Debate

Ratna Saptari, Ken MacLean, Annie Pohlman and Jess Melvin


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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References


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(I), 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
prerogatives, that is, outside interference in the internal affairs of another sovereign state. In some instances, the state-sponsored mass murder of members of the political opposition was one such prerogative.

For these reasons, political scientists developed the concept of ‘politicide’ to describe the genocidal-like action that some states took against real and imagined members of groups its leaders believed to be a threat to their continued rule. (The Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China are the most commonly cited ones.) But the question remains: should politicide remain a distinct category, as many scholars argue? Or should our understanding of genocide be broadened beyond the existing legal definition to include non-legal ones? Melvin firmly aligns herself with the second camp, citing the military’s own documents as material evidence that its commanders viewed the cadres of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) and everyone associated with them as an identifiable sociocultural group that needed to be ‘annihilated down to the roots’. The claim that such a group could be delimited, although not without merit, raises a question that runs through her account of the initial weeks of killing: what is gained and what is lost if the violence of 1965–1966 is categorized as genocide rather than politicide? What, in other words, is at stake in this debate beyond adding the events of 1965–1966 to a tragically long list of twentieth-century genocides? How does our understanding of what occurred change (or not) if analysed through the lens of both concepts?

Melvin’s meticulous, detective-like effort to challenge the silence that surrounds Indonesia’s genocide/politicide is reminiscent of Taner Akçam’s book Killing orders (2018). In it, Akçam established the authenticity of the telegrams high-level Ottoman officials issued, directing subordinates to carry out attacks on the empire’s Armenian population. His careful scholarship dealt another significant blow to Turkish denialist claims that the telegrams were forgeries designed to malign the government for a genocide its soldiers and their collaborators did not commit. The issue of denial occupies a similarly complicated place in the Indonesian case. Perpetrators continue to proudly declare that their violence helped save the country from ‘inhuman’ and ‘atheist’ communists and their fellow travellers, making the killing justified in their eyes. The government similarly refused to issue an apology on the grounds that the destruction of the 30 September Movement was the ‘right thing to do for the nation’. And, despite the recent declassification of some embassy files, the US government has yet to concede that it aided and abetted the massacres by signalling it would support military action if the PKI presented ‘justification for repressing it’.

1 For a related discussion, see Hinton and La Pointe 2013.
Melvin, although she touches upon these issues, might consider broadening the discussion to engage with Stanley Cohen’s (2001) work on denialism. He distinguishes between literal denial (nothing happened), interpretive denial (what happened is really something else), and implicatory denial (what happened is justified). Elements of all three forms are at work within the dominant narratives that characterize the Indonesian case, that is: a genocide/politicide never occurred; the violence was spontaneous and decentralized rather than state-directed; and the deaths were acceptable because the PKI was a ‘mortal enemy’. Cohen’s typology invites a number of questions. In what ways, for example, would utilizing Cohen’s concepts complexify the historiography of the 1965–1966 period in New Order and post-New Order Indonesia beyond the issue of whether or not genocide occurred? What implications might the three forms of denial Cohen identified have for those people who desire that some form of truth and reconciliation commission be set up? What strategies and tactics might be useful in challenging and overcoming these modes of denial? Finally, what models, employed elsewhere, might be usefully adapted for use in the Indonesian context, given that retributive justice is not a realistic possibility?

The genesis of Melvin’s book proves the old adage: ‘You don’t ask, you don’t get.’ However, the ‘facts’ found in the over 3,000 pages of classified documents Melvin obtained are not transparent, a point that Ann Stoler (2002:93–5) makes in her call for a shift from viewing the ‘archive-as-source’ to the ‘archive-as-subject’. The documents Melvin reviewed are a small part of a much larger, still unexamined national archive on 1965–1966 created, organized, and utilized in, as yet, unknown ways. The traditional view of archives as sources of knowledge extraction rather than knowledge production, Stoler argues, misses the ways in which states, as well as others, tell stories about themselves, exercise power within and beyond their bureaucracies, and determine which secrets can be told and which must be protected. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who writes about the power of silences, makes a related point. Trouillot (1995:26) argues that silences shape historical production at four key moments: ‘the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retroactive significance (the making of history in the final instance)’. Consequently, the distinction between ‘what happened’ and ‘that which is said to have happened’ is not always clear, according to Trouillot. Both arguments suggest that much can be gained by examining the documents not only for what they say, but also for what they do not, as Kristen Weld did in her fascinating book Paper cadavers: The archives of dictatorship in Guatemala (2014). How, then, does stepping back, theoretically and methodologically,
to read the Indonesian military documents, both with and against the grain, affect the questions researchers should ask about the events of 1965–1966 moving forward, if access to materials from elsewhere around the country becomes possible?

