

Book Review
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Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: India's Secret War in East Pakistan* (Random House India, 2013), pp. 499.

The Blood Telegram: India's Secret War in East Pakistan by Gary J. Bass provides a historical look into events surrounding the creation of Bangladesh. The book provides us an insight into how Cold War geopolitics influenced the course of war and also talks about the direct role of the US in India-Pakistan war of 1971. It has been published in India as well as in the US, though, under a different sub-title.

Bass is also the author of *The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention and Stay the Hand of Vengeance: The Politics of War Crimes Tribunals*. The author is presently a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. He is a former reporter of *The Economist* and has also written for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, and other newspapers, besides *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy*.

Blood Telegram is a detailed description of events leading to India-Pakistan war of 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh. The author has done extensive research by looking into primary sources, declassified documents of the US State Department and tapes of conservations of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, and has interviewed American and Indian eyewitnesses of the events. The book details atrocities committed against the civilian population during the war and how Nixon and Kissinger aided and abetted in what the author calls "genocide".

The author's description of war events lays bare Nixon's personal opinion about Indian and Pakistani leadership (both East and West Pakistanis) along with Henry Kissinger's role in shaping the course of war. Similarly the author narrates Indra Gandhi's and her key decision makers' hatred against Pakistan. The writer calls them 'Kashmiri Mafia'. Yahya Khan is blamed for placing too much trust on promised American help for controlling the situation in the former East Pakistan.

A big portion of the early part of the book shows the atrocities committed by the Pakistani government against East Pakistanis. The author is of the view that Nixon could have played a role in stopping the large scale killings of the civilians.

He could have also stopped the war by putting arms embargo against Pakistan but Cold War politics and national interests of the US stood in the way of taking such a step. In order to support his argument the writer narrates what is already well known that the US had moved the Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal, and persuaded Jordan and Iran to transfer arms to Pakistan besides encouraging China to get involved in the Indo-Pak war by heating border dispute with India.

In the author's view India was insidiously unrolling its plan for breakup of Pakistan when the US was looking at the developments from a larger geo-political lens. The author opines that Nixon believed Indian victory would boost the Soviet Union's confidence which would have opened a new phase of proxy wars in the region. It was, therefore, necessary to support Pakistan.

Bass explains that Mrs. Indra Gandhi, the Indian prime minister waited past the monsoon season to launch an attack on East Pakistan, justifying it on humanitarian grounds. During this period, she along with establishment hawks, army's top brass and local commanders of border security force (BSF) organized camps for training the East Bengalis in guerilla tactics and provided them arms. They were subsequently launched against the Pakistan army. The author describes how Indians aided and abetted these guerillas (*muktis*). Attacks by these guerillas forced counter attacks by Pakistan army leading to civil war. The author also reveals how Indian media and think tanks bullied Indian government, prior to the war, and forced it not to let go of the opportunity to breakup Pakistan.

The "Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation" signed in August, 1971 enabled India to procure weapons and heavy war machinery from Russia. The treaty also forestalled the possible China threat. Mrs. Indra Gandhi was convinced that fall of Dhaka would make Pakistan militarily so weak that separatist movements in Balochistan and NWFP (now KPK) would gain momentum and Pakistan will become so involved with its internal conflicts that it will not be able to stand up to India in future.

Although the author has extensively cited original State Department documents and Indian sources on the subject, a major flaw of the book is that it has ignored Pakistani sources. Similarly the author unjustifiably labels *Biharis* living in East Pakistan as fifth columnists. *Biharis* were Pakistani citizens and they believed that their loyalty lay with the Pakistani state. Instead of *Biharis* the *Mukti Bahanis*

probably deserved the label as fifth columnists in the context of the then Pakistani state.

The Blood Telegram: India's Secret War in East Pakistan is one of many books available on the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war and does not add anything new on the subject. However the author has consulted authentic documentary evidence which increases its academic value. The book is recommended to anyone with an interest in understanding India's secret role in Indo-Pak war of 1971.

Many Pakistanis know only from Indian and western sources of Pakistan government's and specifically Pakistani military's role during war and only few know what actually happened. There are a number of books by Pakistani writers as well on this subject. '*Witness to Surrender*' by Saddiq Salik, Hassan Zahir's '*The separation of East Pakistan*', '*Tragedy of Errors: East Pakistan Crisis, 1968-1971*' by Kamal Matinuddin, '*Pakistan's Crisis of Leadership*' by Gen Fazal Mueem to name some, and a number of books written by military officers who participated in the war in East Pakistan. More importantly some Bangladeshi writers have also written on this important phase in their country's history. Some of these writers have challenged the dominant narrative, made popular by the western and Indian writers, about the events in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh.