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5 From Student Activists to *Muktibahini*: Students, Mass Violence and the Bangladesh Liberation War

And the students at the university
Asleep at night quite peacefully
The soldiers came and shot them in their beds
And terror took the dorm awakening shrieks of dread
And silent frozen forms and pillows drenched in red

Bangladesh, Bangladesh
Bangladesh, Bangladesh
When the sun sinks in the west
Die a million people of the Bangladesh¹

This chapter examines mass violence in the context of the War of Liberation of Bangladesh (1970–1971) with a particular focus on the way that students of Dhaka University were particularly targeted as victims of the violence. While the mass violence that occurred in the 1971 war between West and East Pakistan was by no means isolated to students, there was a particularly transformative effect on students’ political identity as a result of the violence. For decades prior to the war, Dhaka University students were at the forefront of numerous social and political mobilizations in East Pakistan. In light of the long running political disputes between East and West Pakistan, the sudden and violent outbreak of armed warfare precipitated a necessary shift from a Dhaka University student activist culture that was oriented around strikes, marches, and political agitation to one of *muktibahini* (freedom fighter) that was enacted in armed resistance and guerrilla warfare.

Background and Context: The Struggles in and of Divided Pakistan

Dhaka University was not always a contentious place, nor were the students known to be particularly troublesome to the ruling regime. In fact, the University

¹ Joan Baez, “Song of Bangladesh,” Chandos Music, 1972.

was established during the colonial period as a reward for Muslim elites in East Bengal who remained loyal to and supported the British during the attempted Bengal Partition of 1905–1911. While resistance to the administrative partition of Bengal had been fierce in Kolkata, in East Bengal the Muslim population saw the split as a potentially positive change that would increase economic and political representation for Muslims. When the political mobilization of West Bengal successfully pressured the British to annul the Partition, many Muslims in East Bengal felt betrayed. The British appeased the bitter East Bengalis by promising to build an educational institution to rival that of the great universities of Kolkata, and to base it in Dhaka. The university was actually not built until 1920, but even at this point of the height of nationalist agitation in West Bengal (and throughout much of the subcontinent), Dhaka, and the Muslim intelligentsia in particular, remained largely supportive of the British colonial regime and even, at times, agitated for the need to be more explicit in the Muslim League’s loyalty to the British.

As the Nationalist movement gained steam across the subcontinent, and following the Lahore Resolution in 1940, in which the Muslim League argued for independent Muslim states, the faculty and students of Dhaka University shifted and in turn were highly supportive of the independent Pakistan project. The campus population became vocal supporters of the Muslim League and the leadership of Mohammad Jinnah as the “father of Pakistan.” At independence in 1947, the new nation of Pakistan was created into two wings (East and West Pakistan). Dhaka became the provincial capital of the Eastern wing and Dhaka University became the leading institution of higher education for East Pakistanis.

Almost immediately after independence, however, the relationship between the two wings of East and West Pakistan deteriorated. Despite a larger proportion of the total population residing in the Eastern wing, power was heavily concentrated in the western wing, with most of the political posts were held by individuals from the western portion. In addition, in 1947 East Pakistan was verging on a severe food crisis, and memories of the 1943 Bengal Famine were still fresh. The population was anxious to avert another calamity on the scale of the disaster just four years before, and panic and hoarding became increasingly widespread. The new government’s response was inconsistent and vacillated between utter disinterest and ineffective implementation of policies in addressing the inflated prices of food in East Pakistan and in addressing the rumors of impending disaster.²

² For a more comprehensive treatment of the formation of East Pakistan see Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 105–130.

Students at Dhaka University took the lead role in agitating for food relief for the rural areas, organizing meetings, demonstrations, and building some of the movement culture that they would rely on for the larger, and more politically difficult battle of the *Bhasha Andolan* (Language Movement) of 1952. The Language Movement, from 1952–1956 was the first major battle between Dhaka University students and the government of Pakistan – and the students won. When Pakistani officials announced in 1952 that the singular national language of Pakistan was to be Urdu, the students in East Pakistan shifted from food issues to that of language and identity. Over the next several years students mobilized around the issue of language and continued to be dismissed by a series of government leaders. Dhaka University became the central meeting point and the general starting point of most marches and demonstrations.

