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The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66

BY GEOFFREY B. ROBINSON.
Princeton University Press, 2018, 456 pp.

“**F**orgetting the past was easy to do in Indonesia,” wrote Barack Obama in his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope*. When the future U.S. president was six years old, he moved to Jakarta with his mother, who had married an Indonesian man. They arrived in 1967, shortly after what the adult Obama would describe as “a massive purge of communists and their sympathizers,” when “between 500,000 and one million people were slaughtered.” Obama’s mother later insisted that they never would have gone to Indonesia if she had known about the massacres. His stepfather, who had been drafted into the Indonesian army, said that “some things were best forgotten.”

Few Americans have any awareness of what happened in Indonesia. Standard histories of the Cold War pay the country only cursory attention. (The historian Odd Arne Westad’s recent book, *The*

Cold War: A World History, is a distinguished exception to that rule.) Today, with Asia central to world politics, what was once dismissed as the strategic periphery has become the core. But most Americans are ill equipped to understand the region and the role their country has played there.

In *The Killing Season*, an authoritative and harrowing account of the massacres in Indonesia and their aftermath, Geoffrey Robinson seeks to recover this episode from historical oblivion. Robinson, a history professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who previously worked for Amnesty International, tempers his indignation with scholarly rigor. Confronted with a void, he fills it with archival citations. What emerges is a scathing and persuasive indictment of the Indonesian military and the foreign powers—especially the United States and the United Kingdom—that were complicit in the brutality.

THE DESCENT INTO VIOLENCE

During the Cold War, Indonesia—the fourth most populous country in the world—became an irresistible prize for the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. As these powers vied for influence, they deepened existing divisions within the country. On the right, there was Indonesia’s reactionary army, as well as nationalist and Islamist parties, which often had their own militias. On the left was a behemoth, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which boasted some 3.5 million members, as well as 20 million people who belonged to organizations aligned with it. The PKI was the third-largest communist party in the world, behind only those ruling China and the Soviet Union. By the

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mid-1960s, the United States and the United Kingdom feared that Indonesia was about to go communist.

The carnage began on October 1, 1965, when a group of junior Indonesian army officers killed six generals. The army's remaining chiefs, led by Major General Suharto, claimed that the killings were part of a Communist-backed coup attempt. They then unleashed what Robinson describes as an "awful juggernaut of arbitrary detention, interrogation, torture, mass killing, and political exile," systematically wiping out those branded as Communists or Communist sympathizers. Right-wing militias, death squads, and armed civilians often participated, too. Alleged association with the wrong group—regardless of the truth—was grounds for arrest or execution. President Sukarno's leftist government was swept away in the onslaught, and Suharto and the generals seized power. Robinson conservatively estimates that by the time the military assault ended, just over six months later, as many as half a million people had been killed. An additional million had been thrown into arbitrary detention or packed off to penal colonies and labor camps. All told, Robinson concludes, the campaign represents "one of the largest and swiftest, yet least examined instances of mass killing and incarceration in the twentieth century."

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

After 1966, Suharto's regime, eerily called the New Order, tried to shrug off the massacres as a popular uprising against the Communists rather than a coordinated military assault. Emphasizing the role of militias and local death squads, officials claimed that the violence was the spontaneous product of communal conflict.

Robinson dispenses with that myth. Drawing on Indonesian primary sources, he catalogs the brutality in haunting and gruesome detail and breaks down 50 years of official whitewash to reveal the army's central role in the massacres. These chapters are unbearable to read. Robinson shows that there was nothing banal or impersonal about the extermination of humans whom one Indonesian army officer called "less than animals." People were shot, decapitated, throttled, clubbed to death, gutted with bamboo spears, or slashed apart with knives, machetes, swords, or ice picks. Before being killed, women were often raped. Torture was routine. Guards would beat prisoners with clubs or electric cables, crush their toes, break their fingers, burn them with cigarettes, or deliver electric shocks. Some prisoners were forced to observe the torture of their spouses or children.

As in better-known cases of mass atrocity, such as those in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Syria, the horror in Indonesia was not the inevitable result of ethnic grievances or socioeconomic strife but a well-organized, systematic campaign carried out by political authorities. Robinson persuasively argues that without the Indonesian army to provide training, organization, and encouragement, individuals with parochial grudges could never have inflicted such widespread devastation. Although midlevel authorities had some discretion in choosing their methods, grisly patterns found throughout the country imply institutional repertoires of violence: decapitation, castration, the public exhibition of body parts and corpses, and particular forms of torture were all common. Local militia forces were almost always working either under the command of the army or with its blessing. And

the army supplied ideological justifications for the killings by dehumanizing accused Communists as “devils,” “whores,” “terrorists,” “animals,” and—particularly salient for some Islamist militias—“atheists.”

