

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Amado Anthony G. Mendoza III

Geoffrey B. Robinson. *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66*. Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Jess Melvin. *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder*. Rethinking Southeast Asia. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 8, No. 1, April 2019, pp. 164-170.

How to Cite: Mendoza, Amado Anthony G. Review of *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66* by Geoffrey B. Robinson and *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder* by Jess Melvin. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, April 2019, pp. 164-170.

Link to this book review:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2019/04/vol-8-no-1-book-reviews-amado-anthony-g-mendoza-iii/>

View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2019/04/vol-8-no-1-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

Subscriptions: <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Iyas Salim

*Organization for Advanced Research and Education, Doshisha University****The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66***

GEOFFREY B. ROBINSON

Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder

JESS MELVIN

Rethinking Southeast Asia. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018.

Much like most controversial events in Indonesian history involving the military and the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI hereafter), the question regarding the extent of the Indonesian military's involvement in the systematic detention and massacre of alleged PKI leaders, members, and sympathizers during the aftermath of the September 30, 1965 coup is an issue that has left the public and scholars cold for many years. Evidence of this confusion is manifest, for example, in the enduring narrative (even among scholars and pundits) that the killings in 1965–66 were a result of spontaneous civilian violence aimed at communists, who were portrayed as the atheist and godless (*tidak beragama, tidak bertuhan*) “puppet masters” (*dalang*) of the abortive coup. Even the most critical of scholars (see, for example, Anderson and Mcvey 1971; Crouch 1978; Cribb 1990; Sundhausen 1982) have shown an uncharacteristic reluctance to describe the killings as a result of a nationally coordinated military campaign. The elusiveness of any semblance of resolution to the issue has resulted to the continued impunity enjoyed by the main architects and perpetrators of the genocide.

While a host of scholars have tackled the history of Indonesian genocide from various disciplines and methodological approaches (see, for example, Kurniawan *et al.* 2015; Kolimon *et al.* 2015; Sukanta 2014), with some even making transparent their sympathies for the victims and antipathy toward the perpetrators (see, for example, Mortimer 1969), none have really given conclusive answers in relation to the killings. Relatedly, there is an influx of autobiographical accounts from *ekstapols* (ex-political prisoners), with the rise of a youth generation curious about their nation's troubled history (*sejarah kelam*) and the emergence of “indie” presses in Bandung (Ultimus), Jakarta (Komunitas Bambu), and Yogyakarta (Antariksa, Insist, Kendi, Merakesumba). Hersri Setiawan's (former PKI member and chairman of LEKRA, or Institute of People's Culture, in Central Java) *Memoar Pulau Buru* (2004), Djoko Sri Moeljono's *Pembuangan Pulau Buru* (2017), and Martin Aleida's *Tanah Air Yang Hilang* (2017) come to mind when discussing works that have tangentially tackled the issue of mass detentions and killings during the aftermath of the 1965 coup.

While past and recent scholarship tried to examine the socio-cultural, religious, and area-specific aspects of the killings, autobiographies of former political detainees, and collected accounts of *ekstapols* and survivors focus more on the legacies of impunity and injustice left by the 1965–66 genocide.

In *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder*, Jess Melvin sheds light on the actual participation of the Indonesian military in the 1965–66 killings, pogroms, and civilian government purges inflicted against alleged members of the PKI and its affiliate mass organizations. Focusing on the province of Aceh as one of the primary and earliest evidence of killings having a “centralised and coordinated nature” (Melvin, p. 293), the book presents compelling evidence—through official military documents, telegram communications from various embassies, and personal accounts from perpetrators, survivors, and eyewitnesses—of the involvement of the Indonesian military in all the phases of the PKI annihilation campaign: the portrayal of the September 30 coup as a PKI plot; the encouragement of civilian participation in the physical annihilation of the PKI and its affiliate organizations; the consolidation and streamlining of the “official version of events”; and the subsequent rise of Suharto to power and the militarization of Indonesian bureaucracy. Moreover, by using genocide as the primary lens to understand the events in 1965–66, Melvin does not only attempt to vanquish the ghost that has for many years haunted contemporary Indonesian politics and history, but also contributed to the expanding field of genocide studies in Southeast Asia (see, for example, McGregor *et al.* 2018). On the other hand, as if a match made in heaven, Geoffrey Robinson’s *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66* (2018) pulls out all the stops by offering readers a comprehensive history of the 1965–66 genocide in Indonesia. Eschewing the exclusively area- and gender-specific, socio-cultural, psychological, and religious focus of past scholarship, Robinson favors a comparative approach which does not only account for the aforementioned, but also heavily considers the national and international factors that have influenced the course of events before, during, and after the 1965–66 massacres. Through his skillful and desultory reading of colonial and early postcolonial Indonesian military history, Soekarno’s deteriorating diplomatic relationship with the U.S. and other Western bloc states, and Indonesia and PKI’s pivot to China during the height of the Cold War, Robinson provides a multi-faceted narrative that veers away from pinning the blame to a single faction or party. In the same way, as a contribution to the field of genocide studies, Robinson’s approach also accounts for the variations and particularities of the Indonesian case (especially when considering the dates, methods, and parties involved in the killings) in contrast to other cases of mass detentions and killings.

