

## Occupation and resistance: primary sources in East Timor history, 1975-1989

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Primary source material is a fundamental building block in the construction of any history. The greater the number and variety of primary source materials we have for any period or event, the greater is the clarity with which we might understand what happened, who did what, and why. For the purposes of this essay, primary sources are largely those records that were created at the time of the events they report. As one of many similar definitions puts it: primary sources provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic under investigation. They are created by witnesses or recorders who experienced the events or conditions being documented. Often these sources are created at the time when the events or conditions are occurring, but primary sources can also include autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories recorded later (Yale 2008).

This exploration of primary sources in recent East Timor history is deliberately limited in both scope and time. The first restriction is to confine the source material to what happened on the ground in East Timor itself - invasion, resistance, survival, loss, bravery, betrayal, famine, relief, cohesion, division - as recorded by anyone who lived, or was present, or got first-hand testimony from inside Timor at the time. This portion of the record tells only part of the history of East Timor's traumatic passage from colonial Portuguese Timor to the independent State of Timor-Leste. It does not include, for example, much of the record of the international, largely non-government, solidarity and advocacy networks which played a major role in keeping the issue alive at the United Nations and elsewhere.

The second restriction, to confine the time period from (late) 1975 to 1989, is chosen because it defines the period when East Timor was largely closed to the outside world by the policies and actions of the Indonesian government and military. Jakarta's partial lifting of restrictions on outsider access to Timor in 1989 saw small but increasing numbers of visitors to East Timor able to report independently on conditions in the territory. The infamous 1991 Santa Cruz massacre was a turning point in international concern for East Timor, precisely because it was independently witnessed by outsiders and was effectively undeniable. Almost simultaneous with this event was the emergence of international email communication networks and then later, satellite telephony. These technologies allowed rapid distribution of news direct from East Timor to the outside world, important parts of which remain accessible today (see, for example, ETAN 2015). Prior to 1989, primary source material from inside Timor was much more difficult to come by. That which did appear at the time, often smuggled out at great personal risk to the couriers, was often clouded with questions of provenance or authenticity. In some cases, those questions remain today. Other sources were not available at the time but are now emerging – particularly post-event eye-witness oral testimony, once-hidden resistance documents and the release or declassification of government archives.

### Period 1: Late 1975 - 1978

This three-year period is distinctive for a number of reasons. It starts with the full-scale invasion of Timor by Indonesian military forces on 7 December 1975 and continuing military operations for the next three years. It marks the period when the FRETILIN-led armed resistance was at its greatest physical and material strength but which, by the end of 1978, was largely in disarray. This period is also marked by massive population movements, ultimately leading to widespread death from starvation and illness - greatly exacerbated by the Indonesian government's refusal to allow an independent international humanitarian aid agency presence in Timor.

The major primary source reportage from East Timor immediately accessible in these years came from the East Timorese resistance itself. This source will be considered in some detail before outlining other primary source material for the period.

## Resistance Radio 1976-1978

Australian and East Timorese activists in Darwin recorded broadcasts of the resistance-run Radio Maubere – news, music, messages in Portuguese, English, Tetun and Indonesian – and conducted clandestine two-way radio with the resistance to send and receive news and sometimes coded messages between the resistance and its external representatives abroad. The radio communications were recorded on audio-cassette and summarised, translated or transcribed in Darwin or in Sydney where the public material was circulated in printed form by Denis Freney, the principal organiser of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA)-run radio operation (Elenor 2003; Freney 1976; Manning 2003; Wesley-Smith 1998).

Scattered in a range of private and public collections in Australia and elsewhere, much of the Freney-generated paper records of radio contact survives in the form of CIET<sup>1</sup> press releases. A significant volume resides in Freney's own posthumous archive at the National Library of Australia (NLA 2001). A partial set of the material is also available online (CHART 2015). It can be argued, however, that these are not strictly primary sources; they are, at best, a partial summary or rendering of the original source material, the actual radio communications.

