

## The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT** The massive communal violence that occurred in East Pakistan in 1971 received worldwide attention at the time, but has been largely ignored since. Some scholars and other writers have denied that what took place in Bangladesh was a genocide. Journalists' reports, expatriate testimony, refugee reports and an investigation by the International Commission of Jurists in 1972 all indicate, however, that the Pakistani army did commit genocide in Bangladesh in 1971. The political and ideological circumstances that led to the secession of East Pakistan were conducive to religious and ethnic genocide. Beachler examines the treatment by memoirists and scholars of the 1971 crisis in East Pakistan and seeks to explain the reasons why the genocide in Bangladesh has been largely ignored since the early 1970s. No ideological or partisan faction in the United States has stood to gain much from the study of the Bangladesh genocide. And the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan have not been interested in promoting study of the mass murder and rapes that took place in 1971.

**KEYWORDS** Bangladesh, Bengali, denial, East Pakistan, genocide, nationalism, Pakistan, partition, war of secession

In the 1970s two Asian genocides each resulted, according to most estimates, in the deaths of at least 1.5 million people. In March 1971 the Pakistani army launched a campaign to repress the independence movement of Bengalis in the eastern half of the geographically separated nation. The campaign of murder, rape and pillage that continued until December 1971 caused between one and three million deaths. By some accounts, 200,000 Bengali women were raped. The International Commission of Jurists concluded that a campaign of genocide involved

... the indiscriminate killing of civilians, including women and children and the poorest and weakest members of the community; the attempt to exterminate or drive out of the country a large part of the Hindu population; the arrest, torture and killing of Awami League activists and students, professionals, business men and other potential leaders among the Bengalis; the raping of women; the destruction of villages and towns.<sup>1</sup>

1 Quoted in Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1982), 78–9.

The Pakistani repression ended when India defeated Pakistan in a two-week war in December 1971. East Pakistan gained independence as the new nation of Bangladesh shortly thereafter.

In Cambodia the Khmer Rouge seized power from the US-backed Lon Nol regime in April 1975. The new Communist regime attempted an immediate transition to communism that included the forced evacuation of urban residents to the countryside. Ethnic minorities were especially targeted for persecution. By the time the Khmer Rouge was driven from power by an invading Vietnamese army in January 1979, at least 1.5 million Cambodians had died as a result of Khmer Rouge policies.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the similar death tolls, the two events have received very different levels of attention from scholars in the West.<sup>3</sup> Almost from the moment the Khmer Rouge took power, there were debates about whether or not genocide was being committed in Cambodia and, subsequently, about the nature of the genocide. While the events in what became the nation of Bangladesh received intense media coverage in 1971, there has been little scholarly interest in the question of genocide since that time. Those who write about the secession crisis in South Asia of 1971 tend to ignore or pass briefly over the repressive measures imposed in East Pakistan. Little attention is paid to the Bengalis. In fact, the genocide in Bangladesh attracts so little interest that a portion of this article will be devoted to demonstrating that there is substantial evidence from a variety of sources to indicate that a genocide did indeed occur.

I will examine this evidence and the reasons why the genocide has been widely ignored, beginning with an analysis of the selective interest that seems to afflict scholars of genocide, politicians and activists of all political persuasions. I will recount the background of the political conflict between East and West Pakistan, and apply the definition of 'genocide' to the case of Bangladesh in 1971. The controversy surrounding the number of victims of the 1971 massacres will also be examined. A major section of the paper will explore the evidence for genocide and its denial in western scholarship. In conclusion, I will attempt to explain this neglect, and even denial, in much of the West.

2 East Timor was a third case of an Asian genocide that did not receive much attention in the American media. The Indonesian government was a close Cold War ally of the United States. This interesting case will not be explored here. On East Timor, see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon 2002).

3 While there has been little attention paid to the Bangladesh genocide elsewhere in 'the West', this article focuses on the United States.

## Some genocides are more compelling than others

It is obvious that some killings of genocidal proportions generate a great deal more attention and interest than others. A striking example of a neglected human catastrophe is the mass murder inflicted on the Congo by the Belgian king Leopold II as he exploited the resources of the central African land during the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. While Leopold's primary objective was not to eliminate the Congolese people, outright killings and the harsh conditions imposed on the indigenous people by the Belgians resulted in several million deaths. Despite the atrocities committed by the Belgians in the Congo, the first book-length study in English about them was not published until nearly a century later in 1998.<sup>4</sup>

Among genocides, the Holocaust is today in a category by itself with regard to intensity of interest. There is not only a vast academic and popular library of work about the Holocaust, but also a sizeable body of literature on why so much attention is paid to it, and the ways in which that interest has developed over time. A striking example of the change in the status of the Holocaust in American academia is the career of the eminent Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg. As a graduate student at Columbia University in the 1950s, Hilberg was told that writing a dissertation on the Holocaust was an academic death sentence.<sup>5</sup> Later Hilberg struggled for years to find a publisher for his book, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, a work that is now widely regarded as an authoritative history of the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> By the 1990s interest in the Holocaust was such that Hilberg could publish a memoir that essentially detailed his career as a Holocaust scholar.<sup>7</sup> University of Chicago professor Peter Novick published a work that demonstrated how little interest there was in the Holocaust in the first few decades after the Second World War; it also attempted to explain the reasons for the very intense interest over the past twenty-five years in terms of the emergence of identity politics and Jewish fears of assimilation in American society.<sup>8</sup> Tom Segev explored the changing significance of the Holocaust in Israeli society.<sup>9</sup> In a fiercely polemical work, Norman Finkelstein argued that the study of the Holocaust has been promoted tirelessly since 1967 by some in the American Jewish community to justify Israeli aggression, award victim status to prosperous American Jews and, essentially, extort money

4 Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1998).

5 Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee 2002).

6 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd edn, 3 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2003).

7 Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory*.

8 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1999).

9 Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. from the Hebrew by Haim Watzman (New York: Henry Holt 2000).

from Swiss banks.<sup>10</sup> Other recent work has investigated the ways in which the Holocaust has been presented in the media, museums and historical sites.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years a debate has emerged over the so-called 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust. While ostensibly about the degree to which the Nazi attempt to exterminate the European Jews was unlike any other genocide, the uniqueness debate has become an angry one as it delves into whether or not some Jewish groups have attempted to deflect attention from the suffering of other groups such as the Sinti and Roma, African Americans or Native Americans.<sup>12</sup> The uniqueness debate has, at times, been extremely heated as some champions of other oppressed groups charge that what they characterize as an obsession with the Holocaust leads to the exclusion of any consideration of others who have been the victims of genocide.<sup>13</sup>

At times, genocide denial or indifference to genocide may be a function of partisan or nationalist motivations. George Orwell asserted in his essay 'Notes on Nationalism' that the

nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them. For quite six years the English admirers of Hitler contrived not to learn of the existence of Dachau and Buchenwald. . . . Huge events like the Ukraine famine of 1933, involving the deaths of millions of people, have escaped the attention of the majority of English Russophiles.<sup>14</sup>

In a study of genocide denial in Australia, Ben Kiernan notes the efforts of some in Australia to deny the genocide perpetrated against the Aborigines in the course of the white settlement of that continent and the genocide perpetrated by the government of Indonesia in East Timor from 1975 to 1999. Kiernan attributes these refusals in part to the reluctance of partisans of the right to support causes associated with the political left. The denial of these two genocides was also convenient for those who were supportive of the anti-Communism of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, as well as for those who opposed the movement to recognize Aboriginal land rights. Kiernan

10 Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso 2000).