Melvin’s book consists of eight chapters, with Chapters 2–7 providing a detailed chronology of the military response, civilian reaction, and killings in the various cities and sub-districts of Aceh during the aftermath of the September 30, 1965 coup. Robinson’s, on the other hand, consists of 11 chapters, with the first 4 dealing with the various preconditions and pretexts in modern Indo-

nesian history that “appear to have been especially important in facilitating violence against the Left” (Melvin, p.28). In Melvin’s opening chapter, meanwhile, she presents a comprehensive discussion on genocide as an emerging framework in understanding the 1965–66 killings in Indonesia. Through a review of the term’s usage and a quick overview of how genocide scholars have applied the term to understand various cases of genocide, the chapter raises convincing arguments which “confirms the early assumption that the 1965–66 killings can be understood as a case of genocide according to its sociological (non-legal) and legal definitions” (Melvin, p.31). Similar to Robinson’s current work, Melvin pushes for the use of the term “genocide” in describing the military, paramilitary, and civilian involvement in the mass detentions and killings in Aceh. Further, in the succeeding chapters, Melvin argues that the bureaucratic, ideological, and structural legacies of previous military campaigns during Soekarno’s Guided Democracy, most notably during the “Crush Malaysia” (Ganyang Malaysia) campaign, gave the Indonesian military an opportunity to consolidate their own ranks, granted them unprecedented access to various state organs, blessed them with unbridled authority to “train” civilian defense forces that could be mobilized in the event of a national emergency, and allowed them to control the narrative about the event.

In Chapter 2, Melvin provides a brief history of Indonesia’s national military command structure from the colonial period up until Soekarno’s conception of the Dwikora (People’s Double Command) in 1964; Aceh’s colonial and post-independence history, including its history of resistance against the Dutch and postcolonial separatist rebellions; PKI strength and presence in Indonesia and its surprising spread in Aceh; and the complicated relationship of the traditional and modern Acehnese elite (the *uleebalang* and *ulama*) with the Indonesian army’s top brass. By doing so, Melvin is able to provide context as to why Suharto and the Indonesian military were able to mobilize camps, such as the decommissioned rebel group Darul Islam, that were previously antagonistic toward them. Relatedly, the rise of the modern Acehnese elite and party politics in the province afforded the military, in hindsight, timely allies in their impending collision against the PKI during their 1965–66 campaigns. In addition, Melvin was able to debunk the enduring argument that decades-old conflict between the PKI and Islamic political factions was the main reason why the killings escalated into genocidal levels.

Chapter 3, on the other hand, gives readers a chronology of events both in Aceh and Jakarta from October 1–6, 1965. This brief period offered high-ranking military officials the opportunity to plan coordination tours across the regions, meet with local government leaders, and arrange mass meetings with various political parties (including representatives of the PKI to the Front Nasional) in order to explain “what really happened” on September 30, 1965. As shown in the military documents analyzed in the chapter, Melvin was able to prove the existence of a sophisticated and high level of coordination between the military command in Jakarta (led by Suharto), inter-regional and provincial commands in Sumatra (led by General Ishak Djuarsa), and other political allies, which include Islamic political parties and civilian militia groups. The chapter also

gives readers a glimpse into the campaign which spelled the complete destruction of the PKI in Aceh: *Operasi Berdikari* (Operation Berdikari). Chapter 4 presents a chronology of events from October 11, 1965. The said dates constituted Djuarsa's massive coordination campaign in various cities and regencies of the province. Through this coordination campaign, Djuarsa was able to relay specific instructions regarding *Operasi Berdikari* to various city military commands, local government units, and other key allies in the province. This, and the succeeding coordination and provincial campaigns described in the following chapters, account for the speed and sweep through which the violence in Aceh (and in other regions of Indonesia) spread, leaving a lasting legacy of militarism and intolerance which continues to suppress any semblance of dissent or critical thought in Indonesia.