**Table 1** - Numbers of known recordings of resistance radio communications, 1976-1978.<sup>2</sup>

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
1976				2	2	3	3	10	2			
1977	17	9	13	17	15	12	13	2	16	7	8	5
1978	3		2	4	10	8	3	5	6	7	3	1

Some 200 audio-cassette recordings of 1976-1978 radio contact are known to exist in Australia; more may yet come to light. As Table 1 shows, there are considerable gaps in the record. Most of the known tapes are publically accessible at Australia's National Film and Sound Archive, but some important fragments remain inaccessible in private hands. In the absence of any known internal resistance documents from this period, the radio transmissions are a primary source of the highest importance. They are the best available contemporaneous record from the FRETILIN-led resistance inside Timor. Much work remains to be done to uncover other surviving audiocassettes from that period. Examination of the often poor quality recordings will be a challenging but necessary task for this element of Timor's history.

### *Other sources*

The most extensive source of individual eye-witness testimony from this period can be found in the work of Timor-Leste's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, CAVR<sup>3</sup>, 2002-2005. While the principal focus of interviews with thousands of East Timorese was to record the experience of victims of the occupation period, it also includes material from key resistance figures. Together, these materials do tell some of the whole story of the period. Extracts from this large body of material is collated with other materials in the monumental report of the Commission, *Chega!* (CAVR 2005). The transcripts or summaries of the testimony, along with original audiocassette recordings, are held in the archives of the Post-CAVR Secretariat in Dili. Smaller numbers of contemporary eye-witness accounts for this period can be found in the early-1977 testimony of refugees recorded in Portugal by Jim Dunn (1977) and the few letters which reached the outside world, some of which survive in still-private archives in Australia and elsewhere.

Another important source for this period is the still-emerging corpus of internal communications of governments. Declassified or now-open government archives are the principal primary source for data on the Timor-related actions of particular governments and the rationale behind them. These records also offer a unique insight into Indonesian government and military thinking and actions in East Timor. This appears in reports from Jakarta-based Embassy and other officials on meetings with their Indonesian

<sup>1</sup> Campaign for Independent East Timor

<sup>2</sup> Numbers compiled by author during course of CHART examination of private and public Timor archives.

<sup>3</sup> The standard acronym from the Portuguese: Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação.

counterparts. For this reason, such records are well worth exploring for data on events and conditions inside Timor in this period. A particularly notable example from these sources, and contemporary media reports, is the observations of Western diplomats who witnessed the growing 1978 humanitarian disaster during their visit to the territory in September that year (see CHART 2012a).

The records of the Australian government are probably the most voluminous<sup>4</sup> and about 10-15 percent of them are directly accessible online through the National Archives of Australia, a government agency. Researchers in the USA, Canada, United Kingdom and New Zealand continue to uncover their own government's records on Timor. Significant US and UK records can be found online (NSA 2005; WikiLeaks 2013); others have been privately circulated but are not yet generally accessible.

## **Period 2: 1979-1981**

The second period was defined by the deep descent into disastrous famine conditions during 1979 and the beginning of international humanitarian aid programs from late 1979 into 1980. 1981 saw a resurgence of resistance activity and Indonesian military operations. The period is notable for the paucity of direct information from East Timorese sources inside Timor. With the exception of a resistance attack outside Dili in July 1980, there was mostly silence from the much-depleted organised resistance. Its material surfaced later and one important such document is examined below. In addition to what may now be found in the CAVR archives and in more recently-released government archives, international aid agencies and Catholic Church sources in Timor and Indonesia are valuable sources for this time.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) were permitted by Jakarta to conduct surveys in Timor in mid-1979 and began emergency aid programs later that year. Eye-witness foreign media reports coinciding with the beginnings of the relief program are a valuable record of dreadful human conditions at the time (Rodgers, 1979). ICRC 'Situation Reports', while not generally public documents, surfaced as they were circulated internationally through humanitarian aid agencies. These reports can now often be found in the archives of governments and non-government agencies involved in funding the relief program. ICRC's own archives are generally available forty years after the date of creation (ICRC 2015). It remains to be seen in coming years what these archives might tell us further about ICRC's exclusion from Timor after the Indonesian invasion and what it found in Timor during its 1979 relief efforts and later prisoner protection programs.

