When a state commits atrocities against its own people, what should be the response of the international community? The failure of the global actors to prevent the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the mid-1990s ushered in the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), an international norm that was later adopted by all members of the United Nations General Assembly in 2005. But how do we explain state action (or, indeed, inaction) to avert ethnic cleansing in the pre-R2P era? This is the core question of Volker Prott's study of international intervention during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

Also known as the third Indo-Pakistani war, the Bangladesh Liberation War was a secessionist revolution and conflict in which the eastern wing of the Islamic State of Pakistan, then known as East Pakistan, gained its independence as a sovereign nation state (present day Bangladesh). Arguably, the antecedents of the Bangladesh independence movement can be traced back to the hasty partition of British India following its independence from colonial rule in 1947. As is well known, the partition of British India attempted to demarcate territory along religious lines on the belief that South Asian Hindus and Muslims represented two distinct nations. To put this theory into practice, the departing British colonial administrators created a Muslim-majority state comprised of two non-contiguous wings: East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (modern-day Pakistan). Shelley Feldman recently observed that Pakistan was born out of a “problematic territorial logic” that privileged Islamic solidarity over all other forms of collective identity, such as ethnic, cultural or linguistic ties. The roots of future unrest were therefore established at the moment of decolonization.

The following twenty-three years in Pakistan were punctuated by sporadic popular uprisings, growing inter-ethnic animosity, economic exploitation and dictatorial rule. The relative significance of each of these

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variables remains contested among scholars. Whatever the driving factor, many East Pakistanis believed in a general sense that they had removed one set of colonial rulers (the British) only to be replaced by another (the Pakistanis, specifically, Punjabis). In 1970 two events in Pakistan turned an unhappy union into an untenable arrangement. First, in November a cyclone and tidal bore killed an estimated 500,000 civilians in East Pakistan. While civilians suffered in the wake of the disaster, the central Pakistani government in Islamabad effectively turned the other way, providing minimal aid to its eastern province. East Pakistanis vented their anger at the second significant event: the long-planned general election in December 1970. Although the ruling junta had intended to create the electoral circumstances to ensure the ascension of the Pakistani People’s Party (PPP), a favorite among the military elite in Punjab, East Pakistanis used their sizeable population to elect the Bengali-dominant Awami League, a party that proposed regional autonomy for the eastern province. Over the next few months, the junta, the PPP and the Awami League negotiated a power sharing arrangement, to no avail. The sticking point was that the military wanted to install a Turkish-style civil-military regime, such as the PPP, which would perpetuate the army’s control of the state yet had no electoral mandate to do so. Talks broke down between the three groups and Pakistan’s dictator, Yahya Khan, began plans for a military assault against the disorderly eastern province. Meanwhile, impatient East Pakistanis took to the streets to demand greater regional independence if not absolute sovereignty. The stage for a civil war was now set.

From 25 March to 16 December 1971, Pakistan was engulfed in conflict: for the Pakistani armed forces, it was a battle to re-impose the authority of the central government on its eastern wing; for East Pakistani militias, they were now fighting for secession and the creation of Bangla Desh (land of Bengal). By the standards of the time, this war of independence was relatively brief, lasting less than nine months. In comparison, the Nigerian-Biafran war lasted three years (1967–1970), the Eritrean War of Independence continued for thirty years (1961–1991) and the civil wars in Sudan (1955–1972; 1983–2005) ran for a combined total of thirty-nine years. Despite its relative brevity, the Bangladesh Liberation War was exceptionally brutal: although there is no historical consensus on the number of people killed, it has been estimated that up to three million perished. At the time, western diplomats in situ alleged Pakistani genocide against Bengalis and Hindus. Most famously, US Consul-General to Dhaka Archer Blood cabled a telegram with the subject heading “Selecting Genocide.” Blood later recanted since “atrocities were being committed on both sides,” and therefore Pakistani military action did not meet the narrow definition of genocide.