Robinson's second, third, and fourth chapters read like a perfect complement to Melvin's first four chapters. In the second chapter, for instance, Robinson provides an analysis of the following: the (1) Indonesian colonial and revolutionary experience which inspired acute ideological cracks between the Muslims, PKI, and the Indonesian military; (2) the complexities of Indonesia's post-colonial state formation; (3) the Indonesian military's history of brutal repression of internal enemies; (4) and the highly volatile, polarized, combative, and militant nature Indonesia's post-independence politics, akin to a timebomb waiting to explode. Chapter 3, however, provides an in-depth analysis of the competing versions of the September 30, 1965 coup, while also underscoring specific inconsistencies and improbabilities of the New-Order-sponsored official narrative. Rounding out his foundational chapters, Robinson discusses in Chapter 4 Indonesia's political climate during the height of the Cold War in Southeast Asia in the early 1960s.

Chapter 5 of Melvin's work gives readers a glimpse of the first outbreak of public violence and first wave of mass detentions in Aceh from October 7–13, 1965. Through the military documents and personal accounts of perpetrators who were either ex-members of youth organizations and paramilitary groups, such as Pemuda Ansor (Ansor Youth), Pemuda Pancasila (Pancasila Youth), Hansip (Civilian Defense), and Hanra (People's Defense), we see how the Indonesian military skillfully "encouraged" civilian population in the annihilation of the PKI and its sympathizers. In Chapter 6, Melvin, through an in-depth analysis of national, regional, and provincial military documents, shows how the Indonesian military escalated the "war" against PKI through its own direct involvement in the arrests and killings of prisoners, recruitment, and mobilization of additional paramilitary units, and through the national indoctrination campaign launched by its allied anti-communist political parties. The chapter also features more personal testimonies from survivors, perpetrators, and eyewitness from various cities and sub-districts of Aceh. Chapter 7, on the other hand, focuses on the anti-Chinese violence and civilian government purges that occurred in Aceh, just months after the violence reached its peak in the province. Similar to the previous three chapters, readers will see how the military orchestrated the violence against specific segments of civilian populations, in this case the Chinese members of Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarnegaraan

Indonesia (Consultative Body for Indonesian Citizenship) or Baperki and the rest of the Chinese *pribumi* population in the province.

Chapters 5, 6, and 8 of Robinson's work provides a polyvalent account of the killings, underscoring its various aspects. Chapter 6 examines the violence in Java, Sumatra, and Bali based on accounts of perpetrators, survivors, and reports from national and international media; Chapter 6 zeroes in on the Indonesian army's specific role in the arrests and killings; while Chapter 8 argues that the relationship between the varying patterns of killing and detention is one of the anti-PKI campaign's most neglected aspects, and that both

[m]ass incarceration[s] and mass killing[s] were integrally related in two ways: first, in the sense that most of those eventually killed were first detained, and second, that rates of long-term imprisonment were lower where traces of killing were highest. (Robinson, p. 209)

Again, the aforementioned chapters read like a perfect counterbalance to Melvin's Aceh-specific narrative, especially in Chapter 8 where Robinson puts forward the same argument concerning the detailed and planned nature of the campaign at all levels (national, regional, provincial). Chapter 7, meanwhile, provides an interesting account of international involvement and response before, during, and after the anti-communist campaign in Indonesia. Through a deft look at the "assurances," "encouragements," and "silences" of the U.S., British, and Australian governments before, during, and after the pogroms and mass incarcerations, Robinson is able to draw a clear map of competing international interests in relation to the ongoing anti-communist campaigns in Southeast Asia and the world. Chapter 9 deals with the mass incarceration program employed by the New Order regime as part of its nationwide state propaganda and political censorship. Robinson's final chapters deal with several issues related to 1965–66: (1) actual attempts of various groups and organizations to establish a truthful and accurate account of the events in 1965–66; (2) resistance from the Indonesian government and military to mete out judicial punishment to perpetrators; and (3) various programs, and reconciliation and reparation for victims and survivors.