Then, on 21 February 1952 a number of students were gunned down by police at a demonstration for Bangla as a national language. As news of the killings spread, the city of Dhaka was in chaos. Riots and spontaneous demonstrations broke out across the city, and people swarmed toward the campus of Dhaka University. In the evening of the attacks, several students constructed a monument on the campus entrance to those killed in the protest. The police destroyed the monument almost immediately. Within hours, *Shaheed Minars* (Martyr Memorials) had sprung up all over the campus. Riots continued for several days, and sporadic violence erupted all across the campus and government office quarters. At the national level, the effect of the *Bhasha Andolan* would take years to flesh out and would feed larger movements to follow. At the local level, however, the effect was much more immediate. As the physical hub of the student movement, and the origin of the strikes that were met with violence, Dhaka University became directly linked as the *place* of the *Bhasha Andolan*. It also established students as the self-appointed representatives of the larger population – and this becomes acutely relevant as the Pakistani state struggled to be seen as such. Eventually, Bengali was recognized as a national language of Pakistan, only further legitimizing the political identity of the Dhaka University students.

Shamshul Alam has argued that *the Bhasha Andolan* represents the first moment of “counter-governmentality” in the newly formed Pakistani state.³ Following the *Bhasha Andolan*, as tensions between the east and west wings of Pakistan continued to fester, students of Dhaka University were at the front of

3 S. M. Shamshul Alam, *Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See also: idem, “Language as Political Articulation: East Bengal in 1952,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 21, no. 4 (1991): 469–487.

major mobilizations. Throughout the 1960s, Dhaka University students had also become increasingly associated with the major political parties, especially the Awami League, that were making demands for representation. The leader of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibar Rahman (Mujib), (1920–1975), had become politically visible as a result of his participation in the Bhasha Andolan – while a student at Dhaka University. He held a close relationship with students, and even relied on their support when he was imprisoned for his political activity. Dhaka University students were also heavily involved in the campaign known as Mass Upsurge, which occurred across both wings in order to overthrow the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan (1907–1974); when he announced that he would not run for election in 1969, the Dhaka University students counted this as a massive victory and felt legitimized as the political voice of East Pakistan.

The role of Dhaka University students was clearly that of political agitators and their activities were largely non-violent and consistent with the multitude of other student movements flourishing across the world in the 1960s. After Ayub's resignation, his successor Yahya Khan (1917–1980) ruled while preparations for national elections were made. Students put all of their support behind Mujib, the Awami League candidate. Mujib and the Awami League ran a highly successful campaign across all of East Pakistan, and students played important roles.

On 12 November 1970, just before the elections were scheduled to take place, East Pakistan was hit with a terrible cyclone. *Time* magazine described Cyclone Bhola as “the worst natural disaster of the 20th century – and one of the worst of all of recorded history.”⁴ It is estimated to have killed somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 people. The devastating cyclone was unprecedented and still holds the place as the deadliest cyclone on record.⁵ In another article, *Time* magazine illustrated the attitude taken by the Western controlled Pakistani government,

...Pakistan's government proved shockingly inept and many of its people cruelly callous. ... Though people were reported floating alive offshore three days after the cyclone, the Pakistani navy was never ordered to search for survivors. Some 500,000 tons of grain were stock-piled in East Pakistan warehouses, but the 40-odd Pakistani army helicopters that could have air-lifted them to the delta sat on their pads in West Pakistan. . . Yahya

4 “Pakistan: When the Demon Struck,” *Time* 96, no. 22, November 30, 1970, 16–19.

5 “1970: The Great Bhola Cyclone,” *Hurricanes: Science and Society*. University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Oceanography and the National Science Foundation, accessed March 20, 2018. Accessed January 29, 2019. <http://www.hurricanescience.org/history/storms/1970s/greatbhola/>.

Khan waited a total 13 days before making a formal visit to the Ganges area to see for himself.⁶

Yahya, quoted in a later *Time* magazine in response to a question on “[t]he slow flow of cyclone aid to East Pakistan. . .,” coldly stated, “My government is not made up of angels.”⁷ The elections were delayed until December, but the latent anti-West Pakistan sentiment to which Mujib and the Awami League had been appealing during the campaign was heightened drastically by the merciless stance of the West Pakistani government during the cyclone.⁸

The results of the December elections reflected that outrage. The Awami League won 167 out of 169 seats in the east while the western 144 seats were split up between competing parties. This effectively placed control of the Pakistani government in the hands of the Awami League, and for the first time, there was a chance of a government that was controlled by East Pakistan. According to the original plan that Yahya had put forth when planning the elections, the next step in the transfer to civilian rule would be for Yahya to designate a time for the Assembly to meet and it would then have 120 days to draft a constitution.⁹ What followed instead was a renewal of the fierce debate over details of the constitution and handover of power after several rounds of failed negotiations, on 2 March 1971, Yahya decided to postpone the calling of the Assembly indefinitely.¹⁰

This postponement was interpreted by the vast majority East Pakistan as a way for West Pakistan to deny their right to control the government. Mujib gave a speech on in protest, in which he stated “I have mentioned many times the fact that a conspiracy is going on in this country. There was a general election and the people have elected us and we have a responsibility towards them. But in spite of the clear verdict in our favor the conspiracy has struck at its root.”¹¹ He also called for a general strike that shut down large parts of East Pakistan and advocated a massive non-cooperation movement until Yahya called the Assembly and ended martial law.

