

Bangladesh: A living Bengali remembers Henry Kissinger, killer of “the dying Bengalis”

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Kissinger’s complicity in the slaughter of millions in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War is part of his poisonous legacy in Southasia - one he never answered or apologised for

Henry Kissinger, the US statesman and long-time advisor to successive presidents of the United States, died on 29 November 2023. He was 100 years old and went too soon, as he never faced any consequences for the war crimes he helped plot and perpetrate all over the world, including in Southasia. There is no closure. And now he is gone. But the victims and results of his crimes live on intergenerationally.

In the lead-up to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh in 1971, worried about a Soviet-leaning India causing the collapse of Pakistan, the White House and Kissinger stood on the side of Islamabad as its forces carried out a vicious crackdown on the Bengali population of East Pakistan. Despite receiving multiple warnings from US diplomats about the atrocities being committed, Kissinger approved shipments of weapons that perpetuated them.

In his landmark book *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide*, the international-affairs scholar Gary J Bass documents [US policy on Pakistan](#) using, among other things, White House audio-tape recordings of conversations between the US president at the time, Richard Nixon, and his national security advisor, Kissinger. Bass presents one particular line that especially sticks in the mind. Kissinger hears about the increasing revulsion among Americans, including people in the US government and diplomatic service, at the Nixon administration’s complicity in the genocide of Bengalis by Pakistan’s military and security forces, and their assorted ideological allies. In response, he sneers at those who “bleed” for “the dying Bengalis”.

The dying Bengalis. That phrase is tattooed in my consciousness. It represents much more than a callous disregard for human life. It represents a political and economic order where, let alone living Bengalis, even millions of dying Bengalis do not change the trajectories and calculations that matter to power.

Neither Nixon nor Kissinger exercised any of their considerable leverage to restrain Pakistan’s generals. “Throughout it all, from the outbreak of civil war to the Bengali massacres to Pakistan’s crushing defeat by the Indian military, Nixon and Kissinger, unfazed by detailed knowledge of the massacres, stood stoutly behind Pakistan,” Bass writes.

In the years afterwards, Kissinger never acknowledged his complicity. “Kissinger’s memoirs are a lengthy masterpiece of omission,” Bass tells us. “Although he devotes a long chapter to glossing up his record in South Asia, he says almost nothing about the slaughter of Bengalis, while still insisting that Pakistan’s atrocities were ‘clearly under its domestic jurisdiction’.”

Bass wrote in *The Atlantic* after Kissinger's death: "Rather than reckoning with the human consequences of his deeds, let alone apologizing for breaking the law, Kissinger assiduously tried to cover up his record in the South Asia crisis." In his book *Leadership*, published in 2022, Kissinger was "still trying to promote a sanitized view, in which he tactfully termed former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi 'an irritant' - even though during her tenure he repeatedly called her 'a bitch,' as well as calling the Indians 'bastards' and 'sons of bitches.'"

I am a living Bengali, one among nearly 300 million of us spread across the world, but concentrated particularly in Bangladesh, and in West Bengal, Tripura and various other parts of historical Bengal that have been attached to the Indian Union. My people have been dying in their millions, in various spates, for the last 250 years.

In 1770, a third of all Bengalis were killed by the East India Company's policies of oppressive taxation even during crop failure. The company procured rice for its own troops and for private trading by its officials, to whom our lives were less important than their profits. Cut to 1943 and the Second World War. Sudeep Chakravarti, in *The Bengalis: A Portrait of a Community*, writes:

'The Marwaris were the ones to make the most out of the disruption of normal trading channels during wartime,' the journalist and economic historian Harish Damodaran writes of Marwari acumen during both World War I and World War II. In the Bengali scheme of things this is a gentle estimation. The 'speculative profits' Damodaran writes of were made in commodities like jute and cotton. But none probably hurt the Bengali mind, body and soul like the speculation and hoarding of rice during World War II, precipitated by British policies to stave off a possible Japanese invasion. Along with a few stalwarts of the ruling Muslim League in Bengal, the Marwari is implicated, historically and, perhaps more damagingly, in the public imagination, in denying vast swathes of the Bengal countryside of grain. Up to 3 million dead is a fair number for complicity, and Marwari heroes, visibly and invisibly close to Mohandas Gandhi, providing moral support, underwriting parts of the freedom movement in a delicate balance of Crown and conscience, haven't quite been able to escape Bengal's Nuremberg of the mind. The famine of 1943 was our Holocaust till the war for Bangladesh twenty-eight years later. And then we had two.

Millions of Bengalis killed were not a factor that could impede the war effort of a dying empire and Marwari profiteers' efforts to position themselves as the principal heirs to the seat of the extractor of Bengal. This is a seat that has been eyed or occupied by the Mughals, Rajputs, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danes, Marathas and Marwaris, but never held by Bengalis themselves.