11 Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History Is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge 1999).

12 See the essays in Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, 2nd edn (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 2001).

13 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, 'The politics of uniqueness: reflections on the recent polemical turn in Holocaust and genocide scholarship', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1999, 28–61.

14 George Orwell, 'Notes on nationalism', in George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Vol. 3: As I Please, 1943–1945*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1968), 370.

acknowledges that, in other instances, such as Stalinist Russia or Khmer Rouge Cambodia, leftists have been reluctant to recognize the genocidal actions of Communist regimes.<sup>15</sup>

In some cases, ideological opponents may switch sides with regard to the degree to which they recognize claims of genocide as credible. In the 1980s Iraq waged the Anfal campaign against Kurds in the northern part of the country. Estimates of deaths in that campaign, which included the use of chemical and biological weapons, range from 50,000 to 182,000.<sup>16</sup> Because the United States was at least loosely allied with Iraq in its war against Iran at the time, US government agencies produced reports casting doubt on the responsibility of the Saddam Hussein regime for using what were to be later labelled 'weapons of mass destruction'. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991, the US no longer cited these reports and claimed that Saddam had indeed committed terrible atrocities against the Kurds. In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, critics of US policies like Edward Said took up Defense Department claims to cast doubt on the allegations against Iraq. Said cited an Army War College report that declared that Iran was responsible for at least one of the most atrocious poison gas attacks in the Kurdish village of Halabja.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Iraqi Kurds, a willingness to believe that genocide occurred was time-limited and seems also to have been a matter of political convenience.

### **East Pakistan 1971: background of the crisis**

The tensions between East and West Pakistan that led to the crisis in 1971 cannot be recounted in detail here. However, some aspects of the difficult relations between the geographically, ethnically and linguistically distinct sections of Pakistan from its founding in 1947 to its breakup in 1971 are relevant to this paper as they demonstrate the ethnic and nationalist tensions that often precede genocide. Unlike most modern states, East and West Pakistan were not contiguous, but separated by a thousand miles. East Pakistan was carved out of the Bengali-speaking region of India. The predominantly Bengali East Pakistanis believed they were not fairly represented in political and economic life. Though it was the most widely spoken language in Pakistan, Bengali was denied status as a national language until 1956. And, from the country's founding in 1947, Bengalis rioted against what they perceived to be the inferior status accorded to their language.<sup>18</sup> Though

15 Ben Kiernan, 'Cover up and denial of genocide: Australia, the USA, East Timor and Aborigines', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 2002, 163–92.

16 Leo Casey, 'Questioning Halabja: genocide and the expedient political lie', *Dissent*, Summer 2003, 61–5.

17 Ibid.

18 Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990).

East Pakistan contained a majority of the country's population, most high-ranking civil servants and military officers were from West Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, while a significant portion of the country's foreign exchange was derived from jute grown in East Pakistan, it received just 35 per cent of the money spent on development projects.<sup>20</sup> The Bengalis believed that they were an economic colony of West Pakistan.

Two events in late 1970 sparked off the political crisis of 1971. In November a cyclone and subsequent floods devastated East Pakistan. The death toll from the natural disasters was difficult to determine, but it has been estimated at 250,000 to 500,000. Bengalis believed that the central government in West Pakistan was slow to react and that its response to the catastrophe was inadequate.<sup>21</sup>

In December 1970 Pakistan held elections to a new constituent assembly that was to write a new national constitution. The 1970 elections were the first in Pakistani history to be held on a one-person, one-vote basis and, therefore, a party that could sweep East Pakistan was in a position to dominate the national government. In these elections, the Bengali-based Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a majority of the seats in the assembly. The ethnic divisions in Pakistani politics were starkly illustrated by the election results. The Awami League captured 167 of the 169 constituencies in East Pakistan. The League's 167 seats gave it an absolute majority in the new 313-seat assembly. The Awami League advocated a six-point autonomy plan, first articulated in 1966, that would have granted the Bengalis a semi-independent status within Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> With its electoral victory, the Awami League was in position to enact its programme and to name Mujib, as he was popularly known, as prime minister. Neither of these outcomes was acceptable to the military elites who dominated Pakistan. On 1 March 1971, after Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, head of the Pakistan Peoples Party that had won 80 constituencies in the elections, announced that his party would boycott the assembly, Pakistan's military dictator, Yahya Kahn, delayed the convening of the assembly. In East Bengal, the postponement of the assembly and, thus, the denial of the fruits of electoral victory to the Bangladeshis were met with mass outrage. Demonstrations were followed by widespread strikes that left East Pakistan paralysed. At this point the Pakistani military leadership decided to quell the uprising in Bangladesh with brute force. This began on 25 March 1971 and the generals believed that the Bengalis could be quickly subdued by violence.<sup>23</sup>

19 Ibid.

20 Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications 1971).

21 Robert Payne, *Massacre: The Tragedy of Bangladesh and the Phenomenon of Mass Slaughter throughout History* (New York: Macmillan 1973).

22 Ibid.

23 Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*.

Estimates of the number of those killed in Bangladesh in 1971 vary greatly. A low-end estimate by American political scientists Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, who denied that a genocide took place, was that about 300,000 were killed in actions of the Pakistani army, the atrocities that Bengalis committed against the Bihari minority and in warfare between the Pakistani army and the rebel Mukti Bahini forces that battled for Bangladeshi independence.<sup>24</sup> A. M. A. Muhith, a Bangladeshi writer, estimated that about 3 million Bangladeshis were killed by the Pakistani army between March and December 1971.<sup>25</sup> Rounaq Jahan also placed the number of dead in the range of about 3 million.<sup>26</sup> In a book on democide, R. J. Rummel estimated that about 1.5 million people were killed in Bangladesh in 1971.<sup>27</sup> Based on a survey that he acknowledged was incomplete, Kalyan Chaudhuri estimated the number of Bengalis killed as 1,247,000.<sup>28</sup> Visiting Bangladesh in January of 1972—just over a month after India defeated Pakistan in a two-week war that began on 2 December 1971—journalist Sydney Schanberg reported that foreign diplomats and independent observers estimated a death toll ranging from at least several hundred thousand to more than a million people. Schanberg reported that these same observers indicated that, if one could calculate all deaths that could be attributed to the repression imposed by the Pakistani army, including deaths among both the roughly 10 million refugees who fled to India and those whose lives were disrupted inside East Pakistan, the total number of dead would very likely approach the 3 million total claimed by Bengali leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.<sup>29</sup> With the exception of Chaudhuri, who used Bangladeshi newspaper accounts and government reports, none of the authors provided detailed evidence for the number of deaths they projected.

### East Pakistan, 1971: was there a genocide?

The very definition of 'genocide' itself has given rise to considerable controversy and there are various competing concepts of what constitutes a 'genocide'.<sup>30</sup> As Eric Weitz notes, 'genocide' is a much over-used

24 Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*.

25 A. M. A. Muhith, *Bangladesh: Emergence of a Nation*, (Dhaka: University Press 1992).

26 Rounaq Jahan, 'Genocide in Bangladesh', in Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons and Israel W. Charny (eds), *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views* (New York: Garland Publishing 1997), 291–316.