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Regardless of whether this violence constituted genocide, it is accepted as fact that combatants and civilians engaged in gruesome acts, including decapitation, dismemberment, and the widespread rape of women and girls.\(^8\) In the midst of such horrors, civilians fled their homes for safety, resulting in an internally displaced population of 25 million and the exodus of refugees to neighbouring Indian states of ten million people. During the peak of the refugee flight in May, on average each day 102,000 East Pakistanis entered India.\(^9\)

Given the scale of violence, the mass displacement of civilians and the potential for wider regional unrest, the international community was faced with the question of how best to respond to the East Pakistan crisis. Volker Prott’s article offers a diplomatic history of how and why states intervened based on deep archival research. For non-South Asian specialists, Prott’s study is still essential reading as it addresses universal questions that are relevant to any scholar who is interested in international relations, Cold War geopolitics, and histories of state-based humanitarian intervention. Using the specific case study of the Bangladesh Liberation War, Prott explores all-too-common contemporary dilemmas, for example, whether internal human rights violations justify external humanitarian intervention, whether such intervention require UN Security Council backing, particularly when deadlock between superpowers is likely, at what point a civil war becomes a concern for regional and international security, and whether human rights extend to the right of self-determination and national liberation from postcolonial oppression (26)?

Despite being the cause célèbre at the time—and the subject of the first benefit concert starring Beatle George Harrison—with the notable exception of scholars with South Asian ancestry, the Bangladesh Liberation War has received little attention from historians.\(^10\) Prott aims to fill this lacuna by drawing our attention to the ways in which major international players employed covert tactics of intervention to influence the outcome of the conflict, and in doing so, shaped the post-conflict landscape to suit their national interest. Because the Bangladesh Liberation War was portrayed internationally as a civil war rather than a war of independence, nation-states publicly eschewed meddling in what was deemed an internal affair. But underneath these public pronouncements of non-intervention in favour of a political resolution, a number of states engaged in clandestine activities. Prott examines the covert actions of three major players—India, the United States, and the United Nations (UN)—and concludes with a grim finding: not only were the secret interventions of these actors ineffective, but they also cancelled each other out and therefore exacerbated the conflict and prolonged the suffering of civilians (26, 40, 43).

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“We Have to Tread Warily” is a meticulously researched article and utilizes archival sources from three countries. In the case of Indian intervention, Prott mines the P. N. Haksar and Jayaprakash Narayan papers, collections that are both held at the Nehru Memorial and Museum Library (NMML) in New Delhi. For American perspectives, Prott analyses the Department of State Central Files (RG 59) held at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Prott also examines UN records held at the organization’s New York Archives, specifically, the files in the Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), the East Pakistan Relief Operation (UNEPRO), and Peacekeeping—India and Pakistan series. Curiously, Prott did not consult the UNHCR archives that are held in Geneva and, as a consequence, his discussion on the role of the UN is restricted to high-level politics rather than humanitarian relief on the ground. Another peculiarity is Prott’s extensive use of British government files, held at the National Archives (TNA), including materials from the Prime Minister’s Office, the Dominions Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Cabinet Office. The significant use of British archival materials in this article does provide valuable contextual background, to be sure. However, given the history of British imperialism in South Asia and the extent of British government files consulted, one wonders why this article did not include a discussion on British intervention, or non-intervention as the case may be.

By examining the covert actions of three major players in this conflict, Prott is able to tease out the “tight space between humanitarian and internationalist rhetoric on the one hand and state sovereignty and Cold War alliances on the other” (42-43). For India, the country that hosted ten million East Pakistani refugees throughout 1971, that “space” was particularly narrow. The Indian government was bearing much of the cost and operational responsibility of caring for the refugees and therefore was easily the most significant humanitarian player on the scene. Yet given the history of Indo-Pakistan relations (including a recent and inconclusive war in 1965), the Indian state saw an opportunity to weaken its neighbour and become the dominant nation in the region. As is well documented, from the beginning of hostilities the Indian state harboured, trained, and supplied the Mukti Bahini, the Bangladeshi pro-liberation guerrillas. Some scholars, such as Zorawar Daulet Singh, have argued that India supported the Bangladeshi rebels in order to prepare the ground for an Indian invasion later in the year. Prott disputes this conclusion, arguing instead that the purpose of Indian support for the Mukti Bahini was to “increase international pressure and embroil the Pakistani military in a drawn-out guerrilla war to provoke a collapse from within” (36). Debates over India’s true intentions may be futile, however interesting they may be. First, historical research is inevitably limited by the availability of source materials and the inherent gap between articulated reasons and private motivations seldom recorded, particularly among officials who are mindful of public perceptions. Second, in times of war it is possible for a state to maintain multiple, even competing, objectives, especially when specific individuals and their respective departments cannot agree on desired objectives let alone outcomes. In the case of India then, it is possible that Pritt and Singh are both correct: there is archival evidence that the Indian government wanted to support materially Bangladeshi secessionists in order to weaken their enemy, Pakistan, but short of that outcome, India was also preparing to intervene militarily to ensure a Pakistani surrender.

