

Dissertation Summary

The Construction of History under Indonesia's New Order: the Making of the *Lubang Buaya* Official Narrative

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This study examines the emergence of the New Order's official narrative of the *Lubang Buaya* killings, focusing above all, on the origins of the story. Despite the unclear, controversial nature of the event, which for years has sparked controversy among foreign and domestic scholars, several fundamental facts are certain. Those facts among others were the killings of the top Indonesian army leadership at *Lubang Buaya* on 1 October 1965, which triggered a process that led to President Sukarno's² downfall, the killings of around 500,000 or more alleged communist supporters, the mass incarceration of thousands of people, and the emergence of General Soeharto's New Order military regime, which would dominate Indonesia for the next thirty-two years.

As well as silencing the competing narratives, Soeharto's New Order invested heavily in promoting their version of what happened on 1 October 1965. For over 30 years, the New Order regime utilised public trials, films, monuments and commemorations that were carefully created and that maintained the regime's official version of the *Lubang Buaya* killings. By using those instruments, the regime instilled a deeply

1 This dissertation on the construction of the *Lubang Buaya* official history was presented at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, in 2009 as part of the requirements to obtain a PhD degree in history.

2 I am using the spelling of Sukarno with "u" instead of the old spelling of "oe" to be consistent with all the documents and primary sources that I encountered during the writing of this dissertation.

held, popular belief that the killings were instigated by the Thirtieth September Movement and, most important, by its creator, the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party), as the mastermind. The creation of this official narrative about the coup attempt was first and fundamentally an instrument for fostering and maintaining the legitimacy of the regime. However, in the process, this official narrative also evolved into a means for the regime to stage its triumph over communism and at the same time to glorify General Soeharto's role in leading the anti-communist purge.

Despite years of intensive purging and silencing other views about this tragic event, different and sometimes opposing narratives about what happened on 1 October 1965 nonetheless continue to exist. These other versions remain in the minds of many individuals especially those who witnessed and survived the purging and incarceration. The method that the regime used was to create an official narrative that reduced and simplified the complexity of the event and to ignore other tragic events that happened in the aftermath of the killings of the generals. By doing so, the regime transformed the confusing events of *Lubang Buaya* into a clear, definitive, official narrative. Through the power of the New Order regime, this official narrative has, in the decades following its initial articulation, been reinforced by the construction of a massive marble monument, the production of a film, *Pengkhianatan G30 S/PKI*, and it permeates the fabric of society with the annual rituals of the 1 October commemoration day.

To understand the nature of the construction of the official *Lubang Buaya* narrative, several questions need to be addressed. First, how did the New Order regime manipulate the memory of *Lubang Buaya* and make it the major tenet for the regime's legitimacy and triumphal displays? Second, what were the reasons behind the New Order's efforts to insert the *Lubang Buaya* narrative into the established historiography of Indonesia? Third, how did the official narrative gain wide public acceptance in the early years following its initial construction?

The killing of the generals at *Lubang Buaya* resulted from the actions of the Thirtieth September Movement in the wee hours of 1 October

1965. Since then, the event has become the source of controversy and endless debates among scholars and the public alike. Many studies have been done trying to explain what actually happened on that fateful day. There are many theories about the origins and motives for the Thirtieth September Movement, and the possible masterminds behind the abduction and killing of the army generals. From all the theories available, one can draw up a list of suspected possible masterminds, which are as follows: the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party), Major General Soeharto, President Sukarno, the CIA and the People's Republic of China. Each of these suspected masterminds has its followers who present compelling arguments, trying to convince others why their theory is the most valid.

The persistence of these widely divergent interpretations arises from the vague, even confusing, nature of the event itself, which at the end produced wide-ranging reactions from many parties in response to the confusion. However, oftentimes these theories about the architect of the incident always seem to be based on unexamined assumptions that there were particular mastermind(s) behind the debacle. After examining the origins and nature of the event, this dissertation argues that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find a single convincing explanation about the perpetrators of the incident. This argument becomes clearer when we examine the multifaceted dynamics that drove the Thirtieth September Movement's decisions and actions.

Despite the evident complexity, the New Order would ignore this to establish a simple, good-versus-evil narrative that is convincing and easy enough to grasp. At the same time, the official narrative was reproduced with particular goals in mind: to eliminate the army's political arch enemy, the communist party, and to cement the regime's legitimacy. This study will show how a particular New Order, official narrative would emerge as a convincing, definitive history, using devices that not only presented the narrative but also ensured its lasting preservation.

The importance of understanding the origins and driving force behind these massive efforts to construct an official narrative is that it allows clearer understanding about how a military regime works to establish

a particular account that serves its needs in seizing and holding power. This particular case study will show the extraordinary effectiveness of the official narrative, its persistence can still be seen and felt even after the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998.

Weaving the vast amounts of information, ranging from primary, secondary and oral interviews data, and then writing it into a coherent narrative and argument was indeed a challenge. However, there is something that I and perhaps most historians feel necessary to have in writing an historical narrative, which is establishing the historical context that led to the events at *Lubang Buaya*. Chapter I discusses the research questions, their importance, and the theoretical and methodology framework for this study. In chapter II and, to a certain extent, in each of the following chapters, considerable attention was devoted to writing the background that led to the killings. The background historical context not only describes and discusses the gravity of political events at that time, but it also includes a section that talks specifically about the effect of politics in daily Indonesian social life in the 1960s.

