
GUERRILLAS, GUNS, AND KNIVES? DEBATING INSURGENCY IN SOUTH BLITAR, EAST JAVA, 1967–68

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Honestly I tell you. When did we rebel, with what? We didn't have any weapons and there were no army deserters with the Indonesian Communist Party [PKI]—these are all lies.

Lies Sari, "South Blitar: A Forgotten Place"¹

[The base in] South Blitar was defeated, but a positive aspect of the defeat was that the PKI rediscovered its path, the path of armed revolution as the best defense against armed counterrevolutionaries.

Defense statement of Mohammad Munir,
PKI Central Committee member, March 2, 1973²

The Suharto New Order regime justified the massacre of half a million leftists in 1965–66 and the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands by implicating the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) in the coup attempt of

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¹ Lies Sari, "Blitar Selatan yang dilupakan" [South Blitar: A Forgotten Place], unpublished manuscript, n.d., supplied to the author, p. 2.

² Munir was sentenced to death in 1973 and was executed on May 14, 1985. An appeal to the High Court regarding his death sentence was rejected in 1981. "Execution of Mohammed Munir," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20,32 (1985): 1,327.

September 30, 1965. The regime's version of history, that the PKI was responsible for the coup attempt, has had lasting effects on Indonesian society generally, but also on how former political prisoners accused of being members of the PKI understand, and, in turn, refashion the past. The opening quotes highlight a key tension, for example, in the way two former South Blitar fugitives narrated an aspect of this past, when, after the initial purges, surviving party leaders and members regrouped in South Blitar, East Java, from 1967 to 1968. That strategy was a tactical retreat, to ensure survival of the remaining members and to formulate ways to resist the army takeover in Indonesia. When survivors and relatives talk about this period of the party's history, they are concerned *not* to reinforce the long-held assumption of the PKI's complicity in the coup attempt, or to suggest a broader pattern of PKI resistance in the aftermath of the purges.

The catchphrase "South Blitar" denotes the southern part of the Blitar District, an area of about 3,200 square kilometers, south of the city of Blitar, adjacent to the districts of Tulungagung and Malang. All three districts border the Indian Ocean on the southern side. The Brantas River divides the Blitar District into two parts, the north and south. The South Blitar area is predominantly limestone country, quite mountainous, with uncertain rainfall, and in the 1960s, there were few roads. The people's staple foods in the 1960s were mainly cassava and corn, eaten twice a day. Coconut was available, and gardens growing vegetables, such as beans, pumpkin, and sweet potatoes, augmented this diet. Rice was reserved for special occasions. The local population was mainly engaged in subsistence farming. A government survey showed that villagers in Bakung and Suruhwadang lived in houses with walls made of woven bamboo and relied on oil lamps for lighting.³ They had no running water. Most households had no personal transportation, not even bicycles. (By contrast, those in Blitar City, some twenty kilometers away, had access to bikes and other modes of transportation.) Due to the South Blitar's mountainous terrain and limited arable land, there were no large-scale plantations in this area. The PKI had been quite successful in this area, receiving approximately 85 percent of the vote in the 1955 elections.⁴ Leftist mass organizations such as the Peasants' Union (Barisan Tani Indonesia, BTI) and the People's Cultural Institute (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, Lekra) had also flourished here.

During June–September 1968, the army's Brawijaya Division mounted a counterinsurgency campaign, Operasi Trisula (Trident Operation), to rout the communists out of South Blitar, during which actions hundreds of people were killed or arrested. New Order representations of this operation through books, films, museum exhibits, and the Trisula monument portray the communists as having organized an armed uprising. They portray the Trisula offensive as a form of cooperation between the villagers of South Blitar and the army, and suggest that PKI's

³ Conditions affecting South Blitar families after the 1968 Trisula operation are discussed in a university study, Institut Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan (IKIP), Surabaya and Balai Penelitian Pendidikan, *Laporan pelaksanaan survey foster-care tentang anak-anak korban G.30.S/P.K.I.: di daerah Blitar Selatan dan tjalon keluarga asuhan di Ketjamatan Bagor Kabupaten Ngandjuk dan di-Kotamadya Blitar* (Surabaya, 1971), pp. 35–36, with a view to presenting a much better outlook for the South Blitar children if they were to be taken out and cared for by foster families in Nganjuk District and Blitar City.

⁴ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja* (Surabaya: Jajasan Taman Tjandrawilwatikta, 1969). p. 30



Trisula Monument in Bakung, South Blitar, commemorating the 1968 operation
Photo: Vanessa Hearman



Trisula Monument in Bakung, South Blitar depicting cooperation during the Trisula between different sections of the armed forces and local villagers. Photo: Vanessa Hearman

South Blitar base-of-operations represented a critical threat to the nation.⁵ Under the New Order, Indonesians were encouraged to accept unquestioningly the government's assertion that the communists had attempted the violent overthrow of the Sukarno government in 1965, and also to accept the need for unceasing battle against communism. Today, when South Blitar survivors tell their own versions of what occurred at the base, their personal stories and memories are shaped by these army-imposed representations.

In this context, how do survivors deal with the New Order's representation of the South Blitar episode as proof that the party's leadership and followers attempted to organize a violent uprising in that region of East Java? I will examine some of the impacts of the New Order's version of history about South Blitar on its survivors. I explore how the mainstream narrative about South Blitar affects the consciousness of former political prisoners, who themselves have tried to resist the New Order narrative more generally. I also seek to reconstruct this period of the PKI's history based on the accounts of its survivors. I examine the origins of the base itself, life in South Blitar prior to the Trisula operation, and the differing accounts of the extent of PKI resistance during the military operation (from individuals' personal experiences). Finally, I examine the theme of betrayal and how it relates to South Blitar.

Oral historian Alessandro Portelli sketched out, in an essay on the Italian Resistance during World War II, the difficulties some partisans had with acknowledging the use of violence by the partisans themselves, whether it was violence directed against those accused of being traitors or against Fascists.⁶ The Resistance movement's image in Italy was as a peaceful and just movement fighting for democratic ideals.⁷ In a similar way, some former Indonesian political prisoners, particularly those who had not been part of the South Blitar base, found it difficult to accept that there might have been violent acts of resistance, however minor, carried out by leftists in South Blitar. Likewise, among those who fled to South Blitar, there are many different versions about what actually occurred there. In this article, I explore the reasons for those differences and how the New Order version of history has influenced former political prisoners' interpretations about events at the South Blitar base.

New Order Version and Historiography

The PKI was subjected to elaborate mythmaking during the New Order regime, connected with the army's anti-communist propaganda campaign, in which it blamed the PKI for the killing of seven army officers at Lubang Buaya on September 30, 1965. Elements of these myths have endured.⁸ Mass leftist organizations, such as Gerwani

⁵ Anonymous, *30 tahun Indonesia merdeka* (Jakarta: Tira Pustaka, 1981), pp. 182–83.

⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); in particular, see the essay "The Battle of Poggio Bustone: Violence, Memory, and Imagination in the Partisan War," pp. 126–39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸ See Saskia E. Wieringa, "Sexual Slander and the 1965–66 Mass Killings in Indonesia: Some Political and Methodological Considerations," Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Working Paper Series No. 125, November 2009, pp. 3–7, which examines how anti-Gerwani sentiments continue to mark public life in Indonesia even after the resignation of President Suharto in May 1998.

(Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, Indonesian Women's Movement), the trade-union federation's All-Indonesia Trade Union Centre (Sentra Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia, SOBSI), and the cultural organization Lekra were also targeted. Key aspects of this propaganda campaign were rumors that Gerwani women had sexually tortured and mutilated the generals' bodies,⁹ and accusations that the communists were atheists and had tried to overthrow the state. In this atmosphere, and with tension heightened by the curfews, media censorship, and other repressive orders at the beginning of October 1965, it became possible to alienate large sections of the Indonesian people from the PKI, and to justify the post-September 30 massacre and purges carried out against party members and sympathizers.

There are few official documents recording the 1965–66 killings and details about the victims. In contrast, the military and government documented carefully the results of the Trisula operation (June–September 1968). One year after the operation ended, the Brawijaya Division produced a commemorative volume¹⁰ and commissioned a documentary film, using footage shot during the operation.¹¹ The story woven by army historians about the South Blitar episode, through military histories, monuments, and textbooks, was an important part of the regime's consolidation process. In order to consolidate, it was vital to neutralize any remaining support for President Sukarno within the military and in sections of the Indonesian Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia, PNI). The new regime could not have governed effectively without first defeating politically these Sukarnoist forces. At the time of the Brawijaya book's publication, the military, including the Brawijaya Division itself, was riven with divisions. The rifts were between those who continued to support Sukarno and those who aligned themselves with the ascendant groups supporting Suharto. The book emphasizes the numbers and names of military officers and soldiers arrested in connection with supporting PKI-linked fugitives, suggesting that the authors set out to document the erosion of the network of pro-Sukarno soldiers.¹² Understood in its historical context, this book was to celebrate the victory of the military over the PKI, but it was also very much a part of the arsenal in the New Order regime's consolidation, which was still underway when the book was published in late 1969. The volume was fast-tracked for publication on October 1, 1969, to mark the four-year anniversary of the coup attempt. The relatively disjointed and, in some parts, repetitive nature of the book suggest that it was compiled from a variety of documents written by different authors. It reads, in parts, like a field manual or a series of reports. Due to the dearth of alternative sources, but also because of its detailed maps and accounts of various elements of the operation, this army volume has remained an influential history of the Trisula operation. The Armed Forces History Centre's four-volume work on "the latent danger of communism" situates the South Blitar episode as part of a

⁹ Robert Cribb, *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), p. 29.

¹⁰ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja* (Surabaya: Jajasan Taman Tjandrawilwatikta, 1969).

¹¹ "Perpustakaan Museum Brawijaya, Tempat Menyimpan Dokumen Sejarah Militer," *Jawa Pos*, February 20, 2008, Radar Malang section, p. 1. Also, author's discussion with library and documentation section head, Major Henry Handoko, Museum Brawijaya, in Malang, February 20, 2008. He indicated that this film was being used as educational material for soldiers in 2008 to warn of the dangers of communism.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5. It is pointed out here that the South Blitar base had attracted many military deserters.

series of communist resurgence attempts and reproduces descriptions of South Blitar and the Trisula operation, including maps and photos, from the Brawijaya text.¹³ Army accounts of the operation painted a picture of communists infiltrating a poor, isolated region that had, as the army account conceded, been historically sympathetic to the left.¹⁴

Other sources about South Blitar and the Trisula operation are military and organizational (auto)biographies, often written many years after 1968. During the New Order regime, military biographies often reflected the need to mark one's role in anti-communist operations, in particular because of the divisions within the military between those who continued to support Sukarno and those who aligned themselves with the New Order. The Trisula operation was an important milestone in early New Order rule, particularly in East Java. Therefore, as the Brawijaya Division commander who presided over the operation, Muhammad Jasin devoted a section of his autobiography to it¹⁵ and to the prestige that its success brought to him and Witarmin, the Trisula field commander.¹⁶ Agus Sunyoto's history of the Ansor Youth Movement's paramilitary organization, Banser (Barisan Serbaguna, Multipurpose Force), and its "holy war" (*jihād*) against the PKI, discusses their activities in South Blitar.¹⁷ Sunyoto's work, published during the New Order period, showed that Banser members were primarily acting as *hansip* (civilian defense guards) alongside the military in South Blitar.¹⁸ Indonesian media reporting of the 1966–68 period was remarkably uniform. Sources tended to be confined to those sanctioned by the government, such as the official news agency Antara and military-sponsored newspapers such as *Berita Yudha* and *Angkatan Bersenjata*.¹⁹ Non-military media outlets, such as the magazine *Skets Masa*, in East Java, took a radically different stance once Sukarno was deposed, and began reporting on PKI attempts to revive itself and on the army's military triumphs, similar to the military-sponsored newspapers' reporting.²⁰

Scholarly literature on the 1968 South Blitar episode was marked by Cold War anti-communist sentiments and was usually part of an overall analysis of Indonesia after the PKI had been dismantled. Justus van der Kroef and Arnold Brackman, for example, saw the 1968 South Blitar episode as part of communist attempts to regroup across the

¹³ Markas Besar Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia, *Bahaya Laten Komunisme di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pusat Sejarah dan Tradisi ABRI, 1995), vol. 5, pp. 83–107.

