

Anti-genocide Activists and the Responsibility to Protect

Annette Jansen



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‘Combining deep conceptual innovation and insight with original primary research, this important new book illuminates the world of “responsibility to protect” activism and identifies the values, concerns and motives that lay behind the global campaign to eliminate mass atrocities. Experts in the field and new students alike will benefit from this book’s critical reflections and its insights have relevance well beyond the world of R2P and mass atrocities.’

– Alex Bellamy, *Director of the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, The University of Queensland, Australia.*

‘Annette Jansen explores with great sensitivity the idea of the “sacred in the secular” as a distinctive motivation for humanitarian interventions – and therefore as acts that are neither purely altruistic nor simply part of global power play. The book argues that it is not merely the urge to prevent or stop genocide that energizes the call for humanitarian intervention but the sense of horror at the assault on “Humanity” as a sacred entity. A rich and nuanced comparison is made between the discourses of the Responsibility-to-Protect advocates on the one hand (Rwanda, Yugoslavia, etc.), for whom the aim is to save “Humanity,” and solidarity activists on the other (e.g., East Timor), whose primary concern is to protect and promote the political independence of a particular national entity. This book is a significant contribution to the literature on humanitarianism.’

– Talal Asad, *Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus, Graduate Center City University of New York, USA.*

‘Scholars have spent a lot more time trying to understand the perpetrators of genocide and atrocity crimes than they have the individuals who feel it is their duty to stop such crimes from taking place. What motivates these human rights activists and humanitarians is the focus of Annette Jansen’s fascinating book. Although they are attempting to save potential victims, they also see themselves as attempting to save a universal humanity that they hold to be sacred. In their defence of the sacred, they are not only following their beliefs, they also are saving themselves from losing faith in humanity altogether.’

– Michael Barnett, *University Professor of International Affairs and Political Science, George Washington University, USA.*



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Anti-genocide Activists and the Responsibility to Protect

Although the Genocide Convention was already adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1945, it was only in the late 1990s that groups of activists emerged calling for military interventions to halt mass atrocities. The question of who these anti-genocide activists are and what motivates them to call for the use of violence to end violence is undoubtedly worthy of exploration.

Based on extensive field research, *Anti-genocide Activists and the Responsibility to Protect* analyses the ideological convictions that motivate two groups of anti-genocide activists: East Timor solidarity activists and Responsibility to Protect (R2P)-advocates. The book argues that there is an existential undercurrent to the call for mass atrocity interventions; that mass atrocities shock the activists' belief in a humanity that they hold to be sacred. The book argues that the ensuing rise of anti-genocide activism signals a shift in humanitarian sensibilities to human suffering and violence which may have substantial implications for moral judgments on human lives at peril in the humanitarian and human rights community.

This book provides a fascinating insight into the worldviews of activists which will be of interest to practitioners and researchers of human rights activism, humanitarian advocacy and peace building.

Annette Jansen has a professional background in humanitarian policy making and obtained a PhD in social cultural anthropology at Amsterdam VU University, Netherlands. She currently works as an independent researcher and policy adviser on themes related to conflict, peace building, religion and gender.

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Note on informants

The names of informants in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Three exceptions were made for public figures whose roles in the movements have already been documented in other publications.



Figure 0.1 Australian East Timor solidarity activists and sympathizers turn to the streets of Melbourne demanding a UN intervention in East Timor, September 1999.

Source: Used by permission of photographer John Englart (Takver). © Creative Commons Sharealike 2.0.



Figure 0.2 Annual ministerial meeting on the responsibility to protect during the opening of the UN General Assembly session, co-hosted by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P), September 2011.

Source: GCR2P. Used by permission of the GCR2P Director.

For Janine, the most dedicated activist I know



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Preface

We had to pick a new country for me to work on. I had just returned to the headquarters of Oxfam Novib in The Hague after a six month mission to tsunami-affected Aceh. My colleague, also an advocacy officer, already 'did' the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Arms Trade Treaty. He suggested taking up Afghanistan.

It was March 2006, and the Dutch parliament had consented to a Dutch troop contribution to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan. The Dutch involvement in the ISAF mission followed that of various other European nations. Many occasions would arise to lobby for the protection of Afghan civilians and for a reconstruction policy that would prioritize the needs of vulnerable Afghan people. Oxfam Novib had supported local Afghan civil society organizations since 1982, so we had the position and background to provide some meaningful input.