As previously mentioned, it is imperative to establish the historical context before we delve into the events that we want to discuss because the context would provide us with a more solid understanding of why particular things happened when they did. Furthermore, it will be more difficult to understand the logic of the regime's construction of the official narrative without knowing and understanding the contemporary historical and political contexts, which will explain, if you will, the raw materials and motivation for the fabrication of the official history.

In addition, chapter II contains new information about the Catholic groups though small in number they played crucial roles in the struggle against the Communist Party in the mid-1960s, especially in the aftermath of the killings. Their roles during the transition from Sukarno to Soeharto require a closer examination and could be a dissertation topic in itself.

In chapter III, the analysis shifts focus and examines the accounts of what happened on the day when the events began to unfold. This chapter

concludes that 1 October 1965 was indeed a chaotic and confusing day, which leads into a needed extended discussion about the dynamics of that day. Drawing from multiple sources, it was evident that there was much speculation and confusion among different groups and individuals who lived through that day.

This chapter demonstrates that the events of 1 October 1965 were unclear, vague, and mysterious from the very beginning. Therefore, confusion could not be avoided in producing a variety of views and interpretations of the event. The repercussions from this confusing event would continue to be the source of debates for years to come. Chapter III discusses how the initial confusion generated an opportunity for a particular official narrative to become the reigning narrative in explaining what took place before, during and after the killings.

Chapter IV describes the early evolution of the official narrative through the policies to systematically purge the communists and other enemies of the New Order. This chapter also briefly discusses the beginning of the exaltation of the nation's ideology, *Pancasila*, and describes how it was appropriated to serve as part of the legitimisation for the regime. The description of the regime's systematic purges and the mechanisms it used are important to tell because, I would argue, they helped contribute to the formation of the perception of the PKI's guilt and treachery at every level of Indonesian society.

Chapter V examines an important but often ignored aspect of the 1965 tragedy, which is the *Mahmillub* or the Special Military Tribunals (SMT). Using heavy media coverage, the public trials of prominent communists and coup leaders was part of the New Order's effort to show the people that the pursuit of justice was being respected and properly served. For years, scholars have labelled these proceedings simply as show trials. Despite its massive magnitude and negative, even dismissive, labelling, there is almost no study of the SMTs other than the one done by the activists from *TAPOL bulletin*, which described and analysed the trials from human rights and judicial perspectives. However, this study omits the larger political ramifications.

A close study of the trial transcripts and press coverage of the trials revealed that the SMTs served much more than as adjudicators at mere show trials. A careful reading of the court documents indicates the SMTs had in fact larger political ramifications; they were a public arena for dissension among competing narratives on the *Lubang Buaya* killings and, most importantly, served as a perfect stage for legitimising the New Order regime in staging its public triumph over its defeated enemy.

Chapter VI examines the background ideas behind the representation of the regime's triumph embedded in the monument, the annual commemoration day, and the infamous film, *Pengkhianatan G30 S/ PKI* (The treachery of the Thirtieth September Movement/PKI). This chapter draws data from a wealth of information related to the making of these symbols, showing the ways they complement, strengthen and finally set in concrete the regime's official narrative of *Lubang Buaya*.

Finally, Chapter VII concludes this study by answering the research questions and explaining the consequences of the official narrative and its contribution to a myth making that will continue to dominate the nation's perception of the event for years, even after its principal creator has gone.

This dissertation concludes that Indonesia's traumatic past that originated from the killings at *Lubang Buaya* resulted in the New Order's construction of the *Lubang Buaya* official narrative and it was done using various symbolic materials such as monuments, film, as well as the Special Military Tribunals and purging policies. The effort was so successful that it shaped the country's collective memory of this event.

This study also demonstrates the nature of the event, which turned out to be far from the simplified story of good versus evil that is in the official narrative. In fact, the nature of the event and thus the story's origins are full of uncertainty, controversy, and even mystery. Nonetheless, a dominant narrative emerged from this complex situation and was intentionally constructed and maintained; first to serve General Soeharto in claiming his legitimacy for power, and later to facilitate his regime's sense of triumph and, finally, to insert the narrative into the history of the nation's journey.

The New Order's official narrative did not rely on critiques, explications or evaluation of sources that follow the accepted rules of historical scholarship. Instead the narrative pursues an immediate claim of 'truth', using established themes of *Pancasila* ideology and discourses about godless communism. Hence, these themes strengthened a version of history that proved to be emotive, pious and affirmative in forming the symbols of lasting collective memory

The chapters in this dissertation demonstrate the process, themes and, to a lesser extent, the effect of this official historical narrative. With a striking consistency, a particular narrative was embedded within the state's efforts at making certain artefacts, thereby inducing a version of history that would influence Indonesian public perspectives on the *Lubang Buaya* killings—and do this so successfully that it would shape perception of the 1965 tragedy for years to come.