.

(confidential interview no. 19 with a farmer and former detainee, Klaten, 10 May 2010)

Another witness reported that he had repeatedly written down a false name while he was being detained in an attempt to avoid detection because he feared his captors would kill him if they discovered his true identity (ISSI: transcript 3.13). The makeshift detention facilities formed a system in which people were held and transferred, usually from the smaller collection facilities to the central facilities at the district level. In Klaten town, for instance, at least five major facilities of this kind can be

identified. Sometimes these locations functioned as interrogation and execution sites as well; sometimes inhabitants were taken to other facilities for interrogation before they were returned to their detention facility. At times, detainees experienced a significant interval between the moment of their arrest and the first time they were interrogated. Most of my respondents were eventually taken to one or more of these five sites in Klaten town, but detainees from Klaten were also moved to internment sites of various kinds in Kartasura, Yogyakarta or Surakarta (camps, prisons, etc.). Conversely, people who were taken to or had been held in custody in one of the cities or towns in a neighbouring district were sent to a district facility – if they were “requested” there for execution, for instance. In some cases, an absurd kind of logic worked against those who had been caught in the net mistakenly, as in the case of a PNI member who had been held for a year without being processed. When he was finally interrogated, he was told that he simply had to be a PKI member, otherwise he would not have been held at the detention site for so long (Hasworo 2004: 41).

Arbitrariness was also widespread when it came to executing people, and some lost their lives simply because they had the same name as someone the authorities were looking for. One respondent described the problem of executions which took place in such a random manner in the following words:

Sometimes in 1965, people had no idea why [they were targeted]. Apparently, there was someone by the name of Loso whom they were looking for, so “Loso” became the main thing – Loso from Klaten. Then there was someone from Klaten who was called Loso – that was all that mattered. They put him in a truck and off he went. [...] What an abuse of human rights when people who weren’t even investigated properly got shot just like that! A [case of] mistaken identity, just because of their name!

(confidential interview no. 3 with a former member of a communist teachers’ union, Klaten, 4 March 2010)

Other respondents recalled similar cases in which people who were not connected with the PKI were targeted and killed unsystematically and without any apparent connection to anything they had done (confidential interviews no. 19 and 20 with two former detainees, Klaten, 10 May 2010). Since the army’s violence was applied in such a rapid manner, it could only be a very blunt tool initially, but its application would become more organised over time.

In detention, the prisoners were taken for interrogation, although it is still not clear what system, if any, was initially at work in such interro-

gations. It was often reported that the interrogations were conducted by the CPM (Corps Polisi Militer, Military Police Corps), which had no civilian jurisdiction under normal circumstances (as a military police force, its only use had been to enforce discipline within the army). The role of the CPM in the selection and execution process can be characterised as ambivalent. Although accounts of the CPM featured prominently in testimonials, there was only a very small detachment in Klaten consisting of just a handful of soldiers (confidential interview no. 28, Solo, 21 May 2010). There are accounts of CPM members who actually saved the lives of respondents who were just being taken to execution sites. In one such case, a CPM member stopped a convoy en route to an execution site in the last week of October and ordered both the guards and detainees to return to the camp (ISSI: transcript 3.13). At that time the executions were just starting, so the operational hierarchy appears to have still been unclear, which perhaps saved the lives of these people. Other witnesses reported that people were able to avoid being selected for execution by bribing members of the CPM. Conversely, respondents reported that the interrogations conducted by the CPM were mere formalities and that the interrogators showed little interest in asking any probing questions:

A: There were interrogations by the police and the CPM. There was a prosecution team [...] They only asked me my name. “Do you know the revolutionary council?” – “I do, sir” – “How come?” – “I heard about it on the radio” – “Where were you?” – “At home [...]”. That was it – it was all over in five minutes. So the interrogation was just a formality – only pro-forma.

Q: Pro-forma?