I use the word "killed" very consciously, over the more ambiguous "died", to point to something that has been known by Bengalis forever but is often made to seem almost non-existent by forced forgetting or deemed to be natural by the sheer lies that absolve killers. The Nobel-winning economist Amartya Sen and the historian Janam Mukherjee, author of *Hungry Bengal*, have elucidated those very structures of power that were active in killing us and forcing us to forget, or making it seem that Bengalis "naturally" died in huge numbers. Bengali lives lost, even thousands or millions of them, can be explained away: like how the British prime minister Winston Churchill did when he said the millions of Bengalis killed by famine in 1943 had brought it upon themselves by "breeding like rabbits." Add the nearly three million killed in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War by the collaboration of Pakistan with Kissinger and Nixon's United States, and you have the story of a people who have been killed ("died") like none other.

The story of Kissinger's own people, the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and Nazi pogroms before that, has been rightly immortalised throughout the world - so much so, some argue, that it has provided cover for a genocide perpetrated by Israel against Palestinians. Kissinger, whose family fled Nazi Germany just in time, helped liberate the Nazi concentration camp at Ahlem as part of the

US forces at the close of the Second World War. His reflection on the experience, 'The Eternal Jew', was published in the historian Niall Ferguson's *Kissinger, Vol. 1, 1923-1968: The Idealist*:

"What's your name?" And the man's eyes cloud and he takes off his hat in anticipation of a blow. "Folek... Folek Sama."

"Don't take off your hat, you are free now."

And as I say it, I look over the camp. I see the huts, I observe the empty faces, the dead eyes. You are free now. I, with my pressed uniform, I haven't lived in filth and squalor, I haven't been beaten and kicked. What kind of freedom can I offer? I see my friend enter one of the huts and come out with tears in his eyes: "Don't go in there. We had to kick them to tell the dead from the living."

That is humanity in the 20th century. People reach such a stupor of suffering that life and death, animation or immobility can't be differentiated any more. And then, who is dead and who is alive, the man whose agonized face stares at me from the cot or Folek Sama, who stands with bowed head and emaciated body? Who was lucky, the man who draws circles in the sand and mumbles "I am free" or the bones that are interred in the hillside?

Folek Sama, your foot has been crushed so that you can't run away, your face is 40, your body is ageless, yet all your birth certificate reads is 16. And I stand there with my clean clothes and make a speech to you and your comrades.

Folek Sama, humanity stands accused in you. I, Joe Smith, human dignity, everybody has failed you. You should be preserved in cement up here on the hillside for future generation[s] to look upon and take stock. Human dignity, objective values have stopped at this barbed wire. What differentiates you and your comrades from animals[?] Why do we in the 20th century countenance you?

Yet, Folek, you are still human. You stand before me and tears run down your cheek. Hysterical sobbing follows. Go ahead and cry, Folek Sama, because your tears testify to your humanity, because they will be absorbed in this cursed soil, dedicating it.

As long as conscience exists as a conception in this world you will personify it. Nothing done for you will ever restore you.

You are eternal in this respect.

And if these words written by Henry Kissinger reflect meaning and feeling, which I think they do, in a very particular way, here the word "humanity" becomes a stand-in only for one's fellows in race and faith. In the name of a wider humanity - a humanity of Jews, Bengalis and all human beings who have been victims of power - my condemnation and hatred for Kissinger is eternal. As long as conscience exists as a conception in this world, he will personify the antithesis of it.

I could end here but I want to present three historical documents from the US Department of State archives. I want you to read these with all that I have said till now in mind, aware of the crimes that power is always hiding in its words, by its words - even when it is speaking in private, truthfully.

First, a conversation between Kissinger and Nixon recorded in the White House. It took place after much of the US-assisted genocide of Bengalis had already been carried out by Pakistan, but before Bengali nationalist forces and their Indian allies finally liberated Bangladesh on 16 December 1971. Indira Gandhi, the Indian prime minister at the time, had backed the Bengali nationalists in word and deed, arming and training the rebels and later sending in the Indian Army, and was on a state visit to the United States. Nixon, Kissinger and Haldeman discuss the US president's meeting with

Gandhi the previous day, and agree on the approach to take in an upcoming meeting:

Washington, 5 November 1971, 8:51-9:00 am

Nixon: This is just the point when she is a bitch.

Kissinger: Well, the Indians are bastards anyway. They are starting a war there. It's—to them East Pakistan is no longer the issue. Now, I found it very interesting how she carried on to you yesterday about West Pakistan.

Nixon: I think I'll make the meeting today a rather brief—cool. [unclear] I don't mean by that cool in terms of not trying to bring up [unclear] I'll talk to her a little about Vietnam, and—

Kissinger: I'd let her talk a little more, maybe today—

Nixon: Yeah?

Kissinger: —to be a little less forthcoming. But basically, Mr. President—

Nixon: So I was trying to give her no excuses. Now I've talked to her, told her everything we're going to do. Now it's up to her.

