

**“And not just the men, but the women
and the children, too”:
Gendered Images of Violence in Indonesian,
Vietnamese, and Cambodian Cold War Museums**



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[*Abstract*]

This article is a sub-section of a comparative analysis of depictions of violence in Jakarta’s Museum of the Indonesian Communist Party’s Treachery, Ho Chi Minh City’s War Remnants Museum, and Phnom Penh’s Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. In comparing these public history sites, I analyze how memories of mass violence were central to state formation in both Suharto’s anti-Communist New Order (1966-1998), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1976-present), and Cambodia since the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea (1979-present). While this comparison points out specific distinctions about the role of the military, the nature of revolution, and conceptions of gender, it argues for a central similarity in the use of a mythology of victimization in building these post-conflict nation-states. This article focuses on my gendered analysis of the use of images of women and children in each museum. Depending on context and political purpose, these museums cast women as tragic victim, revolutionary heroine, or threat to the social order. My analysis of gender places stereotypical images of violence against women (the trope of women and children as the

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ultimate victims) in conversation with dark fantasies of women as perpetrators of savage violence and heroic images of women liberated by participation in violence.

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I . Introduction

Some of the Cold War's most horrific violence devastated parts of Southeast Asia. The region's "hot battles" included murderous political purges, prolonged guerilla warfare, and genocide. With Communist and anti-Communist forces acting as both perpetrators and victims, millions of civilians were caught up in these ideological struggles. In the immediate aftermath of the violence, the victors sought to solidify their narrative of their nation's role in the Cold War. Several museums created in the 1970s and 1980s, and which played prominent roles as sites of state sponsored education remain open today. Exhibits in Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, and Jakarta inform the public about specific acts of violence and murder during the ideological struggles of 1945 to 1989.

Paul Ricoeur (2004) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) offer models to explore the ways in which the official voice of the state constructed Cold War narratives of violence and victimization in Southeast Asian museums. Jakarta's Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes (Monumen Pahlawan Revolusi) complex, Ho Chi Minh City's War Remnants Museum (Bảo tàng Chứng tích chiến tranh), and Phnom Penh's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (សារមន្ទីរខ្មែរក្រហមប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍ទួលស្កង់) demonstrate the essential processes of remembering, forgetting, and silencing. While these public history institutions display similarities in their emphasis on the violence and tragedy of the Cold War and as they use similar narrative structures, themes, and formats, the museums are dramatically different in their political perspectives. While the Indonesian and Vietnamese museums are directly at odds with each other, the Cambodian site attempts to transcend Cold War political dichotomies.

This essay should serve as an intervention in the fields of

Southeast Asian studies and Cold War history. For the former, despite the foundational work of scholars such as Anthony Reid (1988), far too many research projects are trapped within the nation-state or even old colonial framework.

As a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Indonesia in 2012-2013 and Cambodia in 2018-2019, I witnessed the American diplomatic push to get Southeast Asians to “Think ASEAN” and to develop a regional identity. However, working with Indonesian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese graduate students and university faculty, I observed that very few “thought ASEAN” and many lacked important knowledge about their neighboring countries’ history. To a certain extent this can be attributed to the ways that post-colonial and Cold War realities structured national education systems.

For example, Indonesian graduate students in history frequently study in the Netherlands or Australia and many Vietnamese scholars have connections with French institutions but very few Cambodian or Vietnamese study Indonesia and Indonesians rarely specialize in Cambodia or Vietnam. Furthermore, the field of Indonesian studies require some expertise in the Dutch language and research on Vietnam and Cambodia’s almost century-long colonial era requires French language skills.

While from a practical standpoint this all makes sense, the result is a lack of regional knowledge, expertise, and identity amongst many scholars in the ASEAN community (Singapore is the exception to this rule, but that island nation is exceptional in so many ways). To develop a regional identity that transcends the nation state-paradigm, we must further scholarship that takes an ASEAN perspective.

This comparative study of museums and memorials as public history institutions in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia is a contribution to this endeavor. While there are studies of each of these sites, none have done so within a comparative framework that links Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. It is essential to the success of Southeast Asian studies that there is a scholarly body of literature that provides a comparative analysis of its members’ national narratives.

I have selected Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia as case-studies for this piece for several reasons. First, all three nations endured some of the worst violence in Cold War Southeast Asia. From 1945 to 1975, the First and Second Indochina Wars in Vietnam left some 3,000,000 dead. In less than four years in power, the Khmer Rouge government killed, starved to death, or fatally neglected roughly a million and a half people (and this is not considering the civil war of 1970-1975 or the Third Indochina War of 1975-1991).

When General Suharto seized power in 1965, he oversaw the murder of at least 500,000 but possibly over a million Indonesians (and an equal number were jailed in horrific conditions for years). While all of these figures are the subject of intense academic and political debates, it is clear that these three nations paid a heavy toll in the middle years of the Cold War (1945-1991) and they are thus worthy of our attention. Only Laos and East Timor suffered similar levels of bloodshed and neither of these states have sufficient resources to create comparable museums.

Second, these three cases offer different forms of Cold War violence: warfare, political purges, and genocide. Third, all three museums were opened in roughly the same years, the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and continue to operate to this day. Fourth, the governments of these three nation-states have placed tremendous importance on cultivating a specific historical narrative of this violence for contemporary political purposes. That is to say, these museums are an important part of the construction of official memory in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Finally, these museums represent the various sides of the Cold War conflicts, including not just the Communist/anti-Communist conflict but also the Sino-Soviet split.

Recently, Masuda Hajimu (2019) noted that beginning with the 2005 publication of Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, there has been a "Third World turn" in Cold War studies. Scholars have shifted their focus from the super-powers of the Global North to the various regional actors in Latin America, Africa, the greater Middle East, and

Southeast Asia (Jager and Mitters 2007; Um 2012).

In 2010, South Korean scholar Heonik Kwon coined the phrase “the Other Cold War” to refer to this correction and in 2018 American historian Paul Thomas Chamberlin called for a “rethinking of the long peace” in his *The Cold War’s Killing Fields*. This comparative analysis of the Indonesian Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes, the Vietnamese War Remnants Museum, and the Cambodian Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum adds to this conversation by including three dramatically different Southeast Asian perspectives on the experience of the Cold War.

When comparing these public history sites, we see how memories of Cold War era mass violence were central to state formation in Suharto’s anti-Communist New Order (1966-1998) and in the post-Suharto Reformasi era (1998-present), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1976-present), and Cambodia since the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea (1979-present). While the Indonesian and Vietnamese museums stick to clear Cold War ideological positions, Cambodia’s museum reveals a noticeable ambiguity and even confusion.