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References


3 ‘No, Really, It’s the Military.’

It is rare that a book makes a big splash in Indonesian studies, even rarer when that book is the author’s first. Jess Melvin’s The army and the Indonesian genocide: Mechanics of mass murder has made such a splash, and I have been very pleased to watch the water sluice out, pouring over the Indonesian military’s lies of the last five decades and, indeed, dampening much of the scholarship written about 1965 in the process. Melvin’s book—which draws on the military’s own records to prove that the army incited and carried out the killings and mass detentions—confirms once and for all what survivors of
this violence have been saying for decades: local civilians often participated in the killings, but it was the army that drove them. Meticulous in her detailing, Melvin devotes the majority of her book to laying out the chronology of the army’s ‘eradication campaign’ against the communists. One can’t help but echo Liem Soei Liong’s (2002) assertion: ‘It’s the military, stupid!’

Before going on, I must declare a conflict of interest for this review. I met Jess Melvin when we were both PhD students and, in the decade since, have collaborated with her on a range of projects. We have co-authored and co-edited materials, and I consider her a very good friend. I am not an impartial reviewer of Melvin’s work and I share many of her political sympathies, particularly when it comes to demanding truth and justice for the victims of 1965.

With the majority of the book devoted to going through, step by step, the chronology of the army’s policy of a coordinated eradication campaign, the emphasis is on the military’s own records—or the ‘genocide files’, as Melvin calls them. She assigns Chapter One to addressing the issues around using the term ‘genocide’ to describe the anti-communist eradication. She marshals her evidence and arguments very capably for why we should be applying this term, addressing specific issues to do with the military’s intent, the target group, and whether that group should be ‘protected’ under the UN Genocide Convention. Those less familiar with the literature in comparative genocide studies tend to get themselves tangled up in highly legalistic, narrow interpretations of genocide, which revolve around prosecuting it as an offence under international law. I am sorry to say that many learned colleagues have cast their eye briefly over Article II of the Convention and then dismissed the 1965 case out of hand. The field of genocide studies has moved well beyond these interpretations, though, and Melvin’s arguments provide a new, and well-founded, contribution to this field with her description of the army’s eradication of an ‘ideologically constituted’ national group. The 1965 case is one which tests our conceptual boundaries and understandings of what genocide is; Melvin’s analysis pushes out those boundaries and that is a good and helpful endeavour. Pushing those conceptual boundaries helps us to understand both the Indonesian case better and the phenomenon of genocide more broadly.

I am also glad that Melvin calls out the apologist nature of some of the scholarship written about 1965, particularly that produced during the New Order period. Her assessments of this earlier scholarship are fair: she notes that it was indeed much more difficult to conduct research on 1965 under the regime, and that it was much harder to interview survivors. Yet there were those who did just that, such as Saskia Wieringa, who started interviewing Gerwani (the communist-aligned mass women’s movement) members in 1981, at the height of that regime. Quite rightly, Melvin highlights that there seemed to be a num-

Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde 176 (2020) 373–394
ber of scholars who basically took what the military authorities told them at face value and reproduced it. I think it is important to say as well that these more apologist accounts—those which repeat a number of falsehoods regarding the nature and coordination of the killings, such as the fiction that the military were somehow bystanders to the wrath of civilians caught up in blood lust—have endured in their authority on the topic. That is, until now, I sincerely hope. In her assessment of the existing literature on 1965, Melvin also highlights the critical contributions of a number of key scholars, such as Wieringa and Cribb, and points out how these contributions have clarified so much of what we know about the killings. Certainly the discovery of the genocide files puts paid to the military’s barefaced lies about 1965, but survivors have said that the killings and mass detentions were centrally coordinated and directed for many years. So, now that Melvin’s work provides the military’s own documentation for this, perhaps scholars can devote what little time we have left with the remaining survivors (and perpetrators and bystanders) to fill in the many, many other blanks in our knowledge about this period.