¹⁴ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 30. In this account, it was noted that the South Blitar area had delivered 85 percent of the vote to the PKI in the 1955 elections.

¹⁵ M. Jasin, "Saya Tidak Pernah Minta Ampun Kepada Soeharto" — *Sebuah Memoar* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1998), pp. 66–95. Jasin later became critical of Suharto and the New Order's "excesses."

¹⁶ Witarmin was promoted to become head of Kopassandha, the precursor to Kopassus (Komando Pasukan Khusus, Special Forces Command) of the Indonesian Armed Forces. Harsja W. Bachtiar, *Siapa dia? Perwira tinggi Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Darat (TNI-AD)* (Jakarta: Djambatan, 1988), p. 467.

¹⁷ Agus Sunyoto et al., *Banser Berjihad Menumpas PKI* (Tulungagung: Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan PW GP Ansor Jawa Timur & Pesulukan Thoriqoh Agung, 1996), pp. 161–80.

¹⁸ Sunyoto et al., *Banser Berjihad Menumpas PKI*, pp. 170–72. Banser members also acted as spies prior to the operation.

¹⁹ Roger K. Paget, "Jakarta Newspapers, 1965–1967: Preliminary Comments," *Indonesia* 4 (October 1967): 211–26. Paget provides a survey of newspapers that were still publishing in the post-coup-attempt period.

²⁰ *Skets Masa's* coverage of the military's pursuit of the PKI throughout Java culminated with the Trisula operation in South Blitar, and Grip publishers issued a "special edition" book based on that coverage. See: *Skets Masa* editorial team, *Operasi Trisula, Brawidjaja Menghanturkan PKI-Gaja Baru* (Surabaya: Grip, 1968).

archipelago.²¹ For van der Kroef, the evidence for this was the series of “security disturbances” across many islands in Indonesia that marked the period following the 1965–66 mass killings up to 1968. By 1971, however, van der Kroef had shifted his position and concluded that the New Order regime cultivated rumors of alleged communist revival to consolidate its power and maintain the raft of “informal and extra-constitutional social and political controls exercised for years now by the armed forces throughout the country.”²² Van der Kroef acknowledged the problems for analysts in the late 1960s of having to rely on military sources, pointing out that rumors of new PKI plots had become common currency.²³ In fact, by 1971, it had become clear that the PKI was a spent political force in Indonesia, due to the arrests and killings of its militants.²⁴ Many years later, Robert Cribb cautioned against accepting that the communist “bases” represented a critical threat to the regime, arguing that all the PKI “resistance” attempts, including those in Blitar and West Kalimantan, taken together did not constitute a civil war.²⁵ Cribb also pointed to the passivity with which most victims of the killings in 1965–66 went to their deaths.²⁶ I examine additions to the literature on South Blitar in the post-Suharto period in the section below.

Emerging Literature

After President Suharto’s resignation in May 1998, limited debates reappeared about the events of September 30, 1965, and the following few days. A key issue has been to establish accountability for the murder of the generals and for the PKI’s involvement in the Thirtieth of September Movement (Gerakan 30 September, G30S). There has also been a move to document the experiences of former political prisoners and to campaign for recognition of the human-rights abuses inflicted on those prisoners. Historical revision, or providing accounts that differ from those of the New Order regime, can be broadly divided into three strands: those that concentrate on the coup attempt itself,²⁷ on the general manipulation of Indonesian historiography under Suharto, and on literature dealing with the mass killings and imprisonment. In his recent contribution to literature on the coup attempt, John Roosa, for example, argued that the Special Bureau, an internal party unit answerable to Chairman DN Aidit and responsible for “handling” military officers who were members or sympathizers of the

²¹ See Justus M. van der Kroef, *Indonesia since Sukarno* (Singapore: D. Moore for Asia Pacific Press, 1971); and Arnold C. Brackman, *The Communist Collapse in Indonesia* (New York, NY: Norton, 1969).

²² Van der Kroef, *Indonesia since Sukarno*, p. 124.

²³ Justus M. van der Kroef, “Indonesian Communism since the 1965 Coup,” *Pacific Affairs* 43, 1 (Spring 1970): 35.

²⁴ Van der Kroef writes: “Yet underground PKI operations are not so extensive at the moment as to constitute a real threat to the Government, whether in the capital or the outlying provinces.” See van der Kroef, *Indonesia since Sukarno*, p. 124.

²⁵ Cribb, *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966*, p. 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁷ For example, see Baskara T. Wardaya, *Membongkar Supersemar: Dari CIA Hingga Kudeta Merangkek melawan Bung Karno* (Yogyakarta: Galangpress, 2007); and Harsutejo, *G30S, Sejarah yang Digelapkan: Tangan berdarah CIA dan Rejim* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 2003).

PKI, did have links with the Thirtieth of September Movement.²⁸ The government's banning of the Indonesian translation of Roosa's book in 2009,²⁹ taken together with the 2007 ban on history textbooks that omitted associating the PKI with the Thirtieth of September Movement, are signs of this topic's continuing sensitivity within the Indonesian government. A number of books published in the last ten years remain wedded to the New Order regime's version of events, or at least seek to warn of the dangers of communism, a central theme of the New Order.³⁰

A second strand of the emerging literature focuses on the manipulation of Indonesian historiography under Suharto.³¹ One of the main contributors to this broad critical reappraisal of Indonesian historiography is Asvi Warman Adam, a historian at the Indonesian Institute of Social Sciences (LIPI, Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia).³² The third strand of recent literature focuses on the aftermath of the Thirtieth of September Movement, especially the mass killings and imprisonments,³³ and includes memoirs and oral histories, some by political prisoners.³⁴ A common theme in this particular literature is to highlight the need for post-dictatorship accountability and the restitution of the rights of political prisoners. The National Human Rights Commission began investigating the 1965 human-rights abuses systematically throughout the archipelago in August 2008. Those who were imprisoned or whose family members perished in the 1965–66 killings seek state recognition of the abuses committed against them and their relatives. Survivors' groups, specific to the 1965 killings, as well as groups that raise awareness about other abuses under the New Order regime, have developed since 1998. Former public

²⁸ John Roosa's book *Pretext for Mass Murder* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006) can be seen as part of the post-Suharto debates, reexamining the 1965 events. An Indonesian translation of this work, titled *Dalih Pembunuhan Massal*, was banned by the Indonesian Attorney General's office in 2009.

²⁹ "Rights body wants AGO to clarify ban," *The Jakarta Post*, December 30, 2009.

³⁰ See Firoz Fauzan, *Pengkhianatan Partai Komunis Indonesia: Hari Duka Nasional 1 Oktober 1965* (Jakarta: Bhuana Ilmu Populer, 2009); Aco Manafe, *Teperpu mengungkap pengkhianatan PKI pada tahun 1965 dan proses hukum bagi para pelakunya* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 2007); and Aminuddin Kasdi and G. Ambar Wulan, *G.30.S. PKI/196: Bedah cesar Dewan Revolusi Indonesia* (Surabaya: Java Pustaka Media Utama, 2005).

³¹ See Bambang Purwanto and Asvi Warman Adam, *Menggugat Historiografi Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2005); and Asvi Warman Adam, *Membongkar Manipulasi Sejarah: Kontroversi Pelaku dan Peristiwa* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2009).

³² An indication of the contentious and, in turn, contested nature of reexamining Indonesian historiography was the demonstrations against Asvi Warman Adam on March 29, 2007, by anti-communist groups who demanded his sacking for being "pro-communist." See "LIPI Didemo 300 Orang Anti Komunis, April 4, 2007," Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, www.antara.co.id/arc/2007/3/28/lipi-didemo-300-orang-anti-komunis, accessed March 17, 2010.

³³ John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid, ed., *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65, Esai-esai sejarah lisan* (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004).

³⁴ For a preliminary examination of this genre of 1965 memoirs, see Vanessa Hearman, "The Uses of Memoirs and Oral History Works in Researching the 1965–66 Political Violence in Indonesia," *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 5,2 (2009): 21–42. Individual biographies are, for example, Sulami, *Perempuan Kebenaran Penjara* (Jakarta: Cipta Karya, 1999); Sudjinah, *Terempas Gelombang Pasang: Riwayat Wartawati dalam Penjara Orde Baru* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2003); and Achmadi Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru* (Yogyakarta: Syarikat, 2002). Oral-history collections about survivors include Francisca Ria Susanti, *Kembang-kembang Genjer* ([place of publication unknown], Lembaga Sastra Pembebasan, 2006); and Hersri Setiawan, *Kidung Untuk Korban: Dari Tutur Sepuluh Narasumber Eks-Tapol* (Solo: Pakorba and Pustaka Pelajar, 2006). There are also memoirs that remain unpublished whose authors have died, such as Sumiyarsi Siwirini, "Plantungan: Pembuangan Tapol Perempuan," unpublished manuscript, provided to the author by manuscript editor, Harsono Sutejo, via email, May 24, 2007.

servants who were imprisoned in the 1960s, for example, have set up a group in Solo to demand that their right to a pension be recognized.³⁵ The widespread institutionalized discrimination against former political prisoners and their families under Suharto, which lasted for over three decades, means that there are scores of people now seeking some form of redress and for whom reconciliation is important.