The museums display telling similarities in their structure and format, including historical dioramas and collections of photographs and artifacts directly tied to acts of political violence, warfare, and genocide. They also demonstrate shrewd political choices about what to include and what to silence in the official narrative. While this comparison points out specific distinctions about the role of the military, the nature of revolution, and conceptions of gender, it argues for a central similarity in the use of a mythology of victimization in building these post-conflict nation-states (Gillis 1994; Winters and Sivan 1999). This essay calls attention to these museums’ discursive uses of images of women and children.

All three sites welcome thousands of visitors in what academic scholarship has theorized as “Dark Tourism” or “Death Tourism” (Sharpley and Stone 2009; Sion 2014; Williams 2007). This is the practice of visiting sites associated with traumatic historical events, ideally for edification but sometimes for titillation (the Netflix series *Dark Tourist* exemplifies the prurient aspect of the phenomenon).

The audience for these three museums is a strong point of contrast.

The museums in Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City have become major international tourist attractions but the Jakarta museum is little known outside of the country. Recently there was an effort by military intelligence to ban foreigners from entry; I personally ran afoul of this secret order in November 2017 and helped to bring it to international attention (Hasan 2018; Vann 2019). Thanks to the Indonesian state's propaganda machine, almost all Indonesians know about the Lubang Buaya museum and may have been there on a student field trip. Yet Vietnamese and Khmer make up a small minority of the crowds in their national museums. When I interviewed Chhay Visoth, the Director of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in March 2019, he spoke of various initiatives to bring local school children to the museum.

My analysis is based upon a series of site visits between 2006 and 2019. During this period, I have seen these museums evolve with changing geo-political context. My methodology adopts a classic world history approach and blends it with techniques from ethnography and public history. Comparative history is one of the standard genres in world history, used to illustrate the uniqueness of historically specific detail while also providing insights into larger theoretical models to build a global narrative (Frederickson 1981, 1995; Pommeranz 2000).

Cultural Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" offers an ethnographic tool for historians to describe not just historical behavior or acts but the larger cultural and political context of those acts (Geertz 1973). By using these two techniques, comparative history and thick description, I offer a model for approaching the history of the memory of mass violence in Cold War Southeast Asia in these three museums.

Museums, as a form of public history, serve as crucial sites for the articulation of memory, and were prioritized in both post-war Vietnam and Suharto's Indonesia. If Hun Sen's Cambodia, a regime struggling to rebuild after decades of civil war, foreign occupation, and genocide, has had difficulty in finding resources to spare for

luxuries like museums, it still recognizes their importance. Indeed, for all three regimes, the management of recent history has been essential to state legitimacy. It is in these museums that the governments educate citizens about what the regime stood for and, importantly, who the regime had defeated in the establishment of the state, characterized as a revolutionary struggle. Thick description allows us to tease out the Cold War context and form a history of this political culture. Comparative history allows us to put these two museums into conversation with each other and to draw some larger conclusions about the political culture of Cold War Southeast Asia.

An analysis of gender places stereotypical images of violence against women in conversation with dark fantasies of women as perpetrators of savage violence and heroic images of women liberated by participation in violence. In all three museums, the trope of women and children as the ultimate victims contends with images of female Communist fighters. In Jakarta these women are vilified and slandered; in Ho Chi Minh City they are hailed as heroines; and in Phnom Penh they serve as martyrs to an incomprehensible evil. The museums’ competing visions of women are structured by Cold War era ideological positions that survive three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

II . Jakarta: Dangerous Women and a Dead Little Girl

On the night of September 30/October 1, 1965, in a bungled coup plot, the attempted kidnapping of seven right-wing generals by disgruntled mid-level officers resulted in the deaths of six generals, a lieutenant, and the one surviving general’s young daughter (Robinson 2018; Roosa 2006). Their bodies were thrown into an abandoned well in Lubang Buaya (“The Crocodile Hole”) in an obscure corner of the Halim Airforce Base in south Jakarta.

A faction of rabidly anti-communist officers, led by General Suharto, immediately seized upon the murders as a pre-text to launch a campaign to destroy the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Within six months, the Indonesian National Army (TNI),

working with allied religious organizations and criminal gangs, slaughtered upwards of a million PKI members and fellow travelers, the vast majority unarmed civilians. A larger number of party members, union organizers, feminists, intellectuals, and family members were detained for over a decade in brutal conditions in island prisons such as Pulau Buru. Even after release, they suffered legal and social discrimination as their identification cards were marked “EKS-TAPOL” (“former political prisoner”).

To justify the bloodshed and his insubordinate seizure power, Suharto promoted the myth that the People’s Republic of China was arming a massive PKI militia in preparation for a communist takeover. For the next generation, the New Order used this lie and the dark fantasy that an underground PKI might seek revenge to legitimize military rule and keeping the Suharto family’s kleptocracy in power. According to this Lubang Buaya narrative, only Suharto and the TNI could protect the nation from the ongoing threat (Djakababa 2009; McGregor 2007). In the context of the global Cold War, the destruction of the largest communist party outside of China and the Soviet Union and the establishment of a bitterly anti-communist regime in Indonesia was a tremendous triumph for the United States of America (which played a supporting role in the mass murder) (Easter 2005; Scott 1985).

Suharto’s regime quickly proved itself to be not only anti-communist but also anti-feminist. In the days after the failed coup, the army-controlled press spread false rumors that the generals were brutally tortured. In what Siskia Wieringa terms “sexual slander,” the propaganda machine promoted lurid tales of sexually licentious Gerwani members singing “Genjer Genjer” (a popular folk song frequently played at PKI rallies) and dancing the risqué “Dance of the Flowers” as they sliced the generals’ faces and genitals with razor blades.

In Bali, the newspapers reported that Gerwani women were posing as prostitutes in order to castrate men (Anderson 1987; Wieringa 2011). Rhetorical misogyny incited brutal patterns of violence against women in the coming months and years. Rape and sexual mutilation were common tactics in the subsequent mass

murders. The thousands of women detained in the New Order’s prisons suffered through further violations from casual daily humiliations to sexual slavery (Budiarjo 1996; Pohlman 2015).

Outside of the make-shift detention centers and prison islands, institutionalized violence against women became a central feature of the New Order regime. Rachmi Diyah Larasati, herself from a Javanese family of performers deemed “politically unclean” during the New Order, has shown how female folk dancers were particularly vulnerable to state violence, incarceration, and surveillance (Larasati 2013).