I would also note that this book is not just about the Indonesian army. It is a book about Melvin’s second home, Aceh, and the violence that marked so many lives in that place. As such, the story that Melvin tells about Aceh is, in many ways, far richer and reflects much more the years that she has spent in the province. This richness is found particularly in the sketches that she makes at different points in the book about individuals and their communities, and their perspectives and experiences, which she draws on to help the reader understand the terrible events that unfolded around these people. The section in Chapter Two, for example, where she introduces people she interviewed in the various districts of Aceh, gives us a much better understanding of the conditions in these districts prior to the killings than the speculative accounts about the province seen before. Melvin interviewed survivors, eyewitnesses, and perpetrators of the mass violence in Aceh, and these accounts are just as vital to understanding this violence as the military’s documents.

As this review contributes to a debate about Melvin’s book and its impact, however, I will restrict myself to two points: the first is that, though undeniably it is Melvin’s focus, this story is not just about Aceh but can tell us much more about the killings in a wider sense. This is a topic that Melvin points to in the introductory section, where she talks about regional variation, but revisits in the conclusion. In this closing section, Melvin begins what I hope will be a larger conversation within our scholarly community about the coordination of the anti-communist campaign at the national level, and how this played out across Indonesia. Melvin asks a number of provocative questions about this in the conclusion, and I would invite her to lay out an agenda for this future
research. Second, and related to the first, what role should our largest source of information—that is, the oral and written accounts primarily produced by survivors and witnesses—play in this future research agenda?

To conclude, I note that *The army and the Indonesian genocide* is currently being translated into Indonesian; the English version has been bootlegged already throughout activist circles in Indonesia. If the English version made a splash, then when the Indonesian version drops, I am sure we will see an even bigger wave. Finally, they say that historians get better as they get older. *The army and the Indonesian genocide* is Melvin’s first book and I, for one, cannot wait for her next manuscript.

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References


4 Reading the Indonesian Genocide Files

Before I begin, I would like to thank each of the reviewers, Ratna Saptari, Ken MacLean, and Annie Pohlman, for their generous comments and thoughtful questions. I would also like to thank them for their patience. Due to unforeseen circumstances, it took longer to reply than I had hoped.

4.1 Stoler’s Challenge

How should the Indonesian genocide files be read? This is the question at the heart of Ken MacLean’s astute comment that the Indonesian genocide files—the 3,000 pages of military documents which I found in Aceh in 2010—should

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2 I discovered the bundle of documents that I call the Indonesian genocide files in the archives of the former Badan Intelijen Negara (BIN, State Intelligence Agency) in Banda Aceh. I visited this archive after my colleague Douglas Kammen sent me a copy of a report prepared by the Komando Daerah Militer Aceh (Kodam Aceh, Aceh Regional Military Command), outlining its involvement in the 1965–1966 genocide. The report had been scanned as part of the
be read ‘both with and against the grain’. In doing so, MacLean invites me to respond to American anthropologist and historian Ann Stoler’s challenge that researchers view archives ‘not as sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production’ (2002:90). Read this way, Stoler explains, archives serve as ‘monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography’. MacLean asks what an ethnographic reading of the Indonesian genocide files might look like and how such a reading might affect the questions researchers ask about the events of 1965–1966 moving forward.

An ethnographic reading of the Indonesian genocide files provides a fascinating lens through which to view the 1965–1966 killings. Not least, this is because prior to the discovery of the archive in 2010, it was not yet known if such an archive existed. It was not known, for example, if the Indonesian military had produced any written orders, nor was it known what role, if any, the state had played in the violence (Crouch 2007 [1978]; Cribb 2010). The Indonesian genocide files constitute the most comprehensive collection of internal military documents produced during the time of the genocide ever to be discovered. They also point to clear similarities between the 1965–1966 mass killings in Indonesia and other cases of state-orchestrated mass murder of unarmed civilians during the twentieth century, including the Holocaust, which constitutes the archetypal case of genocide.

Prior to the discovery of the Indonesian genocide files, researchers were reliant on public military documents and oral history accounts from survivors, perpetrators, and other eyewitnesses of the violence (Notosusanto and Saleh 1978; Cribb 1990). These two sources of evidence presented researchers with two, often diametrically opposed, examples of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes as ‘that which is said to have happened’ (2004:2). The exact mechanisms through which the killings were implemented, let alone the question of who was ultimately responsible for the killings—explanations ranged from civilians running amok to Indonesian state-directed policy (Cribb 2002)—remained a topic of open debate.