WESTERN RESPONSIBILITY

But the Indonesian army was not the only responsible party. *The Killing Season* also harshly condemns Western powers: Robinson argues that in Indonesia, “the United States and its allies aided and abetted crimes against humanity, possibly including genocide.”

In backing up that grave accusation, Robinson provides less a smoking gun than a kind of smoldering miasma. For one thing, the book contains few quotes from top White House officials and none from U.S. President Lyndon Johnson. The loquacious president’s silence here is notable when compared with his depiction in other histories of this period, such as Fredrik Logevall’s classic account of U.S. escalation in Vietnam, *Choosing War*, which shared ample direct evidence of Johnson’s thinking. But what Robinson does reveal is sordid enough.

In April 1965, the U.S. ambassador in Jakarta wrote to Johnson that Washington should give the army and other anti-Sukarno forces “the most favorable conditions for confrontation”; it’s not clear how or if the president responded. When the killing began, the CIA informed Johnson that it favored a broad crackdown on the Indonesian Communists, and he apparently did not object, according to Robinson. Around this time, British and U.S. officials made secret assurances to a top Indonesian general that they would not interfere in the country’s domestic affairs. Even as the atrocities

worsened, the Johnson administration offered no criticism. In November 1965, the U.S. deputy chief of mission in Jakarta told a senior Indonesian army officer that the Johnson administration was “generally sympathetic with and admiring of what [the] Army [is] doing.” Despite its brutality, the army’s campaign was met with enthusiasm in the Johnson administration: Undersecretary of State George Ball told Vice President Hubert Humphrey that if “the PKI is cleaned up . . . we will have a new day in Indonesia.”

Johnson’s team also spun the Washington press. Ball told James Reston of *The New York Times* that the Indonesian army had the “strength to wipe the earth with the PKI and if they don’t, they may not have another chance.” These actions met with no evident resistance from other parts of the administration. (In comparison, in 1971, U.S. diplomats in East Pakistan [now Bangladesh] risked their careers to oppose U.S. President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger’s support for a Pakistani military junta that was massacring Bengalis.)

COLD WARRIORS

Robinson spares no one, but his indictment is nuanced and rises above Cold War passions. He finds no evidence that the United States or the CIA orchestrated the coup attempt or the massacres. He doubts that a small CIA station could manage such devastation, and he is wary of exonerating the Indonesian army leadership and local murderers. Furthermore, Robinson repeatedly criticizes the charismatic Sukarno and other militant nationalists for dangerously escalating the country’s tensions. In 1959, Sukarno had decried parliamentary democracy

as a foreign implant that was alien to Indonesian culture and had installed an authoritarian “guided democracy.” Although the country was nominally nonaligned, Sukarno veered leftward—particularly as Mao’s China, on the brink of its Cultural Revolution, galvanized revolutionaries across Asia. To rally the public, Sukarno campaigned to crush the new country of Malaysia, which had been created from former British colonial territories in what he saw as a neoimperialist attempt to throttle Indonesia. In a 1965 speech, he declared, “We are now fostering an anti-imperialist axis—the Jakarta–Phnom Penh–Hanoi–Peking–Pyongyang axis.”

In criticizing the United States and its allies, Robinson also points out that they were responding to Soviet military aid to Sukarno and growing Chinese influence. China, in particular, had backed Sukarno’s campaign against Malaysia and offered to help him develop nuclear weapons. Zhou Enlai, Mao’s premier, offered the PKI 100,000 light arms to help it develop a militia force that would arm some 21 million workers and peasants. As the historian Taomo Zhou has shown, in 1963, the Chinese premier included the PKI in a meeting with Communist leaders from Southeast Asia, exhorting them to “go deep into the countryside, prepare for armed struggle, and establish base camps.” All this Chinese bluster, Robinson contends, while more show than substance, emboldened Sukarno and the PKI to challenge the army.

Still, Robinson’s main complaint is with the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies, which had been pressing the Indonesian army to smash Sukarno and the Communists for years. After 1958, when the Soviets extended massive

military aid to Indonesia, U.S. officials began funneling smaller amounts of support to the Indonesian army, which the Joint Chiefs of Staff described as “the only non-communist force in Indonesia with the capability of obstructing the progress of the PKI toward domination of the country.” As China ramped up its support of Sukarno, the United States started covertly funding and aiding anticommunists—including an Islamist party whose members proved particularly brutal during the killing campaign.

