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From [New York Review of Books](#) | Original Article



Suspected communists under armed guard, Jakarta, Indonesia, December 1, 1965

In May 1962, a girl named Ing Giok Tan got on a rusty old boat in Jakarta, Indonesia. Her country, one of the largest in the world, had been pulled into the global battle between capitalism and communism, and her parents decided to flee the terrible consequences that conflict had wrought for families like hers. They set sail for Brazil, having heard from other Indonesians who had already made the journey that this place offered freedom, opportunity, and respite from conflict. But they knew almost nothing about it. Brazil was just an idea for them, and it was very far away. Suffering through anxiety and seasickness for forty-five days, they made their way past Singapore, across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius, down past Mozambique, around South Africa, and then all the way across the Atlantic to São Paulo, the largest city in South America.

If they thought they could escape the violence of the cold war, they were tragically mistaken. Two years after they arrived, the military overthrew Brazil's young democracy and established a violent dictatorship. After that, the new Indonesian immigrants in Brazil received messages from home describing the most shocking scenes imaginable, an explosion of violence so terrifying that even discussing what happened would make people break down, questioning

their own sanity. But the reports were all true. In the wake of that apocalyptic slaughter in Indonesia, a young nation littered with mutilated bodies emerged as one of Washington's most reliable allies, and then largely disappeared from history.

What happened in Brazil in 1964 and Indonesia in 1965 may have been the most important victories of the cold war for the side that ultimately won—that is, the United States and the global economic system now in operation. As such, they are among the most important events in a process that has fundamentally shaped life for almost everyone. Both countries had been independent, standing somewhere in between the world's capitalist and communist superpowers, but fell decisively into the US camp in the middle of the 1960s.

Officials in Washington and journalists in New York certainly understood how significant these events were at the time. They knew that Indonesia, now the world's fourth most-populous country, was a far more important prize than Vietnam ever could have been. In just a few months, the US foreign policy establishment achieved there what it failed to get done in ten bloody years of war in Indochina. And the dictatorship in Brazil, currently the world's fifth most-populous country, played a crucial role in pushing the rest of South America into the pro-Washington, anticommunist group of nations. In both countries, the Soviet Union was barely involved.

Most shockingly, the two events led to the creation of a monstrous international network of extermination—that is, the systematic mass murder of civilians—across many more countries, which played a fundamental role in building the world we all live in today.

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Unless you are Indonesian, or a specialist on the topic, most people know very little about Indonesia, and almost nothing about what happened in 1965–1966 in that archipelago nation. The truth of the violence remained hidden for decades. The dictatorship established in its wake told the world a lie, and survivors were imprisoned or too terrified to speak out. It is only as a result of the efforts of heroic Indonesian activists and dedicated scholars around the world that we can now tell the story. Documents recently declassified in Washington, D.C., have been a huge help, though some of what happened still remains shrouded in mystery.

Indonesia likely fell off the proverbial map because the events of 1965–1966 were such a complete success for Washington. No US soldiers died, and no one at home was ever in danger. Although Indonesian leaders in the 1950s and 1960s had played a huge international role, after 1966 the country stopped rocking the boat entirely. But after going through the documentation and spending a lot of time with the people who lived through these events, I came to form another, deeply unsettling theory as to why these episodes have been forgotten. I fear that the truth of what happened contradicts so forcefully our idea of what the cold war was, of what it means to be an American, or how globalization has taken place, that it has simply been easier to ignore it.

Two events in my own life convinced me that the events of the mid-1960s are very much still with us. That their ghosts still haunt the world, so to speak.

In 2016, I was working my sixth and final year as Brazil correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, and I was walking the halls of Congress in Brasília. Lawmakers in the world's third-largest democracy were preparing to vote on whether they would impeach President Dilma Rousseff, a former left-wing guerrilla and the country's first female president. Down the corridor, I recognized an unimportant but reliably outspoken far-right congressman by the name of Jair Bolsonaro, so I approached him for a quick interview. It was widely known by that point that political rivals were trying to bring President Rousseff down on a technicality, and that those organizing her ouster were guilty of far more corruption than she was.

Because I was a foreign journalist, I asked Bolsonaro if he worried the international community might doubt the legitimacy of the more conservative government that was set to replace her, given the questionable proceedings that day. The answers he gave me seemed so far outside the mainstream, such a complete resurrection of cold war phantoms, that I didn't even use the interview. He said, "The world will celebrate what we do today, because we are stopping Brazil from turning into another North Korea."

This was absurd. Rousseff was a center-left leader whose government had been, if anything, too friendly with huge corporations.

A few moments later, Bolsonaro walked up to the microphone in the congressional chambers and made a declaration that shook the country. He dedicated his impeachment vote to Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the man who, as a colonel during Brazil's dictatorship, oversaw

Rousseff's own torture. It was an outrageous provocation, an attempt to rehabilitate the country's anticommunist military regime and to become the national symbol of far-right opposition to everything.