Studies of South Blitar represent a relatively small part of this exercise in historical reexamination. The lack of new significant scholarship on South Blitar is partly due to the fact that the Trisula operation marked the end of the PKI and the beginning of a long period of New Order rule. For former political prisoners, what took place in South Blitar could be problematic in showing that some leftists had tried to fight back against the Suharto-led repression by regrouping in South Blitar to reorganize the party. Herein lies the importance of challenging the South Blitar historiography and making it a part of reexamining the anti-PKI repression as a whole. It is impossible to look at PKI attempts to regroup in isolation from the broader context of the scale of repression against party members and sympathizers. There have been limited attempts by organizations in Blitar and in Jakarta to document people's experiences in 1968. Members of Lakpesdam NU³⁶ in Blitar have conducted interviews about the 1960s and built a network of contacts in the villages of South Blitar. Lakpesdam NU held a cultural event at the Trisula Monument in 2004 to bring together locals, former political prisoners, and NU followers, as an early attempt at grassroots reconciliation to overcome the legacy of violence and stigmatization against the South Blitar community.³⁷ In this work, they are, however, somewhat hampered by their association with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, Awakening of Religious Scholars). For former political prisoners and South Blitar villagers, NU was linked with the 1965–66 killings through the paramilitary group Banser's participation in those killings and the active support of many NU religious leaders, or *kiai*, for the killings. During the Trisula operation, NU, the Ansor Youth Movement, and Banser actively assisted the military.³⁸ Within NU in East Java, some leaders oppose working with former political prisoners on the basis of fears that the Left could rise again, thus posing difficulties for the young Lakpesdam activists who have been involved in attempting to foster reconciliation and working to document the experiences of South Blitar villagers during the Trisula Operation.³⁹ As far as I am aware, Lakpesdam Blitar has neither published the

³⁵ Forum Komunikasi Korban G30S (30th September Movement Victims' Communication Forum), Solo. Iskandar, interview, Solo, May 3, 2007. Due to their imprisonment, these public servants have been considered ineligible for the public-service pension.

³⁶ Founded in 1985, Lakpesdam NU (Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia, Institute for Research and Human Resources Development) is a human-resources development arm of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and a non-government organization engaged in research and publication (www.lakpesdam.or.id). Lakpesdam NU held a cultural event at the Trisula Monument in 2004 to bring together locals, former political prisoners, and NU followers, as an early attempt at grassroots reconciliation to overcome the legacy of violence and stigmatization against the South Blitar community.

³⁷ Budiawan, *Mematahkan pewarisan ingatan: wacana anti-komunis dan politik rekonsiliasi pasca-Soeharto*, (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004), pp. 212–19.

³⁸ Sunyoto et al., *Banser Berjihad Menumpas PKI*, p 171.

³⁹ *Aula* magazine, published by NU in East Java, had a special issue dedicated to warning of PKI resurgence and the brainwashing of particular NU activists by leftists. *Aula*, Special Theme: Awas PKI, May 2008. On the work of Syarikat, a non-government organization in which many NU activists are involved, which aims to foster reconciliation between NU and former political prisoners, see Katharine E.

interviews it has collected, nor any analysis of the material. The Indonesian Social History Institute (Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia, ISSI), based in Jakarta, conducted seventeen interviews in the South Blitar area as part of a larger oral-history project in Indonesia. An essay by Andre Liem, the main interviewer in South Blitar, shows that South Blitar was not a clear-cut case of meaningful armed resistance against the New Order.⁴⁰ The collection of interviews represents an important source in understanding more deeply the experiences of local people during this time, as well as the social and political history of the area prior to the 1960s. In this article, I set out to broaden our understanding about South Blitar and the lived experience of the Trisula operation beyond the limited material that has hitherto been available.

Methodology and Interviewees

My analysis draws on a combination of primary data, including interviews conducted in 2007, 2008, and 2009; military accounts; media reports from late 1965 onward; and court (trial) documents. I conducted interviews with villagers in South Blitar and former political prisoners. I also draw on the interview material collected by ISSI and Lakpesdam NU in Blitar. Members of the latter introduced me to some of the interviewees who provided information for this article. The material from Lakpesdam NU consists of interviews conducted in 2005 with four women who have lived in the South Blitar area all of their lives. In addition, this organization also facilitated an interview with Hasyim Asyhari, a former member of the Nahdlatul Ulama's Ansor Youth Movement who took part in anti-PKI operations in South Blitar, who became embittered at his treatment under the Suharto regime.⁴¹

The six main informants whom I interviewed are all former political prisoners from outside the South Blitar area. They include Rewang, a member of the PKI's newly (in 1966) constituted Politburo, and those who were not party members, such as Lies Sari, a journalist who wrote for a national economic weekly. While obvious to many, it should nevertheless be stated here that those who were arrested in South Blitar served long prison sentences.

Rewang was born in Solo in 1928. He joined the PKI in the late 1940s and was active in Central Java in the Indonesian Peasants' Union (Barisan Tani Indonesia, BTI). In 1965, he became a member of the PKI Politburo and the secretary of the Central Committee. He was arrested in South Blitar, went to trial in 1971 for attempting to overthrow the government and resurrecting the PKI, and was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. He was released from prison in 1991. He lives in Solo, Central Java.⁴²

Lestari was born in 1930, in Bojonegoro. She was an activist in Gerwani and the trade-union federation, SOBSI. Before her arrest, she lived in Surabaya. She was

McGregor, "Confronting the Past in Contemporary Indonesia: The Anti-Communist Killings of 1965–66 and the Role of the Nahdlatul Ulama," *Critical Asian Studies* 41,2 (2009): 195–224.

⁴⁰ Interviews held by the Indonesian Social History Institute, Jakarta, consulted by the author in July 2007. Andre Liem, "Perjuangan Bersenjata PKI di Blitar Selatan dan Operasi Trisula," in *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir*, ed. John Roosa et al., pp. 163–200.

⁴¹ Hasyim Asyhari, interviewed by the author, South Blitar, February 10, 2009.

⁴² Rewang, interviewed by the author, Solo, February 14, 2009.

married to Suwandi, the secretary of the PKI provincial committee for East Java, who, after his capture in South Blitar, was forced to cooperate with the military. Lestari served eleven years in prison, mostly in the Malang Women's Prison. She lives in Jakarta.⁴³

Putmainah, born in 1927, was a PKI member of parliament for Blitar. Her family has a long history in the Blitar region, with her father being involved in Sarekat Islam in the area. She was a Gerwani leader at the local level and was active in running the Jasmin Kindergarten (Taman Kanak-kanak Melati) network that Gerwani organized. Her husband, Soebandi, was shot dead during the Trisula operation. Putmainah served ten years in prison, mostly in Plantungan Women's Prison in Central Java; she was released in 1978. She lives near Blitar.⁴⁴

M. Winata (a pseudonym) was born in 1935. A PKI member since his high school days, he is from a district in East Java near Blitar. He trained overseas to become an engineer and was a senior public servant in the Directorate of Mining before being arrested and jailed in Salemba Prison, in Jakarta, for a year. After his release, in 1966, he returned to East Java. After several months, he feared for his safety in his village and made his way to South Blitar. He was arrested again in 1968 during the Trisula operation and tried in 1977 for his involvement in the South Blitar case, after having already served nine years in jail. Upon conviction, he was sentenced to an additional nineteen years in prison. He was finally released in 1990.⁴⁵

Tuti (a pseudonym) was born in 1925 and became the head of Gerwani's Surabaya-based East Java provincial committee. Together with Winata, she was tried in 1977 for violent attacks against the state in the aftermath of the Trisula operation. She was sentenced to seventeen years in jail, served this sentence mainly in the Malang Women's Prison, and was released from prison in November 1988. I interviewed her near Surabaya.⁴⁶

Lies Sari had been a Jakarta-based journalist prior to her arrest. She also uses the names Sri Soelistyowati and is sometimes known as Lies Katno, through her marriage to Sukatno, Pemuda Rakyat (People's Youth) chairperson. Sukatno was a member of parliament in 1965. After his arrest in connection with the South Blitar case, he was sentenced to death in 1968. He died in 1997 while on death row.⁴⁷ Lies Sari lives in Jakarta.⁴⁸

In preparing this article, I analyzed the military publications and biographies discussed earlier, as well as an unpublished manuscript written by Lies Sari, Muhammad Munir's defense speech delivered at trial, and media reports from the 1980s on the execution of some South Blitar detainees. I visited the Trisula Monument

⁴³ Lestari, interviewed by the author, Jakarta April 26, 2007.

⁴⁴ Putmainah, interviews with the author, Blitar, May 11, 2007, and March 1, 2008.

⁴⁵ M. Winata, interviewed by the author, East Java, February 22, 2008.

⁴⁶ Tuti, interviewed by the author, Surabaya, August 2, 2007, and February 16, 2008.

⁴⁷ Then-Timorese resistance leader Jose Alexandre "Xanana" Gusmao, who was also imprisoned at the time, made a special appeal for Sukatno's release after witnessing Sukatno's ill health in prison. "Sukatno Dies after 30 Years in Prison," TAPOL, May 8, 1997, www.xs4all.nl/~peace/arc/arceng/state/ims.html (accessed February 16, 2010).

⁴⁸ Lies Sari, interviewed by the author, Jakarta, January 31, 2009.

in Blitar to view the way this period was represented by the regime—as a harmonious collaboration between local South Blitar villagers and the military. I also visited the Brawijaya Museum, in Malang, to examine how this military institution showcased the Trisula operation to museum audiences. I found displayed there several unpublished photographs from the operation, such as pictures of the arrest and interrogation of key PKI leader Suwandi, and photos from the celebratory ceremonies commemorating the killing of PKI leader Oloan Hutapea. From this research, this article aims to provide a more detailed discussion of the South Blitar period of the party's history than has hitherto been available.

The Impetus to Flee the Cities of Java

Many key PKI leaders, such as Aidit, Sakirman, Lukman, and Nyoto, had been killed or arrested by the end of 1965. Then, the arrest of PKI Politburo member Sudisman in December 1966 was another significant blow and indicated that the PKI's next layer of leadership was coming under threat.⁴⁹ At the time, there were two main PKI branches: one led by Sudisman, a member of the Politburo in Jakarta, and the other clustered around Ismail Bakri, in Bandung, which Rewang supported.⁵⁰ Rewang was the chairperson of the Central Java PKI provincial committee and a secretary and candidate member of the Central Committee. A section of the surviving party leadership had become critical of the PKI's previous emphasis on pursuing a legal, parliamentary path and entrusting its fate and that of its membership to president Sukarno and other non-communists, a policy for which the party was now paying the price.⁵¹ After the arrest of Sudisman in December 1966, there were only two members left of the original Politburo. "Second echelon" leaders of the PKI and its affiliated organizations, such as Oloan Hutapea, Munir, Sukatno, and Tjugito, became increasingly drawn to Rewang's group.⁵² Ruslan Wijayasastra became the chairperson of the "emergency" Central Committee.⁵³

Due to the indiscriminate killings of PKI members after October 1965, an urgent task was to save the lives of party cadres, if the party were to survive in the future, but

⁴⁹ Liem, "Perjuangan Bersenjata PKI di Blitar Selatan dan Operasi Trisula," p. 174.

⁵⁰ According to Soedjono, Sudisman's grouping still supported Aidit's ideas whereas Ismail Bakri's group was critical of this line and that leadership's closeness to Sukarno. Imam Soedjono, *Yang Berlawanan: Membongkar Tabir Pemalsuan Sejarah PKI* (Yogyakarta: Resist Books and Yayasan Sapu Lidi, 2006), p. 323.

⁵¹ According to Imam Soedjono, *Yang Berlawanan*, pp. 323–24, this criticism was mostly voiced by the Ismail Bakri group, though Sudisman later agreed to the issuing of the Self-Criticism document (Tegakkan PKI yang Marxis Leninis untuk memimpin revolusi demokrasi rakyat Indonesia—Otokritik Politbiro CC PKI, September 1966).