Following Stoler, we can understand the Indonesian genocide files as a monument to the New Order state. They provide the first glimpse of how the military, which rose to power on the back of the killings, seized control of the state and explained its role in the killings to itself. They also provide evidence of what the military wanted to say about its role in the killings, what it could not say, and what it had to say in order to ensure that its campaign was able to

Aceh Digital Library project initiated by KITLV during the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Reading this document, it became apparent that the military had kept detailed records of its involvement in the violence.
be implemented. But, before this new source of evidence could be unravelled, it was first necessary to learn how to read the archive. This required painstaking detective work, as it was necessary to track down the meaning of different acronyms, position titles, references to legislation, and other military-speak.

The Indonesian genocide files were produced, in the first instance, to be understood by members of the Indonesian military and other key civilian political leaders, who were assumed to understand not only the terminology used in the documents but also the political situation in which they were produced. I often found this information in the most obscure of places, including in legal-military documents found in various private archives. I read the documents against each other, producing endless timelines and chains of command and by following the paper trails that revealed which orders and documents were seen as the most important. It was only once the archive could be read at this most basic level that it was possible to begin to analyse the mechanics of how the killings were implemented and, moreover, what the documents might say about the regime that created them.

Stoler concurs with Michel Foucault’s proposal that the archive is not an institution but the ‘law of what can be said’ (Stoler 2002:94). The Indonesian genocide files confirm that the Indonesian military trod a fine line between acknowledging and denying its agency behind the killings. It described the killings internally as the result of an ‘annihilation operation’ led by the military (Melvin 2018:110–32), while never explicitly ordering the mass killing of civilians in its written documents. On the one hand, the documents tell us, the military wished to portray its annihilation operation publicly as defensive, necessary, and legal. In doing so, it avoided portraying the operation as offensive, waged in cold blood, and counter to the fundamental common-law principle that unarmed civilians are entitled to protection. On the other hand, the military was, nonetheless, required to produce thousands of pages of documents to coordinate what amounted to its most extensive mobilization since Indonesia’s War for Independence (1945–1949). In bridging the gap between ‘that which is said to have happened’ and the hard evidence produced through the coordination and implementation of the military’s annihilation operation, the Indonesian genocide files tell us how the military justified its actions to itself.

The files show that the military used legislation from the government’s existing Ganyang Malaysia (Crush Malaysia) campaign to enact martial law in Sumatra from 1 October 1965 (Melvin 2018:73–4). It also declared a state of emergency in Jakarta to stop what it ingenuously described as an abortive communist coup. It then proceeded to hold coordinating meetings at each level of civilian government in Aceh, including at the local, district, and pro-
vincial level, in order to garner official support for its annihilation operation (Melvin 2018:138–55). It also held coordinating meetings with civilian militia groups, which, it is recorded, were mobilized and armed to ‘assist’ the military in its annihilation operation (Melvin 2018:162–87). The military was careful, however, not to provide written orders explicitly calling for the mass killing of civilians. In its records, victims’ bodies are ‘found’ in the streets, or state prisoners simply disappear after being transported to state-run jails and detention centres (Melvin 2018:175).

The reason for this silence was not so much due to a fear of prosecution under either national or international law; to this day, perpetrators enjoy complete impunity for their actions. Rather, it would appear that such an admission was considered beyond the ‘law of what could be said’. It was ‘mandatory’ for the Indonesian people to ‘assist’ the military in its annihilation operation against the Indonesian Left (Melvin 2018:126), but the precise manner in which the majority of the killings were perpetrated—at military-controlled killing sites around the country—was left off the record. This information can be revealed by triangulating the military’s internal account with oral history accounts by perpetrators and survivors: the documents place targeted individuals in the military’s custody and track their transportation to known killings sites, while oral history accounts describe how these targeted individuals were murdered and buried in military-controlled mass graves (Melvin 2018:194–230).

