

**“IF YOU LEAVE US HERE, WE WILL DIE”:** How Genocide Was Stopped in East Timor. By *Geoffrey Robinson*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. xvi, 319 pp. (Figures, maps, B&W photos.) US\$27.95, cloth. ISBN 978-0-691-13536-6.

After a 1999 United Nations-sponsored referendum in which a strong majority of East Timorese voted for independence, Indonesia’s military (the TNI) and its militia allies waged a campaign of terror and destruction. Over a few weeks, they killed many hundreds of civilians, forced at least 400,000 people to flee their homes—almost half of the illegally occupied territory’s population—while burning or destroying about 70 percent of East Timor’s buildings and infrastructure.

Historian Geoffrey Robinson vividly recounts the terror and the surrounding events, while offering a multifaceted analysis of the structural and contingent factors that brought about and ultimately stopped it. In doing so, he engages important discussions on violence, humanitarian intervention, and justice following mass atrocities. The result is a thoroughly researched, carefully analyzed and compellingly argued work, one greatly enriched by Robinson’s first-hand witnessing of, and participation in, myriad developments he discusses as a political affairs officer with the UN mission that oversaw the vote.

In analyzing the terror, Robinson interrogates the three principal explanations that circulate, all of which, he finds, have some value. The first is that the militias were a spontaneous response to the public emergence of the pro-independence movement in 1998-99, and that their violence reflected traditional cultural practices. The second is that the TNI formed the militias and orchestrated them. And the third is that powerful Western countries and the United Nations are responsible for the violence because of their failure to take appropriate action.

Indonesian officials most typically advance the first, one “not wholly without foundation,” says Robinson, given divisions among East Timorese and a tradition of violence, typically colonially fostered, on the half-island. Yet, among other deficiencies, such explanations fall short by referencing supposedly “universal psychological conditions or cultural traits,” and are unable “to account for variation across time and place” (12). Hence, Robinson ultimately gives little credence to this line of analysis, and emphasizes the second and third explanations.

To help explain why the TNI and its paramilitary allies engaged in the scorched-earth campaign—in violation of Indonesia’s international obligations and in the presence of a UN mission and international media representatives—Robinson introduces the concept of an “institutional culture of terror.” This describes “a complex and evolving system of norms, discourse, and behavior *within an institution*, in which extreme violence or terror is a

defining feature” (46)—a feature that infected commanders, soldiers and members of affiliated organizations. Thus, while the militia groups had diverse socio-geographic origins, they drew upon a common “repertoire of violence” (121).

Longstanding Western complicity or acquiescence also contributed to TNI calculations, Robinson surmises, making the military confident that international intervention would be slow in coming—and perhaps not happen at all. Indeed this seemed like an accurate forecast in early September 1999 as the terror exploded when “powerful states [most notably the United States] continued to insist that the restoration of order was Indonesia’s responsibility” (185).

What explains this posture’s reversal was “an unusual conjuncture of historical trends and events that distinguished that moment decisively from the situation in the late 1970s”—including the presence of many foreign observers and journalists; the influence of international NGO and church networks; East Timorese courage and fortitude; and a “temporary shift in prevailing international norms and legal regimes that strongly favored humanitarian intervention” (19).

This conjuncture’s outgrowth was a UN-authorized military force that ended Indonesia’s reign of terror in East Timor. This prevented a second genocide from occurring, Robinson suggests, a position for which he offers remarkably little support. (The first occurred in the 1975-79 period, the initial years of Indonesia’s invasion and occupation).

Given “the consequences of international *inaction* [my emphasis] in the late 1970s with the results of intervention in 1999” (244), Robinson concludes, one can only determine the merits of international humanitarian intervention on a case-by-case basis. Regardless of the conclusion’s wisdom, *inaction* was not the problem in the late 1970s. As Robinson explains, various Western countries “effectively encouraged the invasion of East Timor, facilitated the institutionalization of state terror in Indonesia, and abetted crimes against humanity” in both countries. Had they not done so, “it is quite possible” that the terror in 1999 and the previous 24 years “would never have happened” (244).

That they did aid and abet Indonesia’s crimes for so long makes this reader wish that Robinson had applied his lens on pathologically violent institutional culture to Western states. What is it about their “norms, discourse, and behavior” (46) that led them to behave across different governments/administrations in such violence-enabling ways, to say nothing of their directly violent practices abroad? Similarly, one wishes that Robinson extended his excellent analysis of the lack of accountability by the TNI and other elements of the Indonesian state following the occupation to Jakarta’s international partners-in-crime, and thus enriched his insightful discussion of justice and reconciliation.

Those concerns notwithstanding, Robinson's meticulously crafted book is an important one for experts on Southeast Asia, international affairs, violence, transitional justice and human rights alike to consider and debate. Its clear writing, historical depth, and strong yet nuanced analysis also make it highly appropriate for both upper-level undergraduates and graduate students.

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