John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965–1966 in Indonesia*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press [Critical human rights], 2020, xvii + 352 pp. ISBN: 9780299327309, price: USD 79.95 (hardcover).

In a meticulously researched and compellingly argued study, John Roosa presents, for the first time from up close, the history of Indonesia's anticommunist massacres in 1965–1966. Through personal narrating, he details the experiences emerging from small, individual stories and connects them in an original attempt to help us understand this national event as an instance of genocide or mass atrocity against civilians. While several previous scholars have sought to explain the killing of hundreds of thousands alleged communist members, sympathizers, and their family in Indonesia in 1965–1966, as Roosa notes, most of them attend to the killing as one abstract, big narrative, devoid of ordinary individual events. By unearthing the details of the massacres, the book sheds light on one of the world's most atrocious tragedies of the twentieth century.

Facing limited access to sources and the dearth of existing archives—that is, those that have not been destroyed yet—as a consequence of anticommunist propaganda, Roosa's method of oral history allowed him to investigate and reveal the ordinary details of the massacres. He interviewed perpetrators, bystanders, and victims, and meticulously explored archives, including newspaper collections. Stories of the mass killings have lingered among the public through word of mouth, myths, and gossip. Roosa painstakingly crosschecked the validity of these stories by interviewing different subjects and complementing these interviews with archival sources. This project took about two decades and grew as more evidence was discovered and the political climate changed. The result is a one-of-its-kind book that is able to narrate the stories of the victims, humanize them, and present their experiences along with their hopes and daily challenges rather than treating them merely as numbers.

Roosa argues convincingly that the anticommunist massacres of 1965–1966 constituted a mass atrocity against civilians. He reveals that the most common method was the army-organized killing of detainees, organized in particular by the army's Territorial Command. As such, the book clarifies the longstanding question of who the perpetrators were—the army, civilian militias, or ordinary people. From this study, it is clear that the methods of torture and killing were systematic and structural. In the same way that Roosa attends to the detailed, disparate stories of individual victims, he reveals various detailed aspects of the army as an organization and their different roles in the killings.

The book is structured in two parts. The first part delves into the history of the army's Territorial Command, its rivalry with the Communist Party of Indonesia (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI), its anticommunist propaganda

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© RIANNE SUBIJANTO, 2021 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17704012

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [CC BY 4.0 license](#).
Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 10:17:19AM
via free access

campaign, and its practice of torture and its effects (chapter 1–3). In remarkable detail, Roosa guides us through the structure of the army, the history of the Territorial Command, Sukarno's "Guided Democracy", and the PKI. The second part explores case studies of the mass disappearances in four regions: the city of Surakarta and the surrounding area of Central Java, the island of Bali, South Sumatra, and Riau (chapter 4–7). In each chapter, Roosa skillfully weaves vivid—and at times gripping and eerie—individual stories with a broader conceptual analysis, helping us understand the history behind these particular events. Both aspects, i.e. the empirical story and the conceptual analysis, complement each other. The stories bring the concepts to life, often in a visceral way. They read as if one can feel and hear the confusion, fright, and terror of the victims of torture and violence. The concepts, conversely, help us frame how these individual events can be studied and understood academically.

One of the most important concepts Roosa discusses as he explores the use of media is Gramscian hegemony. It is clear that during Sukarno's Guided Democracy, at least two competing ideologies emerged: the anticommunist block and the army versus the PKI. I was left wondering how these three forces mapped against each other and how their internal relationship evolved. What was the dominant, hegemonic power? Was it Sukarno's Guided Democracy? Or did the two competing ideologies that were fighting for hegemony co-exist during the time of Sukarno's waning power? If so, this would help us understand the situation prior to 1965; if there existed two warring hegemonies in the absence of centralized power, it made sense for the army to put an infrastructure in place that eventually gave them the upper hand during the G30SPKI (30 September Movement) tragedy.

Roosa demonstrates that the media played a key role in shaping the army's propaganda against the PKI, in which the only way to stop the latter's cruelty was through a preemptive war against them, hence the killing of detainees. Almost all media echoed each other and amplified the official narrative. At this point, communist media had been closed and their editors awaited arrest, if they had not already been killed. This ensured the propaganda would spread unchallenged. In the absence of an opposing hegemony, it had proven easy to bring the disparate anticommunist groups into alignment. Without any competing ideologies and powers, hegemony turned into dictatorship. This dictatorship perpetuated itself on the basis of reproducing its propaganda for the following 32 years.

One of the most revealing arguments in this book is the relationship between the media on the one hand and the production of 'truth' and torture on the other. The propaganda and its machinery related closely to the killing. Roosa discusses how torture was used not only to confirm and advance the

army's version of truth, but also to produce a fantasy world claimed as the truth (chapter 3). In other words, propaganda fed into the establishment of torture, just as torture fueled the reproduction of propagandistic truth. Not mentioned in the book is how the army used this regime of torture not only to cultivate an official truth, but also to sustain this fantasy-as-truth; the media memorialized the army's propaganda along with the collective paranoia and depression it had forged. One may safely infer from Roosa's study that what has been spread by this propaganda machinery is not so much the fear of the PKI, but the fear of torture and violence.

Roosa's account of the way many communists willfully surrendered themselves to police stations, where they were detained and, without much resistance, killed, tells us something about the nature of democracy and communist culture in Indonesia. After the Russian revolutions of 1917, the *Partai Komunis di Hindia* was the first communist party in Asia established outside Soviet Russia. This party, along with its affiliated unions and organizations, led the most popular and radical anticolonial movement in colonial Indonesia at the time. One of the movement's legacies is the practice of political education amongst ordinary colonized Indonesians on democratic and egalitarian principles. Many of the children and young people educated in this movement fought for Indonesia's independence just over two decades afterwards. In Roosa's story, army members who were communists adopted a horizontal relation with each other in their meetings, shedding their hierarchical positions as army members. The fact that many of these alleged communists surrendered themselves and did not fight back is not evidence that they were weak or naïve. The 1965–1966 victims instead truly believed in the state's ability and its apparatuses to protect its citizens. What these victims show, then, is true loyalty and patriotism towards the state. It is the state that broke this trust by doing away with a relationship based on true loyalty, obedience, and patriotism. What prevailed afterwards had regressed into a relationship between the state and its people based on fear.

In his final chapter, "Afterlives," Roosa demonstrates how the Indonesian state in the post-Reformation era continued to sabotage democratic efforts to give justice to the victims of the 1965–1966 killings. The elephant in the room has become clear: the creation and sustenance of an infrastructure of fear. Now, the ball is in the army's court.

Rianne Subijanto

Baruch College, City University of New York, New York City, NY, USA

rianne.subijanto@baruch.cuny.edu