The discovery of the Indonesian genocide files enables researchers to tighten their questions about the events of 1965–1966. What is needed now is the production of clear timelines and chains of command for each of Indonesia’s provinces. In the case of Aceh, I have been able to identify key phases in the military’s annihilation operation. This information can now be used as a template for other provinces: were the same phases followed, or were there different patterns in the violence? It is vital for oral history accounts to be attached to clear dates, locations, participants, and directions. In order to achieve this, researchers should be seeking to locate further archives as a matter of urgency.

4.2 Interpreting Local Patterns
Ratna Saptari insightfully points to a key area of debate among scholars of the 1965–1966 period when she asks how differences between national and local patterns in the killings should be interpreted. As Saptari explains, while ‘other scholars have argued that local tensions have played a strong role in shaping the nature and scale of the acts of killing’, my book provides clear evidence that the killings were centrally coordinated by the military. It also documents how the killings were implemented ‘step by step’ in each of Aceh’s districts, illuminat-
ing subtle differences in how the killings were coordinated at the local level in different parts of the province. What is the reason, Saptari asks, for these ‘different strategies’ and how do they square with the argument that the killings were centrally coordinated?

Historically, a false dichotomy has emerged within scholarship into the 1965–1966 killings over how the killings should be understood. This tension was originally a result of what I have described as the ‘evidence problem’ that researchers found themselves burdened with prior to the discovery of the military’s own internal records. This is because, while it was not yet known if national orders had been produced, there was a greater understanding of the killings at the local level, based largely on oral history accounts from survivors (Cribb 1990; McGregor, Melvin and Pohlman 2018:3). By focusing on local patterns, researchers were able to tell the story of the killings without constantly running up against the problem that they did not yet know if, or how, the killings had been centrally coordinated. This explanation became problematic, however, when local variations in the killings were viewed as diminishing the role of centralized leadership behind the killings (Cribb 1990; Kammen and McGregor 2012).

In a country as large and as diverse as Indonesia, it should be no surprise that local patterns in the killings would arise, even though, as we now know, there is incontestable evidence that the killings were implemented as part of a centrally coordinated campaign led by the national military leadership. As for local patterns within Aceh itself, Saptari asks why different groups were called upon to act as executioners in different districts. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand local histories in each area. Yet, it is just as important to understand that the killings could not have occurred on the scale and with the level of coordination that they did without the centralized leadership of the national military command.

Nationally, as in Aceh, there are more similarities in the patterns of violence than differences. In the case of Aceh this was due, in large part, to the personal role of Aceh’s military commander, Ishak Djuarsa, who conducted a coordination tour of the province to demand that all local military commands, civilian government bodies, and civilian populations ‘assist’ the military in its annihilation operation. By connecting local patterns in the violence with the military’s own internal records of that violence, it is possible to unpick the specific chains of command responsible for the implementation of the military’s annihilation operation, stretching all the way from Jakarta down to the village level.

In her review, Saptari asks why tensions based on land issues did not play a large role in the violence in Aceh, as it did in Java. The answer to this question has historical roots. Aceh was one of a number of provinces that experienced
social revolution during the national war of independence (Morris 1985). In Aceh, this movement was led by Aceh's peak Islamist organization, the Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh (PUSA, All Aceh Ulama Association, led by Daud Beureueh, who would go on to lead the Darul Islam rebellion in the province between 1953 and 1962), and PUSA Youth (led by Teungku Husin Al Mudjahid, a young religious scholar who was allied with PKI-led social revolutionary forces in neighbouring East Sumatra) (Reid 1979; Insider 1950). At this time, Aceh's traditional, landed aristocracy, the uleebalang, were attacked for their support of a Dutch return. Many uleebalang families were killed and their land and property seized by social revolutionary forces. While some of this land was made available for immediate use, the remainder was placed under the control of the provincial government (Melvin 2018:76). This meant that, by 1965, land reform in Aceh was not as pressing an issue as it was in other areas, such as Java. Ironically, this was in large part due to communist influence within Aceh's Islamist movement during the late 1940s.

