

BOOKS

As Pinter said: it never happened, it didn't matter, it was of no interest

Constructive Bloodbath in Indonesia: The United States, Britain and the Mass Killings of 1965-66 by Nathaniel Mehr
Spokesman Books, £15

Despite the best efforts of dissident writers such as Mark Curtis, Noam Chomsky and John Pilger, the involvement of the United States and United Kingdom in what the CIA called "one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century" remains largely unknown in the West. As Harold Pinter put it in his Nobel Prize-winning lecture, the horrific events that occurred in Indonesia in the mid-1960s "never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn't happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest."

Fortunately for those who do have an interest in the realities of US and UK foreign policy, Nathaniel Mehr, a left-wing journalist who is co-editor of the *London Progressive Journal*, an online current affairs magazine, has written a detailed 135-page primer on this dark period of Indonesian history. Academic in tone, the writing is never scintillating and a little dry in places, but the book is always considered, clearly argued and well-sourced.

After giving a welcome introduction to the post-war Indonesian political landscape, Mehr describes how an attempted coup against President Sukarno gave the army, led by General Suharto, an excuse to unleash a systematic campaign of terror against the popular Indonesian Communist Party in October 1965. Over several months, around 500,000 Indonesians were slaughtered, many with little or no connection to the PKI, but murdered to settle a local dispute or for political maneuvering.

Keen to counter the PKI's growing influence, from 1958 the US had cultivated a close relationship with the Indonesian military machine, providing "military assistance" (training, equipment and weapons) amounting to more than \$10 million each year. In addition, the US furnished the Indonesian military with a "hit list" of around 5,000 people associated with the PKI.

The British played a lesser role, explains Mehr, but were guilty of co-ordinating "a deliberate campaign of misinformation" about the PKI in an attempt to stir up anti-communist feeling among the Indonesian public. "We see every advantage in letting the generals get on with clobbering the communists", reported one British official at the time.



As two suspected communists are led to their deaths, a soldier bayonets to death other prisoners at his feet

As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman noted in their 1979 study of US foreign policy, the atrocities constituted a "constructive bloodbath" committed by those whose interests were aligned closely with America's own interests – and therefore marginalised, obfuscated or even covered sympathetically in the mainstream media and in academic literature.

A "mass joyful death wish" that was "tinged not only with fanaticism but with bloodlust and something like witchcraft" were just two of the quasi-racist explanations provided by Western observers. As Mehr argues, attempts to present the mass slaughter as the spontaneous product of "a sort of primitive Eastern madness" had the effect of exculpating the Suharto regime and its foreign backers.

So why did the US and UK support the mass murder of half a million Indonesians? Mehr points to the testimony of Richard Nixon: "With its 100 million people and its 300 mile arc of islands containing the region's richest hoard of natural resources, Indonesia is the greatest prize of all in South East Asia."

Having destroyed any viable opposition, Suharto ruled Indonesia with an iron fist for more than 30 years, suspending its democratic institutions and opening up the country to Western corporations. Suharto's enthusiasm for free market "shock therapy" was such that the World Bank praised Indonesia as a "model pupil of globalisation". Of course, throughout this period, the corrupt dictator continued to be backed to the hilt by the US and UK, even when Indonesia mounted its genocidal invasion and occupation of East Timor in 1975.

Today the US and UK are embroiled in the unpopular occupation of Afghanistan. According to an editorial in *The Guardian*, their "lofty nation-building objectives" will have to be downgraded in the future. *The Independent* went further, arguing that the occupation "is a noble cause" and that Britain "must stay the course".

Constructive Bloodbath acts as a powerful antidote to this establishment-friendly consensus – a timely reminder that post-war American and British foreign policy has never been sincerely interested in human rights, peace and democracy but has, rather often, been opposed to them. ●

Ian Sinclair