Kissinger: While she was a bitch, we got what we wanted too. You very subtly—I mean, she will not be able to go home and say that the United States didn't give her a warm reception and therefore, in despair, she's got to go to war.

Nixon: Yeah.

Kissinger: So her objective—she has a right to be a little sore because you thwarted her objective. She would rather have had you give her a cool reception—

Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: —so that she could say that she was really put upon.

Nixon: Oh, we really—

Kissinger: And—

Nixon: We really slobbered over the old witch.

Kissinger: How you slobbered over her in things that did not matter, but in the things that did matter—

Nixon: Yeah.

Kissinger: —you didn't give her an inch. So that she's—

Nixon: She knows.

Kissinger: She knows she isn't coming out of here with any—she can't go home and say, "The president promised to do the following for me," and then when you don't do it—

...

Kissinger: But, Mr. President, even though she was a bitch, we shouldn't overlook the fact that we got what we wanted, which was we kept her from going out of here saying that the United States kicked her in the teeth. We've got the film clip of this; you've got the toast. You've got the general warmth that you generated in the personal meeting.

Nixon: I do think at dinner tonight [unclear].

Kissinger: You didn't give her a goddamn thing.

Nixon: [unclear]

Kissinger: If you would have put on a Johnson performance, it would have been emotionally more satisfying but it would have hurt us. Because—I mean if you had been rough with her—

Nixon: Yeah.

Kissinger:—then she'd be crying, going back crying to India. So I think even though she is a bitch, I'd be a shade cooler today, but—

Nixon: No, no. I mean, "cool" in terms of, like yesterday, as you noted, I tried to carry the conversation.

Kissinger: No, I'd let her carry it.

Nixon: And was sort of saying, "look, we're being as good as we can in dealing with Pakistan. What else can we do?" Today, I'm just going to say [unclear].

Kissinger: That's what I would do. Except for Vietnam, I'd give her five minutes of the Tito talk because it will go right back to the Russians as well as to the Vietnamese.

Nixon: Will it?

Kissinger: Oh, yeah. They have the closest diplomatic ties now with Russia. They leak everything right back to them.

Second, another conversation, this one over the phone shortly after the liberation of Bangladesh. Nixon and Kissinger talk about delaying the recognition of Bangladesh - where, remember again, millions had been killed with direct material assistance and diplomatic protection provided by Kissinger and Nixon's government - until after Nixon has had the opportunity to discuss the issue with the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai.

Washington, 4 February 1972, 10:34 pm

P: What's the dope today?

K: Nothing of very great significance. [The Pakistan prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto] has indicated he has no objection to our recognizing Bangla Desh. I think we should hold up on that until you talk to [Zhou]. It would give you an opportunity to show how much you take them into consideration.

P: Sure. Either that or send them a message asking what they think about our doing that.

K: Well, it's only two weeks away. I think we can handle it.

P: That's not a big issues [sic].

K: No, and you can make points on it with the Chinese. Do it after you're back and it will show our compatibility with the Chinese. But it means we ought to be able to do it in March.

Third, a letter from Nixon to Bangladesh's prime minister, Mujibur Rahman, telling him about the United States' decision to recognise Bangladesh as a sovereign state and establish diplomatic relations.

Washington, 4 April 1972

Dear Mr. Prime Minister:

I wish to inform you that the United States Government has recognized the People's Republic of Bangladesh and that we would like to establish diplomatic relations at the embassy level with your government.

Historically, there have been warm ties between our two peoples. The United States has maintained an official mission in Dacca since 1949 and over the years many Americans, both in private and official capacities, have derived great satisfaction from the opportunity to work side by side with the Bengalee people in a variety of enterprises aimed at combatting disease, illiteracy, poverty, hunger and the impact of natural disaster. Enduring relationships have resulted from this collaboration.

I am sure that the friendship and goodwill between our two peoples will be further strengthened in the coming years, and I trust that our traditional cooperative association with your development efforts will continue. We fully share your aspirations for the progress and the welfare of the Bengalee people and the hope that the nations of the Sub-continent can normalize their relations and work together to forge a lasting peace.

Sincerely,

Richard Nixon

In response to the news of Kissinger's passing, Bangladesh's foreign minister, A K Abdul Momen, remarked that "in 1971, he was dead against the people of the then East Pakistan ... That is very sad for such a smart man to do such inhumane things ... He should have apologized to the people of Bangladesh for what he has done."

As long as power and powerlessness co-exist, Henry Kissinger will be remembered. If, one day, humanity triumphs over power, the Henry Kissingers of the world will disappear. Till then, rest in peace, Kissinger. All the Bengalis are not dead. Neither are the Chileans, whose lives you treated with similar contempt. Neither are the Vietnamese. Neither are the Cambodians. Neither are the Cypriots. Neither are the Timorese. Neither are the Argentinians. Neither are the South Africans. Neither are the Palestinians. And we shall not die.

Garga Chatterjee

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