6 “East Pakistan: The Politics of Catastrophe,” *Time* 96, no. 23, December 7, 1970, 28–31.

7 “Good Soldier Yahya Khan,” *Time* 98, no. 5, August 2, 1971, 26.

8 International Commission of Jurists, ed. *The Events in East Pakistan, 1971: A Legal Study* (Geneva, 1972), 12. Full text of report available at International Commission of Jurists, Publications: Thematic Reports. Accessed January 29, 2019. <https://www.icj.org/the-events-in-east-pakistan-1971-a-legal-study/>

9 *Ibid.*, 13.

10 Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 53–110.

11 Ramendu Majumdar, *Bangladesh, My Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd, 1972), 77.

Students on Dhaka University exploded with anger at the news. *The Pakistan Observer* reported,

Immediately after the announcement was read out in a special radio broadcast on Monday, the students from different residential halls of Dacca University and other educational institutions of the city and the people from all walks of life . . . came out on the roads brandishing bamboo sticks and iron rods and chanting various slogans in protest of the postponement.¹²

Jahanara Imam lived near Dhaka University during the years preceding and during the war, and both her son and daughter were student activists on the campus. Rumi, her son, was killed in the war. Her memoir, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (The Days of Seventy One)¹³ is perhaps the most widely circulated and read account of the war period from the campus perspective. In her entry for 2 March 1971, she describes the flurry of activity in the wake of the postponement,

After finishing his tea Rumi said: "I'm going to the University. The Students League and DUCSU [Dhaka University Central Student Union] are holding a meeting under the Banyan tree [the Amtolla of past mobilizations]." I protested, "Why do you need to walk all the way there? You are not even a member of those parties? Why do you have to attend these meetings?" Rumi replied, "Things are no longer confined to any party, Mother. Now the fire has spread everywhere." . . . I glanced through the newspapers. All the student, labour and political parties have called meetings today. The East Pakistan Student League and the Dhaka University Central Student Union have called a joint meeting under the banyan tree at the University at 11 o'clock and at 3 o'clock at the Paltan. The NAP will hold a meeting at the Shaheed Minar . . . [it] enjoys the support of the East Pakistan Student Union . . . the newly formed Forward Students Block will also hold a meeting at Baitul Mukarram at 4 o'clock. All the meetings will end in protest marches. By postponing the parliament session, President Yahya has disturbed a hornet's nest.¹⁴

The choice of meeting spaces on the campus that were linked to previous mobilizations reflected the centrality of the campus space to the protests and the prominence of students in the political reaction. As one Dhaka University librarian recalls,

There were so many people who gathered and occupied the school for many days. Every day, I could not see any grasses in the yard, because they were so loosely packed.

¹² *The Pakistan Observer*, March 2, 1971. Bangla Academy Archive Collection.

¹³ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Days of Seventy One) (Dhaka: Sandhanee Prokashanee, 1986).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

Those people who not come into the school overflowed in the streets around the school. I have never seen so many people gathered together in my life.¹⁵

The protests grew in size and fury. By 4 March sixteen students had been killed by police.¹⁶ The reports of injuries in across the eastern wing numbered in the hundreds in only a few days.¹⁷ Despite the scattered violence that flared up between police and protesters however, the movement was largely non-violent. Students however, were anxious to see change and growing impatient. Hassan, a student at Dhaka University, remembers that “We were ready to finish what had begun in 1969. We were ready for independence. Mujib had to be convinced.”¹⁸ Dhaka University students of all of the major student organizations held a public meeting on 6 March with the express purpose of convincing Mujib to escalate the situation and declare an independent Bangla Desh (as the name had come to be rumored) the next day at his planned speech at the racecourse. The students urged Mujib to set up a provisional government and appealed to the international community to recognize that their movement was for justice and freedom.¹⁹

The next day, the students’ influence on Mujib was clear. While he stopped short of fully declaring secession, Mujib noticeably catered to the outrage of the students. In his famous speech, attended by over 300,000 people, he declared a full boycott of all government institutions and economic activity. He said,

... now, with great sadness in my heart, I look back on the past 23 years of our history and see nothing but a history of the shedding of the blood of the Bengali people. Ours has been a history of continual lamentation, repeated bloodshed and incessant tears. We gave blood in 1952, we won a mandate in 1954. But we were still not allowed to take up the reins of this country. In 1958, Ayub Khan clamped Martial Law on our people and enslaved us for the next 10 years. In 1966, during the Six-Point Movement of the masses, many were the young men and women whose lives were stilled by government bullets. After the downfall of Ayub, Mr. Yahya Khan took over with the promise that he would

15 Quoted in Kitamura Yuto, “The Student Movements in Bangladesh: The Role of Students and Student

Organizations at Dacca University during the Independence Movements between 1947–1971” (PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), 136.