This influence would not last. By 1965, clear fault lines existed between former Darul Islam fighters, who allied themselves with the national military leadership following the movement's surrender in 1962, and the PKI, which was seen as a conduit for Sukarno's socialist vision for Indonesia in the province (Melvin 2020:25). In addition to strongly advocating for the rights of workers (especially teachers, and plantation and railway workers) and peasants in the province, the PKI led vocal campaigns criticizing the military's rapprochement with former members of Darul Islam. The PKI opposed the implementation of Islamic law (Syariat Islam) in the province, which had been supported by the military as a means to bring the rebellion to an end. It also called for the 'cleaning out' of former Darul Islam elements from the villages (Melvin 2018:79–80). It was not inevitable that this fault line should develop. It is a little known fact that the military mobilized PKI sympathizers in Central Aceh into militia groups to fight against Darul Islam units during that rebellion (Melvin 2018:86–7). During both the Darul Islam rebellion and the military's annihilation operation, it was the military's political objectives that ultimately determined who was considered friend or foe.

Saptari asks what motivated members of Aceh's civil society to collaborate with the military as part of its annihilation operation in the province. This motivation can be largely explained by two factors: first, civilians were explicitly ordered by the military to participate in this operation and warned that, if they did not cooperate, they could expect to be targeted themselves (Melvin 2018:139–55); and, second, former members and sympathizers of the Darul Islam were fearful of being portrayed as disloyal to the military, as it was only three years since they had been offered amnesty and the opportunity to
reintegrate within the national armed forces (Melvin 2018:77). Darul Islam supporters disliked both Sukarno and the PKI and had no reason to attempt to prop up Sukarno’s faltering regime. Yet, large-scale violence did not occur in the province until it was ordered and facilitated by the military.

Saptari also asks about the prevalence of sexual violence in Aceh during the time of the killings and questions why this is not a topic covered in more detail in my book. Sexual violence did occur in Aceh during the time of the killings. During my fieldwork, I heard survivors and perpetrators speak about sexual violence, including the apparent mass rape that occurred at a killing site in Meulaboh, West Aceh (Melvin 2018:215). However, such violence is not recorded in the military’s internal documents, most likely because it was considered to be unspeakable and beyond the ‘law of what can be said’. This is clearly a topic that requires further study. It is my hope that this important topic will be taken up by other researchers in the future.

4.3 Does the Genocide Label Matter?

MacLean, in his review, traces the history of the exclusion of political groups as a protected group under the Genocide Convention. He explains the rise of the term ‘politicide’ as a response to this exclusion and asks what is ‘at stake’ in categorizing the 1965–1966 killings as genocide. In The army and the Indonesian genocide, I argue that the 1965–1966 killings should be understood as a case of genocide. I make this argument because it is this charge that best captures the military’s stated intent to ‘destroy, in whole or in part’ its target group. In addition, this target group, identified by the military as both Indonesia’s ‘communist group’ and as ‘atheists’ (a group that included not only PKI members and their sympathizers but also the Indonesian Left and their families and acquaintances in general), can be understood as a national and religious group, both of which constitute protected groups under the Genocide Convention. My aim in utilizing the genocide label is thus to trigger international-law mechanisms to bring those responsible for this violence to account. By contrast, the term ‘politicide’ has no legal standing and is a purely theoretical concept. There is no gain to be made in describing the 1965–1966 killings as politicide other than to highlight the problematic nature of genocide as a concept.

MacLean has suggested that I intend to ‘broaden’ existing legal definitions of genocide to include ‘non-legal ones’. That is not my position. Rather, I propose that the 1965–1966 killings fall under the existing legal definition of genocide—prominent legal scholars Matthew Lippman (1994:210) and David Nersessian (2010:24) state that atheistic groups can be understood as a ‘religious group’ under the Convention—while also pointing to the problematic nature of this normative definition. Australian genocide scholar Dirk Moses (2020:1) argues
that the concept of genocide is highly problematic and can, in fact, be used to obfuscate the principle that all state- and para-state sponsored murder of civilians should be vehemently opposed, regardless of the identity ascribed to the groups killed. Moses asks why the killing of civilians motivated by race hatred should be seen as worse (the ‘crime of crimes’), compared with, for example, the indiscriminate killing of civilians during warfare, known dismissively in the West as ‘collateral damage’. The legal definition of genocide, itself the product of a long, political process aimed at ensuring that the victors of World War Two would not face genocide charges themselves, Moses explains, has resulted in a de-politicized understanding of genocide which marks it as something extremely rare and almost impossible to prove.