⁵² Van der Kroef, "Indonesian Communism since the 1965 Coup," pp. 34–60. Oloan Hutapea was editor of *Bintang Merah* (Red Star), the PKI's theoretical journal; Munir was secretary general of the trade union federation, SOBSI; Sukatno was a People's Youth leader; and Tjugito was a PKI Central Committee member. These men were members of the PKI "emergency" Central Committee and were captured in South Blitar in 1968.

⁵³ Rewang, interviewed by the author. The emergency Central Committee was formed after Sudisman's arrest in December 1966. For a detailed composition of the Politburo and Central Committee, see Imam Soedjono, *Yang Berlawanan*, p. 325.

this was becoming a difficult task in the cities.⁵⁴ The official banning of communism in 1966 provided justification for many members of the PKI and leftist organizations to run or hide. Hiding even in large cities, such as Surabaya, was not a long-term solution. As a result, those in hiding or on the run opted for a tactical retreat to isolated parts of Java. As the highest-ranking surviving leader responsible for establishing a remote base, Rewang explained the motivations for retreating to South Blitar:

Our departure to South Blitar was based on the view that there was no longer any legal guarantee for communists. The possibility for peaceful struggle had disappeared. We needed to take up armed resistance, so we decided to relocate the party leadership to South Blitar.⁵⁵

Several people whom I interviewed noted that the hardships they experienced while living on the run or trying to hide in Jakarta were part of the motivation for retreating to South Blitar. Tuti, formerly a Gerwani leader from East Java, was on the run and worked as a courier to maintain communication with and between party leaders and members. Over time, Tuti had difficulties finding shelter and food for herself, let alone for those whom she was in charge of protecting. Putmainah, a Gerwani leader in Blitar and a parliamentary member prior to the 1965 coup attempt, had seven children to support while on the run. She rented a series of houses for brief periods, moving on quickly without ever getting settled.⁵⁶ PKI members were not the only ones being sought by the authorities. The split in the Indonesian Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia, PNI) in 1965 had created two opposing camps: those aligned with Ali Sastroamidjojo and Surachman, and those favoring Osa Maliki.⁵⁷ Members of the Ali faction, and Surachman himself, were in South Blitar because they were being targeted in the purges, which had by late 1966 widened to threaten pro-Sukarno forces. By 1966, the PKI was suffering from the purges and its formal structures had largely ceased functioning. The question of whether the party could mount a comeback seemed secondary to that of survival.

The government did not anticipate that South Blitar, perceived as a quiet backwater, represented a potential source of PKI resistance. South Blitar's reputation for inactivity was in contrast to the reputations of other party bases, such as Klaten, in Central Java, where many actions, such as land seizures by the Indonesian Peasants' Union, had occurred prior to October 1965.⁵⁸ The party assigned the East Java branch to investigate and assess the area around South Blitar as a possible hiding place and a base from which to regroup. The reasons for considering South Blitar were the area's isolation, the relatively minor purges there in 1965–66, and the area's historical support for the PKI and leftist mass organizations. Moreover, South Blitar was not the only area that housed political fugitives. Additional "projects" or bases were established in East

⁵⁴ Rewang, cited in Andre Liem, "Perjuangan Bersenjata PKI di Blitar Selatan dan Operasi Trisula," in *Tahun yang tak pernah berakhir*, ed. John Roosa et al., p. 174. Original text in Indonesian; translation by the author.

⁵⁵ Rewang, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ Putmainah, interviewed by the author, March 1, 2008.

⁵⁷ Angus McIntyre, "Divisions and Power in the Indonesian National Party, 1965–1966," *Indonesia* 13 (April 1972): 183–210.

⁵⁸ Rewang, interviewed by the author.

Java, in varying stages of development, mainly in the mountainous areas around Mounts Semeru, Lawu, Raung, Argopuro, and Kelud, as well as in South Malang.⁵⁹

The fugitives had been hiding in South Blitar for between one and one-and-a-half years before the Trisula operation, in which five thousand soldiers and three thousand “militias and vigilantes” auxiliaries were deployed.⁶⁰ The most intense period of the operation was from June to July 1968, and it officially ended on September 7, 1968. The operation destroyed the fugitives’ base and, according to the *New York Times*, around one thousand “party members” were captured or killed.⁶¹ Many Trisula detainees were photographed and the photographs published in the Brawijaya commemoration book (with a list of those arrested) or displayed in the Brawijaya Museum, in Malang. These records confirm that those arrested included PKI central and regional leaders, and Gerwani’s leaders. Those who fled to South Blitar to escape political persecution included party organizers, students, former soldiers, military officers, and trade union leaders.⁶² In this, we can see how wide the regime’s net was, ensnaring people who were only loosely united under the umbrella of leftist organizations, who in some cases were not even PKI members.

Life in South Blitar before Trisula

Many fugitives found South Blitar quite remarkable. Lestari explained:

In those days, you could count the houses with tiled roofs. To have a chair inside the house was very rare. What you would find was just one big *divan*, for the whole household to sit and sleep on.⁶³

To reach South Blitar, Rewang traveled by public transportation (a combination of train and buses) at the beginning of 1967, when the base was first being established. In the course of their journeys to South Blitar, many fugitives had to travel across Kediri District, a stronghold of the Lirboyo Pesantren (a religious boarding school). Led by Kiai Haji Machrus Ali, this *pesantren* was a key force in suppressing the PKI in the Kediri region, where thousands were killed during the period 1965–66.⁶⁴ Interviewees recalled their trepidation about being in Kediri. Putmainah, who originated from the northern reaches of Blitar district, arrived in South Blitar via Surabaya. A courier in Surabaya told her she should head for South Blitar for refuge. Putmainah’s husband, Subandi, was part of the base’s leadership. Putmainah did not use the most direct

⁵⁹ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 5. The areas the military identified concurred with those identified by Rewang.

⁶⁰ “Reds Renew Campaign in Indonesia,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1968.

⁶¹ Philip Shabecoff, “Indonesia is Still Purging Reds Three Years after Failure of Coup,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1968. The figures used were likely supplied by the army.

⁶² Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, pp. 289–310.

⁶³ Lestari, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁴ The roles of Kiai Haji Machrus Ali and the Lirboyo Pesantren are discussed in Hermawan Sulisty, *Palu Arit di Ladang Tebu: Sejarah Pembantaian Massal yang Terlupakan (Jombang-Kediri, 1965–1966)* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2000), p. 166; and Sari Emingahayu, “Pergolakan Politik 1965–66 di Kediri,” in *Sisi senyap politik bisang*, ed. A. Budi Susanto (Jakarta: Kanisius, 2007), pp. 88–89. Also see *Tiga Tokoh Lirboyo* (Kediri: Badan Pembina Kesejahteraan Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo, 2002), pp. 85–87, which presents a sanitized account of the anti-PKI operations in Kediri, but also shows the influential role of Machrus Ali in galvanizing support for the operations.

route, but took unexpected routes to avoid drawing attention to herself. She recalled that, while riding in a horse cart (*dokar*) on her way southward, she drew down her conical hat over her face to avoid being noticed as they passed by Pondok Tenggara, a *pesantren* in Kediri district. Many fugitives made their way to South Blitar in a roundabout way, using a combination of train travel followed by rides in trucks or carts across the southern countryside.

Fugitives usually lived with local families or found some housing nearby; they rarely lived in the forests as guerrillas,⁶⁵ as was often portrayed. Moreover, many PKI members and sympathizers integrated (*berbaur*) into the local population. Their daily activities, mirroring those of their hosts, included working on farms, collecting firewood and water, and helping with other household chores, “even washing the bottoms of their [hosts’] children if required.”⁶⁶ Interviewees were anxious to show that they “fitted in” with their hosts and were not a burden. Lestari gave several examples of how they attempted to assimilate, for example, by eating the same kind of food:

What was most important was that we adapted, so that we all became one. So we really dived in, tried to understand their lives. At that time the people were still very primitive. They did not even know what a [kerosene] stove was. We were accepted by the people, so there was no difficulty, so long as we could adapt to the local people, be together with them, for example, by having to eat cassava meal [*tiwul*], their kind of food.⁶⁷

Lies Sari lived in South Blitar for a year, while trying to reunite with her husband, Sukatno, who was in South Malang, an adjacent area.⁶⁸ As distinct from what she told me about how she came to be in South Blitar, Lies Sari stated in an interview with VHR Media in 2008 that she was a member of the Ali-Surachman wing of the PNI, and that she had been arrested along with a pharmacology student from Bandung while they were engaged in a study about the natural resources of the south coast of Java.⁶⁹ She is most likely the only former South Blitar detainee to have written an account of her time in the area. Her work is a semi-ethnographic study of a community in Pasiraman village, containing accounts about local spiritual beliefs and rites, as well as her work as a midwife’s assistant.⁷⁰ Her writings also contain a strong emphasis, also conveyed in interviews (and shared by military and government sources cited earlier), on the “primitiveness” of the people in South Blitar. She explained that the people were animists and had their own style of dress, which was less modest than she and other townsfolk would normally countenance. The villagers only grew a limited range of food crops and had little knowledge about the use of organic fertilizers, such as

⁶⁵ Muyatno, interviewed by Andre Liem, Indonesian Institute of Social History, Jakarta, transcript and recording accessed by author on July 30, 2007.

⁶⁶ Winata, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁷ Lestari, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁸ Lies Sari, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁹ Yulianti, “Kejamnya Rezim Suharto (4), Diinjak, Kemaluanku Berdarah,” VHR (Voice of Human Rights) Media, January 31, 2008, [www.vhrmedia.com/vhr-story/lakon,Kejamnya-Rezim-Soeharto-\(4\)-21.html](http://www.vhrmedia.com/vhr-story/lakon,Kejamnya-Rezim-Soeharto-(4)-21.html). Accessed February 16, 2010.

⁷⁰ Lies Sari, “Blitar Selatan yang dilupakan.”

manure.⁷¹ Lies Sari's work evokes a sense of place about South Blitar, beyond the images of arid limestone villages and a people burdened by poverty, but is nevertheless framed by her perception of seeing communists as the agents of modernization.⁷²

Lies Sari rejected the idea that the South Blitar episode "was a rebellion" (*pemberontakan*). She refuted the assertion that there were army deserters and weapons present in South Blitar, and claimed that statements to that effect were lies concocted by "ex- [PKI] Special Bureau traitors" in Jakarta. Instead, she stressed the self-defensive nature of the fugitives' presence. She explained that there were PKI leaders who, by virtue of their inability to find alternatives in the big cities, were hiding in "forgotten villages"—by her definition, villages that had been "left behind"⁷³ and undeveloped.⁷⁴ She explained that, "For one year, cadres from mass organizations and the party were scattered across the entire south coast *who never met one another*."⁷⁵ This statement is probably inaccurate, as some cadres worked with two others in well-organized, three-person political cells.⁷⁶ She says about the fugitives, "Only those [cadres] who placed them [fugitives]—each village would have several people placed there—knew."⁷⁷ These statements taken together contradict one another. Fugitives in South Blitar would likely have met others on the run, or in the act of placing or being placed as fugitives, and possibly during any political activity, in villages or local houses.