From that time on I was deeply involved in the humanitarian lobby to prevent what we called 'the blurring of lines' – the mixing of roles and responsibilities between the military and humanitarians. The 'blurring of lines' – so we were convinced – would hamper the impartiality of humanitarian assistance and would thus ultimately affect the Afghan people in need of that assistance. I recall travelling to the NATO headquarters in Brussels with other Dutch advocacy officers in an attempt to convince the NATO press officer to abstain from framing the military ISAF mission as a humanitarian mission. I remember my outburst during the formal meeting of the Dutch Afghanistan Platform, in response to a military officer who said that NGOs should not make such a fuss because 'we are all there for the same thing'. 'We are not!' I responded to his reddening face: 'Our primary goal is to protect Afghan civilians, to support reconstruction in line with *their* needs and wishes. Your primary goal is the fulfilment of a military mission and for that you are seeking to win the hearts and minds of Afghan people. To you, the Afghan civilians are instrumental to a counter-insurgency strategy!'

By then Oxfam Novib had taken a more principled stance in the debate on humanitarian military interventions, by opposing the ISAF mission and seeking to safeguard humanitarian principles. Other Dutch NGOs however, had opted for a more pragmatic approach. In their view, the humanitarian scene had changed irrevocably: the involvement of the military in the domain previously dominated

by humanitarians could no longer be prevented. Moreover, more humanitarian and human rights activists began to call for UN military interventions to protect civilians and safeguard human rights.

These developments worried me. How could it be that ‘we’ human rights activists and humanitarians, who so clearly came from a background of non-violence, ended up advocating the use of violence? How could we be so sure – given the range of reports on the failings of UN peace keeping missions – that the use of force would actually bring our goal nearer? That it would not further exacerbate violence and increase human suffering? Why did a movement that was so well-known for its tradition of self-criticism and aversion to power refrain from tackling this dilemma in a much more fundamental way? Why this urgency and insistence to increase the means for mass atrocity interventions without any fundamental discussion on the premises and without any substantial data to go on?

Due to my background in the science of religions perhaps, I sensed a strong ideological and existential undercurrent in the call for (military) mass atrocity preventions that I wished to uncover. As I wrote at the time in an angry contribution posted on a blog of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC):

there is also this aspect of human rights having evolved into one of the most popular worldviews of our times. A worldview that offers a quite particular narrative as to how the ‘modern civilized’ world should perceive, judge and deal with violence, suffering and cruelty. It is larded with missionary language and zeal, it calls on people to join the struggle for human rights, to secure the ‘never again’, and does not shy away from using political, moral and even military violence to achieve that end.

(Jansen 2009)

So here I was, the lone human rights believer suffering a crisis of faith. I decided to formulate my own research agenda to come to terms with what I felt were key questions of identity and direction. That agenda should help the human rights and humanitarian community to confront its ambiguous relation to violence. It should do so by analysing the ideological conceptions and assumptions of violence and human suffering that informed the call for humanitarian military interventions – or mass atrocity interventions as they were named by Responsibility to Protect-advocates. Conceptions and assumptions that, I sensed, could better be grasped, examined and explained with the aid of concepts from social anthropology and science of religions – such as ‘the sacred’.

My personal quest eventually resulted in this book. I hope that it managed to transcend the prejudiced position of the distressed humanitarian advocacy officer that I was at the time. I hope that I acquired the scientific skills to produce something that moves beyond the outcry ‘*I don’t like what you did to my religion!*’, as scholar in international relations Michael Barnett so rightly qualified one of my earlier writings.

Reference

Jansen, Annette. 2009. Why the human rights movement struggles with good news stories. *Making Sense of Sudan*. <http://africanarguments.org/2009/09/17/drawn-by-disasters-why-the-humanrights-movement-struggles-with-good-news-stories/> (accessed 29 March 2013).

Acknowledgements

Thinking of the past six years the image of a journey emerges, a journey filled with so many places, faces, objects and people – people with whom I might have spoken only for a few minutes, people who shared their life stories with me, people who were my intellectual or emotional anchors. Together they wove the web that lifts and holds together this book – a book that can never fully do justice to the actual – varied and multifaceted – lives and stories on which it was built. It is also a book that makes me indebted to many of you. For, as my supervisor warned me at the onset of my research, as an anthropologist you will always in some way or another betray the people whose worldviews you study: and he did not even begin to speak of how I would neglect friends and family at times when once again I found myself immersed in research, secluded in the solitary sanctuary of my study.