I agree with Moses that genocide is a highly problematic concept. At its worst, it clings to outdated notions of essentialist group identity that do not even cover all groups exterminated during the Holocaust. Meanwhile, social science has argued successfully for decades now that racial and ethnic identity are as constructed as other forms of group identity (Moses 2020:19; Cornell and Hartman 1998). The charge of genocide is likewise too often used as a political cudgel: it is a crime that ‘we’ as ‘civilized’ and ‘moral’ beings do not commit. Rather, it is a crime that can only be carried out by uncivilized and immoral ‘others’. This slip into anti-scientific discourse is deeply unhelpful. I use the term genocide to describe the 1965–1966 killings in Indonesia because it captures the special intent (dolus specialis) requirement of the crime. Mass murder becomes genocide when it is carried out with the ‘intent to destroy’, either in whole or in part, a specific target group, and the Indonesian military openly admits to holding this special intent in its internal documents (Melvin 2018:41–3).

What types of groups qualify as protected groups under the Genocide Convention—whether they are primordial or constructed—should surely come second to the issue of intent. Unfortunately, the question of whether or not the 1965–1966 killings should be understood as genocide often overshadows what are arguably more important questions, such as: How did the Indonesian military manage to mobilize the entire state and civilian population to participate in its annihilation operation? And how were up to one million unarmed civilians systematically murdered by the Indonesian state without so much as a raised eyebrow from the United Nations and with the express approval of Western nations? I am not blindly wedded to the term and would be prepared to drop it, as long as the central questions of intent and agency, complicity, and impunity, are properly addressed.
4.4 **Challenging Official Narratives**

In his review, MacLean remarks on the complicated nature of official denial surrounding the 1965–1966 killings. In doing so, he points to the work of South African sociologist Stanley Cohen, who proposes that states can engage in three basic forms of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory (Cohen 2013:7–9). MacLean astutely proposes that all three of these forms of denial can be seen in the Indonesian state’s official narrative of the violence, whereby it is stated that genocide/politicide never occurred; the violence was decentralized rather than state-directed; and the deaths were acceptable because the PKI was a ‘mortal enemy’. He asks how utilizing Cohen’s concepts might ‘complexify’ the historiography of the 1965–1966 period and how these modes of denial might be challenged and ultimately overcome.

Cohen’s concepts complexify the historiography of the 1965–1966 period by confronting the Indonesian state’s official narrative on multiple fronts. This includes confronting the insidious claim—also adopted in the West—that however horrible the killings might have been, they were ultimately justifiable because they stopped the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Yet, it is important to remember that the ability to directly confront the Indonesian state’s official narrative in this manner is new. A central reason why the 1965–1966 killings have remained ‘justifiable’, both within Indonesia and among its allies, has been the difficulty in refuting the Indonesian state’s continued denial of responsibility for the violence. This is because, without access to the military’s internal documentation of the violence, it was not yet known how the killings had been implemented in any detail.

The Indonesian state’s continued denials—literal, interpretive, and implicatory—can now be directly confronted by comparing the state’s official public narrative of what happened with the state’s official internal narrative of what happened. It is now indisputable that the military initiated an annihilation operation for the stated purpose of annihilating Indonesia’s communist group; that this violence was coordinated by the national military leadership, which mobilized existing chains of command to coordinate this operation until the formation of a new nationwide command, the Komando Operasi Pemulihan Keamanan dan Ketertiban (Kopkamtib, Operations Command to Restore Security and Order), was established specifically for this purpose in late 1965; and that this operation was offensive in nature and deliberately aimed at an unarmed, civilian population, for the stated purpose of annihilating the military’s target group as such. Each strand of this new narrative proves the military’s official public narrative to be based on deliberate lies and misinformation. It also provides new ammunition for those advocating for the establishment of an official truth and reconciliation commission to investigate the events of 1965–1966 in Indonesia.
4.5  **Future Directions for Research**

Annie Pohlman, in her review, has asked me to lay out an agenda for future research into the 1965–1966 period. She posits this question as one of the key researchers of this period, who has dedicated her professional life to rewriting the history of the 1965–1966 violence through the voices of its survivors. If a research agenda for future research into the 1965–1966 period could be contained in a single sentence, it would surely be for researchers to search for facts, facts, facts. We are currently passing through a critical phase in the post-life of the 1965–1966 killings, in which the events are remembered as lived memory, to a time in which no living participants will remain. It is absolutely imperative that we speak with as many remaining living participants as possible, including survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, and any other witnesses. It is also vital to use this moment to collect as much primary-source documentary evidence as possible, before it is too late.