27 R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers 1997).

28 Kalyan Chaudhuri, *Genocide in Bangladesh* (Bombay: Orient Longman 1972).

29 Sydney H. Schanberg, 'Bengalis' land a vast cemetery', *New York Times*, 24 January 1972, 1.

30 Wardatul Akmam, 'Atrocities against humanity during the liberation war in Bangladesh: a case of genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 4, no. 4, December 2002, 543–59.

term.<sup>31</sup> The definition used in this article is the one adopted by the 1948 UN Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide, to which 142 nations are signatories. Article II defines 'genocide' as follows:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.<sup>32</sup>

To use the important distinction introduced by Robert Melson, the Bangladeshi genocide was a *partial* genocide and not a *total* genocide. In a total genocide there is an attempt to eliminate the entire class of victims. Melson characterizes the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide and the 1994 Rwandan genocides as total genocides.<sup>33</sup> Melson defines a partial genocide as '... mass murder in order to coerce and to alter the identity and politics of the group, not to destroy it'.<sup>34</sup> There was no attempt to eliminate the entire population of East Pakistan. The Pakistani army wished to eliminate those elements of the Bengali Muslim population that it believed were vital to the autonomy movement, to spread terror among the general population and also to decimate the Hindus who, it believed, played a malevolent role in East Bengal. The army's ultimate objective was to crush the movement for autonomy.

While the numbers of dead cannot be calculated with precision, there is no doubt that the Pakistani army killed vast numbers of Bengalis. Villages were burned and crops destroyed. Several million people fled, under

31 Eric Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2003).

32 'Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide', 9 December 1948, available on the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights website at [www.ohchr.org/english/law/genocide.htm](http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/genocide.htm) (viewed 14 June 2007).

33 Robert Melson, 'Modern genocide in Rwanda: ideology, revolution, war, and mass murder in an African state', in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (eds), *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).

34 Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992).

wretched circumstances, to India. The destruction of homes and creation of refugees by terror undoubtedly increased the death toll. Bengali women were raped in large numbers by the occupying military. The toll of death, violence and destruction targeted at ethnic and religious groups would indicate that the Pakistani army and its indigenous collaborators indeed committed genocide in Bangladesh in 1971. In order to make this case, I will examine the ideological and geo-political aspects of the 1971 secession crisis. First, the claims of journalists, diplomats, aid workers and others will be introduced to demonstrate that there is credible evidence that mass killings, rapes and expulsions took place across East Bengal and throughout the nine-month civil war. The time scale and geographical breadth of the killings and other atrocities point to the likelihood that genocide occurred.

### **The evidence of genocide**

A variety of sources depict systematic killing, rape and destruction by the Pakistani army consistent with genocide. These eyewitness and journalistic accounts are not absolute proof of genocide, but they do indicate that the atrocities continued throughout the nine months of military repression in East Pakistan and that they occurred in many regions of the country. These reports indicate that students, politicians known to favour independence, intellectuals, Awami League activists and Hindus were special targets of the army.

The military launched its operations on the night of 25–6 March with Operation Searchlight. Dhaka University was among the targets of this first attack on Bengali nationalism. On 29 April 1971 Ohio Republican Senator William Saxbe placed a letter from a constituent, Dr Jon E. Rohde, in the Senate record. Dr Rohde had served in East Bengal for three years as a physician with the United States Agency for Independent Development (USAID). His letter contained the following account of what he witnessed before he was evacuated from Dhaka:

My wife and I watched from our roof the night of March 25 as tanks rolled out of the Cantonment illuminated by the flares and the red glow of the fires as the city was shelled by artillery and mortars were fired into crowded slums and bazaars ... On the 29th we stood at the Ramna Kali Bari, an ancient Hindu village of about 250 people in the center of Dacca Ramna Race Course, and witnessed the stacks of machine gunned burning remains of men, women, and children butchered in the early morning hours of March 29 ... At the university area we walked through ... two of the student dormitories at Dacca University [were] shelled by the army tanks. All inmates were slaughtered. ... A man who was forced to drag the bodies outside, counted one hundred three Hindu students

buried there . . . We also saw evidence of a tank attack at Iqbal Hall where bodies were still unburied.<sup>35</sup>

Dr Rohde's assessment of the situation in East Bengal was as follows: 'The law of the jungle prevails in East Pakistan where the mass killing of unarmed civilians, the systematic elimination of the intelligentsia, and the annihilation of the Hindu population is in progress.'<sup>36</sup>

Another American evacuated from Dhaka, Pat Sammel, wrote a letter to the *Denver Post* that was placed in the House record by Representative Mike McKeivitt of Colorado on 11 May 1971. Sammel wrote:

We have been witness to what amounts to genocide. The West Pakistani army used tanks, heavy artillery and machine guns on unarmed civilians, killed 1,600 police while sleeping in their barracks . . . demolished the student dormitories at Dacca University, and excavated a mass grave for the thousands of students; they've systematically eliminated the intelligentsia of the country, wiped out entire villages—I could go on and on. It's hard to believe it happened.<sup>37</sup>

Further reports of a massacre at Dhaka University can be found among James Michener's interviews in Teheran with Americans who were evacuated from the East Pakistani capital. Several evacuees reported that they had seen Pakistani leaders with specific lists containing the names of Bengali professors who were slated for execution. They also reported seeing mass graves of students who had been killed.<sup>38</sup>

Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas was permitted to tour East Bengal in April 1971. His reports indicate that government policy was to eliminate the Hindus by death or expulsion. The comments made by Pakistani military officials in Bengal are eerily reminiscent of Nazi notions of purification and the weeding out of bad elements from society. According to Mascarenhas, senior government and military officials in East Bengal stated: 'we are determined to cleanse East Pakistan once and for all of the threat of secession, even if it means killing off two million people and ruling the province as a colony for 30 years.'<sup>39</sup> Another officer claimed that it had reached the point where Bengali culture had in fact become Hindu culture: 'We have to sort them out to restore the land to the people, and the people to their faith.'<sup>40</sup> A major in the Pakistani army told Mascarenhas:

35 Rohde's letter is reprinted from the Record of the US Senate as 'Recent events in East Pakistan' in Sheelendra Kumar Singh *et al.* (eds), *Bangladesh Documents*, vol. 1 (Madras: B. N. K. Press 1971), 349–51.

36 *Ibid.*, 351.

37 Reprinted from the Record of the US House of Representatives in *ibid.*, 357.

38 James A. Michener, 'A lament for Pakistan', *New York Times Magazine*, 9 January 1972.

39 Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*, 117.

40 Anthony Mascarenhas, 'Genocide', reprinted from *The Times* (London), 13 June 1971 in Singh *et al.* (eds), *Bangladesh Documents*, 358–72.

This is a war between the pure and the impure . . . The people here may have Muslim names and call themselves Muslims. But they are Hindu at heart. We are now sorting them out . . . Those who are left will be real Muslims. We will even teach them Urdu.<sup>41</sup>

Mascarenhas identified the principal targets of the campaign in East Bengal who were singled out for murder and/or intimidation: Bengali militiamen in the East Bengal regiment and the East Pakistan Rifles; Hindus who, as has been noted, were viewed as the rulers of East Pakistan and the corrupters of Bengali Muslims; all Awami League officers and volunteers; students, especially college and university men and some women who were viewed as militants; and Bengali intellectuals and teachers who were regarded as militants.<sup>42</sup>

To instil terror there was much random violence inflicted on Bengalis. Rounaq Jahan aptly summarized the pattern of the killings: 'Though Hindus were especially targeted, the majority of the victims were Bengali Muslims—ordinary villagers and slum dwellers—who were caught unprepared during the Pakistani army's sweeping spree of wanton killing, rape, and destruction.'<sup>43</sup> The genocidal campaign aimed to deprive the Bangladeshis of the capacity for physical, political and intellectual resistance. One Pakistani officer spoke in defence of the actions by arguing that only men were being killed.<sup>44</sup> As R. J. Rummel remarked, it was as if killing unarmed men was somehow virtuous.<sup>45</sup>

Mascarenhas reported that officers at the Pakistani army's eastern command headquarters in Dhaka made clear the government's policy with regard to East Bengal. The Bengalis had shown themselves to be unreliable and would be ruled by West Pakistanis. The Bangladeshis were to be re-educated along Islamic lines. The two regions of Pakistan were to be joined by a strong religious bond. Finally, when the Hindus had been eliminated by death or expulsion, their property was to be distributed among middle-class Muslims.<sup>46</sup> While at Comilla on East Pakistan's eastern border with India, Mascarenhas heard officers discussing their search for Hindus. Those Hindus apprehended were killed, while others abandoned their homes. Entire villages were burned for small acts of defiance.<sup>47</sup> Mascarenhas's reports of his ten-day tour of East Pakistan indicate that the genocidal rhetoric expressed by many officers of the Pakistani army were not idle boasts.

