

BOOK REVIEWS

***Sukarno and the Indonesian Coup: The Untold Story.* By Helen-Louise Hunter. Westport CT: Praeger Security International, 2007. Hardcover: 201pp.**

This book ought to have been published with two warnings. First, in all its 201 pages, there is not a single footnote, bibliographical reference or specification of a source. Remarkably, Helen-Louise Hunter and Praeger publishers offer the reader a narrative of the tangled and immensely significant events in Indonesia in 1965 — an abortive coup whose suppression cleared the way for the overthrow of President Soekarno, the rise to power of General Soeharto and the destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) — that is completely without the usual apparatus of scholarly accountability.

The second warning would have partly explained the first: this is not a new piece of scholarship at all. Rather it is a slightly re-worked version of a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) intelligence report which was released in December 1968 with the title “Indonesia — 1965: The coup that backfired” and which is widely available in university libraries. Hunter, who is acknowledged in the preface of this report as its author, was then a CIA analyst; she had not previously worked on Indonesia, but was set to analysing the Indonesian coup on the basis of previous experience in dissecting the 1963 revolution in Zanzibar. It is not clear whether she visited Indonesia for her study but she certainly had access to Agency materials and to materials supplied to the CIA by the Indonesian military.

None of this background is mentioned in the book itself, but it was revealed at the launch of the book in Washington in July 2007. On that occasion, former CIA officer Hugh Tovar described

Hunter's original report as "still ... the best paper" on the topic of the coup. As one might expect after such praise, and from the fact that Hunter left the CIA in the 1980s to work for a Washington law firm, the book is a copy-edited and slightly censored version of the 1968 report, rather than a revision or elaboration. Here and there sentences have been omitted or spruced up, but what is new in the book seems to be limited to three and a half pages at the very end, headed "The coup in perspective".

Two issues arise concerning the 1968 report. First, was it a genuine internal CIA intelligence report that was subsequently declassified, or was it produced for public consumption? In other words, does it tell us what the CIA really believed had happened in Jakarta in September–October 1965? Or was it merely a piece of propaganda intended to reinforce the Indonesian military's claim that the coup was "in every respect the planning of the PKI" (p. 265)? Hunter implies the former, while CIA whistle-blower Ralph McGehee suggests the latter, so the question is perhaps still open.

Second, assuming the report reflected the CIA judgement, how reliable was the material on which it was based? In the 1968 report, Hunter includes a five-page appendix which begins with the statement "our knowledge of the coup preparations that were being made in late August and September 1965 comes mainly from the confessions and interrogation reports of those involved". She acknowledges that the interrogations were sometimes carried on by means of torture, but goes on to argue that the character of these reports precludes the possibility that they were the result of any "carefully concocted fabrication". They reveal, she suggests, a story too complex in its details to have been fabricated. It is not an implausible line of reasoning, but without a better account of the material, it is not convincing. For reasons not made clear, moreover, this discussion of sources is omitted from the 2007 re-published version of the report.

The chief weakness of Hunter's account lies, however, in two aspects of her analysis. First, she falls into the classic error of conspiracy theorists by pinning key elements of her argument on anomalies. Scattered through accounts of complex events such as the 11 September 2001 World Trade Center attacks or the assassination of Lin Biao, there are always curious anomalies — warnings that are not heeded, obvious actions not taken, people or objects who are not where one might expect them to be. Anomalies need attention, of course, but conspiracy theorists characteristically use them to demolish straightforward explanations and then to construct vast

and complex conspiratorial arrangements as explanation. Hunter's text is studded with speculative comments suggesting that the only way to explain anomalies is by resorting to an implausible scale of conspiracy involving not just the PKI as an organization but also President Soekarno, air force commander Omar Dani, Foreign Minister Subandrio, and very possibly, the Chinese.

Hunter's second weakness is her supposition that there was a single coherent (though ultimately botched) conspiracy. Her analysis lives in a Cold War mentality in which there were only communists (and their dupes) and anti-communists (with their allies). In the four decades since Hunter finished her work, we have come to realize that the 1965 coup is not a whodunnit; there was no single conspiracy, except at the very simplest level. Indonesian politics of the time, rather, was a pungent soup of multiple, overlapping and intertwining conspiracies, in which nobody knew what was happening and no one was pulling more than some of the strings. We now know that the communist party leader D.N. Aidit was deeply involved in a plot by middle-ranking leftist army officers to kidnap senior anti-communist generals. But we cannot be sure even that all the principals were reading from the same page, let alone that other figures who were aware that something was in the wind were somehow part of the conspiracy.

Hunter's "untold" claim for a text that has been sitting on open-access library shelves for nearly forty years is deceptive and Praeger shows an unfortunate disdain for proper scholarly practice in publishing the work without indicating its provenance. But the real objection to this opportunistic publication is that it brings us no closer to understanding the events of 1965.

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