Fragments of CRS records, like those of ICRC, may be found in non-government archives in Australia and elsewhere but whether direct access through CRS is possible remains unclear. Some CRS records may be also be found in the CAVR archives.

The emergence of the East Timorese Catholic Church as a source of information began with the decision of its then head, Monsignor da Costa Lopes, to speak out about conditions in the territory. Communications with his Indonesian counterparts in Jakarta and, through them, to other national Church aid agencies surfaced occasionally at the time. Indonesian Catholic Church aid and development workers with access to Timor also became necessarily careful but useful sources of information. It was Indonesian and Timorese Church sources, in their concern for humanitarian consequences, that drew attention to renewed Indonesian military operations in 1981. Records of both these Timorese and Indonesian sources in this period can now be found scattered in non-government aid agency collections in western Europe and Australia, such as the Australian Council for Overseas Aid Human Rights Office archives (CHART 2011).

### *Problems of authenticity*

One resistance source document from this period, which has only surfaced publicly in recent years, provides some instruction on the care that must be taken with all putative primary source material. The document in question purports to be an official record of the historic March 1981 meeting to reorganise the FRETILIN/FALINTIL resistance under the new leadership of Xanana Gusmao. The document became part of the CAVR library collection sometime before 2005. It was not cited in *Chega!* but conformed with key elements found in oral testimony of meeting participants provided to the Commission. There were, however, problems with the document. It seemed unlikely to have been typed inside Timor

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<sup>4</sup> A thousand or more folders for the 1974-1989 period; personal assessment by author.

at the time of the meeting; it was missing some introductory pages and scarcely mentioned the known formation of a new resistance entity, the Revolutionary Council of National Resistance (CRRN). A more complete version of the document was subsequently found in 2013 in the extensive but undocumented archive of Antonio Barbedo de Magalhaes in Portugal. This version revealed that the document was a meeting record derived from audiocassette recordings smuggled out of Timor in 1983. The document was created under the direction of the then Lisbon-based leader of the external resistance, Abilio Araujo, but was apparently not circulated widely at the time.<sup>5</sup> Without access to the original recordings on which it is based, this document should be treated with some caution. It may not be a complete record of the historic March 1981 meeting. A more detailed exploration of this particular document has been published online (CHART 2012b; CHART 2014).

### **Period 3: 1982-1989**

While East Timor remained effectively closed to the outside world for another eight years beyond 1981, the flow of information from the territory increased enormously through a range of different channels. The 1981 Indonesian offensive drew particular international attention to political prisoners on Atauro and this attention carried on into 1982. The 1982 Australian Senate Inquiry, the 1983 ceasefire, a change of government in Australia, an Australian parliamentary delegation and renewal of hostilities that same year each played a part in the information flow. Of greater significance over this period, however, was the increasing numbers of East Timorese studying in Indonesia and expanded contacts between the Indonesian and Timorese Catholic churches. The latter continued to assert itself publicly through its new leader, Monsignor Carlos Belo following Costa Lopes' removal in 1983.

In addition to the potential sources of material already mentioned, what follows is a pointer to the range of original materials which surfaced from different channels during this period.<sup>6</sup>

- East Timorese Students travelling between Dili and Java/Bali became safe couriers for resistance communications into and out of East Timor.
- Australian activists visited Jakarta to gather documentary data and interview Timorese and Indonesian eye-witnesses to events and conditions inside Timor.
- The 1982 Australian Senate inquiry collected large amounts of information from Timorese refugees and while some of that material was given *in-camera* to protect families in Timor, much is now in the public domain.
- Australian and Timorese activists combined to smuggle radio parts into Timor and successfully re-established direct radio contact with the resistance for the first time since late 1978.