The position of the United States government was more ambivalent than that of India. At the time of crisis, the US was closely aligned with Pakistan and was using this relationship to leverage communication channels to Beijing. As a Cold War ally, Pakistan had also enjoyed decades of American development aid and access to military supplies. If only to oppose India, President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry

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12 Zorawar Daulet Singh, Power and Diplomacy: India’s Foreign Policies during the Cold War (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 277.
Kissinger were particularly hawkish in their support of the Pakistani military. In private, recorded conversations, Kissinger infamously declared Indians as “such bastards”; meanwhile Nixon mused that all Indians “really need is a mass famine.” However, the Nixon White House was not omnipotent, and its hostility was tempered by diplomats in the US State Department. On this point, Prott’s article makes another contribution to the literature, demonstrating that US foreign policy was marked by hesitation and compromise and, “at least covertly, was much less clear cut in its support of the Yahya regime than has been claimed” (33).

The response of the UN was particularly constrained when compared with the actions of the US and Indian governments. Indeed, one could argue that the Bangladesh Liberation War demonstrated the inherent limitations of the UN international system. Because the US and the USSR supported opposing sides in the conflict, the UN Security Council was deadlocked and unable to intervene (40). Furthermore, as a body comprised of—and funded by—nation-states, the UN General Assembly was loath to support any secessionist movement that may undermine the inviolability of existing national borders. Prott also explains how the UN was still reeling from errors of its recent past. Under the Hammarskjöld secretoryship, the UN embarked on a “proactive approach to peacekeeping and nation-building.” But after the “debacle of large-scale UN intervention during the Congo Crisis in the early 1960,” the UN retreated “to a safer policy of minimal political involvement that sought to protect the UN’s reputation for impartiality to secure its financial and political viability” (33). With the UN unable to intervene directly in the conflict, it instead offered humanitarian assistance as a “cloak” for peacekeeping (40). Once again, Prott demonstrates that this deception was futile: the covert measures of the UN were “insufficient to encourage the refugees to return [to Bangladesh] or restore order and stability in East Pakistan” (39). I would add that the UN was also restricted in its operations in the refugee camps by an Indian government that was suspicious of foreign interference. For example, Indian External Affairs Minister Swaran Singh lamented in June 1971, “I am fully convinced about the total ineffectiveness of the UN organization…whether they are political, social, or human rights. They talk and talk and do nothing.” Thus, the Bangladesh Liberation War illustrated the impotence of the UN to prevent atrocities conducted within nation-states, a failing all too evident in subsequent civil wars of the twenty and twenty first centuries.

Not only were the covert actions of India, the US, and the UN ineffective, collectively these clandestine activities worked together in ways that prolonged and ultimately escalated the war. Prott calls this unintended consequence “the drift to war” (39). Ironically, it was the direct intervention of the Indian military in December that caused the Pakistani surrender, the cessation of hostilities, and Bangladeshi independence. One cannot but be left with the conclusion that public inaction, when combined with covert intervention, can have dangerous and unexpected consequences, particularly when multiple actors are employing this tactic. Prott does not consider the role and influence of civil society on these Cold War machinations, an important but understudied dimension. To be fair however, a discussion on non-state actors is presumably beyond the scope of a journal article.

Prott’s “We Have to Tread Warily” is an important study that reminds us of the importance of exploring the gap between public rhetoric and implemented policy. This article draws our attention to an under-studied conflict in the Cold War and how the East Pakistani crisis can be used as a case study to examine broader trends that were underway by the early 1970s. For example, Prott concludes that the combination of “overt inaction and covert interference…anticipated the ascendancy of a ‘narrow’ human rights concept stripped bare of its political and interventionist connotations from the mid-1970s” (43). Prott could have reflected on this last point in more detail or at least provided some examples of “narrow” human rights in practice in the 1970s and 1980s. What the article does demonstrate is that there is still much we do not know about the Bangladesh Liberation War and its wider implications. I hope this article inspires more historians to study this postcolonial conflict, particularly among non-South Asian specialists.

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