



Book Review

Gary J. Bass (2014); *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide*; Hurst & Co: London

reviewed by **Christiana Spens**



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It is often said that ‘history is written by the winners’, though there is some room for challenge to that truism it would seem, given the publication of Bass’ recent exposé of the role of Nixon and Kissinger in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of (mainly) Bengali Hindus in 1971. Whether power can be won in retrospect with critical historical research is a topic for another essay, another book even, but certainly we see in Bass’ astounding volume a shifting of perspective and understanding of a previously hidden chapter of American as well as Pakistani, Bengali and Indian history. Specifically, *The Blood Telegram* exposes the manner in which Nixon and Kissinger, during the Cold War, illegally and covertly supported Pakistan’s assault on East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which killed hundreds of thousands of civilians and displaced around ten million more, putting huge strain on India, where most were taken in.

Bass focuses on the American role in this story, and specifically the diplomat whose outrage at the massacre was most vocal: Archer Blood, the US consul general in 1971 in Dhaka, the principal city of East Bengal. His dealings with, and protestations of the behaviour of the higher American administration are telling, certainly, and to focus on this diplomat’s place in the unfolding atrocities and related political manoeuvres is, in itself, a clever choice on the part of the author. An underlying understanding of what makes a good story, and what makes history readable, is key to the book’s wider appeal and effect in communicating a brutal and complex report in a compelling fashion. Learning the details of the massacre and the role of Nixon and Kissinger in its unfolding violence, through Blood’s cables and telegrams (which reported the gruesome reality of the genocide to those in DC), as well as new interviews and previously unheard White House tapes, provides a gripping narrative and sense of urgency that is eminently readable. The story exposed remains as shocking as it did at the time: “At the White House, Kissinger’s aides were shaken by Blood’s reporting. “It was a brutal crackdown,” says Winston Lord, Kissinger’s special assistant, who says he read some of the cables. “In retrospect, he did a pretty good reporting job,” says Samuel Hoskinson, about Blood. “He was telling power in Washington what power in Washington didn’t want to hear.”” (73) Those reports were damning and provocative then, and form the skeleton of *The Blood Telegram*, in which Bass harnesses the momentum of the original cables (which were of course covered up subsequently by Nixon, Kissinger, and aides), and uses it to fuel a fresh reflection not only on that period, but also on the effort to conceal it.

First describing the personal and political context (on the American side) that paved the way for Pakistan’s brutal crackdown on East Pakistan, Bass explains the prejudices of Nixon and Kissinger against India (and its leader, Indira Gandhi) and the Bengali people, and suggests that those personal, emotional impressions made possible an excessively lax view on the consequential mass casualties and political upheaval that their involvement caused. The role of emotion in these political and military decisions is particularly interesting, and by telling the story in a way that is perceptive of the characters involved, and sensitive in their portrayals, Bass brings a rare emotional intelligence and insight into charting the escalation of violence.



This perceptiveness in identifying the personal prejudices involved also adds weight to the assertion that the mass killings constituted a ‘genocide’, a term which obviously implies a racist motivation or undertone to the decision to kill hundreds of thousands of people (as opposed to ‘mass killing’, which need not have such motivation).

As Bass points out, these personal prejudices were inappropriate given America’s own political principles, not to mention the expected professionalism and lawfulness of its leaders; the contradiction betrays an interesting tension between the personalities in power and the structure and laws they were supposed to protect and promote. The pronounced conflict between Archer Blood and his staff, and their superiors in the White House is not only interesting as a thorough description of that pivotal moment in history, but also as a symbolic struggle between American principles and the preferences of particular leaders. In this case, of course, the dissenters were silenced. Despite Blood’s reporting of the genocide, his linking of it to American sponsorship and weapons, and then his outright protest (together with other staff in the consul, via a “dissent cable” which explicitly spoke out against the “moral bankruptcy” of Nixon and Kissinger’s policy), the genocide, and its American support, persisted.

Both Nixon and Kissinger flouted US law, knowingly, by allowing the transfer of American F-104 Starfighter jet interceptors to Pakistan, and rather than be deterred by Blood (et al)’s protestations, they were irritated by them, and only strengthened their military sponsorship in an attempt to hit India by proxy. The conflict also served as a cover for their clandestine communications with Mao Zedong’s China, and Kissinger’s trip there, to secure Chinese support against the Soviet Union (as well as further isolation of India). This type of struggle has repeated itself, on some level, many times over since. The use of proxy wars and parallel covert operations was hardly limited to the Cold War, let alone this particular period of it, and this exploration of these military behaviours has implications for more recent manifestations of the same tendency. In that sense, learning about this chapter in history is a useful tool for anyone interested in parallel issues in international relations since. As well as identifying a general pattern in US foreign policy, and its inherent problems, Bass also illuminates a time in American and global history that has had lasting implications, not least for the region itself, where the 1971 genocide only worsened relations between India and Pakistan, and goes some way to explain the complicated complicity, to this day, between the US and Pakistan.

Perhaps the most fascinating element of this story, however, is its previous concealment, and the subsequent uncovering that this book represents. Bass explains meticulously the efforts that Nixon and Kissinger went to in order to conceal their culpability in genocide, and to present, instead, images of themselves as good and law-abiding statesmen. The levels of manipulation and deception involved in that cover-up, not only by Nixon and Kissinger, but in their various aides and supporters, is a compelling subject indeed. The gulf between real actions when in office, and reputation is pronounced here, and the ambitiousness required to attempt to gloss over that guilt and hypocrisy is quite astounding. Bass exposes an awful period of American foreign policy and personal ruthlessness, and in so doing leaves lingering some profound and timely questions and ambiguities concerning rogue leaders, illegal proxy wars and the heavy human price paid for underhand military coups. He also raises to prominence the (until now) silenced voices of dissent within the US foreign office, their principled struggle to act in accordance with American laws and ideals, and their personal sacrifices in doing so. *The Blood Telegram* is a brilliant account, therefore, of bravery as well as hypocrisy, and principles despite realpolitik.



About the reviewer

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