A: Pro-forma, so the supervisor could say: “Oh, I see you’ve already done some work”. Because at that time, if you wanted to interrogate someone – and there were thousands of people – it would have taken years to do, so they only asked you your name, this, that and the other, [and then I was told] “put your signature here and we are finished”.

Q: Were there also more detailed interrogations?

A: The ones that were more detailed took place in Yogyakarta [in 1967].

(confidential interview no. 3, Klaten, 4 March 2010)

Another respondent attested to the ambivalent role of the CPM:

At the time, the interrogations were done at the CPM office. There were brutal interrogations, too, and there were ones that weren’t. If they were brutal, they forced [us] to “just confess”, and

anyone who didn't was tortured. I was asked if I had been in Jakarta at the time [1 October 1965]. I replied that I hadn't because exams were being held at the university at that point. (confidential interview no. 21 with a former student and detainee, Klaten, 11 May 2010)

In the interrogations, it was very common for people to be asked if they had participated in the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement in Jakarta, even if it was clear that they had not been there. In one absurd case, a detainee from a remote village in Purworejo was told that the hole he had dug next to his house was intended to bury generals like the ones killed by the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement, yet his village was so isolated that he had not even heard of the movement in Jakarta (Hasworo 2004: 43).

When asked if there was also corruption within the CPM, a member of army intelligence replied forcefully: "They were all corrupt!" ("*Itu semua korrupt!*") (confidential interview no. 28, Solo, 21 May 2010). Corruption and nepotism meant that some PKI and BTI members in leading positions actually managed to avoid being executed. These phenomena were so widespread, in fact, that a proverb emerged: "*Suka miskin atau suka bungib*", i.e. "Enjoy poverty or enjoy [your] grave" (ISSI: transcript 3.14). One witness reported that her uncle was saved from execution because his family bribed the authorities to spare him:

A1: My uncle was imprisoned in Klaten – yes, in Klaten. He was the only village head who survived, my uncle, but the money had to keep on flowing [...].

A2: They wanted money.

A1: They did, they wanted money [...] Back then, we were afraid whenever the police came asking for money, so we gave it to them – and when they came again to ask for more money we gave it to them again. Ultimately, my uncle was not killed – he didn't die. (confidential interview no. 1, Klaten, 17 February 2010)

Those who could afford to take the opportunity to make a bribe were usually members of the village elite. Because the leadership cadres of the BTI often came from this social stratum, corruption tended to deflect targeting from BTI leaders and exposed the poorer rank-and-file followers to danger instead.

This evidence of poor investigations, chaos and randomness in Klaten corresponds to Hasworo's findings about Central Java as a whole (2004: 39–45). For people who witnessed the arbitrariness and greed with which human lives were destroyed in those days, the memory of injustice still lives on to this day. But from the perspective of the main perpetrators in Jakarta, the lack of reliable men among the local forces



and the chaos on the ground were obstacles in the path of their declared intention to eradicate the PKI.

## 5 Attempts by the Centre to Control the Periphery

By studying a remarkable set of sources (Kopkamtib 1970), Kammen and Zakaria (2012) recently drew attention to Suharto's efforts to control the exercise of violence. Using orders issued by Suharto and other key players from October 1965 onwards, they identify Suharto's intention to unleash this violence as the reason why the killings began in October and November 1965. Extending the limits of our understanding, Kammen and Zakaria open the door for further research on the relationship between detention and execution. One crucial and understudied aspect of this relationship is the question of how the apparatus decided on the fate of individual detainees, i.e. which people would be executed and who would be allowed to live on in detention, or even released. We know that the system was interested in persecuting communists, but it is less clear how a decision was made that an individual detainee had been sufficiently involved in the PKI to warrant them being executed.

To be sure, Jenkins and Kammen (2012: 93–94) mention a second-hand report from a US diplomat that in November 1965 Suharto ordered PKI members not involved in the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement to be shot without any further investigation. They also mention that large numbers of detainees who were not PKI cadres were simply handed over to civilian death squads in order to empty the camps. We have already seen that the disorderly situation led to such arbitrary executions, especially in the early stages of the violence. But there are two reasons to doubt that this phenomenon occurred universally. First, many “common followers” clearly survived these months in detention centers across Central Java (in part because they were allowed to receive food supplies from people who were outside). Second, there is evidence which allows us to trace efforts by Suharto and his men on the ground to also carry out targeted selections of detainees. While Jenkins and Kammen raise the question whether non-ideological considerations such as the resources needed for feeding and housing large numbers of prisoners might have increased the scale of violence, this article cannot give this question the attention it would deserve. Instead I shall focus on evidence of efforts to target the violence with greater precision.

Suharto's own instructions reveal that he was concerned about the question of how to select detainees for execution and tried to bring order

into a chaotic and arbitrary system by gradually establishing standard procedures for the selection process (Supreme Operations Command instruction 22/KOTI/1965, 15 November 1965, in: Kopkamtib 1970; Ministry of Defence decree Kep-1/Kopkam/ 12/1965, 21 December 1965, in: Kopkamtib 1970).

Suharto tasked the commanders at the district level with establishing investigation teams (TEPERDA, Team Pemeriksa Daerah, or regional investigation teams) which were to interrogate prisoners and collect information about them (Army Strategic Reserve Command (KOSTRAD), Decree Kep-069/10/1965, in: Kopkamtib 1970). He also wanted these teams to assist the commanders in “taking measures for a solution of the prisoners” (*“mengambil tindakan penyelesaian pada tawanan/tabanan”*), a bureaucratic euphemism for mass murder that smacks of the “final solution” with which the Nazis tried to veil the Holocaust. These solutions were to be “either according to the law or according to the special discretion” of the commanders (Army Strategic Reserve Command (KOSTRAD), Decree Kep-069/10/1965, in: Kopkamtib 1970). The last word on life and death was thereby entrusted to the district or KODIM commanders (Komando Distrik Militer, District Military Command).

Between late October and late December 1965, the organisational structure involving a variety of “investigation” and “prosecution” teams, with central bodies in Jakarta and various subcomponents of their own, became more and more elaborate – Kammen and Zakaria (2012: 447) offer more details on this point. “Screening teams”, as these bodies were often called, eventually existed all over Indonesia, spreading along with the persecution of the PKI. In assessing individual cases, Suharto’s orders mandated the teams to also gather testimonials from witnesses (Army Strategic Reserve Command, decree Kep-70/11/1965, in: Kopkamtib 1970). Not only direct involvement in the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement, but also attitudes towards that movement became criteria for persecution. Finally, it was clarified that attitudes and activism from the time before October 1965 – the so-called “prologue” to the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement – would be criteria for persecution as well (Ministry of Defence decree Kep-1/Kopkam/12/1965, 21 December 1965, in: Kopkamtib 1970).

Suharto thereby widened the legal and practical scope of persecution from the relatively small cabal of army officers involved in plotting the kidnapping of the seven army officers who were killed in Jakarta to the socio-political behaviour of millions of ordinary citizens throughout the archipelago. Obtaining information from civilian informants about such behaviour became a valid part of the procedure which local com-

manders and their teams were to follow in identifying individual execution targets.

## 6 Civilian Involvement and the Role of Denunciation

Kenneth Orr and Padmo Soegijanto have both documented the work of the screening teams in Klaten independently (Orr 1991: 183; Sugijanto 1988: 254). They each note that the teams consisted wholly or partially of civilians and that they had tasks similar to those of the teams outlined in section 4. Orr reconstructs how an “investigating committee” began its work in the subdistrict of Manisrenggo, which was a PKI stronghold in Klaten located on the higher slopes of Mount Merapi. On the initiative of a detachment of soldiers which arrived in the subdistrict, a “programme” for the removal of communism began. This effort involved local anti-communists, who also formed a small team which had to screen those taken into custody. To judge a detainee’s culpability, they used membership lists seized from the homes of PKI leaders as well as verbally collected information on political orientations and activism. The team came to a clear conclusion in many cases, especially those of high-ranking and better-educated PKI followers. However, a significant number of cases remained unclear, such as people who played a role in the *wayang* theatre or in *gamelan* music and were therefore associated with LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, the Institute of People’s Culture), the PKI’s mass organisation for artists and writers. As Orr writes, the quick escalation of the situation in Klaten propelled the screening team to make the decision to have these prisoners executed:

