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Review: 1 Understanding the Indonesian Genocide of 1965—1966

Reviewed Work(s): The army and the Indonesian genocide: Mechanics of mass murder
by Jess Melvin

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Debate

Ratna Saptari, Ken MacLean, Annie Pohlman and Jess Melvin

Jess Melvin, (2018). *The army and the Indonesian genocide: Mechanics of mass murder*. New York: Routledge.

1 Understanding the Indonesian Genocide of 1965–1966: The Mechanics of Mass Murder, from National to Local

In the last few decades, a proliferation of studies has emerged regarding the disappearances, killings, and sexual violence that occurred in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966. As with most studies on mass killings in other parts of the world, questions raised in these studies included: to what extent were the killings engineered and conducted by the state; how did local hostilities shape the way they were conducted; and how were cultural categories utilized to justify the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of people. If other scholars have argued that local tensions have played a strong role in shaping the nature and scale of the acts of killing (Cribb 1990), Jess Melvin's book provides a strong factual account of the role of the military in establishing a chain of command connecting the military leadership in Jakarta with that of the province of Aceh. Her work is based primarily on two important archival sources. The first is the Laporan Tahunan Lengkap Kodam-I/Kohanda Atjeh (Complete Yearly Report of the Atjeh Regional Military Command/Regional Defence Command) signed by Aceh's military commander, Ishak Djuarsa, showing clearly the military's role in the annihilation campaign against the PKI in the province; the second is a number of classified documents that she obtained from the former Indonesian State Intelligence Agency's archives in Banda Aceh (Badan Intelijen Negara), located in the Aceh Government Library and Archives, containing among others executive orders to initiate genocide in the province. Her account is strengthened by interviews with seventy informants who were family members of those who were killed, former military personnel, government officials, and members of the death squad who participated in the genocide. Based on this material, Melvin contends forcefully that the chain of command linking the central military command and the provincial authorities was undisputable.

Melvin shows that although there were subtle socio-economic differences in Aceh's districts, the mass killing was a national scheme undertaken through a clear chain of command. That the army played a decisive role in mobilizing and directing the killings in various parts of Indonesia has also been argued by Robinson (2018), who showed that the intensity and scale of the killings and detentions was shaped by three interacting factors. These were the introduction of the dual function of the military (*Dwifungsi*), giving them legitimacy to deal with civil as well as military matters; existing local conflicts between anti-communist political actors and the communist party; and the support from the US government and other Western countries for the bringing down of Sukarno's government (Robinson 2018).

On the basis of her penetrating account of the mass killings in Aceh, Melvin firmly argues that these acts fall under the category of genocide. She moves away from the legal definition stated under the UN Convention on Genocide, which formulates genocide as acts committed to destroy national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups, and argues that the fact that the Indonesian military had the intent to annihilate and exterminate 'the communist group' qualifies their actions as genocide. The ordering of the book's chapters clearly shows the step-by-step process of the genocide, from the annihilation campaign and the incitement to kill, to the actual pogrom under the leadership of Ishak Djuarsa.

What is also interesting in her account is that in different parts of Aceh the coordination of the massacres varied in character. In Banda Aceh, collaboration took place between the military and the military police, while in North Aceh it occurred between the military and the para military. In Central Aceh, political prisoners were forced to kill, while in West and South Aceh killings were performed by members of the district government. What was the basis for these different strategies and to what extent do they reflect the different dynamics at the local level? Since members of the civil society were recruited to join in the annihilation process, one wonders how the economic and social context shaped the participation of these actors in the violent actions. For instance, Melvin states that in Central Aceh, a strong Darul Islam community existed side by side with the PKI community, the latter consisting mainly of Gayonese and Javanese migrants who worked on the plantations. However, she argues that these different political alliances did not result in conflictual relations. This was also the case in East Aceh, which was home to Aceh's largest rubber and tobacco plantation and also to Aceh's Javanese community. In this area, the PKI had a very strong base, and plantation workers were mostly members of the plantation workers' union (*Sarekat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia* or *SARBUPRI*) affiliated to the PKI. Although there was also a strong

rival political party, Masyumi, Melvin argues that despite some tensions, there was never any physical confrontation between the two parties. Particularly in the plantation areas of Aceh, one wonders why tensions based on land issues did not play a large role, as they did in the case of Java, where the 1960 Undang-Undang Pokok Agraria or UUPA (The Basic Agrarian Law) provoked the occupation of lands owned by large, private owners through 'unilateral actions' by the peasantry. If these forces did not play a significant role in the annihilation of large groups of people in Aceh associated with the PKI, was the motivation of members of civil society in collaborating with the military in these acts of killing mainly caused by the fear of being labelled as 'a threat to the nation'?

Furthermore, scholarly works on other cases of genocide show that sexual violence and rape are often used as weapons of war and genocide. It is interesting to note that neither in these documents obtained by Melvin nor in the narratives of the perpetrators or victims is there any mention of the sexual dimensions of the violence, an issue that other scholars have brought up for the Indonesian case (Wieringa 2011; Pohlman 2015). This raises the question of whether Aceh is an anomaly in this respect.

The depth of Melvin's work in unravelling the military chain of command in the mass killings conducted in Aceh is a strong contribution to our understanding of the history of 1965–1966 and also very beneficial for further efforts to challenge state impunity regarding Indonesia's violent past. Of course, this brings us to the question of how this highly important piece of work could bring us further towards breaking this impunity. Since the post-Soeharto period, diverse campaigns have been initiated by various social groups to break the silence, before and after the International People's Tribunal (IPT) 1965, which was held in The Hague in November 2015. It would be interesting to see whether, despite the strong Islamist movement in Aceh, a more critical approach to the history of 1965–1966 has been developed locally and provided various local platforms for students, activists, and other members of civil society.

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2 Historicizing the Archive: Rethinking the Mechanics of Mass Murder in Indonesia (1965–1966)

I am delighted to have the opportunity to comment on Jess Melvin's path-breaking book. My questions for her fall into three categories: the genocide versus politicide debate; the productive possibilities of denialism; and the advantages of investigating the archive in question as an object of analysis in addition to being the source of analysis.

The lengthy, two-volume set *The Genocide Convention: The travaux préparatoires* describes, in minute detail, the terms of the debate and the nature of the revisions that culminated in the legally binding 1948 convention on the 'crime of all crimes' (Abhati and Webb 2009). A close reading of the deliberations reveals that the Sixth Committee's members initially considered accepting the UN General Assembly's 1946 Resolution 96(1), which included political groups as one of the protected categories, along with racial, ethnic, national, and religious ones. The Sixth Committee, the primary forum for the consideration of legal questions in the General Assembly, ultimately decided to exclude political groups. It did so on the grounds that membership was a 'matter of individual choice, and such movements were ephemeral', genocide scholar Matthew Lippman (2002:181) explains. By contrast, he continues, the Sixth Committee members regarded the other protected categories included in the Genocide Convention as being characterized by 'cohesiveness, homogeneity, inevitability, stability, and tradition' (Lippman 2002:179). The distinction the Sixth Committee made reflected the beliefs of the time regarding what forms of identity were fluid, and thus subject to change, and what ones were fixed and hence not. But the decision to exclude political groups was also a matter of realpolitik. Member states resisted all provisions that would intrude upon their domestic