Pohlman asks what role our largest source of information, the oral and written accounts primarily produced by survivors and witnesses, should play in this research agenda. Below I outline six essential tasks for students and scholars planning to conduct new research into the 1965–1966 period. This guide begins with practical steps for how oral and written accounts can be used alongside internal records to best leverage both forms of evidence. It concludes with suggestions for how researchers can become more involved in broader initiatives to seek truth and justice for the events of 1965–1966:

1. Interview living survivors and perpetrators of the 1965–1966 killings. As far back as 1991, historian Robert Cribb was already warning that the time to carry out such interviews was quickly passing. When you interview survivors and perpetrators, attempt to elicit as much specific information as possible: ask for names, dates, positions, specific chains of command, and timelines. Compare what different informants say against each other and against the documentation that you can find. Try to understand the motivations of each informant for presenting events in the way they do.

2. Locate and search local government and military archives for documents related to the 1965–1966 period. Be creative. Do not disclose that you are looking for documents related to the military’s annihilation operation. Instead, find a different reason, such as a desire to learn about local culture during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the military’s Ganyang Malaysia campaign, or the Darul Islam rebellion. You can find the documents you need by looking for the date they were produced rather than their titles. Anything from the 1965–1966 period is potentially useful.

3. Piece together the information found in official documents with the information gained from interviews using a triangulation method. Match pub-
lic military accounts and internal military accounts with oral history accounts from survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators. Try to establish specific chains of command and timelines for each geographical area you study. Focus on detail and patterns. Compare events in different geographical locations. Follow paper trails, find out why the document was produced and where it was sent. Ask yourself what the military was attempting to achieve by doing the things it did. What existing legislation and norms did the military draw upon? How did the military mobilize and coordinate civilian groups to participate in its annihilation operation campaign? How did the military justify its actions? What silences can you find in the evidence? Is it possible to locate acts of resistance, no matter how small?

4. Support the Indonesia Trauma Testimony Project (ITTP), which aims to bring together all known archives and testimonial materials related to the 1965–1966 period. It is currently engaged in a race against time. The ITTP is run by volunteers and you can get involved by collecting and sharing your data. If you are given a photo or some other piece of personal evidence, make sure you write down where it came from. Who gave it to you? What does it depict? What is its significance? The ITTP is also collecting oral history recordings made in Indonesia. In the years to come, the ITTP will be looking for volunteers to make transcripts of these recordings. You can also share your own recordings and transcripts in the knowledge that they will be professionally preserved and made available to future researchers.

5. Support the work of the Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia (Komnas HAM, Indonesian National Human Rights Commission) and other human rights organizations in Indonesia that are conducting research into the 1965–1966 period. Understand that these organizations often have to be extremely careful about what they say publicly. While there was an opening up of Indonesian society during the years following Soeharto’s fall from power in 1998 and a political will to learn lessons from the country’s dark past, this will has now largely evaporated. The Indonesian state currently has little to no desire to investigate the 1965–1966 period. This is because the history of the 1965–1966 period is not only the history of the destruction of the Indonesian Left, it is also the story of how most of the current ruling elite gained their power. It is important to understand that, ultimately, the reason why the Indonesian state refuses to properly investigate the 1965–1966 period is due to a lack of political will rather than a lack of evidence.

6. Remember that a comprehensive history of the 1965–1966 period requires not only a rewriting of New Order historiography but also a rewriting of
the history of the Cold War. Why is it that the murder of up to one million unarmed civilians in Indonesia was heralded with great excitement not only by the Indonesian military but by governments in the West? Why is it that some lives are viewed as more valuable than others? How can researchers outside Indonesia bring pressure on their own governments for accountability for their own role in the killings? In what ways might legacies from the Cold War continue to shape our present?

Today, researchers of the 1965–1966 period are in a new position: they can now turn the military’s own words back upon them. It becomes incredibly difficult for the Indonesian state to maintain denial of its involvement in the killings when it has also recorded this involvement in the most minute of detail. If the Indonesian state wishes to maintain that the killings were justified, let it throw open its archives. Let us also call for our own governments to do the same. Let the whole world read the Indonesian genocide files.

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**References**


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