In Rewang's account, he said that, in the South Blitar area, tens (*berpuluh-puluh*) of fugitives gathered. He said, "It went well, the people of South Blitar had not experienced [this] before, of people who used to be leaders, living alongside them. We implemented the three concepts of working together, sleeping together, and eating together."⁷⁸ The fugitives needed to rely on local people for food and so needed to be open about their status of being on the run. Such honesty was confirmed in the account of a local villager, Paijo,⁷⁹ whose recollection contradicts Lies Sari's assertion that the villagers were completely ignorant about the nature of the sudden influx of newcomers into South Blitar and about politics in general.⁸⁰ Paijo explained that he himself did not

⁷¹ Food crops included rice, cassava, sweet potato, banana, coconut, chillies, and corn. For vegetables, the villagers grew bligo, a kind of gourd, pod beans (*koro benguk*), pumpkin, and winged beans. Lies Sari, "Blitar Selatan yang dilupakan," p. 4.

⁷² On the PKI's contribution to education, see Ruth T. McVey, "Teaching Modernity: The PKI as an Educational Institution," *Indonesia* 50 (October 1990): 5–28.

⁷³ *Desa tertinggal*.

⁷⁴ Lies Sari, "Blitar Selatan yang dilupakan," p. 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3; emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Some South Blitar fugitives were involved in three-person "cells." Each person in the cell was responsible for an area of work. In this case, the areas were organization, education, and armed struggle. Each cell was connected to an external contact person. Source: interviews with Winata and Tuti.

⁷⁷ Lies Sari, "Blitar Selatan yang dilupakan," p. 2.

⁷⁸ Rewang, interviewed by the author. The concept of working together, sleeping together, and eating together (*Tiga sama, sama kerja, sama tidur, sama makan*) was one promoted by Lekra, particularly in the "turba," or *turun ke bawah* (down to the base) policy, which advised Lekra artists to live alongside the people in creating their artworks. See also Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri and Muhidin M. Dahlan, *Lekra tidak membakar buku: Suara senyap Lembar Kebudayaan Harian Rakjat 1950–1965* (Yogyakarta: Merakesumba, 2008).

⁷⁹ Paijo (pseudonym), interview with Andre Liem. Interview accessed by author at ISSI, Jakarta, July 30, 2007.

⁸⁰ Lies Sari, "Blitar Selatan yang dilupakan," p. 3.

accommodate any fugitives, as his house on a main road was considered less safe than others. Some locals assisted as couriers or escorted the “visitors”⁸¹ to meet other fugitives in the area. A system of couriers and “posts” was used to facilitate communication and meetings among the new arrivals, often involving local youths.⁸² The newcomers were accustomed to a different way of life in the cities and appeared different to their hosts.⁸³ The guests were not accustomed to walking barefoot, at least not in the early stages of their stay, and so they walked differently, needing to check their footing constantly.⁸⁴ They were forced to adapt to living conditions in the villages, which were relatively more difficult than conditions they experienced in their homes before the coup attempt of 1965. Tuti, for example, had had a domestic servant in her home in Surabaya. By contrast, in South Blitar, she had to walk an hour each way to the spring to bathe.⁸⁵ This lifestyle in South Blitar, however, allowed relative freedom of movement, something that many fugitives had not enjoyed since they fled their homes and went into hiding in safe houses in large cities such as Surabaya.

Political Reorganizing: The Meanings of “Resistance”

The South Blitar base was established during a period of continuing unrest in East Java. Due to strong local support for Sukarno in East Java, Suharto’s formal accession to power in March 1966 did not spell a calmer period in that province, which had suffered greatly from the mass killings. A Sukarno League (Barisan Sukarno) set up in 1966 to express support for Sukarno’s presidency had some traction in the province, although it failed to gain national support and thus did not last long.⁸⁶ Sumanto, who was a school inspector and a trade unionist, told me that he had become a local organizer in Barisan Sukarno in Surabaya prior to his arrest in mid-April 1968.⁸⁷ Throughout 1967 to mid-1968, Surabaya newspapers reported defections from the military, weapons theft, and armed robberies. It was rumored that the PKI was regrouping through infiltrating Javanese mystical congregations. On that pretext, the army attacked and killed Mbah Suro, a mystic and his followers in Nginggil, Central Java, in March 1967.⁸⁸ In this atmosphere, where, as van der Kroef wrote, the regime

⁸¹ Winata, interviewed by the author.

⁸² Anonymous informant, interviewed by the author, South Blitar, March 1, 2008.

⁸³ Lestari, interviewed by the author.

⁸⁴ Winata, interviewed by the author.

⁸⁵ Tuti, interviewed by the author, February 16, 2008.

⁸⁶ First Deputy Prime Minister Soebandrio initiated Barisan Sukarno in response to Sukarno’s speech at the cabinet meeting in the Bogor Presidential Palace on January 15, 1966. In this speech, Sukarno called upon his supporters to unite and defend him in the face of increasing pressure from Suharto and demonstrations by university students calling for Sukarno to disband the PKI. Harold Crouch, in his book *The Army and Politics in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Equinox, 2007), pp. 167–68, discusses the formation, and cooptation by the army, of Barisan Sukarno. Also see Soebandrio, *Yang Saya Alami: Peristiwa G30S, sebelum, saat meletus dan sesudahnya* (Jakarta: Bumi Intitama Sejahtera, 2006), p. 74. Some interviewees became politically involved in the Barisan Sukarno at a local level. Sumanto, interviewed by the author, Blitar, May 11, 2007.

⁸⁷ Sumanto, interviewed by the author.

⁸⁸ Van der Kroef, “Indonesian Communism since the 1965 Coup,” p. 40. A highly propagandistic account associating Mbah Suro with the PKI can be found in Andalusi, *Kisah njata hantjurnja mBah Suro* (Surabaya: Aneka Karya, 1967). Also see David Mitchell, “Communists, Mystics, and Sukarnoism,” *Dissent* (Autumn 1968): 28–32.

kept alive the PKI threat in the minds of the public, the military reported incidents around South Blitar and South Malang of robberies and attacks against local village leaders and against Islamic preachers who were considered anti-communist or who had taken part in anti-communist operations. The military speculated that these actions were some kind of payback for past involvement in eradicating the PKI.⁸⁹ Islamic groups, notably the Nahdlatul Ulama, urged the military to take decisive action to protect them.⁹⁰ The military also reported that there had been attacks against police stations, where weapons had been seized.⁹¹ While it is unclear the extent to which these incidents were politically motivated, evidently the army had not sufficiently “tamed” East Java in the period leading up to the Trisula operation.⁹² The political taming of East Java and other parts of Indonesia was a conscious process for Suharto and his supporters, as was evidenced through the use of the term “New Orderization” (*peng-Orde Baru-an*). In his biography of former Brawijaya commander General Basoeki Rachmat, Dasman Djamaluddin explained that part of Basoeki’s role when he was appointed by Suharto as interior minister was to promote acceptance of and legitimacy for the New Order regime.⁹³ The Trisula operation represented a key milestone in this process of “New Orderization.”

In spite of the serious setbacks that the PKI suffered, it had been a party with a large following. Its leadership might have been destroyed, but its mass base remained and represented a degree of threat to the regime. PKI’s support among the peasantry; among the workers in various sectors, such as plantation and forestry, and in the local administration had not been completely eradicated, in spite of the mass killings and imprisonment. The existence of this mass base made it possible for the party to bring its surviving leadership, members, and sympathizers to an area such as South Blitar. Survival was important, in order to lay the groundwork for future resistance to the regime. In 1968, there was still some hope among its opponents that the Suharto regime would have difficulties in gaining support. The rifts in the military and signs of PKI survival after the mass killings threatened to undermine the new regime. The South Blitar base was another reminder that the work to bring East Java to heel was still unfinished.

The key controversies in South Blitar are related to the lack of information and the proscribed discussion about what occurred in those so-called PKI bases, particularly in the period leading up to the Trisula operation in mid-1968. Over the decades, effective New Order propaganda about Viet Cong-style guerrillas and communist insurrection in South Blitar has blurred the various pragmatic explanations for the base’s construction. Former political prisoners were unable to put forward their version without implicating themselves as communists. How do we account for the

⁸⁹ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 3.

⁹⁰ Sunyoto et al., *Banser Berjihad Menumpas PKI*.

⁹¹ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 12. Sunyoto et al. *Banser Berjihad Menumpas PKI*.

⁹² M. Jasin, “Saya Tidak Pernah Minta Ampun Kepada Soeharto,” pp. 66–72, discusses his role as the Brawijaya commander in the “New Orderization” of East Java.

⁹³ Dasman Djamaluddin, *Jenderal TNI Anumerta Basoeki Rachmat dan Supersemar* (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2008), p. 117.

divergences in testimonies among former political prisoners who *were* in South Blitar?⁹⁴ Despite some extensive questioning, informants such as Putmainah and Lestari maintained that they were completely uninvolved in any kind of political activities in South Blitar, citing reasons such as needing to care for children and, therefore, not having any time for political work.⁹⁵ They maintained strongly that they only came to South Blitar to avoid capture and to reunite with their family members, which reveals to a certain extent the controversial nature of the South Blitar project, which still leaves participants reluctant to discuss aspects of the project that might have involved violence. Interviewees want to stress that the violence was committed *against* them. They want to leave no ambiguity about their being the victims of violence. Ambiguities could arise, should they confirm the use of any violence by leftists in South Blitar. Both Lestari and Lies Sari, interviewed together in Jakarta in 2009, rejected any suggestions of armed resistance against the military in South Blitar.⁹⁶ Lies Sari emphatically denied that the fugitives had any intention to commit acts of violence.⁹⁷ She argued that “PKI traitors”⁹⁸ and Jakarta’s New Order regime had concocted the stories of armed resistance to justify the military force used against them. For Putmainah, however, her husband was a leader of the South Blitar base and she might have been aware of some resistance activities carried out by the base, although she maintained she was not involved in these.

The isolation of some cadres from others and differences in status can account for the inconsistency in testimonies about the purpose and activities of the “base.” There are also still concerns about the implications of admitting to having been involved in attempting to resurrect the PKI during their time in South Blitar. Not all former political prisoners denied, like Lies Sari did, that resistance was among their motivations for being in South Blitar. I asked my interviewees about the involvement of leftist political fugitives in incidents such as attacks on police and military posts, robberies, and thefts of weapons. Their responses ranged from outright denial to confirmation that there had, indeed, been some involvement. One informant spoke about how pro-PKI fugitives carried out assassinations against certain military and anti-communist figures, but there is not widespread acknowledgement among informants that such drastic acts occurred.⁹⁹ Not every fugitive was involved in party rebuilding work. As far as we can trace from testimonies, some fugitives tried to rebuild the party around the South Blitar area by setting up three-person cells. As noted earlier, each person was in charge of one particular area: organization, education, or armed struggle.¹⁰⁰ Winata and Tuti worked together in one cell.¹⁰¹ Tuti was in charge of education or outreach, trying to seek out former party members and supporters. Their intermediary, or external contact person, seemed to have been Gatot

⁹⁴ Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, pp. 128 and 132, also notes the divergences in accounts by Italian partisans about the Battle of Poggio Bustone on the Umbria-Lazio border.

⁹⁵ Lestari, interviewed by the author; Putmainah, interviewed by the author, March 1, 2008.

⁹⁶ Lestari, interviewed by the author; and Lies Sari, interviewed by the author.

⁹⁷ Lies Sari, “Blitar Selatan yang dilupakan,” p. 2, and interview with the author.