16 *The Pakistan Observer*, March 5, 1971. Bangla Academy Archive Collection.

17 Badruddin Umar, *The Emergence of Bangladesh*, vol. 1: *Class Struggles in East Pakistan (1947–1958)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 293.

18 “Hassan,” Personal interview, 2010.

19 Kitamura, “Student Movements in Bangladesh,” 139; Badruddin Umar, *The Emergence of Bangladesh*, vol. 2: *Rise of Bengali Nationalism (1958–1971)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 293–295.

restore constitutional rule, that he would restore democracy and return power to the people. We agreed. But you all know of the events that took place after that . . .²⁰

Mujib's references to the movements that had been led by students positioned these victories as precursors to the current struggle and tapped into the sense of trajectory that the students themselves felt in their outrage.

Finally, although Mujib declared early in the speech that he hoped that there was still a possibility for a united solution of autonomy, he ended his speech with the declaration, "The struggle this time is for emancipation! The struggle this time is for independence!"²¹ Some students interpreted this as a declaration of independence; others saw it as a mild threat with insufficient force.²² Imam describes that among students, including her son Rumi and his friends, debates on the issue of autonomy versus independence were common in days following the racecourse speech. She claims that there was no real consensus among the students, although she depicts a revolutionary influence in the tone of the conversations, recalling, "Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao Tse Tung are the subjects of the constant discussion. Jami [the younger brother of Rumi who listens in on the Dhaka University students' conversations] has not read their works but Che Guevara seems to interest him a lot."²³ Either way, whether Mujib had been pushed by the radical students to move toward independence or if he still believed a united solution based on autonomy was possible and added the threat to appease the demands of students, the political influence of students is clear.

The days that followed were filled with tension. Yahya declared that meetings would be held with the intention of seating the government on 25 March. Negotiations were no success. Mujib's non-cooperation campaign was successfully causing economic ripples in the west, and the two sides seemed to be at a standstill. Then suddenly, without explanation, Yahya abruptly broke off the meetings on 25 March 1971 and flew back to West Pakistan.

²⁰ "The Speech Text," 7th March Foundation. Accessed March 20, 2017. <https://www.7thmarch.com/the-speech-text/>

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Imam, *Ekatorer Dinguli*, 22–25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

Operation Searchlight: The War and Dhaka University

As Yahya left Dhaka and ended the negotiations, a new approach was on the horizon. No longer was Yahya content to find a civil solution, and instead he turned to what he knew best: a military approach. Over the course of the night the nature of the situation changed irreversibly as West Pakistani soldiers moved across the city in the military attack known as Operation Searchlight. *Time* magazine described how the night unfolded as Yahya left,

Five hours later, soldiers using howitzers, tank, and rockets launched troop attacks in half a dozen sections of Dacca . . . Swiftly Yahya outlawed the Awami League and ordered the armed forces to 'do their duty.' Scores of Awami politicians were seized, including Mujib . . . on charges of treason."²⁴

There were numerous accounts of the atrocities that followed as part of the military "crackdown" on East Pakistan. Stephen Shalom Rosskamm described how "In the center of Dacca, the main city in East Pakistan, the army set fire to 25 square blocks and then mowed down those trying to escape."²⁵ In another account, an American working in a rural area of East Pakistan described the carnage:

The Army simply loosed a reign of terror against all Bengalis on the theory that if they were sufficiently savage and brutal, they would break the spirit of Bengali people, and not only stop the rebellion, but ensure that it would never happen again. In the beginning this reign of terror took place in and around the cities. Prime targets of the army were anyone who were or could be leaders; Awami League politicians, professors, students, businessmen. But any Bengali was fair game for a soldier.²⁶

The concentration of violence on the night of 25 March was particularly focused at Dhaka University and the students. As the Army moved to make a statement of force, the recognition of the symbolic importance of the campus as a space of contentious politics is clear. As Sarmila Bose has argued,

If there is a single event in the military action that has captured the imagination of critics around the world as symbolizing "a night of infamy" it is what happened in Dhaka

²⁴ "Pakistan: The Ravaging of Golden Bengal," *Time*, August 2, 1971, 28.