While this gendercide and gendered violence occurred in the specific context of the New Order’s assault on Gerwani as a PKI allied organization, it should also be understood as part of the larger cultural reaction against Guided Democracy’s promises of liberation (Sullivan 2020). Even after Suharto’s fall from power, political rehabilitation of former Gerwani members has been difficult (McGregor and Hearman 2007).

In addition to Gerwani members, peasants associated with PKI land reform campaigns, politically engaged artists, and union activists on plantations and the railways faced death, imprisonment, or decades of state harassment (McVey 1990). Essentially any fellow traveler was at risk. Suharto even banned the singing of “Genjer Genjer.” Popular folk dances, some of which were ribald, were suppressed in favor of refined elite dances from the feudal courts of central Java (Larasati 2013; Tohari 2012).

During the 32 two years of the New Order an array of propaganda tools including annual ceremonies, required film viewings, and street naming repeated the story of the martyred generals and the alleged danger of the PKI plotting in the shadows. Suharto established the Pusat Sejarah TNI, the Army History Center.

Run by loyalists from the officer corps, the Pusat Sejarah TNI published official histories of the alleged coup and opened two major museums, Museum Pengkhianatan PKI (Komunis) (“the Museum of the Indonesian Communist Party’s Treachery”) in the Pancasila Sakti (Sacred National Ideology) monument complex at

Lubang Buaya and the Satriamandala Museum, dedicated to the general history of the armed forces.

Located on the site where the murdered generals' bodies were literally thrown down a well, the former presents the history of the PKI as a long-term threat to Indonesia. Dozens of miniature and life size dioramas depict conspiratorial PKI meetings and violent direct actions such as land seizures, attacks on mosques, and menacing demonstrations. A bilingual sign marked "clothing and traces of blood" directs visitors to the "Room for relics and other historical effects," which houses photographs of the victims, their personal effects (some marked "replica"), and the blood-stained clothing they were wearing when they were killed.

As the name suggests, the museum's ideological message is heavy handed. The graphic violence of the displays leaves little room for nuance. Importantly, the narrative stops with the funeral for the martyred officers on National Armed Forces Day, October 5, 1965. There is no discussion of the subsequent anti-communist slaughter and mass incarceration. Aside from Balinese activist I Gusti Ketut Agung's privately owned Taman 65, Indonesia has no memorials to the victims of one of twentieth century's greatest politicides and mass graves in Java and Bali remain unmarked (Vickers 2010). Rather, the emphasis falls entirely upon the murdered generals. Events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and of Suharto in 1998 did not lead to revisions of the museum. Suharto expanded the Museum of PKI Treachery in 1992 to include the dozens of miniature dioramas. In 2013, the museum added a new wing with life size depictions of the death of Ade Nasution.

The Lubang Buaya complex reveals the New Order's obsession with gender. The museum and the various memorials utilize three main tropes: the dangerous Communist woman, the good Javanese mother, and the innocent child martyr. Famous throughout Indonesia as a national symbol, the Sacred Pancasila monument is the most straight forward presentation of the New Order's gendering of politics. The imposing structure includes a white stone wall, some 17 meters high and decorated with a massive garuda symbolizing the Indonesian republic.

In front of the wall is a two-meter-high platform with somewhat larger than life statues of the several murdered officers standing in a V formation. At the center General Ahmad Yani stands with legs apart, his left hand holds a martial baton and his right hand angrily points to the well in which their bodies were dumped. The statues' rigid postures and stern expressions are a call for revenge against the PKI. We can read their hyper-macho bearing as an attempt to reclaim their tarnished masculinity, they are demanding their masculinity back. In the New Order's mythology, their sexual torture at the hands of Gerwani women and their undignified burial in a well was emasculating. The statue is a call to action. Below the seven figures a long bas-relief wraps around the base of the platform.

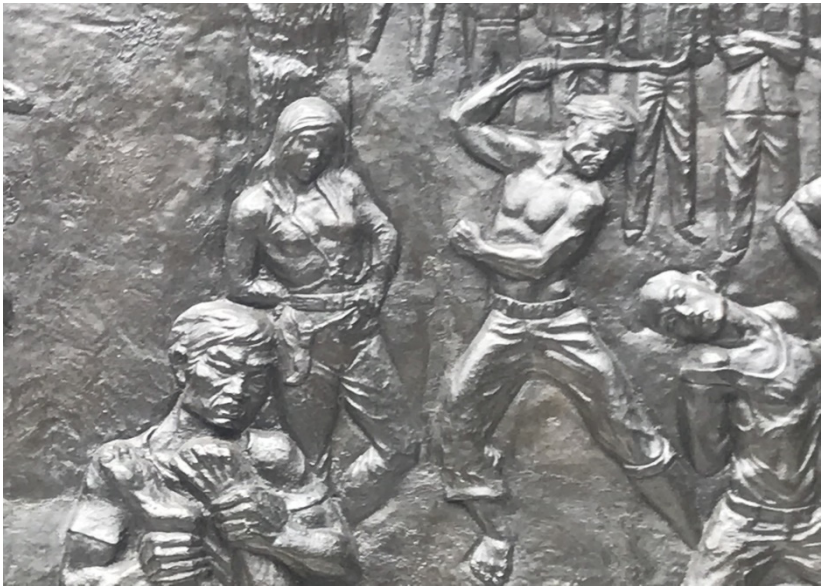
Recalling the pedagogical carvings of Borobudur, the massive Buddhist stupa in central Java, the piece tells Suharto's version of Indonesia's post-colonial history. Starting on the left-hand side we see Sukarno, the leftist revolutionary leader and Indonesia's first president presiding over a nation falling into chaos. As he holds a book labeled “NASAKOM” for his ideology of “Nationalism, Religion, and Communism,” Indonesian men fight with each other as women and children cower in fear.

The social unrest reaches a crisis point on the night of the kidnapping. As armed PKI militants abuse, beat, and murder the officers, throwing their bodies into the well, Gerwani women dance and flirt with PKI men. These women's hair is down, loosely swinging over their low-cut tops which reveal their bosoms. At viewer's eye level, one woman's posterior provocatively projects from the piece. In the background, a woman with her top unbuttoned to the middle of her abdomen leans back on a tree in a state of clear sexual arousal as men are murdered in front of her.

