

Book Review: The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and A Forgotten Genocide by Gary J. Bass

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2014-7-25

Winner of the 2014 Lionel Gelber Prize for Foreign Affairs, *The Blood Telegram* chronicles how Nixon and Kissinger supported Pakistan's military dictatorship as it brutally quashed the results of a historic free election. Gary J. Bass argues that the United States' embrace of the military dictatorship in Islamabad went on to mould Asia's destiny for decades. This book has the potential to fuel international lawyers to research the legal consequences of the passive stance taken by Nixon and his underlings, writes **Lenneke Sprik**.



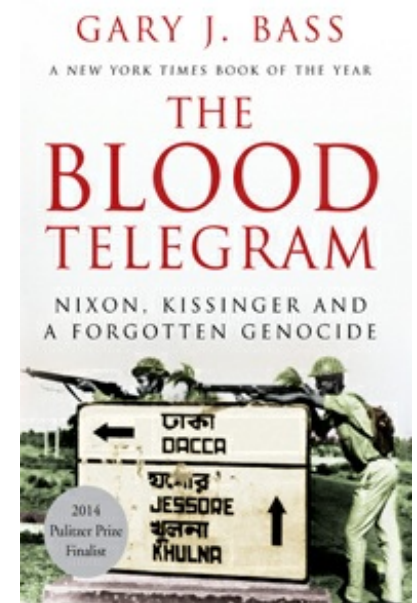
The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide. Gary J. Bass. Hurst. 2014.

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When we think of genocide, the first examples that come to mind are often the holocaust, Rwanda, and Srebrenica. Who would mention the mass murder of up to three million Bengalis in the East of Pakistan in 1971 in this regard? And how many people are aware of the culpable passive role of the United States in this genocide? [Gary Bass](#) convincingly unravels the rather shocking truth of the American position in the Pakistan crisis in a well-written narrative that contains a strong condemnation of United States' bystander role.

When the pro-independence Awami League were elected in 1969, the separation of Pakistan and with that, the independence of the Bengalis living in East-Pakistan, was seen as a threat to the future of the country as a whole. General Yahya Khan, leader of the Pakistani army, took over control before the Awami League could claim its power and started his genocidal campaign against the Bengali population of East-Pakistan in March 1971. Over the course of nine months, millions of Bengalis (mainly Hindus) were killed. International responses to these events were heavily influenced by Cold War rhetoric. Bass' account of the genocide in Pakistan shows how a precarious balance of power had to be kept in place, which obstructed a united stance against Yahya's objectionable policies. Ultimately, India – under Indira Ghandi's leadership – intervened in December 1971, which put an end to the genocide. Nixon and Kissinger have proven to be strategic practitioners of *Realpolitik* in this matter. Their friendship with Yahya, and their support of the genocide through arms supplies, leads Bass to justly criticise the American role in the Pakistani genocide.

By quoting some of the controversial opinions expressed by Nixon and Kissinger, the author not only provides a detailed overview of the factual happenings in Pakistan in the early 1970s, but more than that he reveals the reproachable attitude of the American statesmen towards the humanitarian crisis in Asia. Specifically striking in Bass' story is the reflection of the condescending language used by Nixon and Kissinger regarding the Indian people. Their personal sentiments in this matter unequivocally influenced their stance towards the Pakistani crisis. Accordingly, Bass depicts Nixon's friendship with the Pakistani dictator Yahya as characteristic for Nixon's foreign policy: he was nothing more than a useful bridge in Nixon's master plan to get closer to China. It is this picture of the republican president that Bass paints effectively. In doing so, this book raises awareness of how international politics are often governed by national and personal interests rather than moral interests; something that can be considered a timeless phenomenon in times where states are still hesitant to intervene in other states' affairs to halt mass



atrocities.

In his reconstruction, Bass uses the personal experiences of US general consul Archer Blood as a key figure throughout the book, whose dissenting voice was silenced by Nixon. Blood's telegram asking the State Department for immediate action against the mass atrocities in East Pakistan was neglected and therefore became illustrative of Nixon's bystander conduct. Bass even cited several sources arguing that this makes them 'complicit to genocide'. At one point Bass refers to Kissinger's clear attitude towards international humanitarian crises by referring to one of his comments in which he pointed out that 'a humanitarian concern is not necessarily an American concern'. Bass could not have made that picture clearer had he not used the sources the way he did.

Throughout the book, the reader wonders why Nixon and the likes took this position towards Pakistan and the Bengali crisis. Bass correctly observes three goals that contributed to the controversial stance taken by the president. First, he explains that Nixon wanted to avoid the destruction of the West-Pakistani army. Second, above all Nixon wanted to maintain his bridge through China (Yahya); and third, the American president feared the collapse of the balance of power if any of the great powers would intervene in Pakistan's domestic affairs, which he wanted to prevent at all costs.

Although the book is mainly giving a descriptive overview of events, Bass included the most concise analyses in the book's epilogue. Retrospectively, Bass holds, Indians saw the outcome of this war as 'a victory for democracy and human rights,' with their contribution being a precursor to the current notion of the responsibility to protect. Bass then continues to critically recall some of Indira Ghandi's contributions to world politics that were just as politically driven as the Pakistani or American choices made in the course of events. Bass rightly refers to examples such as Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab and most notably Kashmir, that would make the impression of Ghandi as a 'guardian of human rights' questionable after all.

If there were any doubts that Nixon's presidency was everything except undisputed, this historical account will convincingly dispel them. That humanitarianism had to give way to the political interests of Nixon and Kissinger is the main conclusion drawn from this revealing account of the US stance in the genocide that took place in East-Pakistan in the early 1970s. Whether interested in American foreign policy, international relations, Asian history, or genocide studies, this book will appeal to a wide audience. In a world that focuses more and more on international legal remedies to fight injustice, it might even fuel international lawyers to research the legal consequences of the passive stance taken by Nixon and his underlings.

Lenneke Sprik is a PhD candidate in Public International Law at the University of Glasgow. She holds master degrees in both International Relations and Military law and has been focusing on ethnic conflict, conflict analysis, military interventions and military law for several years now. Lenneke tweets [@LennekeSprik](#), and you can find more about her research [here](#). [Read more reviews by Lenneke](#).

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