41 Ibid.

42 Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*, 116–17.

43 Jahan, 'Genocide in Bangladesh', 299.

44 Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*.

45 Rummel, *Death by Government*.

46 Mascarenhas, 'Genocide', 371.

47 Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*, 117–18.

*New York Times* reporter Sydney Schanberg reported that many Hindu shopkeepers were killed in Dhaka. (It is well worth noting that, while Schanberg covered both the Cambodian and Bangladeshi genocides, he achieved much greater renown for his coverage of Cambodia, culminating in his portrayal as a heroic reporter in the film *The Killing Fields*.) The shops of those murdered were given to non-Bengali Muslims and others who collaborated with the occupation. Hindu temples were demolished. The campaign against Bengali culture was not confined to Hindus. Schanberg reported that automobile license plates with Bengali script were changed to English.<sup>48</sup> Pakistani soldiers informed Bengalis that Urdu was a more civilized tongue and they should abandon Bengali.<sup>49</sup>

Schanberg believed that by late June 1971 the killing had become less indiscriminate and more targeted. He wrote that missionaries in remote regions of Bangladesh were reporting that massacres occurred on an almost daily basis. One missionary told Schanberg that over a thousand Hindus were killed in one day in the southern district of Barisal. According to another missionary, a meeting to effect a reconciliation was called in the northeastern Sylhet district. When a crowd gathered, troops arrived, selected 300 Hindus from the crowd, and shot them.<sup>50</sup>

Further evidence of the genocidal intent of the Pakistani army is provided in A. M. A. Muhith's account of his conversations with West Pakistani officials in May and October 1971. According to Muhith, the West Pakistanis argued that killing 300,000 or even 3 million Bangladeshis was justified if it would preserve the nation of Pakistan as it was constituted in 1947. Muhith also claimed that West Pakistani soldiers frequently compared Bangladeshis to monkeys or chickens.<sup>51</sup> General Niazi, the West Pakistani commander in East Bengal, was reported to have referred to Bangladesh as 'a low lying land, of low lying people'.<sup>52</sup>

Interviews conducted in early April with foreign evacuees from Chittagong, East Pakistan's second largest city and principal port, provide further evidence that the army's killings were not confined to the capital city. As in Dhaka, the army sought to punish the poorest people who were thought to be strong supporters of independence. The flimsy homes in the most impoverished districts were burned. A Danish graduate student reported counting 400 bodies in the river. An American evacuee reported that he saw

48 Sydney H. Schanberg, 'Dacca is still gripped by fear 3 months after onslaught', *New York Times*, 26 June 1971, 1.

49 Sydney H. Schanberg, 'West Pakistan pursues subjugation of Bengalis', *New York Times*, 14 July 1971, 1.

50 Ibid.

51 Muhith, *Bangladesh*.

52 Sydney H. Schanberg, 'A Pakistani terms Bengalis "chicken-hearted"', *New York Times*, 17 July 1971.

dead bodies and witnessed looting and arson by the Pakistani army.<sup>53</sup> Over the course of 1971 nearly 100,000 young Bengali men received military training in East Pakistan or in India and took up arms against the Pakistani army. In retaliation for guerrilla activities, the Pakistani army destroyed entire areas where insurgent actions had occurred. Killing, burning, raping and looting took place in the course of these raids.<sup>54</sup>

Part of the campaign to terrorize the Bengali population involved mass rape. Estimates of the number of women raped range from 200,000 to 400,000. Some of the victims were imprisoned in camps where they were subjected to several sexual assaults a day.<sup>55</sup> Some women claimed to have been assaulted by as many as eighty men in a single day.<sup>56</sup> The women who had been sexually assaulted found themselves in especially dire straits in a society in which female chastity was so highly prized. A post-independence campaign to find husbands for the women, who were dubbed national heroines, was largely unsuccessful.<sup>57</sup> The mass rape of Bengali women has received very little attention and virtually all published accounts reference Susan Brownmiller's 1975 work *Against Our Will*, which contained eight pages on the rapes. Bangladeshi scholar A. M. A. Muhith did note the mass rapes in his book on the 1971 crisis and claimed that there were 200,000 verifiable victims of rape in East Pakistan. Muhith also noted that this figure excluded those who died or refused to come forward out of fear and/or shame.<sup>58</sup>

The evidence available from journalists, refugees and aid officials indicates that the killings and rapes committed by the Pakistani army were spread across East Bengal, and that the atrocities occurred during the entire nine-month period of the military occupation. Furthermore, about 10 million refugees eventually fled East Pakistan for India. While it is impossible to estimate the deaths caused by dislocation and deprivation, the horrible conditions under which the refugees fled and were housed undoubtedly led to much loss of life. Observers estimated that between two-thirds and 90 per cent of those fleeing to India were Hindus.<sup>59</sup>

The atrocities, the massive flow of refugees to India and the geo-political manoeuvring were all reported extensively in the United States. A study of

53 Sydney H. Schanberg, 'Foreign evacuees from East Pakistan tell of grim fight', *New York Times*, 7 April 1971, 1.

54 Ibid.

55 Jahan, 'Genocide in Bangladesh', provides eyewitness testimony of mass rape camps established by the Pakistani army.

56 Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1975).

57 Ibid.

58 Muhith, *Bangladesh*.

59 Schanberg, 'Dacca is still gripped by fear 3 months after onslaught'. See also Robert Laporte, Jr., 'Pakistan in 1971: the disintegration of a nation', *Asian Survey*, vol. 12, no. 2, February 1972, 97-108.

the coverage in the *New York Times* of various instances of mass killings in the 1970s and 1980s indicates that the events in Bangladesh were well reported in that paper. For example, the killings of the Khmer Rouge received 791 column inches in the paper in 1975, the year that the US-backed Lon Nol regime was displaced by the Khmer Rouge and the initial stages of the Cambodian genocide were launched. In 1971 the events in Bangladesh received 690 column inches.<sup>60</sup>

### **The political and ideological context of genocide**

The circumstances of the Bangladeshi genocide were similar to those of several other genocides. The Bengalis were ethnically and linguistically distinct from West Pakistanis. A minority, in this case Hindus, was thought to be undermining national unity. This minority was identified with a foreign power, India, a nation that had fought two wars against Pakistan. The extent to which Pakistani political and military officers actually believed the ethnic and religious arguments directed at the Bengalis, and the degree to which such statements were cynical attempts to motivate soldiers, is impossible to determine. Either way, such sentiments have accompanied many genocides and they were present in Bangladesh in 1971.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League and the man regarded as Pakistan's founder, propagated the notion that there were two nations on the Indian subcontinent. Against the Congress Party, Jinnah argued that Hinduism and Islam were distinct social orders and that it was fantasy to think they could coexist in a single nation.<sup>61</sup> Islam was the essential element of Pakistani national identity and Muslim nationalism was, at least rhetorically, to be a factor in the 1971 genocide, despite the fact that both East and West Pakistan were predominantly Muslim. While there were massive population shifts between the newly emerging states in 1947, a substantial Hindu minority remained in East Pakistan. By 1970 that population was estimated to comprise 10–12 million of the approximately 75 million residents of East Pakistan. For the Punjabis, who dominated the West Pakistani military and government, Hindus residing in the East would provide a convenient scapegoat for Bengali nationalist demands.