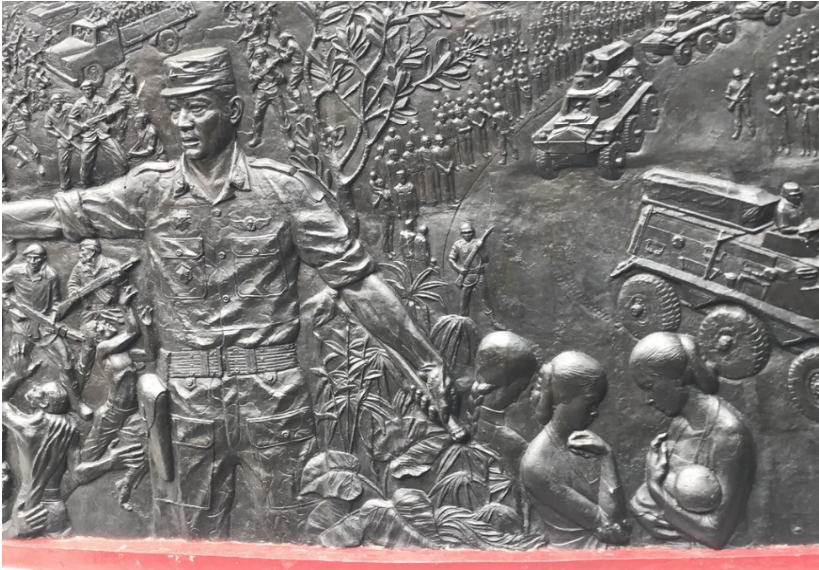
With their sexuality on display, we see that Marxism has liberated these women but also turned them into dangerous monsters. The next image is an over-sized depiction of Suharto assuming control of the nation. Immediately behind his left arm, a group of Indonesian women dressed in traditional attire and with their hair tied up in a dignified Javanese style bun stand with their



<Fig. 1> "Bad women" from Gerwani dance seductively as the generals are tortured, Monumen Sakti Pancasila.



<Fig. 2> Gerwani women strikes a sensual pose in the midst of violence, Monumen Sakti Pancasila.



<Fig. 3> As Suharto restores order, “good women” show their submission to male authority, Monumen Sakti Pancasila.

eyes downcast in a submissive posture. One of them holds an infant in her arms. These three women personify the New Order’s anti-feminism, termed “state ibuism” by Julia Suryakusuma and enacted in organizations such as Dharma Wanita, a state-controlled women’s group (Suryakusuma 2011). These good women of the Suharto era stand in sharp contrast to the bad women of the Sukarno years.

Throughout the museum, the most prevalent image of women is that of female PKI cadres, somewhat incorrectly referred to as Gerwani, as a threat to Indonesia’s peace and security. There are multiple dioramas that show women taking part in PKI protests but they play a relatively minor role. Yet in a display adjacent to the main museum, the savage Gerwani women steal the show.

The Veranda of Torture, a small house which is allegedly the original site of the events in question, contains a shocking life-size tableau. Mannequins of three officers are seated, their hands tied and visible sign of violence indicating that they have been beaten. They are surrounded by a group of rebel soldiers and women in

military fatigues. The women have their hair down, red kerchiefs tied around their necks to indicate their politics, and AK-47s slung over their shoulders. They seem to be cheering as the officers suffer.

The museum staff have installed a sound system that plays the frightening soundtrack from the film *G-30S/PKI*, a state commissioned propaganda docudrama from the early 1980s about the murder of the generals. Here we see the most dangerous consequence of the PKI's activity: the mobilization of rebel women.

Yet the museum offers two counter-images to the dangerous PKI woman: the good mother and the innocent child. In the sections of the museum devoted to the slain officers, there are a number of photos of them with their wives, conveying the appropriate heterosocial normative behavior and identity. But it was not just six generals and one lieutenant who were killed on that fateful night.

As he fled to safety in a neighbor's yard, General Nasution's five-year-old daughter Ade was shot. In 2013, the museum added a life-size recreation of Ibu Naustion holding her fatally wounded child as her husband climbs a wall behind them. In the room of relics and historical artifacts, there is a large display case with photographs of Ade and a number of her possessions. The display does more than demonstrate the alleged threat that the PKI posed to the families of Indonesia, it is designed to elicit an emotional response. The New Order utilized the gendered images of grieving mother and martyred daughter in its anti-Communist messaging.

For the Suharto regime, the Cold War was more than a contest between the super-powers of the Global North. It was a struggle to save the women and children of Indonesia from a horrific fate. The New Order's utilization of a discourse of the dangerous woman versus the good woman had serious real-world implications. The army's initial lies about Gerwani women slashing the general's genitals with razor blades as they sang, danced, and performed sexual acts on the rebel troops fueled popular anger against the PKI.

Obviously, such rage fueled the violence against the party, which resulted in the deaths of at least 500,000 people (possibly many more) and the mass incarceration of at least twice as many

political prisoners. But the specific misogynist messages directedly contributed to the gender specific violence which many accused women faced.

In Central and East Java there were widespread reports of rape and other forms of sexual violence, including publicly desecrating women’s bodies in 1965 and 1966. Such acts were revenge for the Gerwani’s alleged sexual mutilation of the generals. Later, female political prisoners were subjected to sexual violence and exploitation while in prison or during required weekly and monthly parole visits to the local police or army station. The ideological underpinnings of the New Order’s anti-feminism and its institutionalized violence against women are on display at the Lubang Buaya museum complex.

III. Ho Chi Minh City: Liberated Women and Martyred Innocents

In contrast to decades of intransigent anti-Communism in Indonesia, the Vietnamese Communist Party has taken its museum through several revisions and name changes in accordance with the new geo-political realities of the post-Cold War world.

Founded as the Exhibition House for U.S. and Puppet Regime Crimes (Nhà trưng bày tội ác Mỹ-ngụy) in 1975, and only to become the Exhibition House for Crimes of War and Aggression (Nhà trưng bày tội ác chiến tranh xâm lược) in 1990, since July 4, 1995, the site has been known as the War Remnants Museum (Gillen 2014).

Quickly opened after three decades of revolutionary warfare, the museum was an essential component of the Marxist party’s propaganda efforts to solidify Hanoi’s control over the newly-unified nation (Bleakney 2006; Laderman 2009; Nguyen 2016; Schwenkel 2009). By accusing both the Americans and the Republic of Vietnam of war crimes, the name reflected the Communist Party’s suspicious attitude towards the south, anti-imperialist diplomacy, and international posture as the heroic martyr of the Global South (Denton 2005). Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001) and Heonik Kwon (2006,

2008) have addressed the significance placed upon the politics of memory in post-war Vietnam.