⁹⁸ John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, p. 137, names some PKI members who turned traitor and led the authorities to detain other leftists.

⁹⁹ Winata, interviewed by the author.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*; and Tuti, interviewed by the author.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Sutaryo. Gatot Sutaryo had served earlier as secretary to former Information Minister Amir Sjarifuddin, who went on to become prime minister; he was a member of the East Java Provincial Committee of the PKI, and, in 1968, secretary of the “project committee” of South Blitar.¹⁰² It is difficult to find out exactly what the cells did, other than to seek to identify and regroup with party members and sympathizers in surrounding areas.

The PKI in South Blitar set up structures to facilitate some training in handling weapons. These weapons would have been obtained from military deserters and through theft and black-market purchases.¹⁰³ In our interview, Rewang explained that any decision to engage in armed conflict would have been made democratically, in a meeting of provincial committees called to approve this course of action.¹⁰⁴ He said any arms they had were negligible. The military found a small number of weapons when they captured two detachments of youth, who, according to the military, were being trained by the PKI in “armed struggle.” In all there were only thirty-four firearms, some of them “old weapons,” and a few blowpipes.¹⁰⁵ The military noted that the shortage of arms and combat skills led the fugitives to hide among villagers to avoid clashes.¹⁰⁶ It would seem that any armed resistance by the PKI was in its infancy at this time and was hampered by a shortage of resources, such as trainers, weapons, and ammunition.

The desire to resist the regime was strong, however, among some fugitives. Winata was one interviewee for whom resistance was important. As he lived in a small village on the outskirts of a district capital, when interviewed he was somewhat concerned about his safety and insisted on using a pseudonym. He was prepared to discuss the use of violence provided I would not use his real name. Winata explained the advantages of South Blitar as a place of refuge and touched on the theme of resistance:

The area was totally red [politically]. Even if the geographic conditions were not completely ideal for us to conduct resistance, the people could be relied upon for our protection. The proof was that we lasted two years there, before our destruction in 1968.¹⁰⁷

Winata decided to join the South Blitar refuge because he was fearful of being arrested again after his release from Jakarta’s Salemba prison in 1966. He had only served one year there. According to him, soon after his release, in Jakarta he came across an article in the newspaper *Suluh Indonesia* accusing him of having been a communist during his time in Europe as a student.¹⁰⁸ To avoid possible repercussions from the article, he quickly departed Jakarta for his village in East Java:

¹⁰² Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, pp. 297–98.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁴ Rewang, interviewed by the author. Convening the provincial committees across Java in South Blitar would have been a difficult task, but this difficulty might have been tackled by requiring a certain number of committee members already present in South Blitar to represent their respective committees.

¹⁰⁵ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁷ Winata, interviewed by the author.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

At the end of 1966, I returned to my home village. I took that particular decision because I was afraid of being captured or killed.¹⁰⁹

He did not feel safer there. He said, "Rather than dying uselessly [*mati konyol*], I decided to join in and go to South Blitar, to hide there." He explained that he had decided he could either wait to be harassed or attacked by local youths, or he could take his life in his own hands and try his luck in South Blitar. He said, "It was better to resist [*berlawan*] than to die for no reason."¹¹⁰ Tuti, who worked with Winata in a three-person cell, also echoed this theme of resistance. She said that those who were hunted "like animals" had the right to defend themselves.¹¹¹ PKI leaders Rewang and Munir (the latter in his defense statement) each expressed similar sentiments. In our interview, Rewang noted that when the Trisula operation smashed the PKI base, "actually, we had not begun; we were still making preparations."¹¹² In order for armed resistance to succeed, he said, there needed to have been "many areas like South Blitar." He cited other attempts by remnants of the PKI to form such bases, as in the Merapi–Merbabu area in Central Java, in West Kalimantan,¹¹³ and in Sulawesi. He said the bases in Kalimantan and Sulawesi enjoyed "good terrain" (*medannya baik*) for struggle, but that they, too, were unable to hold out. According to Rewang, the role of such "base area projects" (*proyek daerah basis*) was to "lay the foundation for armed resistance bases."¹¹⁴

There were differences of opinion among former PKI members in South Blitar regarding armed resistance and the most effective moments to deploy violent tactics. While the PKI leaders and perhaps their followers shifted their thinking more in favor of taking up arms against the state because of the violence they had faced, there were various disagreements about when and where any attacks should take place. Guy Pauker, a pro-military American researcher employed by the US government-sponsored Rand Corporation,¹¹⁵ who kept a close eye on the PKI, pointed to these differences among party leaders. In his 1969 report, Pauker contends that:

Some of the leaders argued that armed struggle be undertaken only after the PKI's underground structure was rebuilt on a strong mass basis, others engaged

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Tuti, interviewed by the author.

¹¹² Rewang, interviewed by the author.

¹¹³ Jamie S. Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), pp. 62–84, describes the PKI's founding of the Tentara Komunis Kalimantan Barat (TKKB, Communist Army of West Kalimantan) in late 1965 or early 1966, and its subsequent alliance with the PGRS (Pasukan Gerilya Rakyat Sarawak, Sarawak People's Guerrilla Force). Operations continued against the PKI and PGRS/Paraku until the mid-1970s.

¹¹⁴ Rewang, interviewed by the author.

¹¹⁵ Katharine E. McGregor, *History in Uniform: Military Ideology and the Construction of Indonesia's Past* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), pp. 65–66, argues that the Rand Corporation was a "Cold War watchdog for the American government." See also Budiawan, "Seeing the Communist Past through the Lens of a CIA Consultant: Guy J. Pauker on the Indonesian Communist Party Before and After the '1965 Affair,'" *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* 7,4 (2006): 650–62.

in isolated terroristic attacks on the Army and on Moslem civilians who had been involved in the anti-communist massacres of early 1966.¹¹⁶

PKI leader Mohammad Munir identified a weakness that undermined preparations for a greater resistance against the regime. In his defense speech in 1973, Munir spoke of a certain hastiness that alerted the regime to the presence of PKI members in South Blitar.

The armed resistance was defeated because, on one hand, the PKI leadership *couldn't control their haste in trying to rebuild the party*, making it easy for the regime to sniff our presence. The regime's immense power struck the PKI when our preparations for battle were far from ripe.¹¹⁷

However he did not elaborate on the attacks that Pauker described as "isolated" and "terroristic." Winata argued that some attacks were ill-conceived and were the result of impatience or anger.¹¹⁸ He claimed that anti-military attacks "close to the entry points into the [hiding] area" were unwise, as they drew attention to the presence of anti-government groups and hindered the fugitives' own movements.¹¹⁹ He discussed some of the attacks in which leftists might have played a part. For example, fugitives donned fake army uniforms to trick those who might have executed communists in the past— Banser members, for instance—to come "on operation in the south [South Blitar]."¹²⁰ Thinking they were going with the military, some Banser members agreed, and then they were killed along the way.¹²¹ Sunyoto, citing Romdhon, the founder of Banser in Blitar, identified several NU *kiai* and Banser members who were killed in such attacks,¹²² which were few in number. Instead of systematically challenging the regime, these small actions succeeded in attracting the attention of the authorities.

The Trisula Operation

The targeting of pro-government and religious figures in the area spurred the renewal of an earlier alliance, dating back to 1965, between Banser and the army to fight the PKI.¹²³ At first, military operations involving Battalions 521, 527, and 511 of the Brawijaya Division proved ineffective.¹²⁴ Partly this was because the local civil defense guards, *hansip*, were passing on information about military movements to

¹¹⁶ Guy Pauker, "The Rise and Fall of the Indonesian Communist Party," Rand Corporation Memorandum, 1969, pp. 61–62.

¹¹⁷ Pledoi [Defense Speech] Mohammad Munir, Dokumen-dokumen Pengadilan Munir, 4 of 7, AKSI News Service, circulated by email on September 23, 1995. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Winata, interviewed by the author; and Tuti, interviewed by the author (February 16, 2008).

¹¹⁹ Winata, interviewed by the author.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Romdhon named these victims as Kiai Maksum, from Plosorejo, Kademangan; Manun, from Dawuhan; Susanto, a member of the Indonesian Nationalist Party, who was also a school principal at Panggungasri; Sastro, head of the Department of Information in Binangun; and two Banser members, who were on guard duty in Panggung Duwet. Sunyoto et al., *Banser Berjihad Menumpas PKI*, p. 166.

¹²³ Sunyoto et al., *Banser Berjihad Menumpas PKI*, p. 166.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 167.

fugitives. The military in response replaced the locals working as *hansip* with members of Banser and began planning a much larger operation.¹²⁵

The Trisula operation was a counterinsurgency led by commanding officer Colonel Witarmin from the 18th Airborne Infantry Brigade (Brigif Linud 18/Trisula), a brigade attached to the Strategic Army Reserve Command (Kostrad). The operation began in June 1968 and formally ended with a ceremony on September 7, 1968, at the operation headquarters in Lodoyo.¹²⁶ As a classic counterinsurgency operation, Trisula was guided by the idea that the guerrillas must be separated from the people, even if the people themselves became casualties.¹²⁷ In the lead up to the operation, local administrators and functionaries were replaced with “caretakers,” often from the military.¹²⁸ Each battalion placed a company of soldiers in each of the villages for which it was responsible.¹²⁹ The military methodically restricted movement through the area by instituting identity checks. It compiled data on the residents of each village. Cattle, which had hitherto roamed freely, now had to have registered owners.¹³⁰ Checkpoints were erected 300 to 400 meters apart throughout South Blitar. Public gatherings were prohibited without permission from the military commander. Putmainah became concerned about these changes, and so she smuggled her children out of South Blitar with women traders going to market, before it became too difficult to move through the area. Other mothers, such as Lestari,¹³¹ left it too late and had to leave their children with local villagers when they went on the run.

In South Blitar, people still recall how they fared during the military operation. The local population was averse to helping the military. Local men disappeared during daylight hours on the pretext of cultivating food gardens away from their houses.¹³² The military drafted locals into taking part in foot patrols, carrying equipment such as field radios, and “managing” detainees. The task of managing detainees included, according to testimonies, digging mass graves and pushing the detainees’ bodies into them, or helping to dispose of bodies in natural grave pits, such as the one at Luweng Tikus (Rat’s Hole). Paijo, interviewed by Andre Liem, recalled that the military

¹²⁵ Winata, interviewed by the author.

¹²⁶ The Trisula Taskforce’s command headquarters, and the base of all elements of the operations, were in Lodoyo, a subdistrict center. Combat, territorial, and intelligence operations were to be simultaneously mounted by two main arms of operation, that is, units of the Brawijaya Territorial Command and units from the Trisula Taskforce. The operation called on entire sections of the Brawijaya command, including nonmilitary or logistical support units such as the engineering corps and equipment, transport, information, and field-hospital operations; as well as religious advisers. Reserves from the Para Commando Regiment of the Army (Resimen Para Komando Angkatan Darat, RPKAD) and one infantry unit from the Central Java Diponegoro Division were also on standby.

¹²⁷ See, for example, Brian McAllister Linn, *The US Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 165.

¹²⁸ In Pasiraman village, nine village functionaries had a military background, from the village head (*kepala desa*) to those at lower levels, such as the *kebayon*, who assisted the village head in carrying out administrative functions. Mr. Y, interview, South Blitar, March 1, 2008.