However, religion was not the only basis for classifying the Bengalis as a weaker people. The British had regarded the Punjabis as a martial race and recruited most of the military from among them. Ian Talbot has argued that, while British reliance on Punjabi recruits had a pragmatic basis, this policy was later buttressed by the myth of Punjabi superiority based on ethnic origin and racial characteristics. Talbot says of Punjabi recruits to the colonial

60 Michael Stohl, 'Outside of a small circle of friends: states, genocide, mass killing and the role of bystanders', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 24, no. 2, June 1987, 151–66.

61 Akmam, 'Atrocities against humanity during the liberation war in Bangladesh'.

Indian army: 'They were designated as martial castes whose racial superiority made them natural warriors.'<sup>62</sup> These stereotypical notions persisted in the military recruitment practices of the postcolonial state. Indeed, the Pakistani army acted with brutality against ethnic groups other than the Bengalis, such as the Baloch, whose autonomy movement was repressed.<sup>63</sup>

Language was also a source of conflict from the moment Pakistan was founded. Bengali was the language of more populous East Pakistan and by far the most commonly spoken language in the new state. In West Pakistan, Punjabi, Sindi, Siraiki and Pashto were the predominant languages. To many of Pakistan's founders, however, Urdu was an essential element of the Islamic nature of the new state,<sup>64</sup> although it was used by only a small minority in West Pakistan.<sup>65</sup> For the *muhajir* (refugee) elite that had left India, the new state was composed not just of East and West Pakistan, but also of those Muslims who remained in India. Urdu proponents argued that the language was part of Islamic culture in South Asia and that it was more closely related to Arabic than other South Asian languages.

From Pakistan's founding, demands for the inclusion of Bengali as a national language were regarded as a threat to the Muslim nature of the new state. Jinnah believed that Urdu should be the language of Pakistan and that demands for Bengali were Indian-inspired. Such assertions were made in 1948 in the wake of the terrible communal violence that resulted in at least 200,000 deaths in the Punjab in 1947 in the events that accompanied the partition of the subcontinent.<sup>66</sup> Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were all victims and perpetrators in the murder, rape and torture that accompanied massive ethnic cleansing and population transfers at the end of British colonial rule.<sup>67</sup> Speaking in Dhaka on 24 March 1948, Jinnah clearly equated the demand for Bengali parity with Urdu as a threat to Pakistani and Muslim unity.

Our enemies, among whom I regret to say, there are still some Muslims, have set about actively encouraging provincialism in the hope of weakening Pakistan, and

62 Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications 1988).

63 Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A Modern History*, revd edn (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005).

64 Philip Oldenburg, "'A place insufficiently imagined': language, belief, and the Pakistan crisis of 1971', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1985, 711–33.

65 Tariq Rahman, 'Language and politics in a Pakistan province: the Sindhi language movement', *Asian Survey*, vol. 35, no. 11, November 1995, 1005–16.

66 Paul R. Brass, 'The partition of India and retributive genocide in the Punjab, 1946–47: means, methods, and purposes 1', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2003, 71–101. See also Anders Bjørn Hansen, 'The Punjab 1937–1947: a case of genocide?', in Steven L. B. Jensen (ed.), *Genocide: Cases, Comparisons and Contemporary Debates* (Copenhagen: Danish Center For Holocaust and Genocide Studies 2003).

67 Brass, 'The partition of India and retributive genocide in the Punjab, 1946–47'. Violence between Hindus and Muslims had occurred on a smaller scale in Calcutta in 1946; see Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1975).

thereby facilitating the re-absorption of this province into the Indian Dominion. A flood of false propaganda is being daily put forth with the object of undermining the solidarity of Muslims of this state . . . Is it not significant that the very persons who in the past have betrayed the Muslim or fought against Pakistan should now suddenly pose as the saviors of your rights and incite you to defy the government on the question of language?<sup>68</sup>

Genocide frequently involves efforts at 'purification'.<sup>69</sup> The ethnicity that is regarded as an impediment to national unity is also often identified with a foreign power that is viewed as a threat to national existence. By 1970 cleansing the Hindus from East Pakistan would come to be regarded as a means of unifying the Muslim state.<sup>70</sup> Bengali nationalism itself was said to be rooted in the Hindu corruption of Bengali Muslims. Former Pakistani Prime Minister Chaudri Muhammad Ali argued that the Awami League victory in the 1970 election was a triumph for Hindus.<sup>71</sup>

The notion of purging Hinduism and its alleged manifestations from East Bengal had begun to permeate the cultural sphere in the 1950s. At that time, the central government attempted to force the Bengalis to substitute Arabic and Urdu words for Bengali words. As part of the effort to cleanse Bengali culture of Hindu influence, the works of Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize-winning Bengali Hindu, were banned from mention on state-owned radio and television by the Pakistani government in the 1960s.<sup>72</sup>

Once the secession conflict began the West Pakistani generals thought that the Bengalis would not be capable of sustained resistance. The belief that the Bengalis would quickly be vanquished was rooted in a perception that the people of East Pakistan were culturally and racially inferior to those in the West. Pakistani military ruler Ayub Kahn (1958–69) elucidated a common view of the East Bengalis when he said that they

probably belong to the very original Indian races. . . . They have been in turn ruled by the caste Hindus, Moghuls, Pathans, or the British. In addition, they have been and still are under the considerable Hindu cultural and linguistic influence. As such, they have all the inhibitions of downtrodden races and they have not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the new born freedom.<sup>73</sup>

The killing of so many Bengali Muslims by the army was a departure from the communal violence between religious nationalists that has continued in

68 Quoted in Oldenburg, "'A place insufficiently imagined'", 724.

69 Nazis often referred to areas that were free of Jews as a result of deportations as *judenrein*, implying that they had been cleansed of Jews.

