

Between late 1965 and early 1969, a campaign to eradicate communism in Indonesia led to the killing of at least 500,000 people. The systematic killings began as a military clash, when a left-leaning group from the Air Force, together with the palace guard of Sukarno, captured and killed six right-wing generals, who had allegedly been conspiring against the President. The statistic of 500,000 deaths in the subsequent reprisals is conservative – the figure of 1 million produced by Indonesian military intelligence in later years is highly likely to be more than mere boasting. Similar numbers were imprisoned on political grounds, and subsequently more again were ostracized from mainstream society and government employment, their identity cards marking them as having an “unclean environment”.

As Geoffrey B. Robinson's *The Killing Season* makes clear, the rise of communism was a threat to sections of the Indonesian military as well as to the United States and its Cold War allies. The assassination of the six military leaders was used by their successors, General Suharto and his allies, in a campaign to vilify all communists as responsible for their murders. Suharto and his allies made these six into official national heroes, and fabricated claims that their deaths had involved sadistic torture. This propaganda campaign became a “pretext for mass murder”, in the words of the Canadian-American historian John Roosa, quoted by Robinson. In the propaganda, the action against these generals was quickly labelled a “coup” by the anti-communists, even though there was no attempted seizure of state power. The label has stuck until recently, becoming a convenient excuse for denying discussions about the murders. The story has fixed remarkably firmly in Indonesia, where the details of the deaths of the six generals are still regarded as somehow outweighing the deaths of 500,000 to 1 million communists in “reprisal”. Communists are seen as the only aggressors of 1965, the ultimate blame-the-victim story.

Robinson has been investigating the massacres since the mid-1980s, when he undertook PhD fieldwork in Bali. His research, including investigations with Amnesty International, identifies continuities in the political uses of violence from the Dutch colonial period to the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. When Robinson first began publishing on the 1965 killings, it was a forbidden topic in Indonesia, erased from textbooks and public histories. Books and articles on the massacres began to appear in the early 1990s, stimulated by the pioneering work of the Australian scholar Robert Cribb. Nevertheless, this remained a trickle restricted to low-circulation university outlets until the fall of President Suharto – who had ousted Sukarno in 1967 – in 1998. Then Indonesians began to publish and publicly debate the killings, though still in an atmosphere of threat and intimidation by the military and Islamic groups whose members had been perpetrators.

Wider international attention came with the release in 2012 of the controversial documentary film *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer and an Indonesian filmmaker who chooses to remain anonymous for fear of his life. The film addresses the currency of the killings in Indonesia but it is not a historical account, which is why Robinson's *The Killing Season* is so necessary. While the film works on emotions of fascination and horror, the book is deliberately clinical in its analysis of



Jakarta, October 1965

Unclean environment

Ensuring that victims of the Indonesian massacres do not simply remain statistics

ADRIAN VICKERS

Geoffrey B. Robinson

THE KILLING SEASON

A history of the Indonesian massacres, 1965–66

429pp. Princeton University Press. £27.95

(US \$35).

978 0 691 16138 9

Jess Melvin

THE ARMY AND INDOONESIAN
GENOCIDE

Mechanics of mass murder

322pp. Routledge. £115 (US \$140).

978 1 138 57469 4

Soe Tjen Marching

THE END OF SILENCE

Accounts of the 1965 genocide in Indonesia

220pp. Amsterdam University Press. €85.

978 94 6298 390 8

the causes, culprits and aftermath of the killings.

Despite, as he says, being motivated by outrage over the continued international and Indonesian silence, Robinson presents a dispassionate account of the circumstances of the killings, beginning with the legacies of colonialism and leading up to the postcolonial resurgence of the Indonesian Communist Party, which saw it become the largest body of its type outside China and the Soviet Union.

Robinson's earlier Bali research is the starting point for his descriptions of the killings themselves, in his fifth chapter, which is almost impossible to read. Under headings of “Who were the victims?”, “How were they killed?” and “Who killed them?”, Robinson draws on extensive descriptions from both primary and secondary sources. These include the widespread oral history work with survivors carried out by Indonesian researchers, only some of which had seen the light of day. The most recent publication of these accounts is Soe Tjen Marching's *The End of Silence*,

which is full of moving testimonies of suffering and oppression.

The opening of the chapter on the killings displays Robinson's ability to combine, with chilling calm, a broad theoretical and comparative analysis with a detailed understanding of events:

The enormous number of people killed in just a few months might lead one to suppose that the killing relied on modern technologies of destruction, such as high-powered firearms, aerial bombardments, gas chambers, or chemical weapons. But that was not the case. Indeed, like most mass killings of the late twentieth century, Indonesia's were carried out with the most rudimentary implements, and without resort to sophisticated technologies beyond the radio, gun, and motor vehicle. The closest parallel, then, is not Germany but Rwanda or Cambodia. He then gives us a prelude to the more detailed descriptions that follow:

While some were killed with automatic weapons or other firearms, the vast majority were felled with knives, sickles, machetes, swords, ice picks, bamboo spears, iron rods, and other everyday implements. And while some died in military or police detention, most died in isolated killing fields – in plantations, ravines, and rice fields, or on beaches and riverbanks – in thousands of rural villages dotted across the archipelago.

In summarizing the existing literature, Robinson acknowledges that the term “genocide” is now accepted in the scholarly community as a description of the killings. The term has grown in usage from its original etymology of planned destruction of an ethnic group to encompass systematic mass murder of any group in a nation. Marching's book uses the term in its title, as does Jess Melvin's *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide*, which also includes moving accounts of the nature and effects of the killings on particular communities.

Melvin is the first to have provided conclusive evidence that the genocide was planned and organized by the Indonesian Army. The PhD thesis on which her book is based was also

one of Robinson's sources for his chapter on the role of the army. Melvin, like Robinson, makes clear that a second wave of killings beginning in 1966 focused on ethnic Chinese. A common misconception about the massacres is that they were anti-Chinese from the outset, but Robinson shows, as does Melvin, that these attacks were a by-product of the main anti-communist actions.

Geoffrey Robinson, Jess Melvin, Soe Tjen Marching and the others working to document the killings are ensuring that the dead do not remain statistics, but have names that must be remembered, along with the families and places where they lived that were destroyed in 1965. They also document the continuing attempts by Indonesian political leaders to erase the victims from the historical record.

While much of Robinson's book draws on the growing literature in the field, his freshest contribution to our understanding of the mass murders comes through his extensive research in archives outside Indonesia, from which the CIA and MI6 emerge as shadowy cheer leaders and sources of support for the Indonesian military.

The word “silence” recurs in discussion of the mass murders, and Robinson shows that the active suppression of attention towards them within and outside Indonesia was a Cold War strategy. That Indonesians still live under the legacy of the Cold War should provoke the same feeling of outrage in all of us that impelled Geoffrey Robinson to produce his important book.



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