Worse yet, even after the mass killing began, the United States provided political support and modest amounts of covert assistance to the Indonesian military. And after Suharto seized power, in March 1966, the United States and the United Kingdom gave him ample aid, including military support. Soon after, the Australian prime minister, Harold Holt, cruelly joked to a New York audience, “With 500,000 to one million Communist sympathizers knocked off, I think it is safe to assume a reorientation has taken place.”

DOOMED TO REPEAT?

Mass atrocity is almost always followed by denial, and Indonesia is an especially bleak case in point. Suharto’s regime remained unrepentantly dedicated to stamping out any remaining leftists and repressing the subjugated provinces of Aceh, East Timor, and West Papua. Under his rule, Indonesia jailed a staggering number of political prisoners, and the New Order added hundreds of thousands of killings to its ledger.

Even after Suharto resigned, in 1998, in response to nationwide protests and the Asian financial crisis, Indonesia continued to bury its past. Unlike in Argentina,

Bosnia, Germany, and South Africa, there have been no war crimes trials, truth commissions, or even monuments to the dead. While some brave Indonesian scholars, activists, and journalists have spoken up, the slaughter has been consigned to oblivion—thanks in part to Western governments with bad consciences.

Robinson accuses U.S. officials, such as the ambassador in Jakarta and the CIA station chief there, of publishing deceitful accounts that whitewashed American responsibility. And for decades, the U.S. government refused or ducked requests to declassify relevant documents under the Freedom of Information Act. In 2017, under pressure from historians, activists, and Tom Udall, a Democratic senator from New Mexico, the government finally released 30,000 pages of records from the U.S. embassy in Jakarta from 1964 to 1968. The glacial pace of declassification is an affront to the victims, an impediment to accountable democratic governance, and a gift for conspiracy theorists. (It is also routine. I'm still waiting on a mandatory declassification review request related to U.S. policy toward Bangladesh that I filed six years ago with the Nixon Presidential Library.)

The United States is not the only country concealing things. As Robinson argues, it is high time for Indonesia to open up its own archives and hold war crimes trials for those implicated. China also keeps its foreign policy decisions shrouded in darkness. Although Beijing briefly declassified some Foreign Ministry papers from this period in 2008, authorities reclassified the bulk of that material in 2013. Chinese scholars worry about the political risks of trying to dig up dirt.

The findings of Robinson's painstaking scholarship may shock those

accustomed to triumphal readings of the Cold War, but Robinson provides a more accurate, if less inspirational, perspective on U.S. policy. The fall of the Soviet empire was a historic victory for liberty, but that is all the more reason to look hard at the United States' darker deeds during the Cold War: devastating wars in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; support for bloodstained governments in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Iran, South Africa, and Zaire (present-day Congo); covert backing for coups in Iran and Guatemala; and complicity in campaigns of mass violence in Indonesia and East Pakistan.

The United States has done little to memorialize or make amends for these dire chapters of its history. There is no prospect of a truth commission for the Cold War. Obama, marked by his early experiences in Indonesia, was unusually forthcoming. In a momentous visit to Jakarta in 2010, he made only an oblique reference to "violence and killing," which "was largely unknown to [him] because it was unspoken by [his] Indonesian family and friends." But in the spring of 2016, he told *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg, "We have history in Iran, we have history in Indonesia and Central America." Around that time, Obama paid a somber visit to a memorial to the victims of the U.S.-backed military dictatorship in Argentina. In September 2016, he acknowledged the civilians killed in the secret U.S. war in Laos, although he stopped short of apologizing. Republicans called these actions unpatriotic.

More than 50 years after the massacres in Indonesia, the United States remains a country that rarely takes responsibility for past transgressions, devotes little effort to educating its

citizens about foreign countries or its historical entanglements abroad, and has a political system that rewards ill-informed and belligerent candidates. All those flaws have congealed in the squalid presidency of Donald Trump, who is more openly contemptuous of human rights than any president since Nixon—and lacks any of Nixon’s strategic vision. Trump has expressed admiration for authoritarian leaders such as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He publicly applauded Saudi Arabia’s “strong action” in Yemen without mentioning the thousands of civilians killed by its bombs. And he praised Rodrigo Duterte, the brutal president of the Philippines, for an “unbelievable job on the drug problem” — explicitly supporting the alleged extrajudicial killings of over 7,000 people, a campaign that Human Rights Watch says could amount to crimes against humanity. It seems likely that Trump will echo some of the worst offenses of his predecessors—and commit some new ones of his own. 🌐