When I interviewed Rousseff a few weeks later, as she waited for the final vote that would remove her from office, our conversation invariably turned to the role of the United States in Brazil's affairs. Considering the many times and ways Washington had intervened to overthrow governments in South America, many of her supporters wondered if the CIA was behind this one, too. She denied it: it was the result of Brazil's internal dynamics. But that is, in its own way, even worse: Brazil's dictatorship had transitioned to the type of democracy that could safely remove anyone—like Rousseff or Lula—whom the economic or political elites deemed a threat to their interests, and they could summon cold war demons to go to battle for them when they pleased.

We now know the extent to which Bolsonaro's gambit succeeded. When he was elected president two years later, I was in Rio. Fights immediately erupted in the streets. Big burly men started yelling at tattooed women who wore stickers supporting the rival candidate, screaming, "Communists! Get out! Communists! Get out!"

In 2017, I moved in the exact opposite direction that Ing Giok Tan and her family had so many years before. I relocated from São Paulo to Jakarta to cover Southeast Asia for *The Washington Post*.

Just months after I arrived, a group of academics and activists planned to put on a low-key conference to discuss the events of 1965. But some people were spreading the accusation on social media that this was actually a meeting to resurrect communism—still illegal in the country, over fifty years later—and a mob made their way toward the event that night, not long after I had left.

Groups composed largely of Islamist men, now common participants in aggressive Jakarta street demonstrations, surrounded the building and trapped everyone inside. My roommate, Niken, a young labor organizer from Central Java, was held captive there all night, as the mob pounded on the walls, chanting, "Crush the communists!" and "Burn them alive!" She sent me texts, terrified, asking me to publicize what was happening, so I did so on Twitter.

It didn't take long for that to generate threats and accusations that I was a communist, or even a member of Indonesia's nonexistent Communist Party. I had become used to receiving exactly

these kinds of messages in South America. The similarities were no coincidence. The paranoia in both places can be traced back to a traumatic rupture in the middle of the 1960s.

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Magdalena was born in 1948, when Indonesia's independence forces, under the leadership of the country's first president, Sukarno, were still fighting to expel the Dutch colonizers. She grew up in a troubled peasant family, always tossed back and forth as a result of marital strife, sickness, and poverty. Like most residents of Java (with the notable exception of the ethnic Chinese), she was Muslim, but she never got very deep into studies of the Quran. At school, she loved gamelan, the traditional Javanese music form, in which a small percussive orchestra plays meditative, meandering ensemble pieces, which can rise and fall slowly for hours.

But she was pulled away from all of that fairly quickly. At thirteen, she dropped out to work as a maid in a nearby household. At fifteen, her mother fell ill, so she came back home and began to sell what they could to their neighbors for some money: bits of wood, salads, cooked meals, fried cassava, whatever they could to get by.

She had never been to a big city, but word was it was easier to get a job in Jakarta. An aunt of hers, Le, had some connections in the capital and told her she could help her get set up there. So, aged sixteen, she got on the train, and rode for a full day, moving slowly westward on tracks originally put down by the Dutch a hundred years earlier, and arrived in Jakarta, all alone. As she passed by the National Monument, she marveled at its scale—about ten times as high as any building she'd ever seen.

They were right about the job prospects. Almost immediately, she started working at a T-shirt factory. Her new employer put her in a small, shared apartment attached to the company's office, with all the other girls. In the morning, she'd put on her uniform and wait. Just after six, she and all the other girls piled into a big truck, which took them from their little home in Jatinegara, East Jakarta, and rode through the morning to Duren Tiga in the South, as the city sped by. They worked from seven to four, and the pay wasn't bad. The men washed the cloth, and the women cut it into the right shapes. Someone else, somewhere else, put it all together.

Conditions were okay, Magdalena thought. And she learned, right away, that this was because

of SOBSI, the trade union network affiliated with the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) that had organized most of the workers in the country. She joined, like everyone else did, and after a few months got a minor administrative role in her local union, without many real duties. She came, cut the cloth, and went home.

That was her first, very minor, introduction to Indonesian politics. She barely understood the revolutionary slogans or ideological jargon coming through the radio at work. She hardly knew anything about the PKI, and had no idea that it was the largest communist party in the world outside of China and the USSR. Nor did she know that President Sukarno, a founding leader of the Non-Aligned Movement that resisted taking sides with either the capitalist or the communist superpowers, was then pitted in a major confrontation with the United States and Britain. SOBSI was simply part of the gig, she knew, and it helped out a lot.

"They would support us, they had our backs, and their strategy worked," she said. "It really worked. That's what we knew."

When she got off work, she was usually too tired to do much—and a bit too young and lonely to venture out into the big city. She kept her head down, and just observed. She didn't talk politics after work—she would lie around and make small talk with her best friend in Jakarta, Siti, maybe gossiping about boys, discussing which girls had boyfriends or husbands. Though she had always been single, she had learned early, growing up back home, that she was considered very pretty. Dating was something she might try later. For now, she was working on building some savings for a life that was just a little more secure.

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[Anti-Communist Violence and the Mass Murder Program That Shaped Modern Indonesia](#)