¹²⁹ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 67.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹³¹ Lestari, interviewed by the author, Jakarta, April 26, 2007.

¹³² Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 89.

transported him and ten other men to a certain area to dig these pits.¹³³ He told Liem that forty prisoners, bound by rope in groups of four, then arrived from Bakung. Several soldiers executed these prisoners, mainly by shooting them in the chest. After the shootings, Paijo and the ten men were told to bury them. It took the gravediggers around two hours to complete the task. The soldiers encouraged the men to take any “good clothing” from the bodies before burying them, but none of the men took anything. When asked why they refused, Paijo explained:

Because I used to be BTI¹³⁴ myself, [they were] like friends. Imagine what I would have said, if I was wearing [a dead man’s] sarong and one of their family members asked, why are you wearing my father’s sarong?”¹³⁵

This sense of identification with the victims meant that the killings had a great impact on Paijo and the other men. Paijo said, “We felt very moved [*terharu*], because we knew the victims.”¹³⁶ It was unclear whether he knew them personally, as he did not name them, or whether he had simply felt that he and the victims shared characteristics. After the burial, the men returned to the command post in the village, located in Mr. Gun’s house, and they were warned by the soldiers to say nothing about what they had just seen. Villagers, often detainees, who were forced to help carry out killings or clean up in the aftermath, in turn became a source of information for the families of victims. Mrs. S., a widow, traced her husband’s fate through testimonies from other villagers who were present at his death.¹³⁷ They told her that he had been beaten on the back of the head with a metal bar, as a result of which he fell into the deep vertical cave at Luweng Tikus, which held dozens of bodies.¹³⁸ Villagers refused to participate in the killings and cleanup wherever they could, but it was not always possible to resist the soldiers’ threats.

The operation increasingly affected villagers in ever more intrusive ways. In June 1968, to exert more pressure on those on the run, the military evacuated thousands of people from hamlets and villages, and placed them in holding camps for several days at a time.¹³⁹ In these camps, the military delivered speeches to villagers instructing them to refuse to help communists, or they, the villagers, would be killed.¹⁴⁰ Airplanes also dropped leaflets in the villages containing similar messages. With these evacuations, people faced the choice of remaining in the villages and being interned—or fleeing into the forested surroundings. The military produced a lasting symbol of

¹³³ Paijo (a pseudonym), interviewed by Andre Liem, date unknown, at Indonesian Institute of Social History, Jakarta. Accessed July 25, 2007.

¹³⁴ BTI, the Indonesian Peasants’ Union, was a mass leftist organization that was politically close to the PKI and had many members in the South Blitar area.

¹³⁵ Paijo, interviewed by Andre Liem.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Mrs. S., interviewed by Lakpesdam NU.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* On Luweng Tikus, see Adi Prinantyo, “Goa Tikus Saksi Sejarah Kelam Blitar Selatan,” *Kompas*, August 27, 2002.

¹³⁹ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 206, discusses an example of such an evacuation between June 22 and July 5, 1968. Twelve villages were identified as evacuation meeting points. These were Sumberejo, Suruhwadang, Lorejo, Kaliwaru, Kaligrenjeng, and Tumpak Kepuh in the eastern zone, administered by Batallion 231. In the western zone, under Batallion 511, were Sawahan, Maron, Krisik, Prede III, Bakung, and Sidomulyo.

¹⁴⁰ Mrs. J., interviewed by Lakpesdam NU, 2005.

South Blitar in the form of the *ruha* (an acronym for *ruang bawah tanah*, underground spaces).¹⁴¹ *Ruha* could be naturally occurring caves on the south coast or holes deliberately dug as hiding places. The military pointed to these hiding places as evidence that the PKI was setting out to emulate the Vietnamese communists, who had developed a system of underground tunnels.¹⁴² The Mbultuk Cave, now a tourist attraction in the Blitar area, is one example of a limestone cave that was used as a hideout. The *ruha* were especially invoked to support the military's propaganda, well after 1968, that the Blitar base was the home of a fully fledged guerrilla movement. Rather, the *ruha* came about as a result of necessity, and to take advantage of the fugitives' natural surroundings.

At the end of June 1968, the fugitives at large were increasingly confined to the "marginal areas." These included relatively inaccessible cliff tops and caves, over which helicopters and planes flew low to attack. To avoid capture, the remaining fugitives traveled alone or in smaller and smaller groups, as it became impractical and dangerous to travel in large numbers. Domestic food gardens and plants that grew wild in the forest were important sources of nourishment for those who remained at large. Winata, Tuti, and Putmainah survived on raw cassava, cassava leaves, sweet potatoes, and forest snails.¹⁴³ Reacting to the increasing vulnerability of the remaining fugitives, intelligence agents directed people to destroy edible plants around the forests to starve the scavengers. In the face of such pressure, many people began to surrender. Men who surrendered had their heads shaved to distinguish them from everyone else. They were called the Bald-headed Troops (*Pasukan Gundul*) and were deployed on construction and other military projects. Much to the delight of the field commanders, many key PKI leaders had been arrested by the end of July. Ruslan Wijayasastra, (chairperson of PKI's emergency committee), was captured on July 13, 1968, in the kitchen of a local villager during an unseasonal downpour.¹⁴⁴ On the same day, Munir was captured in an underground emplacement.¹⁴⁵ Rewang, in turn, was caught on July 20 during a military operation.¹⁴⁶ By early August, all the former political prisoners I interviewed for this essay had been captured.

The South Blitar-linked prisoners served long jail sentences (ranging from more than fifteen years to life), were executed, or were sentenced to death.¹⁴⁷ Deemed to be

¹⁴¹ At Jakarta's Museum of Communist Treachery, the South Blitar "comeback attempt" by the PKI is represented by a diorama showing the mountainous terrain of the area, with two soldiers walking along, oblivious to the *ruha*, or underground tunneling, beneath their feet, which is visible to the museum audience, as the diorama shows the cross section of the hill. See the museum's guidebook, *Buku Panduan Monumen Pancasila Sakti Lubang Buaya* (Jakarta: Pusat Sejarah ABRI, Jakarta [date of publication unknown], p. 21.

¹⁴² *40 Tahun Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia II: Masa pembangunan dan pemantapan ABRI (1965–1985)* (Jakarta: Mabes ABRI and Pusat Sejarah dan Tradisi ABRI, 1985), pp. 4–5, 13–19 (photos).

¹⁴³ Winata and Tuti (February 16, 2008), interviewed by the author; and Putmainah interviews with the author.

¹⁴⁴ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, p. 137.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁴⁷ In 1985, Gatot Sutaryo, Joko Untung, Pratomo, and Rustomo were executed by firing squad. It was thought that they were executed some time during the first three days of July 1985, according to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, *Report by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. S. Amos Wako, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, Commissions on Human Rights, Forty-second Session, agenda item 12, February 7,

“outsiders” or interlopers, those who had traveled to South Blitar simply to hide were quickly transported to other prisons in Java. Male prisoners were first transported to Malang’s Lowokwaru Prison. At the end of August, senior PKI leaders, such as Rewang, Ruslan, Iskandar Subekti, Sukatno, Djadiwirosubroto, and Mardjoko, were transferred to Jakarta to be tried.¹⁴⁸ The South Blitar-linked prisoners experienced extreme deprivation and were treated as dangerous criminals. Eight women held in Malang Prison shared a woven mat on the floor on which to sleep. Unable to receive external parcels (*kiriman*), they were severely malnourished in the first two years of their imprisonment.¹⁴⁹ After some six years in Malang, Tuti was moved to Madiun, then to another prison near where she was to be tried. Tuti and Winata were tried together in one of the district capitals in East Java, near the area where they had been active.¹⁵⁰ Several charges were brought against them of trying to mount an insurrection, committing violent acts against the authorities, and trying to resuscitate the PKI.¹⁵¹ Their trials led the government to argue that South Blitar prisoners had received due process. However, the extent to which they had received fair trials was questionable. Tuti refused the court’s offer of a defence attorney, telling the judge that “the decision was already in [his] pocket.” In Tuti’s account of her trial, commenced in 1977, nine years after her arrest, she described that in one week, several witnesses, who were other PKI leaders, testified that they were not familiar with her political work. In spite of this, the judge still convicted her and sentenced her to seventeen years in prison, without regard for the time she had already spent in detention.

The members of the PKI Central Committee arrested in South Blitar were charged and tried in courts in Jakarta. Some of the prisoners from Pamekasan Prison, namely Gatot Sutaryo, Rustomo, and Joko Untung, were executed in 1985.¹⁵² Others on death row, like Iskandar Subekti, Ruslan Widjajasastra and Sukatno, remained in jail in Jakarta until their deaths in 1993, 1995, and 1997 respectively.¹⁵³

“Singing Birds”: The Question of Betrayal

The wave of arrests in July and early August 1968 was the result of what the Brawijaya Division termed “tactical interrogations,” interrogation that induced detainees to cooperate with the authorities.¹⁵⁴ Betrayal was not just an issue in the earlier purges in 1965–66.¹⁵⁵ It also resonated within the South Blitar group of former political prisoners. For example, the military arrested PKI East Java provincial

1986. See also *The Jakarta Post*, “Justice Minister on Execution of CP leaders,” August 31, 1985, which reported that the executions occurred on Madura Island in July 1985. (That article’s text was reprinted by Joint Press Reporting Service, Southeast Asia Report, JPRS-SEA-85-149, September 30, 1985, pp. 3–4.)

¹⁴⁸ Rewang, interviewed by the author.

¹⁴⁹ Tuti, interviewed by the author, February 16, 2008.

¹⁵⁰ I have not named the precise town to protect the identities of those whom I interviewed.

¹⁵¹ Winata and Tuti (February 16, 2008), interviewed by the author.

¹⁵² “Justice Minister on Executions of CP Leaders,” *The Jakarta Post*, August 31, 1985, as reproduced by the Joint Press Reporting Service, JPRS-SEA-85-149, September 30, 1985.

¹⁵³ Ruslan and Sukatno died while they were still officially political prisoners.

¹⁵⁴ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, pp. 137, 140.

¹⁵⁵ Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, p. 137, presents some well-known cases of PKI members and leaders who collaborated with the authorities.

secretary Suwandi on June 12 and paraded him through South Blitar, where he spoke at public meetings urging others to give themselves up.¹⁵⁶ One interviewee termed this “singing like a bird, urging the other birds to come in.”¹⁵⁷ Tuti had heard that Suwandi was tortured for three days, which possibly led him to help the military in the end.¹⁵⁸ A photograph of Suwandi at the Brawijaya Museum showed him with his hands bound by thick rope while being interrogated. Allegations that he had been severely tortured notwithstanding, he was ostracized by some of the male political prisoners in Madura’s Pamekasan Prison due to the perception that he had betrayed their cause. Suwandi developed a heart condition and died around 1987. What could be the reason for this rancor? Betrayal was viewed with derision in the 1965–66 wave of arrests, but, quite simply, the nature of the party and its activists had changed even further by the time of the Trisula operation. From operating as an open, legal party, the PKI—or rather, its surviving members and leaders—became largely transformed by necessity into a furtive, underground presence between 1965 and 1968, which manner of existence demanded different qualities of its cadres.