With the dramatic ideological and policy changes that followed Lê Duẩn's death in 1986 (he had been General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist party of Vietnam since 1960), the impact of the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms, and the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the Party rebranded the museum. The second name deleted references to the U.S.A and the so-called puppet regime but still stressed the war's brutality and the suffering of the Vietnamese people.

By the mid-1990s, Hanoi and the Clinton administration moved to normalize relations, instigating a final name change. The vague third name, "War Remnants," downplays the violence of the war, fails to capture the anger of the previous two decades, and implies a move towards international and domestic reconciliation. The museum's name change was part of a larger reorientation, an attempt to move beyond two difficult decades of post-war.

Over the course of these ideological shifts, the Communist Party's museum officials have shown great thoughtfulness and sophistication



<Fig. 4> Children's art and a logo with a dove covering up falling bombs decorate the exterior of the War Remnants Museum.



<Fig. 5> Words of peace and cooperation greet international visitors at the War Remnants Museum.

in their evolving interpretation and curation of artifacts on display and have demonstrated a clear desire to make the museum something much more important than a typical war museum. Rather than just a collection of weapons and maps of battles, the War Remnants Museum now openly promotes pacifism and even engages environmental issues. Children figure prominently in this messaging.

If the shifting history of the Ho Chi Minh City museum’s name contrasts with the Jakarta complex’s rigid consistency of title, it is perhaps a window into the deep ideological conflicts at the heart of the two institutions. This is hardly surprising given that one museum represents Southeast Asia’s fiercest anti-Communist state and the other is the symbol of the most successful revolutionary war in the region.

Nevertheless, the two institutions show some fascinating similarities in the composition of their collections. Both build their experience from a similar combination of artifacts: military hardware,

personal effects, collections of photographs, and recreations with life-size mannequins and miniature dioramas of historic acts of violence.

Importantly, both emphasize human physical suffering in gruesome detail. The photographs of the war dead in Vietnam and the Indonesian general's decaying corpses are nothing short of nauseating. Yet, against the Vietnamese museum's massive permanent collection of physical artifacts puts the Indonesian displays seem paltry.

At the Museums of Communist Treachery in Jakarta, Suharto's jeep and General Yani's antique American car sit outside, and inside there is a display case containing a handful of quaint looking pistols and machine guns. In Ho Chi Minh City, the grounds of the museum are littered with the machines of war: tanks, aircraft, and artillery pieces. Inside there is an extensive collection of combat firearms. As in Jakarta, there are life size and miniature recreations, such as an American assault on a provincial hamlet, a village well from a civilian massacre, and a South Vietnamese prison. The model South Vietnamese prison contains a French guillotine, torture devices, the infamous "tiger cages," and an emaciated mannequin shackled to a hard wood frame and showing signs of brutal mistreatment.

Photographs dominate the museum, many stressing the horrific violence endured by Vietnamese civilians (Linfield 2010; Sontag 2003). The three-floor structure is home to permanent and rotating displays with hundreds of photographs of the war that serve as evidence of the war's violence, documenting the brutality of the anti-Communist Saigon government, the destructive collateral damage wrought by American counter-insurgency tactics, the devastating power of American bombs, and the heart-breaking impact of Agent Orange on generations of Vietnamese children.

Highlighted amongst the scores of photographs of American soldiers pointing guns at villagers, desecrated and decayed bodies, and atrocities such as My Lai, there is a display devoted to Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, often known as "the Napalm Girl" in the West. The iconic image of the

■ “And not just the men, but the women and the children, too” ■

naked, burned, and crying nine-year-old girl fleeing in terror from a massive napalm strike captures the horrors that this war inflicted upon civilians, including children. While this photograph is emphasized, it is surrounded by further gruesome images of the suffering children experienced during the war and its aftermath.

The museum devotes significant space to depicting the lingering consequences of Agent Orange, including a collection of photographs of birth defects, an extensive and well-documented presentation on the effects of the defoliant, and a room where children with dioxin-induced birth defects play as their art is displayed on the walls behind them.

Possibly the most shocking display is a glass case with two dead infants preserved in formaldehyde. Both have horrible birth defects, and one child has two heads. Agent Orange’s contemporary impact on children serves as a constant reminder that the war continues to victimize the innocent. Many visitors describe viewing the photographic collection as emotionally powerful, even overwhelming. Some Americans have reacted defensively to the museum, claiming that it vilifies the American troops (Schwenkel 2009: 168-71). That



<Fig. 6> Documentary images of violence against civilians dominate the War Remnants Museum.



<Fig. 7> A special displays tells the story of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the “Napalm Girl.”

said, it is impossible to dismiss the widespread suffering caused by the war. The War Remnants Museum’ emotional impact comes from its use of women and children as martyred victims of a criminal war.

Yet the War Remnants Museum also presents women as fighters, taking up arms against the enemy as part of the liberating force of communist revolutionary struggle. A famous photograph shows a diminutive Vietnamese woman holding a gun on a tall, heavy-set American pilot that she is taking as a prisoner. Her tiny frame and determined face contrast with his awkwardly large stature and dejected expression. The museum argues that Vietnamese women gained agency through the war, unleashing their potential power and strength.

While the actual transformation of women’s lives under communist rule is the subject of much debate, the museum’s message is clear and coincides with other Communist Party propaganda campaigns. For our purposes, we should note that Suharto’s

nightmarish vision of communist women as killers serves as a dark mirror image of the idealized revolutionary heroine of the War Remnants Museum. What is a figure of depravity and cruelty in Jakarta is a symbol of pride and agency in Ho Chi Minh City.

Yet the War Remnants Museum’s logo, a massive white dove covering up red tipped bombs on the outside of the building, hints at the important moments of optimism to be found within. These include the ground-floor display on the international anti-war movement and The Dove, a children’s peace center on the top floor.

For well over a decade, the museum’s exterior fence and the grounds have been decorated with children’s art or art that features children. Most of the pieces depict anti-war statements and calls for world peace, but environmental issues are represented more and more. As in Jakarta, the clear emphasis on children as victims of both the war’s physical violence and the war’s lingering ecological impact is designed to elicit a profound emotional response. In stark contrast to its first twenty years (and in contrast to the Indonesian museum’s stubborn calls for revenge), the Vietnamese museum currently promotes reconciliation.

IV. Phnom Penh: Staring Innocents in the Face

In Cambodia, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek “Killing Fields” have grown from sparse memorials to increasingly sophisticated museums with interpretive displays (Bickford 2009; Hughes 2008; Williams 2004). Unlike Lubang Buaya, both Cambodian locations have an international reputation and high levels of tourist traffic due to their association with the Khmer Rouge’s unspeakable acts of violence (Chandler 1999; Hinton 2005; Kiernan 1996).