70 Oldenburg, "'A place insufficiently imagined"'.

71 Ibid.

72 Jahan, 'Genocide in Bangladesh'.

73 Quoted in Oldenburg, "'A place insufficiently imagined'", 724.

South Asia since independence and today includes violence against Muslims by Hindu nationalists in India, and Muslim nationalist attacks against Hindus in Bangladesh.<sup>74</sup> In the secession crisis of 1971 the Pakistani army killed many fellow Muslims in East Pakistan.<sup>75</sup> Wardatul Akmam attempts to synthesize the national, ethnic and religious aspects of the 1971 genocide. He explains the intentions of the Pakistani government in the following manner:

The ideology to destroy the Bengali nation was that they were descendants of aboriginal Indian tribes. They do not deserve to rule but only to be ruled. Therefore, they were to be crushed in such a way that they could never again demand the fruits of election victory. The Hindus as the victims had the double negative characteristics—they were Bengali and Hindus who were considered enemies of Islam and agents of India. So, they had to be exterminated.<sup>76</sup>

International conflict and war are often precursors of genocide. Christopher Browning places the Nazi decision to answer the *Judenfrage* (Jewish Question) by extermination in the context of the murderous campaign that the Nazis planned to wage in the Soviet Union, which they believed to be ruled by a Judaeo-Bolshevist regime.<sup>77</sup> The Ottoman genocide of the Armenians occurred during the First World War as 'Muslim Turkey' battled, among others, 'Christian Russia'. The Ottoman Empire and Russia had long been rivals for territory and influence in the Black Sea, Caucasus and Balkan regions.<sup>78</sup> Pakistan and India were founded amidst murderous violence. The issue of control of the northern region of Jammu and Kashmir has been a source of fierce controversy between the two nations since 1947. A three-week war in 1965 resulted in an Indian victory. The level of hostility between the two nations was exemplified by Indian Prime Minister Shastri's declaration to a crowd in Calcutta in 1965 that Pakistan lacked the culture of a civilized country.<sup>79</sup> Speaking in the capital of West Bengal, Shastri assured

74 For Bangladesh, see Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2004). Indian Hindu nationalist violence against Indian Muslims is analysed in Martha C. Nussbaum, 'The Gujarat massacre', *Dissent*, Summer 2003, 15–23.

75 There has been no investigation into the numbers of Hindus and Muslims killed in 1971, though there were obviously many victims from each religion.

76 Akmam, 'Atrocities against humanity during the liberation war in Bangladesh', 553.

77 For a discussion of war as an influence on perpetrators of genocide, see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins 1992). Placing the Holocaust in the context of the Second World War is a major theme in Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2004).

78 Melson, *Revolution and Genocide*.

79 Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press 1977).

the crowd that India had no quarrel with the Bengali population in East Pakistan. On the other hand, some West Pakistani elites regarded Hindus as fifth columnists who were agents of an enemy state that posed a mortal threat to Pakistan. Conflict between the Pakistani regions was exacerbated by the discrimination encountered by the Bihari minority in East Pakistan. The Biharis, not all of whom were from the Indian state of Bihar, were Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to East Pakistan during the partition process. During the independence struggle Bengalis killed thousands of Biharis.<sup>80</sup>

The ideological elements that have been conducive to genocide in other times and places were present in East Bengal in 1971.<sup>81</sup> A population regarded as racial inferiors wished to secede from a nation that it believed exploited its natural resources. The Hindu minority in East Pakistan was believed to be allied with a hostile foreign state and the source of secessionist impulses. Cleansing the population of Hindus by death and expulsion was to be the way to remove the corrupting influences and restore the Muslim unity of Pakistan.<sup>82</sup> Intellectuals, students, military officers, politicians and supporters of Bengali nationalism were special targets of the genocide.

### **Memoirists and scholars: the denial of the Bangladeshi genocide**

The US diplomats who wrote about the nine-month occupation of East Pakistan showed very little concern with human rights violations and paid much heed to the geo-political considerations that motivated US foreign policy in the region. In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger, who was National Security Advisor during Richard Nixon's first term (1969–73), acknowledged that Pakistan's reaction to the crisis in East Pakistan was 'brutal and short sighted'.<sup>83</sup> At another point in his long chapter on events in the subcontinent, Kissinger stated that Pakistan 'had unquestionably acted unwisely, brutally, and even immorally, though on a matter which under international law was clearly under its domestic jurisdiction'.<sup>84</sup> Despite the acknowledgement of Pakistani wrongdoing in the East, Kissinger never discussed the number of civilians killed, nor did he mention the mass rape of Bengali women in a very detailed chapter.

Even Kissinger's brief expressions in his memoirs of disdain for Pakistani army repression in East Pakistan appear to have been made after the fact. In

80 Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, *The Events in East Pakistan, 1971. A Legal Study* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists 1972), 9.

81 Weitz, *A Century of Genocide*.

82 Although the Pakistani army also eliminated many Bengali Muslims.

83 Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown 1979), 855.

84 *Ibid.*, 914.

a study of the period, Christopher Van Hollen finds that Kissinger appeared to have had no moral qualms about the vengeance his allies were wreaking on the Bengalis in March and April 1971. In Van Hollen's words: 'At no time during that period is Kissinger on record as voicing outrage or humanitarian concern as the Pakistani armed forces obeyed Yahya's crackdown orders with a vengeance.'<sup>85</sup> In Kissinger's worldview, geo-political strategy was primary and exclusive of any concern for human rights. Even if Pakistani actions were immoral, they were, in Kissinger's view, an internal Pakistani matter. Furthermore, Kissinger argued that the United States had few means to influence the actions of the Pakistani government. For the National Security Advisor and grand strategist, the real reason why the United States could not condemn the brutal repression occurring in East Pakistan was that there were strategic objectives that overrode humanitarian concerns. In Kissinger's words:

To some of our critics, our silence over Pakistan—the reason for which we could not explain—became another symptom of the general moral insensitivity of their government. They could not accept that it might be torn between conflicting imperatives.<sup>86</sup>

At the time of the genocide in the East, Pakistan was serving as an intermediary between China and the Nixon administration. Kissinger was engaged in secret negotiations with China, with whom Nixon wished to set up at least some form of diplomatic relations. China would play an important role in US Cold War policy as a partner of the United States against the Soviet Union. Kissinger argued that he could do nothing that would jeopardize the vital role that Pakistan was playing in nurturing the nascent relationship between the United States and China. Some of Kissinger's strongest critics have argued that the National Security Advisor himself admitted that Romania offered another conduit to China.<sup>87</sup> Whether or not Nicolae Ceaușescu was a viable intermediary for Kissinger's China diplomacy, it is clear that any inclination to consider halting the genocide as more important than geo-political concerns was quickly dismissed.

The administration had early warning that American diplomatic officials regarded events in East Pakistan as genocidal. In early April 1971 a group of American diplomats in Dhaka, led by Consul General Archer Blood, sent a telegram to the State Department protesting the administration's refusal to condemn the mass killings of the Bengalis. The telegram stated in part:

85 Christopher Van Hollen, 'The tilt policy revisited: Nixon-Kissinger geopolitics and South Asia', *Asian Survey*, vol. 20, no. 4, April 1980, 339–61.

86 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 854.

87 Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London and New York: Verso 2001).

... Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to denounce atrocities ... we have not chosen to intervene, even morally, on the grounds that the Awami conflict, in which unfortunately, the overworked term genocide is applicable, is purely an internal matter of a sovereign state ... We, as professional public servants, express our dissent with current policy and fervently hope that our true and lasting interest here can be defined and our policies redirected.<sup>88</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger reacted with fury to the Dhaka telegram and the President ordered that Blood be transferred from his post.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, a reader of the seventy-eight-page chapter on the South Asian crisis of 1971 in Kissinger's memoirs is led to the inescapable conclusion that the author was far more angered by the Foreign Service Officers' disagreement with the administration's policy in the region than he was by the genocide that he did not acknowledge.

American credibility was another consideration that trumped a concern for the human rights of Bangladeshis who were being slaughtered. The Nixon administration claimed to fear that the Chinese would be less interested in a relationship with the United States if the latter were perceived as not standing by an ally. As the events in Bangladesh widened into a war between India and Pakistan, the US began to tilt towards Pakistan. Again, the major concern was with geo-political considerations. As reported by US diplomat Dennis Kux, Nixon confided to French President Pompidou that he was determined to preserve the balance of power in Asia. The American President believed a victory of India over Pakistan was the same as a victory of the Soviet Union over China.<sup>90</sup>

The absence of academic work in the United States on the genocide in East Pakistan/Bangladesh is striking. The most thorough academic study of the secession crisis of 1971, published by University of California political scientists Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose in 1990, stated that there was in fact no genocide in Bangladesh in 1971.<sup>91</sup> The initial efforts by the Pakistani army to repress the surging activities of Bengali nationalists were labelled Operation Searchlight, and numerous accounts published at the time asserted that Pakistani tanks fired on dormitories at Dhaka University. According to Sisson and Rose, the Pakistani army preferred that the detention of Awami League leaders and student activists be conducted in a peaceful manner. Sisson and Rose presented puzzling evidence for this contrarian assertion. They cited the book *Witness to Surrender* by Siddiq Salik,

88 Quoted in Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution* (London: Zed Press 1979), 158.

89 Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press 2001).

90 *Ibid.*, 203.

91 Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*.

published in Karachi in 1977,<sup>92</sup> as supporting their assertion, but they appear to have been truly convinced by their interviews with the military officers involved in Operation Searchlight. Their corroboration of Salik's book seemed to close the case for Sisson and Rose.<sup>93</sup> Either they were unaware of the evidence pointing to genocide in Bangladesh or they chose to disregard it without ever informing the reader of their reasons for doing so.

In their text, Sisson and Rose did not address the issue of the total number of victims or the actions of the Pakistani army against the Bengalis in 1971. In a footnote, they provided a much lower estimate of victims, 300,000 to 500,000, than others who had attempted the imprecise task of counting the victims of the genocide. Their sources for this low estimate were two Indian officials responsible for monitoring affairs in Bangladesh in 1971. While the slimness of evidence accepted by Sisson and Rose is not, of course, proof of the accuracy of any counter-claims, their view of the issue of civilian murder was clearly that it was peripheral to the events in South Asia in 1971.<sup>94</sup> The marginality of human rights violations was further evidenced by the fact that, while Sisson and Rose discussed the geo-political implications of the influx of millions of refugees from East Bengal into India, they gave no consideration to the cause of the mass migration. Nor did they discuss the rape of Bengali women in 1971.

### Selective compassion

Despite the evidence of genocide through murder and rape in East Pakistan in 1971, little attention has been paid to the human suffering in Bangladesh. No book-length study of the genocide in Bangladesh has been published in the United States; essays about it have appeared in some collections on genocide but not in others. Some recent books on the 1971 Pakistani war of secession even deny that there was genocide in East Pakistan. Other memoirs and accounts of the era make only passing references to the repression and atrocities. One article on the Bangladesh genocide was published in the *Journal of Genocide Research* in 2002; all of the sources in this interesting article, which applies different definitions of 'genocide' to the Bangladeshi case, cite actual evidence of genocide from publications dating from the early 1970s.<sup>95</sup> In the past few decades there has been little investigation of even the basic question of how many victims were killed by the Pakistani army in 1971.

Three factors go a long way towards explaining the extent to which a genocide will be studied in the United States: the degree to which political

92 Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender* (Karachi: Oxford University Press 1978).

93 *Ibid.*, 298n9.

94 See *ibid.*, 306n24.

95 Akmam, 'Atrocities against humanity during the liberation war in Bangladesh'.

points can be scored by an ideological or partisan faction; the status of the perpetrator regime in the aftermath of the genocide; and the power of the American community of the ethnic group that was victimized. (There are, of course, other, more prosaic factors, such as changes in academic fashion, that can explain why topics fall in and out of academic favour.) In the case of Bangladesh, the interests of the regimes that have governed the country since 1971 must also be examined.

A genocide will receive more attention when an intellectual or academic faction feels that it stands to gain politically or intellectually from promoting a certain perspective and from interpreting or researching the genocide. Conservatives will focus on the crimes of regimes the United States has opposed or now opposes. The left is more interested in atrocities committed by US allies, especially if there is American complicity. When the first reports of Cambodian genocide emerged, conservatives, who for decades had warned of the calamities that Communism would bring to Southeast Asia, felt vindicated. The academic and activist left, which had so vigorously opposed US policies in Southeast Asia, argued vehemently that these stories were atrocity propaganda and that the policies of the Khmer Rouge were rational attempts to address the disastrous conditions the country they inherited.<sup>96</sup> Both the left and the right had a significant stake in interpreting the events in Cambodia.

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, there were still ideological wars to be fought over the Cambodian genocide. For those who wished to continue to attack the left, Cambodia represented the inevitable result of attempts to build a socialist Utopia: proof of the evils of Marxism. The US government, motivated by Cold War alliance politics, actually supported Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in diplomatic circles until the early 1990s.<sup>97</sup> It is ironic that the end of the Cold War facilitated further research on the horrors perpetrated by a Communist regime. With diplomatic imperatives altered, the US government could reassign to the Khmer Rouge the evil status it had before it seized power and acquired a grudging acceptance—despite mass murder—because of its alliance with the Chinese and opposition to the Vietnamese who were allied with the Soviet Union. Federal funding for the Yale Cambodian Genocide Project was available only after the fall of

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, Gareth Porter and George C. Hildebrand, *Cambodia: Starvation and Evolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1977). While they are not uncritically supportive of the policies of the Khmer Rouge, Chomsky and Herman are skeptical of claims about its atrocities: Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* (Boston: South End Press 1979). Support for the Khmer Rouge by the American left is discussed in Samantha Power, *'A Problem from Hell': America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books 2002), and also in Peter Maguire, *Facing Death in Cambodia* (New York: Columbia University Press 2005).

<sup>97</sup> Power, *'A Problem from Hell'*.

the Soviet Union. In this instance, the changed state of geo-politics facilitated the study of a particular genocide.<sup>98</sup>

The study of genocide in Cambodia has also been facilitated by the fact that, since 1979, the country has been governed by regimes intent on exposing the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge. Western scholars had access to the various archives soon after the Khmer Rouge was driven from power. The S-21 torture and extermination centre was opened in 1980 as the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes.<sup>99</sup> Mai Lam, the Vietnamese colonel who set up the museum and who had also organized the Museum of American War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City, had no interest in hiding the savage barbarism that occurred at S-21 where 14,000 people were murdered after being tortured. As an official of a Communist government, Mai Lam wished to distance the Khmer Rouge regime from socialism. The museum made many comparisons between the policies of the Khmer Rouge and those of the Nazis.<sup>100</sup> In 1992 the Cornell University Library microfilmed the entire S-21 archive. The establishment of Tuol Sleng and the Cornell microfilming were possible because the genocidal regime was conquered. Pakistan, on the other hand, has not had a government that wished to facilitate research on the genocide committed by the military in Bangladesh.

As already mentioned, despite the extensive media coverage of the events in Bangladesh in 1971, there has been relatively little scholarship on the genocide in the more than three decades that have elapsed since the breakup of Pakistan. In a 2001 comparative study of genocide that includes coverage of the Armenians, the Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia, Alex Alvarez never mentions Bangladesh.<sup>101</sup> Bangladesh is likewise never mentioned in the edited collection *Studies in Comparative Genocide*.<sup>102</sup> A book edited by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, two eminent American genocide scholars, has chapters on many genocides, but Bangladesh is not among them.<sup>103</sup> The 1971 genocide in East Pakistan is included in the previously cited work by R. J. Rummel and in the volume on twentieth-century genocides edited by Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons and Israel W. Charny. Neither of these works cites any new research on the genocide in Bangladesh.<sup>104</sup>

98 The controversy over the Cambodian genocide is well summarized in Eyal Press, 'Unforgiven: the director of the Cambodian Genocide Program rekindles animosities', *Lingua Franca*, April/May 1997, 66–75.

