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*The Blood Telegram—Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide* (Alfred Knopf, 2013) by Princeton University professor Gary J. Bass unearths the sinister role played by then President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1971 during Pakistan's nine-month slaughter of Bengali people in what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. According to diverse sources, hundreds of thousands and maybe as many as three million people were killed. About 10 million refugees, mostly Hindu, fled to India, only to be kept in desperate camps where people died of starvation, lack of clean water and preventable diseases.

*The Blood Telegram* is an engrossing and revealing blow-by-blow account of the cynical—in fact criminal—diplomacy, as well as the often vicious back-biting and backstabbing, among the various actors: Nixon, Kissinger, Pakistan's ruling general Agha Yahya Khan, India's leader Indira Gandhi and other Indian government officials, U.S. State Department figures and those representing the U.S. in Pakistan and India like Archer Blood. Author Bass combed through thousands of pages of recently declassified material from the Nixon Library, the National Archives of Washington and archives in India, interviews with White House staff, diplomats and Indian generals and previously unlistened-to and rather sordid White House tapes. Almost every paragraph of his book is footnoted, with 2,600 footnotes in total.

The book is up close and personal, revealing the immorality and baseness of especially Nixon and Kissinger, who knowingly and regularly lied to the public, the U.S. Congress and other governments and broke the laws they claimed to represent during the civil war between East and West Pakistan.

The American consul general in Dhaka, Archer Blood, sent many warnings of an impending bloodbath, saying that there was no chance of Pakistan holding together. Nixon's response was, "I feel that anything that can be done to maintain Pakistan as a viable country is extremely important." Kissinger commented, "Why should we say anything [to Yahya] that would discourage force [in East Pakistan]?"

## Some Background



When India won its independence from Britain in 1947, Britain took advantage of divisions it had helped fan and other factors to split its former colony into two states based on religion, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and primarily Hindu India. With the partition, as many as two million people died and 15 million refugees defined by their religious affiliations fled the land they had lived on for generations and flooded across each other's borders (Hindus living in Pakistan relocated to India and Muslims in India to Pakistan) to regions completely foreign to them.

This odd geographical creation born of contending reactionary interests combined different ethnic groups in both East and West Pakistan. There were Pashtuns, Punjabis and Baluchis in Western Pakistan who were mainly Muslim. East Pakistan was comprised of Bengalis and Biharis, a Muslim majority and sizeable Hindu minority. The partition of the British colony left both India and Pakistan devastated, claiming many lives in riots, rapes, murders and looting. This was the original crime that set the stage for the horrendous events of 1971.

The difference between East and West Pakistan was more than distance, the 1,500 kilometers of Indian territory that separated them. West Pakistan was economically much better off, contained the central government, the military institutions and tried to make Urdu the country's official language. East Pakistanis were majority Muslim and mainly spoke and saw themselves as Bengali. Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims who moved to the East after partition were an exception. East Pakistanis were looked down upon by West Pakistanis. West Pakistan was only 25 million compared to 57 million East Pakistanis. From the beginning the question of the country's official language was an issue of great protest.

With independence from Britain, people in East Pakistan were initially loyal to the government in West Pakistan, but gradually felt that British colonialism had been replaced by West Pakistani domination. The West was suspicious of Bengalis and the Hindu minority in East Pakistan and saw them as pro-Indian. By 1958, the Pakistani generals imposed martial law in East Pakistan, banned political parties and made it impossible for Bengalis to voice their grievances.

Demands for more autonomy in the east were a constant. After two decades of statehood, opposition grew and many student and worker demonstrations pressed for autonomy. Facing a serious crisis of legitimacy, elections were finally granted by West Pakistan's military ruler, General Yahya.

The disastrous November 1970 Bhola Cyclone struck East Pakistan and the results fuelled outrage against West Pakistan. The devastation took the lives of 500,000 people in the low-lying area of East Pakistan. One witness recounted how after the 250 kilometre-an-hour winds, there was nothing to see but bodies of people and cattle strewn over the land. Some had been hurled 10 metres high into trees or out into the sea. Seen from a helicopter, the area hit by the storm looked like "a huge chocolate pudding dotted with raisins"—on closer view the awful realization was that the "raisins" were dead bodies.



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