Acknowledging this irredeemable shortcoming on my part, I still want to make an attempt to say to all those who made this book possible:

Thank you.

Thank you Freek, Gerrie and Henk for being the best possible supervisory team I could imagine. Henk for offering to ‘carry me through’ this project and keeping your word, Gerrie for encouraging me time and again to think and choose freely, Freek for being almost my editor-in-chief ever since I started writing.

Thank you the seventy-one informants whom I cannot name because of the privacy I promised you. Your willingness to engage in soul-searching regarding your own life choices and humankind’s destiny proved invaluable to my research. Thank you for opening up your lives to me and sharing the stories, experiences and insights that constituted the raw material of this research. Thank you Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect in New York and Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect in Brisbane for your courageous decision to welcome me into your offices, even though you sensed that what I ultimately wrote might be critical of what you believe in. I hope I managed to strike a balance in this book between expressing sympathy and respect for your struggle whilst retaining the critical eye of the researcher. I hope that some of my insights may enrich you as yours did me.

Riet, Ben, Yvonne, Mustapha, Mayssa and Sam – the preciousness and precariousness of family have become so much clearer to me over the last five years.

Thank you Mama, because I have inherited your craving for knowledge and reading, and for teaching me to be curious about different peoples and cultures and never to judge others. Thank you Papa for passing on your eye for beauty and showing me how to carry on when the going gets tough, and thank you Yvonne for being my soul sister in every sense of the word.

Thank you long-time friends – Anne Mieke, Babbe, Bianca, Cécile, Coree, Debbie, Elvira, Erwanto, Hans, Janine, Jorrit, Lisa, Marijn, Marina, Margriet, Rebecca, Roelf, Petruschka – for being my emotional anchors, for your unfailing warmth, laughter, joy, our many dinners, outings and walks, your patience and support.

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Last but not least, to all those wonderful, colourful people from the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Amsterdam VU University who gave me a home away from home – thank you. Thank you Marjo and Ton for opening the doors to me, Annet for your good humour and practical assistance: Aalte, Alexander, Amer, Daan, Emine, Erik, Joan, Lidewijde, Maaïke, Marina, Mijke, Nasreen, Peter, Rhoda and many others for your companionship, for sharing frustrations, insights, joy, many lunches and drinks and for those innumerable tokens of support and understanding that only initiates can offer to each other.

Acronyms

ACFOA	Australian Council for Overseas Aid
APCET	Asia-Pacific Coalition for East Timor
APR2P	Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
ASA	Asian Student Association
AWD	Action for World Development
CARE	Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (humanitarian organization originally founded in the United States)
CAVR	Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste [Portuguese] – Timor Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation
CDPM	Comissao para os Direitos do Povo Maubere [Portuguese] – Commission for the Rights of the Maubere People
CHART	Clearing House for Archival Records on Timor
CICC	NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court
CIDAC	Centro Informacao e Documentacao Amilar Cabral [Portuguese] – Information and Documentation Centre Amilar Cabral
ETAN	East Timor and Indonesia Action Network
EU	European Union
Falintil	Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste [Portuguese] – Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor
Fretilin	Frente Revolucionaria de Timor Leste Independente [Portuguese] – Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor
GCR2P	Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
ICISS	International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty
ICRtoP	International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect
IFET	International Federation for East Timor
INTERFET	International Forces East Timor
IPJET	International Platform of Jurists for East Timor

LEKHAT	Lembaga Hak-hak Masyarakat [Indonesian] – Social rights organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
OXFAM	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (international humanitarian organization originally founded in the United Kingdom)
PRD	Partai Rakyat Demokratik [Indonesian] – People’s Democratic Party
R2P	responsibility to protect
RENETIL	Resistencia Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste [Portuguese] – National Resistance of East Timorese Students
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
TAPOL	The Indonesian Human Rights Campaign (based on Indonesian abbreviation <i>tahan politik</i> meaning ‘political prisoner’)
TimTim	Timor Timur [Indonesian] – East Timor
TIS	Timor Information Service
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UDT	Uniao Democratica Timorese [Portuguese] – Timorese Democratic Union
UN	United Nations
UNAMET	United Nations Mission in East Timor
YCS	Young Christian Students Movement, also referred to as Young Christian Workers (YCW)



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1 Introduction

We urge you to send a clear message that, collectively, the international community, the Security Council and the Human Rights Council will not be bystanders to these mass atrocities. The credibility of the United Nations – and many innocent lives – are at stake.