“Khmer Rouge” is a political epithet for the Communist Party of Kampuchea, coined in the 1960s by Prince Sihanouk. This revolutionary Marxist party overthrew the US-backed strongman Lon Nol and occupied Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, after a seven-year, nationwide guerilla insurgency. Traumatized and radicalized by years of devastating American bombing, hardened by the deprivations

of tropical jungle warfare, and disciplined by a brutal and secretive political leadership known only as Angkar (“The Organization”), the zealous Khmer Rouge cadres immediately forced the evacuation of Phnom Penh, a city straining to accommodate a massive internal refugee crisis (Becker 1986; Kiernan 1985; Shawcross 2002).

Using the ruse that American B-52s would soon bomb the city, Khmer Rouge evacuated Phnom Penh in just a few days. Clad in black uniforms and red scarves, cadres marched hundreds of thousands of Cambodians into the countryside with only what they could carry. The evacuation, however, was a carefully calculated ruse to seize and execute Lon Nol government officials, military officers, and rank-and-file soldiers (Bizot 2003). Emptying the capital was also key to the Khmer Rouge’s anti-urban vision of an agrarian socialist utopia with the forced creation of collective farms. Celebrating the Khmer peasantry as “base people,” these rural revolutionaries with totalitarian aspirations condemned educated urbanites as corrupted “new people” or “April 17th people.” In addition to thousands upon thousands of summary executions on political grounds, during the next three and a half years, over a million Cambodians would die from mistreatment, malnutrition, disease, and general economic mismanagement (Tyner 2017).

Children who survived the disastrous reign of the Khmer Rouge recount stories of hunger and an omnipresent fear. They also demonstrate the importance the regime placed on children, who were taught that loyalty to Angkar was more important than family ties. Many were trained to as child soldiers (Pran and DePaul 1977; Ung 2000).

First they Came for My Father, a recent feature film by Angelina Jolie, tells this history of the Khmer Rouge years from the perspective of a child. In contrast to these well-known children’s survivors’ tales, there has been relatively little research on the specifics of women’s experiences under the Khmer Rouge.

However, since 2012, Theresa de Langis, an American scholar resident in Phnom Penh, has been working with local students to collect oral histories of women who survived the Khmer Rouge. She explains her project as “understanding of the ways in which women

were uniquely impacted by the atrocity, including as victims of widespread sexual violence and gender-based abuse. This is a story that has been silenced and neglected for close to 40 years” (de Langis 2019). The shame and trauma experienced by many survivors of sexual abuse accounts for the lack of sources that specifically gender life under the Khmer Rouge (de Langis 2016).

By 1976, the Khmer Rouge turned Phnom Penh’s Tuol Sleng high school into an infamous prison, known as S-21, run by Santebal, the party’s security police. Classrooms at the secretive prison site became torture rooms or were divided into cells. Under the direction of party veteran Comrade Duch, the small S-21 staff compiled thousands of detailed dossiers on each prisoner, including mugshots, autobiographical confessions, and interrogation notes.

S-21 initially imprisoned a few hundred Lon Nol loyalists and other alleged enemies from the civil war, but as Pol Pot’s increasingly paranoid inner circle began to turn on itself, the site held thousands of Khmer Rouge party cadres suspected of counter-revolutionary activities or disloyal sentiments (Chandler 1999). These purges condemned an estimated 14,000 men, women, and children, including both ethnic Khmer and several hundred foreigners to imprisonment, torture, and interrogation, before being sent to their death. Only seven inmates survived.

Initially, executions took place at Tuol Sleng or nearby, but as the number of victims grew the condemned were taken to neighboring villages where they were beaten to death and thrown into shallow graves. Almost 9,000 victims (some estimates are much higher), many from S-21, were sent to Choeung Ek, the most infamous of the so-called “killing fields.” After several years of tension between Phnom Penh and Hanoi, increasing evidence of anti-Vietnamese massacres, and quixotic Khmer Rouge cross-border raids, Vietnam invaded Cambodia on December 25, 1978, starting the first war between Communist states. Pol Pot’s regime was quickly chased out of the eastern provinces. While the massive Vietnamese army bore the brunt of the fighting, a small contingent of Khmer Rouge defectors, including current prime minister Hun Sen, served in the campaign. In the ensuing political vacuum, the

Vietnamese Communist Party supported and supervised the creation of a new Marxist client state ready to take over from Pol Pot.

Faced with military collapse, the Khmer Rouge leadership once more evacuated the roughly 40,000 inhabitants of Phnom Penh, leaving the city deserted for a second time as party loyalists fled west. This set the stage for a decade of warfare between Vietnamese allied Khmer and a variety of groups who opposed the foreign occupation. Ironically, in an effort to punish the Vietnamese and to keep them from pushing into Thailand, the United States of America gave covert aid to the anti-Vietnamese coalition led by the Khmer Rouge.

The foreign invasion force entered the capital on January 7, 1979. The following day, two Vietnamese photojournalists made the stunning discovery of the urban torture center at Tuol Sleng (Chandler 1999: 2-3). Further horrors awaited the troops who later uncovered the suburban execution grounds. Recent violence was evident at both sites, including fresh blood on the floors of the former school buildings and a stench that lingered for months. While legitimately dismayed by the carnage of this revolution gone wrong, the Vietnamese occupiers and their Cambodian allies were quick to politicize and publicize their enemies' crimes against humanity as a buffer against international condemnation of the Vietnamese invasion of their neighbor and the introduction of punitive American sanctions against war-torn Vietnam.

Led by pro-Vietnamese former Khmer Rouge, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1989) set up Tuol Sleng as a museum to document the Pol Pot regime's horrific violence in 1980. As such, Brigitte Sion has described Tuol Sleng as "a promotional tool for post - Khmer Rouge government" (Sion 2011) The Vietnamese Communist Party played a major role in the establishment first of Tuol Sleng as a "genocide museum" and then of Choeung Ek as a memorial site. Vietnamese officials sent Colonel Mai Lam, who had previously worked on Ho Chi Minh City's Exhibition House for U.S. and Puppet Regime Crimes, to oversee the project (Chandler 2001).

Mai Lam worked with East German advisors and gathered inspiration from Holocaust museums and memorials in France, the

U.S.S.R., and Soviet bloc countries, leading to several fundamental decisions that set the tone of the Cambodian sites for decades. The museum organizers sought to communicate the horror of the Khmer Rouge years without tarnishing the image of Marxism.