Suwandi, provincial secretary of the Indonesian Communist Party, in East Java under interrogation after his arrest. Photograph of a picture in an exhibit, Brawijaya Museum, Malang

¹⁵⁶ Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, pp. 91–92.

¹⁵⁷ Winata, interviewed by the author.

¹⁵⁸ Tuti, interviewed by the author, February 16, 2008.

In South Blitar, PKI members and sympathizers were forced to deal with an organized armed, military response, requiring finely attuned skills for living on the run, and a certain amount of discipline. Remembering how PKI members and leaders had collaborated with the authorities in the 1965–66 purges,¹⁵⁹ PKI cadres now regarded such cooperation in any form with disdain. Winata explained that “the rules in the field” in South Blitar were especially tough—even to disclose one’s real name to the authorities constituted an act of betrayal. Even in their every day dealings, South Blitar fugitives, therefore, used several aliases.¹⁶⁰ In Tuti’s case, her captors only discovered her actual identity because she neglected to erase her real name from the temples of her spectacles. Tuti, however, also blamed her comrades’ cooperation with the authorities in confirming her identity. The PKI’s rapid growth in the first half of the 1960s and its mass membership, she argued, had resulted in a shortage of trained cadres who were disciplined and loyal in times of hardship. During her interrogation, Tuti was ordered to write a statement to convince others to surrender.¹⁶¹ She refused the military’s request, on the grounds that many fugitives saw such deeds as dishonorable and, therefore, this tactic would not have convinced them to surrender. I believe that Tuti told me this story as a distinct counterpoint to the tale of Suwandi’s collaboration with the military. Rewang felt that betrayal was “normal” or understandable, given the pressure of the times. In contrast, low-ranking cadres seemed to take a hard line against those accused of “betrayal.” Winata gave a carefully worded response when I asked him about accusations of betrayal among former South Blitar prisoners. He prefaced his remarks by emphasizing that he did not condone working with the military. He went on to explain that that his more tolerant attitude toward Suwandi was molded by his sense of indebtedness, as in the past Suwandi had secured the release of Winata’s wife from prison.¹⁶² The fugitives in South Blitar held a glimmer of hope that the New Order regime could be overcome. However limited their resistance might have been, the thought that traitors had undermined their efforts made it all the more painful.

South Blitar and the 1965–66 Repression: Remaking the Connections

During the New Order regime, Rewang and others could not speak openly about their South Blitar experiences without implicating themselves as communists. The experiences of former political prisoners who had been in South Blitar, including stories of their imprisonment there, were different from the experiences of other political prisoners who had not been in South Blitar. By the late 1970s, many political prisoners associated with 1965 had been released.¹⁶³ The bulk of former political prisoners had no experience of living in South Blitar, as they were in prison during the

¹⁵⁹ Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, p. 137.

¹⁶⁰ The use of a number of pseudonyms is evident in the personal information concerning those whom the military dubbed *tokoh*, important figures in the PKI, who were arrested in South Blitar; see: Semdam VIII Brawidjaja, *Operasi Trisula Kodam VIII Brawidjaja*, pp. 289–310. Also confirmed by Tuti, interviewed by the author, February 16, 2008.

¹⁶¹ Tuti, interviewed by the author, February 16, 2008.

¹⁶² Winata, interviewed by the author.

¹⁶³ Greg Fealy, *The Release of Indonesia’s Political Prisoners: Domestic versus Foreign Policy, 1975–1979* (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1995).

years 1967–68, the most critical years of the period in question. Buru Island prison camp closed down in 1981,¹⁶⁴ but some South Blitar prisoners were still incarcerated until the late 1990s—this was particularly true for death-row inmates. Most of the political prisoners seized in 1965–66 were never tried in a court of law, with the exception of those subjected to Extraordinary Military Tribunals (Mahkamah Militer Luar Biasa, abbreviated “Mahmillub”). It is questionable, if in content, the Mahmillub could be considered a court of law.¹⁶⁵ As discussed earlier, many PKI leaders arrested in South Blitar were tried in ordinary courts and led the government to claim that their legal rights had been upheld.¹⁶⁶ The nature of the charges goes some way to explain why even today some former South Blitar prisoners insist on their anonymity and still use pseudonyms, which suggests that there is stigma or discomfort triggered by being associated with South Blitar. Some refused to grant interviews, refused to allow interviews to be recorded,¹⁶⁷ or went to great lengths to deny that they had engaged in any acts of resistance, violent or otherwise, against the regime. Apparently the New Order portrayal of the fugitives as insurrectionary communist guerrillas continues to hold sway. These differences in experiences between groups of political prisoners also account for the disagreements about the correct tactics to survive and regroup following the 1965–66 mass killings and imprisonment.

There were also recriminations against some of the leaders who set up the South Blitar base. Some leftists who were invited to join the base in 1968 were sceptical and chose not to go to South Blitar.¹⁶⁸ In defending his course of action, Rewang explained that sharp disagreements about the bases’ legitimate functions appeared only after the victory of Trisula. He explained that, in his view, the debates about and condemnation of South Blitar as a poor sanctuary, and a poor choice of tactics, only arose in hindsight, in the context of the base’s defeat. He said that those criticisms came from “outsiders” and, in contrast, those in South Blitar were “solid.”¹⁶⁹ He also felt that the condemnation came from “outside [South Blitar], such as in Buru [Island prison camp]. It was only after the fact that they said it was adventurism.”¹⁷⁰ He held steadfast that, “armed struggle was only because of armed oppression [by the military]. If the people don’t have their own force, then they can’t win.”¹⁷¹ This ongoing debate, some forty years old, reveals to us the fractures in this group of people who in a sense shared a

¹⁶⁴ Hersri Setiawan, *Kamus Gestok* (Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 2003), p. 287.

¹⁶⁵ The Mahmillub has been discredited as a tribunal set up by the military after army officers already concluded that the PKI was guilty of involvement in the 30th September Movement. See, for example, John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, p. 6. For some consideration of the defendants’ Mahmillub testimonies, however, see Harold Crouch, “Another Look at the Indonesian ‘Coup’,” *Indonesia* 15 (April 1973): 1–20.

¹⁶⁶ Majalah Tempo Online, “Sukatno siap didor,” October 2, 1993, at <http://majalah.tempointeraktif.com/id/arsip/1993/10/02/NAS/mbm.19931002.NAS4544.id.html>, accessed March 15, 2010.

¹⁶⁷ Rewang, for example, refused my initial request for an interview in 2008 about South Blitar. After being persuaded to participate by another former South Blitar detainee, he agreed to be interviewed in February 2009. “Tuti” and “Winata” are pseudonyms. Tuti refused to have our first interview (August 2, 2007) recorded. Two men in South Blitar, who had been involved in Lekra’s cultural activities in the 1960s, gave their testimonies anonymously.

¹⁶⁸ Hersri Setiawan, interviewed by the author, Jakarta, April 27, 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Rewang, interviewed by the author, used this exact word, “solid,” derived from the English language.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

certain history, but remained with distinct experiences: those like Rewang, who lived the South Blitar life of exile, and those with similar ideals who were already in prison in the late 1960s.

At times, South Blitar leaders were also blamed for the plight of other political prisoners already incarcerated, and for the fate of South Blitar villagers. In 1968, there was an atmosphere of heightened alert and increased monitoring prior to and during the Trisula operation. Prisoners held in other prisons in Java complained of markedly worse treatment during the period surrounding the operation. Adam Soepardjan, a metalworkers' unionist, alleged that in 1968 a campaign to starve those incarcerated in Kalisosok Prison, in Surabaya, during which hundreds died, was the authorities' payback for ongoing PKI activities.¹⁷² Those who might otherwise have merely been placed on watch lists were arrested in operations in Jakarta because they had family roots in Blitar or nearby towns.¹⁷³ Another criticism against the leftist fugitives from within their own ranks focuses on the fate of villagers after the operation. Following the operation, villagers were forced to cope with "rehabilitation." Military officers were placed in village government positions, villages were redesigned, and the population in some cases was relocated into several major centers for surveillance purposes. Villagers had been imprisoned, registered, and displaced from their homes, and had their movement restricted. During their June 1969 visit to the area, officials Bartley and Kenney from the US Consulate in Surabaya praised the Trisula operation as a successful example of counterinsurgency, though conceding that the area was a "soft target."¹⁷⁴ A former political prisoner who now heads a survivors' organization in Solo told me that the fate of the South Blitar villagers was Rewang's "personal responsibility." He said because the villagers suffered a great deal during the operation, out of discomfort, Rewang never returned to South Blitar.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, Rewang did not return to South Blitar after his imprisonment, but in our interview he explained that this was to avoid government accusations that he was returning there to stir up the local community.¹⁷⁶ The assertion that villagers were resentful towards the fugitives, or that they bore responsibility for the fate of the villagers, also conflicts with other testimonies¹⁷⁷ showing the warm and continuing bond that was built between the fugitives and the villagers, even after captured fugitives were released from prison. While they lived under the New Order regime, it was safer for former political prisoners and the villagers to maintain the perception that there was no further contact between them after the end of the Trisula operation.

Despite increased attention in the last decade to the repression of the PKI, the South Blitar period of the party's history has been relatively little discussed, possibly

¹⁷² Adam Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara Rezim Soeharto: Kisah Nyata Anak Manusia* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2004), pp. 268–70. A report in the *Economist*, November 30, 1968, discusses "hundreds and perhaps thousands" of inmate killings in Javanese prisons by guards and soldiers. The highest number of deaths resulted from the South Blitar events and occurred between June and September 1968 (as cited in Van der Kroef, "Indonesian Communism," p. 51).

¹⁷³ Haroto, interviewed by the author, Jakarta, July 28, 2007.

¹⁷⁴ Department of State airgram, "Inspection Trip to South Blitar," Report from D.T. Kenney, US Consulate Surabaya to American Embassy Jakarta, A-12, June 29, 1969.

¹⁷⁵ Confidential interview, Solo, February 14, 2009.

¹⁷⁶ Rewang, interviewed by the author.

¹⁷⁷ Tuti, interviewed by the author, February 16, 2008.

because of doubts about how to deal with the ambiguity of questions of resistance against the regime. This article has tried to expand the historiography that is available about South Blitar in the framework of contributing to a growing body of work focused on the experiences of survivors of political violence. Violence in Java against the political left continued beyond the initial wave of killings and imprisonments in 1965–66. While there are many differences in the experiences of those who were already incarcerated in 1965–66 and those present in South Blitar, I have sought to emphasize the relationship between the 1965–66 killings and imprisonments with the South Blitar phase. What happened to those who survived the initial mass killings and purges—at least for a period? This article has extended “the story” of the political repression beyond the 1965–66 period to encompass those who, up through mid-1968, survived on the run and were part of a controversial “base building” effort in the southern reaches of East Java. The continuing domination of the New Order version of the history of South Blitar makes it even more important to establish this continuum, particularly in light of the growing historical reappraisal regarding the mass killings and imprisonment. For survivors, it is impossible to escape completely the dominance and therefore the effects on their testimonies, of the regime’s version of history, as well as the concerns within, for example, sections of the NU leadership, to maintain a consensus about the 1960s events. In an atmosphere of openness following democratization, however, there are far greater possibilities today for survivors to revisit the 1968 South Blitar events, as these events were lived and experienced.