It would have been a difficult task for any lawyer. Damsyuki [Orr’s respondent] and his colleagues were inexperienced amateurs and there were no directions from the government as to the criteria that should be applied. As the days went by, and the makeshift prison was filled, news began to get through of widespread slaughter in other parts of the residency, some of it clearly beyond the control of even such a makeshift body of investigator-prosecutor-judges as themselves. Better a few semi-judicial errors than uncontrolled mayhem (Orr 1991: 184).

There is evidence that people had been detained and killed in several subdistricts in Klaten, including Prambanan, Ceper and Tulung. At a square in Tulung, a gory public “auction” was held at which prisoners were displayed to members of the public who could pick and choose

whom they wanted to take with them to kill (confidential interview no. 39, Tulung, 6 March 2010). But most of the detainees were held at the central facilities in Klaten town. Their experiences offer further insight into how Suharto's instructions worked out in practice. As has been noted before, some members of the armed forces were not trusted by their own superiors to conduct the investigations reliably, and so civilian volunteers were brought in to brutalise the detainees. The militants belonging to a detachment called Mahasura (Mahasiswa Surakarta, Students from Surakarta) were renowned for their ruthlessness and hatred of communism:

At that time, the questions basically had to do with organisations: "Are you PKI?" – "No, I'm not PKI, I'm a member of LEKRA" [...]. I still got beaten even though I said that. When you returned from an interrogation, you found your friends back at the camp had already prepared a soothing powder (*bobok*) to treat your injuries. The Mahasura were simply inhuman.  
(confidential interview no. 19, Klaten, 5 October 2010)

Another respondent reported that he had never witnessed any interrogations by the security apparatus, but that members of anti-communist mass organisations conducted this task and that "generally, the ones they trusted were the Mahasura" (confidential interview no. 27 with a former detainee, Klaten, 20 May 2010).

Civilians not only became involved through interrogations, but also through the investigative side of the screening process. For the investigators in the central facilities, this task meant receiving information from the villages. Given that there were around 400 municipalities in Klaten at that time with an overall population of about 800,000 to 900,000 people, the investigators at the KODIM could not possibly have known about the political situation and the role of individuals without receiving reports from the villages in which they lived.

It would be surprising if the army's intelligence apparatus had not played a crucial role in identifying PKI members during the killings in Indonesia – Anderson (1986), for instance, highlights the role of army intelligence in East Java. But it remains unclear how much capacity this apparatus had in Central Java and how it operated there during the first two years of the killings. Much the same can be said of the aforementioned KORAMIL, which normally could have been expected to provide subdistrict-level information to the central investigation teams at the district level. Indeed, several witnesses mentioned that the KORAMIL played a role in arresting detainees, either as collection points for prisoners who had been swept up in nearby operations and were then trans-

ferred to larger camps or by actively assembling people, who then were also transferred to prison camps at the district level. In contrast, it is not clear which role the KORAMIL played in the process of selecting detainees for execution or if they played any role at all.

In the absence of such tangible evidence, the role of both KORAMIL and army intelligence in collecting information about potential execution targets can be identified as a matter for further research. It should be pointed out, however, that a KORAMIL had a staff of ten men facing a population measured in tens of thousands: of the 23 sub-districts of Klaten in 1961, only one had a population of fewer than 25,000 inhabitants and 17 had more than 30,000 (PPSK UGM and Central Statistical Bureau 1980, table 29).