Gerhard Scheumann, a propaganda film maker from the German Democratic Republic, was saddened that this violence was “carried out under the hammer and sickle” and held that the Khmer Rouge had “dragged the Communist Party in the dirt” (Maguire 2005: 94) The result was a series of aesthetic choices that linked S-21 to memories of Nazi concentration camps. For example, there is no Marxist or socialist realist iconography so typical of revolutionary regimes. Nor are there political slogans printed on red banners (by way of comparison, Angelina Jolie’s 2017 film *First They Killed my Father* includes traditional Marxist iconography in its depiction of the camps, including hammers and sickles and portraits of Marx and other leaders).

Rather, the museum is starkly reminiscent of Auschwitz, the ultimate scene of fascist violence. It contains a series of bare rooms with shackles on the floor and a framed photograph of the how the room was found on January 8, 1979. Serge Thion held that the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum invoked the “sinister charisma” of the infamous European death camp (Thion 1986: 86). Thion, who had taught in the high school during more peaceful times stressed the Vietnamese and Eastern European influence in the site, thus questioning its authenticity:

But the place was not as it was when Deuch [sic.] had left it. Vietnamese experts had been brought in, soon after the discovery. Since 1975, these North Vietnamese experts had created throughout Vietnam several political museums. Some of them had been trained in Auschwitz, Poland. Auschwitz itself had been closed for several years, in the 50's, to allow rebuilding and redesigning. In Tuol Sleng also, many things have changed over time (Thion 1993).

Tuol Sleng’s minimalism sets a very different tone from Mai Lam’s Ho Chi Minh City museum or Jakarta’s anti-Communist museum. The museum’s few displays directly resonated with Western memories of the Nazi death camps: piles of victims’

clothing and a map of Cambodia made of human skulls and bones with the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers painted blood red. The map of skulls has since been taken down but as of April 2019, a large photograph of it is on display in Building D.

At the Choeung Ek “Killing Fields” memorial, the famous stupa filled with bones has raised questions regarding its cultural appropriateness. King Sihanouk himself asked “[w]hat Buddhist man or woman accepts that, instead of incinerating their dead relatives [...] one displays their skulls and their skeletons to please ‘voyeurs’?” (cited in Harris 2007: 233). The use of human remains to evoke an emotional reaction is indicative of the museum’s political purposes. Even the decision to include the contested term “genocide” in the museum’s name is a political act designed to invoke fascist - not Marxist - mass violence.

It took about a year to set up the school-cum-torture center as a museum. As early as March 1979, the new Democratic Republic



<Fig. 8> A classroom turned into a torture cell which Vietnamese soldiers discovered in January 1979.

of Kampuchea organized tours for foreigners. Reports indicate that the buildings continued to have the horrible stench of death (Legerwood 1997). While Mai Lam and his team remained in Phnom Penh until 1988, Ung Pech became the director when it opened to the local population in July 1980. Importantly, he was not only Cambodian, but one of the very few survivors of the prison (that said, evidence indicates that the Vietnamese controlled the museum during this decade). Tens of thousands of Cambodians flocked to the prison in the first few weeks, and hundreds of thousands by year’s end (Chandler 1999: 8). During the subsequent civil war, United Nations occupation, and reestablishment of an independent government, the site became an internationally recognized symbol of the unfathomable violence of revolutionary excess.

Much like the Ho Chi Minh City museum, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum has grown and changed over the past fifteen years, now incorporating further documentation and displays. In contrast to its Spartan beginnings, today’s museum has a series of posters presenting a very brief history of the Khmer Rouge era. Elsewhere there is a collection of paintings by Vann Nath, one of seven survivors, that depict the various torture and execution practices (Nath 1998).

Starting in the early twenty-first century, a handful of S-21 survivors such as Vann Nath, Chum Mey, and Bou Meng have been present on the museum grounds. Vann Nath passed away in 2011, but the other two have become fixtures at the site. They sit at tables, selling their books, answering questions, and politely posing for photographs with visitors. Elsewhere there are various artifacts such as shackles and chains and cells have been reconstructed and water-boarding equipment has been put on display.

However, the museum’s iconic symbol is the collection of photographs of the former inmates. The Khmer Rouge staff at S-21 used colonial era police techniques and old French equipment to take thousands of mug shots of prisoners, often moments before certain torture and death (Benzaquen 2010; Caswell 2014; Riley and Niven 1995).

These photographs were part of the party’s surprisingly

elaborate system of intelligence files found by the Vietnamese. Several rooms at Tuol Sleng are filled with these haunting images. While the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is free of the heavy-handed ideology seen in Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City, visitors do not get a clear sense of the historical context for the violence, nor its relationship to the Cold War.

Despite several signs that refer to “The Pol Pot Clique” and a few other ambiguous references, it is difficult to label the narrative either Communist or anti-Communist. Many visitors would be surprised to learn that the museum was created by an international team of Communists. Emotionally powerful, the sites emphasize Cambodia’s victimization at the hands of an incomprehensible evil but keeps the ideological component vague. The failure to present sufficient historical context is a consequence of the difficulties of acknowledging that many members of the current government are former Khmer Rouge cadres.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum’s weak historical narrative does not give a full account of the complicated revolution and decades of civil that preceded and followed the disastrous Khmer Rouge regime. In fact, the 14,000 victims of S-21 are not an accurate representation of the Khmer Rouge’s violence. The overwhelming majority of the deaths between April 17, 1975, and January 7, 1979, occurred on the regime’s utopian communal farms scattered throughout the countryside, not in the nearly abandoned city.

While there were hundreds of thousands of summary executions and fatal tortures, the regime’s disastrous and unhinged attempt at radical rural egalitarianism was the biggest killer. Of the roughly 1,700,000 deaths (~20% of the population), the majority were due to disease, malnutrition, and the gross mismanagement of essential infrastructure. Furthermore, after the initial purge of Lon Nol loyalists, most of those sent to S-21 were Khmer Rouge cadres, many of whom were high ranking party members. It is undeniable that unspeakable suffering was inflicted on these individuals, yet up to their arrest most had participated in the brutality of the Khmer Rouge revolution. Indeed, the surviving interrogation reports illustrate widespread confusion amongst the detainees as to why

■ “And not just the men, but the women and the children, too” ■

they were arrested. As in Stalin’s purges, the party was turning on itself (Tyner 2018).