99 David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999).

100 Ibid.

101 Alex Alvarez, *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001).

102 Levon Chorbajian and George Shirinian (eds), *Studies in Comparative Genocide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan and New York: St Martin's Press 1999).

103 Gellately and Kiernan (eds), *The Specter of Genocide*.

104 Rummel, *Death by Government*; Totten, Parsons and Charny (eds), *Century of Genocide*.

Access to the records of perpetrators and survivors greatly facilitates investigation of a particular genocide. Pakistan has little interest in promoting greater knowledge of a genocide inflicted by the nation's military regime. Documents that might shed greater light on the intentions and motivations of the Pakistani government in 1971 are not available to researchers. Many governments are unwilling to admit past acts of genocide. For example, to this day, the Turkish government fiercely resists the notion that genocide was committed against the Armenians during the course of the First World War.<sup>105</sup> The neglect and even denial of the genocide in Bangladesh is attributable to several other factors. Mainstream American policymakers, Henry Kissinger being of course a prime example, have little interest in focusing on a genocide that featured the United States 'tilting' towards the perpetrators. American scholars whose work has dealt with events on the subcontinent in 1971 are far more interested in the various permutations of diplomatic strategy than the slaughter of a few million Bengalis.

The study of Cambodia, on the other hand, has served the political and ideological needs of several factions in American politics since the Khmer Rouge took power in April of 1975. There is simply not much political mileage to be made of the genocide in East Pakistan. Some critics of Kissinger, such as Christopher Hitchens, author of *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, included the Bengalis on the list of atrocities associated with Henry Kissinger.<sup>106</sup> (The film version of *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* does not mention Bangladesh.) But, because the United States was much less complicit in the human rights violations in Bangladesh than in other cases and because Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was not a compelling figure on the left, Bangladesh remains a relatively uninviting topic for the American left. The subversion of the elected Marxist government of Salvador Allende in Chile and the establishment of a military dictatorship there resulted in far fewer deaths than the slaughter in East Bengal. For the US left, however, Allende represents a far more sympathetic political figure than Mujib, who had a much less coherent ideological programme and ran a corrupt government before his assassination in 1975.<sup>107</sup> The American right has little interest in promoting study of a genocide that involved a Republican president siding with Pakistan, a Cold War ally, against India, which was viewed as the Soviet Union's proxy in South Asia.

The military regimes that ran Bangladesh from 1975 to 1990 also had little incentive to promote study of the 1971 genocide. The Mujib government was

105 Henry R. Huttenbach, 'The psychology and politics of genocide denial: a comparison of four case studies', in Chorbajian and Shirinian (eds), *Studies in Comparative Genocide*.

106 Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*.

107 For a critical view of Mujib's government from an author who chronicled Pakistani army atrocities in Bangladesh, see Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1986).

overthrown in a military coup in 1975 and, for the bulk of the next fifteen years, Bangladesh was dominated by military regimes led by Generals Ziaur Rahman and H. M. Ershad.<sup>108</sup> Since the Awami League that Mujib headed was closely associated with the independence movement of 1971, the military governments were not eager to emphasize the events that led to independence. Furthermore, both Ziaur and Ershad were responsible for the genocide committed against the Jumma tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>109</sup> Their own complicity in genocide may have been a further factor in their reluctance to emphasize the genocide of 1971. In the case of Bangladesh, the nation created in the civil war of 1971, a museum devoted to the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army, in what is called a liberation war, was not established until 1996.<sup>110</sup> The liberation war remains a matter of intense debate within Bangladesh to this day. In 2004 there was even controversy over whether Mujib or Ziaur was the first to declare independence from Pakistan.<sup>111</sup>

The military regimes were allied with those who wished to make Islam predominant in Bangladeshi politics. For example, in 1977 Ziaur amended the constitution to replace secularism with 'absolute faith and trust in Almighty Allah'.<sup>112</sup> In 1988 Ershad declared Islam to be the state religion.<sup>113</sup> Accordingly, the military regimes courted religious elements that had opposed independence and even collaborated in the genocide. In the years after Mujib was deposed, measures were taken to rehabilitate those who were accused of collaborating with the Pakistani army in the atrocities of 1971. The issue of the 1971 atrocities was a weapon in the struggle between Islamists and secularists in Bangladesh for decades after independence. In 1971 Golam Azam was the East Pakistan chief of the conservative religious party Jamaat-i-Islami. In this role, he organized death squads that murdered Bengali intellectuals. In the 1990s secularists wanted to try Golam Azam for his part in these crimes, while Islamists defended him.<sup>114</sup> It has often been in the interest of governments and powerful political factions within Bangladesh to ignore or distort the genocide. The fact that local volunteers, or *razakars*, aided in the genocide makes the events of 1971 even more politically complex for any government in Bangladesh. The reluctance of

108 Larence Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, an Interpretive Study* (Karachi and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992).

109 Mark Levene, 'The Chittagong Hill Tracts: a case study in the political economy of "creeping" genocide', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1999, 339–69.

110 See the website of the Liberation War Museum at [www.liberationwarmuseum.org](http://www.liberationwarmuseum.org) (viewed 26 June 2007).

111 The issue is reported in an article in an English-language newspaper by an unidentified staff correspondent, 'Zia first proclaimer of independence, reprinted liberation war history says', *Daily Star*, 9 July 2004.

112 Riaz, *God Willing*, 20.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

Bangladeshi governments to explore the genocide fully is a further disincentive for western journalists and scholars to take up the matter.

American Jews have been key promoters of the study and remembrance of the Holocaust in the United States.<sup>115</sup> A study of growing interest in the Ukrainian famine in the United States and Canada concluded that the establishment of Ukrainian émigré communities in North America was in part responsible for the increased attention garnered by that tragedy.<sup>116</sup> Armenians in the United States have been the motivating force behind the growth of the study of the Armenian genocide from the 1960s to the present.<sup>117</sup> There is not a sufficiently powerful Bengali ethnic presence in the United States to engender greater recognition of the events in Bangladesh in 1971. Great Britain has a substantial Bangladeshi community, but Bangladeshis in Britain are relatively poor and lack a significant university-educated elite.

The genocide in Bangladesh is also neglected because some political and governmental officials in the United States, Pakistan and Bangladesh have an interest in denying that genocide occurred there or at least in not emphasizing what happened in 1971. There are few politicians and academics in the West who would gain political points by focusing on the genocide of 1971.<sup>118</sup> The Bangladesh genocide is ignored because there is so little interest in Bangladesh among those who have the academic, financial and political capital to draw attention to it. The case of Bangladesh is similar to that of other genocides. The extent to which attention is devoted to studying them is not related to the horror of the events that occurred, but to a variety of circumstances that have been explored in this article. Thomas Jefferson proclaimed that the proposition that all men were created equal was self-evident. It is also self-evident that, in some important ways, all genocide victims are not remotely equal.

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115 Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*.

116 Frank Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian famine of 1932–3: the role of the Ukrainian diaspora in research and public discussion', in Chorbajian and Shirinian (eds), *Studies in Comparative Genocide*.

117 Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins 2003).

118 The claim here is not that all academic research seeks to score political points, but that there are few political gains to be had in focusing on Bangladesh.

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