A proportion of the material which became available during these years remains largely inaccessible in private archives in Australia, Portugal and elsewhere. However, significant volumes can be directly accessed online in two Portuguese-based digital collections. The document database of Timor-Leste's Archive and Museum of the Timorese Resistance, managed by Lisbon's Mario Soares Foundation, holds an especially rich collection of 1990s resistance documents (AMRT 2015). Smaller numbers of resistance documents for the 1980s are present and include important original materials gathered by the UK activist organisation, *Tapol*. The digitised materials collected by the Portuguese activist organisation *Comissão para os Direitos do Povo Maubere* (CDPM) are accessible online and include many documents smuggled from Timor by students or refugees during the occupation years (CIDAC 2015). Another important source is the Jill Jolliffe microform collection (Jolliffe 1997).

### **Reflections on primary sources in East Timor's history**

The vast array of primary source material on Timor's modern history, while at first seeming a blessing, also carries with it some burdens. Can we write a decent history without consulting the major caches of known material? If the answer is 'no', then how can we access that which is in another country or is still held privately? There are no immediate solutions to the problems but all researchers can work together to

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<sup>5</sup> This document was not, to the certain knowledge of the author, known in international solidarity circles or included in any Timor-related publications at the time.

<sup>6</sup> Information based on author's perusal of archival collections since 2001.

create some. At the very least it should be possible to begin constructing an online guide or 'map' of collections and their content for would-be researchers and historians to consult. When significant new documents or collections are found, researchers could contribute the information to the ever-growing guide.

The biggest blank area in any such 'map' will be Indonesia-sourced materials. With the exception of some surviving Indonesian military and administrative documents in Dili and fragments of resistance-captured military materials now available online, very little official Indonesian primary source material on Timor is known. We can only guess at the whereabouts of the volumes of documentary materials gathered or created by the Indonesian military in the course of its planning, intelligence gathering and conducting military and other operations in occupied Timor. Recent books by Indonesian military figures and others involved in the Timor story contain useful material but are, at best, very partial accounts (see for example Syahnakri 2013; Wanandi 2012). We can only hope that the ongoing democratisation in post-Suharto Indonesia leads to interest in Indonesia's 'Timor story' and will stimulate its researchers to uncover their country's still-hidden Timor primary source materials.

In conclusion, a final reflection on how we make use of these materials. As more sources come to hand, or different perspectives are employed, written history will change: 'history does not produce definitive answers for all time. It is a process' (MacMillan 2010, 167). But anyone who purports to write history has certain responsibilities in the use of primary sources. These responsibilities are marvellously illustrated in the records of the controversial British defamation case brought by David Irving against the author and publisher of a book which accused Irving of distorting facts and manipulating documents about Hitler and the Holocaust, so undermining his reputation as an historian. Irving lost the case. After an extraordinary forensic examination of Irving's work by the court, the Judge concluded that Irving did indeed deliberately falsify the historical record, motivated... by a desire to present events in a manner consistent with his own ideological beliefs even if that involved distortion and manipulation of historical evidence (EWHC 2000, 13.163). One commentator on the Irving case sought to derive from the judgement what could be expected from a 'conscientious' or 'objective' historian:

(1) She must treat sources with appropriate reservations; (2) she must not dismiss counter-evidence without scholarly consideration; (3) she must be even-handed in her treatment of evidence and eschew 'cherry-picking'; (4) she must clearly indicate any speculation; (5) she must not mistranslate documents or mislead by omitting parts of documents; (6) she must weigh the authenticity of all accounts, not merely those that contradict her favored view; (7) she must take the motives of historical actors into consideration (Schneider 2001, 1535).

While few who write history can expect to face court to defend their work, it seems reasonable and uncontroversial that all users of primary sources should keep Schneider's list in mind.

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