On the other hand, there is evidence which suggests that the authorities received information from civilians, both individuals and organisations. This evidence shows that the authorities indeed had a need for information from the grassroots. While it is not possible to determine with any precision how much information the army received from its own intelligence and how much it received from civilians, it is clear that the involvement of information from civilians opened the door for people to take their own initiative and denounce others:

Q: What determined which prisoners were killed and which people weren't?

A: Things were submitted from the area [where they lived], from their environment. Basically, if there was a letter from their home village saying: "Kill that one", then that person was taken away and killed. [...] Back then, it wasn't hard at all – you could send a message without the village head's permission; all you had to do was get a stamp from one of the political organisations.

Q: So who put the stamp on the letter?

A: Well, the branch leaders of the various organisations.

(confidential interview no. 27, Klaten, 20 May 2010)

Denunciation as an aspect of repression was a feature of all authoritarian regimes in the 20th century. As a subject of historical research, this phenomenon has been studied more comprehensively by Gellately since the 1990s with regard to European history (see Gellately 2001), but his conclusions are also relevant to the topic of this article on Indonesia. Denunciations are an inherently interactive process between the state and society. How authorities react to receiving denunciations determines whether citizens' readiness to denounce each other increases or decreases: "If they ignore the denunciation or are not receptive, then denunciations will tend to dry up. When the authorities welcome accusations of

this kind, they will tend to get more of them” (Gellately 2001: 17). Historically, denunciations offered disadvantaged or marginalised people an opportunity to exercise power or to take revenge against those they saw as having taken advantage of them. In such cases, loyalty to the repressive regime was not the primary motive for denunciation and the regime’s search for political wrongdoing was merely a convenient opportunity for the denouncers. Reports to the authorities about such wrongdoings were therefore also used to resolve friction with family members, friends, colleagues or neighbours. It has been estimated that in Nazi Germany, for instance, 75 per cent of all denunciations “were provided for reasons that had little or nothing to do with obviously or expressly supporting the Nazis” (Gellately 2001: 23).

Moreover, the more a repressive system is hungry for information about wrongdoing, the more it opens itself up to manipulation through personally motivated reports. Evidence from Klaten suggests that this form of manipulation also occurred in 1965:

Q: But how did the army know whom to trust/who wasn’t influenced by the PKI?

A: Well, people chat to each other every day, don’t they? Anyone who’s active at LEKRA has to be a PKI person. [...] Conversely, anyone who goes to the Marhaenist meetings [had to be a PNI follower ...]. People knew about each other. Back then, when Sarwo Edhie arrived, he relied on such [word-of-mouth] reports. They weren’t objective because of personal interests, quarrels among heirs, for instance, quarrels over women, girlfriends [and so on].

(confidential interview no. 3, Klaten, 3 April 2010)

One former detainee who had already been selected for execution, but then narrowly escaped this fate was told by his captors that they had relied on reports from his home village for his selection. He also recounted that in other cases informers used such opportunities to their own advantage (confidential interview no. 5 with a former BTI leader, Klaten, 3 November 2010). Sugijanto confirms this finding, noting the establishment of a screening team in the district of Prambanan in Klaten. Its task was to identify the hundreds of suspects who were held at the subdistrict office, but “local disputes and personal conflicts led to some arrestees being unjustly branded as communists” (Sugijanto 1988: 254). Another account describes a pervasive climate of fear and denunciation as friends started to turn on friends, “ready to harm each other through slanderous accusations”, and that those “who had a score to settle were jubilant, because they had the opportunity to get even: Just mention one

name, and add another word: ‘PKI!’” (Lan 2004: 33). Hasworo (2004: 37), who also brought similar events to light, suggests that personal interests may have overridden political motives at times.

Even though the evidence suggests that there might have been a distinction between private and ideological motives for denunciation, one has to be careful in drawing the conclusion that such a distinction can actually be made. Cribb (2002: 555) has pointed out that by 1965 private and political antagonisms had become largely conflated in Indonesia. The question of whether or how far these two motivations can be seen as being separate might be a subject of further research. What the evidence makes clear, however, is that the state found it impossible to separate its agenda for political violence from the agendas of those whose help it needed to find its targets.