(UN Watch 2011)

‘What’s it all for?’

I sat in the canteen of a New York university. Opposite me was a woman whom I had known ever since I joined the advocacy team of Oxfam Novib, the Dutch branch of Oxfam International. When I was only just starting to lobby politicians and governmental representatives this woman was a great example to me. I recall her detailed knowledge of conflict areas, her outstanding talent for political and policy analysis, but above all the zeal and determination she put in following through advocacy campaigns until some meaningful change had been achieved. Here she was again, seven years later, still working at full speed while her belly clearly indicated that she was due to give birth within a week. This time she had joined the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect to advocate implementation of ‘the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’ (United Nations 2005: 30). This newly ‘emerging norm’ – called R2P by insiders – seeks to increase the ability of the UN to end mass atrocities.¹ When R2P is invoked the international community represented by the UN can impose various sanctions on the state committing mass atrocity crimes, including, as a last resort, the use of military force.

Marvelling at what seemed to me an endless flow of energy and dedication, I asked her how she managed to remain so committed. What motivated her to dedicate so much of her time to ending the suffering of distant others? With visible disinterest, she began to list a number of socio-cultural factors – mentioning her Christian upbringing and ‘some British colonial guilt’. Then, after a pause, her tone of voice changed. She remembered being in a meeting with a group of R2P proponents, including Gareth Evans, co-chair of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) that had developed the R2P doctrine. ‘At some point during this meeting’, she recalled, ‘Gareth said, “whatever

2 Introduction

we screwed up in the past, let's not screw this up, for then we destroy all that's left of the international community". 'And he is right, you know', she exclaimed, 'for if we cannot stop or prevent mass atrocities, then what's it all for?'²

This book studies the worldviews and beliefs that motivate activists to advocate mass atrocity interventions. It unravels the ideological conceptions and assumptions through which anti-genocide activists view the world and humanity and make moral judgements on human suffering and violence. It does so by studying two groups of anti-genocide activists – the East Timor solidarity activists who supported East Timorese self-determination and called for interventions to end what they perceived as a genocide in East Timor from 1975 to 1999, and the R2P-advocates who promote the implementation of the newly emerging norm of 'the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity' since its inception in 2001 (United Nations 2005: 30).

The study builds on the view that the urge to respond to horrific scenes of ethnic cleansing cannot be explained solely as an act of altruism or merely by the need to protect international stability. Mass atrocity interventions are also a response to an image of human cruelty that is so appalling to those who cherish a worldview of human rights and humanitarian values that they feel they must resist it, if need be by violent means. The communal killings in Rwanda, Srebrenica and Darfur are experienced as a direct attack on core beliefs of what it means to be human – beliefs and values that have become so central to the meaning of life of many activists that the mere thought of giving up their struggle evokes questions of an almost existential nature. As the R2P-advocate exclaimed above, 'if we cannot end or prevent these atrocities, then what's it all for?'

This existential question underpinning the call for mass atrocity interventions constitutes the main subject of my research. My interest is in the activists' world-making in the sense of meaning making – 'the structures of meaning that allow us to come to terms with the world' (Van de Port 2011: 23). What intrigues me and the worldviews and beliefs I seek to unravel, are those of the people who are in no way directly affected or threatened by mass atrocities, yet who somehow feel an urge to act in response to the suffering of *distant* strangers. This phenomenon is well captured by Judith Butler:

And yet, it seems to me that something different is happening when one part of the globe rises in moral outrage against actions and events that happen in another part of the globe, a form of moral outrage that does not depend upon a shared language or a common life grounded in physical proximity. ... These are times when, in spite of ourselves and quite apart from any intentional act, we are nevertheless solicited by images of distant suffering in ways that compel our concern and move us to act, that is, to voice our objection and register our resistance to such violence through concrete political means.

(Butler 2011: 2)

Focusing on the activists who respond to distant suffering means that I will not describe or analyse the views and experiences of the victims and survivors of mass