While David Chandler’s seminal research shows that their arrest, interrogation, and forced confessions were the product of a merciless machine obediently following the orders of a paranoid leadership, many of the faces staring out of the mugshots belonged to those who had engaged in the very revolutionary excesses the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was established to condemn. In many ways, the Tuol Sleng narrative of violence is ahistorical, silencing discussions of more complicated histories (Tyner 2017). Considering that in the 1990s Prime Minister Hun Sen’s Win-Win Policy used a series of amnesties to convince Khmer Rouge fighters to join his government and no small number of current state workers have a Khmer Rouge past, such calculated vagueness is understandable (perhaps even essential).



<Fig. 9> Mugshots of women and children stare at visitors in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

As with Lubang Buaya and the War Remnants Museum, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum highlights the Khmer Rouge's female and child victims. Several of the empty rooms in Building B are filled with bulletin boards displaying hundreds of the famous mugshots. Visitors might notice that the gender division is almost equal between women and men and there are several boards with only photographs of children.

There is now an air-conditioned room where twice a day two short videos are screened where Norng Chan Phal tells his story. After his father's arrest, his brother, mother, and him, were taken to S-21 when he was 8 or 9 years old. Immediately separated from his mother who was soon executed, Norng Chan Phal and several other children were detained in a pig pen. Fortunately, this was in late 1978 and the regime soon collapsed. In the ensuing chaos, he and three other children hid at S-21 until they were discovered by Vietnamese troops. Now a billboard sized photograph of the rescued children is on display on the museum grounds.

When I spoke with him in March 2018, he told me he needed to write a book in order to make "real money." When I visited the site in 2019, he also had a table set up to sell *Norng Chan Phal - the Mystery of the Boy at S-21 - Story of Family, Love and Struggle to Rebuild Life After the Khmer Rouge Genocide*, his memoir as told to Kok-Thay Eng. While it remains unclear how many children actually passed through S-21, the museum highlights his experience.

One Khmer woman, Huot Bophana, receives special attention in the museum. Bophana's life and death is presented as a tragic love story with the Khmer Rouge regime killing her and her husband after her love letters were discovered. Bophana has been the subject of a book by the journalist Elizabeth Becker and a 1996 film by acclaimed director Rithy Panh (Becker 2005). In the museum, there are multiple reproductions of her S-21 mugshot and a several minute segment of the audio tour is devoted to her tale. With the visible female presence, one may get the impression that the horrors of Tuol Sleng were equally visited upon men, women, and children.

Yet David Chandler's research holds that less than 7% of the

■ “And not just the men, but the women and the children, too” ■

estimated 14,000 people sent to Tuol Sleng were women, with children making up a far smaller number. Why then does the museum over-represent women and children in its displays? One answer may lie in the museum’s attempt to discuss the way in which the Khmer Rouge visited violence upon the country as a whole, sparing no one, not even women and children. Yet there is something else going on. In keeping with tactics of the Museum of Communist Treachery in Jakarta and the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh’s Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum uses the suffering of these women and children for emotional impact.



<Fig. 10> Huot Bophana receives special attention in the museum’s narrative.

V. Conclusion

Despite their profound ideological differences, these three museums dedicated to Cold War era mass violence in Southeast Asia show remarkable similarities in their use of images of women and children. These public history institutions all resort to emotional appeals that demand that we empathize with female and young

victims. Side-stepping complicated political issues in favor of simpler narratives, the museums exploit gender and age for their various political agendas. Crafted as personifications of innocence and as the universal victims, women and children serve as the ultimate argument for their righteousness of their cause.

Be it photographs of an innocent five-year old Ade Nasution weeks before her murder, Phan Thị Kim Phúc screaming in pain from her napalm seared flesh, or a bewildered child's enigmatic stare or artifacts such as a blood stained nightgown, a tank of formaldehyde containing babies with dioxin induced birth defects, or Huot Bophana's secret love letters to her husband, these museums strike at our hearts and demand that we hate those that committed such crimes. Faced with such evidence, how could we not cry for justice for these innocent victims?

If all three engage in a discourse of victimization, the Vietnamese War Remnants Museum stands out for also celebrating female fighters liberated by revolutionary struggle. In keeping with the state's Marxist ideology, the site hails women warriors for their strong and significant contributions to the defense of the nation against American aggression and in the campaign against the so-called puppet regime in Saigon.

Images of small Vietnamese peasant girls training with weapons support a narrative of national unity against foreign invaders, as well as the promise of gender equality after the war is over. Conversely, but very closely related, the greatest fear of the Suharto regime seems to have been the potential for violence from women liberated by Marxism.

In addition to its ham-fisted anti-communism, the Museum of the Treachery of the Indonesian Communist Party displays serious anxiety regarding women's rights. The Jakarta museum argues that Gerwani members were bloodthirsty and lusty witches, capable of terrible crimes. Their politics, like their sexuality, are out of control and thus a danger to the nation. Meanwhile, the ideal woman is a modest and religious mother.

At the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, women are simply

victims. In an effort to avoid overly complicated politics, the museum dances around the issue of female Khmer Rouge cadre. Displays that address the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia—the genocide trials of five high ranking Khmer Rouge leaders—fail to discuss the gender issues raised by the presence of Ieng Thirith, the Minister of Social Affairs. There is also no discussion of sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge regime.

All three museums are important components of state projects to cultivate a specific memory of Cold War era violence. These memories form the basis of state supported political narratives. Yet there are telling differences between the coherence of each museum’s narratives. The Indonesian Museum of the Treachery of the Indonesian Communist Party has the clearest political position. In contrast, the Cambodian Toul Sleng Genocide Museum is intentionally ambiguous.

While one might assume that a museum run by the Vietnamese Communist Party and its famous propaganda machine might be the most didactic and inflexible of the three, the Jakarta site is by far the most rigid and the least accurate museum. The directors of Ho Chi Minh City’s War Remnants Museum have shown an impressive level of professionalism and willingness to revise its displays with changes in the global politics.

Meanwhile, the army run Jakarta museum clings to dated Cold War propaganda which comes off as increasingly anachronistic with each passing year, especially since the Suharto regime came tumbling down in a popular revolt well over two decades ago. The persistence of New Order ideology in democratic Indonesia is due to the continued presence of Suharto loyalist in the officer corps, state bureaucracy, and other positions of power in Indonesia.

When these museums are considered together, we can see how the public memory of Cold War era violence plays a crucial role in state-building in these three ASEAN member-states. Despite their ideological differences all three governments recognize the importance of these histories of violence in contemporary Southeast Asian politics. In each country museums serve an essential role in this project.

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