It also remains unclear how far denouncers could go in reporting people to the authorities, as there is no evidence that anyone who was an opponent of the PKI, for instance, was killed because of false accusations. By and large, denunciations only appear to have been effective against people who could be accused of having had at least a slight connection to the party. Moreover, there is anecdotal evidence that the power of denunciation was moderated by social elites who had the capacity to intervene personally at internment sites in order to obtain the release of people who had been “wrongfully” arrested. A *lurah* (village head) reportedly vouched for a prisoner at a detention site in Kartasura, for instance, telling those in charge that the prisoner was one of “our own people”, and thus succeeded in securing his release (ISSI transcript 3.16). It can be assumed that such informal intervention worked in favour of those whom members of the local elite considered to merit such a step, which would have made people who lacked such connections vulnerable.

The study of denunciation therefore shows that the state’s inadequate capacity to target violence against such a large number of individuals in such a short time was, to a certain extent at least, complemented by people who were outside these institutions. They showed initiative in supplying information that allowed the army to identify potential targets and decide what to do with them. The nature of their motives does not need to concern us here – rather, we can confine ourselves to the observation that state institutions were influenced by society “from below” in carrying out the killings.

## Conclusion

The state institutions which were tasked with persecuting the PKI in Central Java had too few reliable men and too little time to identify and process such a large number of potential execution targets (thesis 1). They therefore relied on a “shock campaign” and descended on the population with rapid brutality. Improvisation became a key feature of this form of persecution (thesis 2). Makeshift detention facilities were needed to concentrate those swept up in mass arrests before it could be decided what to do with them, and they allowed the state institutions in charge of them a higher degree of control than if they had sourced out all violence to civilian opponents of the PKI who operated as death squads and directly attacked people in their own homes (thesis 3). The amount of confusion and complexity was considerable in these settings. Suharto reacted by streamlining the selection process, mandating the creation of TEPERDA in each location, followed by more elaborate organisation over time. These screening teams were tasked with gathering information on individual detainees that would facilitate their selection for execution (thesis 4). This reliance on information, in connection with limited resources to carry out more probing investigations on their own, led to the involvement of civilians (thesis 5). Civilian involvement often took the form of denunciations. The dynamics of denunciations can be observed throughout the history of political repression, and the Indonesian case confirms the presence of individual initiative, in particular. Moreover, decisions about the selection of detainees for execution were not the state’s sole prerogative, even if these detainees were held in facilities guarded and controlled by state institutions (thesis 6). However, what appears to be special about the Indonesian killings is the way in which private and political motivations for denunciations seem to have been largely intertwined with each other.

Therefore, although Suharto put Sarwo Edhie in charge of an operation to persecute PKI followers in Central Java and detain and/or kill tens of thousands of them, the extent to which they and the men under their command controlled the violence they carried out was limited – and allowed the social environments of their victims to have an influence as well. This finding only applies to patterns of violence directly carried out by the armed forces – Jenkins and Kammen (2012) make clear that other patterns, such as violence by civilian militias, were also significant in Central Java.

The relationship between state and society was therefore one in which state institutions were driving the turn of events as a whole and caused the mass persecution of civilians in Central Java. But on the level



of individual persecution, civilians exercised control from below and therefore moderated individual outcomes according to interests that were not necessarily congruent with the political agenda of the state institutions which were driving the persecution. In some cases, as we have seen, financial interests took the form of proverbial corruption, thus allowing people to survive even though the state intended to target them for extermination. Likewise, favouritism by members of the local elite may have allowed people to escape persecution in a few instances; in other cases, which are potentially large in number, people whom state institutions might otherwise not have ended up detaining or killing lost their freedom or their lives because of the role played by individual initiatives or interventions such as the ones highlighted here.

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