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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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