Readers, especially those who have little to no knowledge of the 1965–66 anti-communist purges in Indonesia, may find discomfort in some of the information disclosed in both books. More than the accounts of actual violence featured in both works, the calculated and callous nature of the killings still stands as the campaign's most harrowing aspect. Nevertheless, this discomfort might be assuaged by the fact that these books were written to settle age-old questions regarding the events that transpired during that "year that never ended" (*tahun yang tak pernah berakhir*). Specialists, on the other hand, will find in Melvin's work answers to questions that have eluded scholars who have previously tackled the 1965 coup and its attendant legacies. Scholars interested in international relations, especially in the anti-communist incursions of Western states in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, will find Robinson's work insightful and rich in historical data.

Through her interweaving of military documents, interviews, and personal accounts, Melvin

has probed into the complexities, contradictions, and lasting legacies of impunity of the anti-communist campaign in Aceh (and in Indonesia as well). In contrast to Robinson's macro approach, Melvin was able to see the traces of the national (even international) involvement through the examination of the provincial and local aspects of the genocide in Aceh. Emphasizing the centrality of military involvement throughout the anti-communist purges and in the consolidation of the nascent New Order regime's power, the book separates itself from past and existing scholarship on the 1965–66 genocide, which, due to the fugitive nature of primary sources (and the Indonesian military's paranoia), failed to explain the deliberate and organized nature of the killings, notwithstanding the existence of variations in methods and auxiliary groups involved. On the other hand, Robinson's comparative approach affords readers an opportunity to see the various internal and external interests in play before, during, after the 1965–66 genocide. More than just a straightforward narrative of the killings, Robinson is also interested in the continuing quest of justice for survivors and their families, and in the legacy of violence and silence the killings (and the regimes that sponsored it) have left on its wake. Finally, by stressing the centrality of "historically specific acts and omissions made by people in positions of political power" (Robinson, p. 296), Robinson convincingly argues that mass killings and incarcerations are not acts of a people who have run "amok" (as popular accounts are wont to claim), but of various forces and institutions that have decided to settle political conflict through violence.

Though Melvin and Robinson, like Oppenheimer with his films, might be accused of opening up old wounds, what these brave and groundbreaking books really open up is a way of breaking the specter of silence that has haunted Indonesian society for decades. Rich in historical data and written in impeccable scholarly prose, these two tomes are must-reads for Indonesians ready to confront the troubled history of their nation.

Amado Anthony G. Mendoza III

Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas, University of the Philippines-Diliman

References

- Aleida, Martin. 2017. *Tanah air yang hilang* [Lost homeland]. Jakarta: Penerbit Kompas.
- Anderson, Benedict; and Mcvey, Ruth. 1971. *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965 Coup in Indonesia*. Ithaca and New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program.
- Cribb, Robert, ed. 1990. *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali*. Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.
- Crouch, Harold. 1978. *The Army and Politics in Indonesia*. Jakarta: Equinox Publishing.
- Kolimon, Mery; Wetengterah, Liliya; and Campbell-Nelson, Karen, eds. 2015. *Forbidden Memories: Women's Experiences of 1965 in Eastern Indonesia*. Translated by Jennifer Lindsay. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing.
- Kurniawan et al., eds. 2015. *The Massacres: Coming to Terms with Trauma*. Jakarta: Tempo Publishing.
- McGregor, Katharine; Melvin, Jess; and Pohlman, Annie, eds. 2018. *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965:*

- Causes, Dynamics and Legacies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moeljono, Djoko Sri. 2017. *Pembuangan Pulau Buru: Dari barter ke hukum pasar* [Banishment in Buru Island: From barter to the law of the market]. Bandung: Ultimius.
- Mortimer, Rex. 1969. The Downfall of Indonesian Communism. *The Socialist Register* 8: 189–217.
- Setiawan, Hersri. 2004. *Memoar Pulau Buru I* [Buru Island memoir I]. Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.
- Sukanta, Putu Oka. 2014. *Breaking the Silence: Victims Speak about the 1965–1966 Violence in Indonesia*. Translated by Jennifer Lindsay. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing.
- Sundhausen, Ulf. 1982. *The Road to Power: Indonesian Army Politics, 1945–1967*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.