²⁵ Steven Rosskamm Shalom, *Imperial Alibis: Rationalizing US Intervention After the Cold War* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 122.

²⁶ International Commission of Jurists, *Events*, 24.

University during the night of 25-26 March 1971. The spectacle of a military regime sending the army to crush a “rebellious” university put the conflict in the starkest possible terms for most people and earned the regime lasting condemnation.²⁷

Although the campus had been closed officially for several weeks due to the continued political unrest, and many students had gone from the campus to their village homes, there were still many students remaining, particularly the most radical of activists, many of whom had been training militarily and arming themselves for just such an invasion. Just as Mujib had advised them to “make every home [a] fortress,” students had erected barricades at all of the entrances to the campus. As troops crossed the campus barricades, the reality of what military warfare really meant hit home for the students. An international reporter, Simon Dring, wrote of the invasion,

In the capital, the students, reckoned to be the militant hard core of the Awami League . . . talked endlessly of fighting to the death. But they had nothing more than a few rifles . . . equally ancient pistols, and some homemade bombs . . . Once the shooting started, the jeering, the shouting, the open defiance of the military might of the Pakistan Government died a quick death.²⁸

Dring hits on an important consideration in his assessment. The students, while versed in the repertoire and ideology of revolution, had never been faced with actual warfare. At the worst points in past mobilizations, students had faced gunfire from police, but never outright military invasion and systematic attack. The result was a slaughter.

Dring described the carnage in another article, painting a gruesome image of the fate of the unprepared students,

Caught completely by surprise, some 200 students were killed in Iqbal Hall, headquarters of the militantly anti-government Students’ Union, I was told. Two days later, bodies were still smoldering in the burnt out rooms, others scattered outside, more floated in a nearby lake, an art student sprawled across his easel. The military removed many of the bodies, but the 30 bodies still there could never have accounted for all the blood in the corridors of Iqbal Hall.²⁹

²⁷ Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 50–51.

²⁸ Simon Dring, “Dacca Eyewitness: Bloodbath, Inferno,” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 1971, A1.

²⁹ Simon Dring, “Tanks Crush Revolt in Pakistan,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 30, 1971, 30.

Dr. Nurul Ullah, a professor in Engineering at Dhaka University witnessed the attacks first-hand on the night of Operation Searchlight. He recalls,

At midnight, though, we woke up to the sound of an explosion. After a little while there were the sounds of mortar and gunfire. We all took shelter from the bullets in the passage between our bedroom and the bathroom. Feeling curious, I crawled to the window and tried to peek outside to see what was happening. At the time I was living at Fuller Road, opposite the Assembly hall [at Dhaka University]. It was a four storied flat for University professors of Engineering. From my window I could see Jagannath Hall, where there were usually a lot of students, and the large field. That night was pitch dark, even then I could feel that the Jagannath Hall Hostels and the roads around were covered by military. Then I saw some rooms in the hostels were set ablaze. In that light I saw soldiers with flash lights searching all the rooms. I couldn't dare to stare for long. Coming back to the corridor I spent the rest of the night sleepless.³⁰

The next morning, Ullah reports, the field in front of Jagannath Hall was covered in bodies and he set up a small video camera to record another incident in the massacre. He describes that,

... those people on nearing to the dead bodies, the soldiers who brought them moved slightly to the east and aimed rifles at them. For a moment everything was quiet. I saw a bearded man, kneeling down begging for life. Then the firing started. Rounds after rounds of bullets and people were falling on the ground, and bullets piercing bodies, hitting the ground, raising the dust. When the firing stopped, I saw the bearded man still alive, seemed like no one fired directly at him. The man with clasped hand was begging for his life. One soldier kicked him on the chest trying to lay him on the ground. But the man was still on his knees. Then they fired on him. His body merged with the other dead bodies. The soldiers who stood in line on the north side now they marched away. Those who killed were circling around the dead intently and fired to be absolutely sure that they were dead.³¹

Another professor, Dr. Muhammad Anisur Rahman, who was on the campus has recounted his experience on the campus that night as well. He describes,

We were in Flat 34C in a faculty apartment house opposite Jagannath Hall ... At around 10 pm we heard some noise outside, peeped through a window of our bedroom ... and saw students putting up barricades on the crossing ... Shortly before midnight Dora [his wife] and I woke to noise outside ... and saw truck and jeep loads of military armed with rifles and light machine guns. They got off right in front of our house, lined up against boundary wall and took position facing Jagannath Hall ... after a few minutes there was a mortar sound from a distance, and the sky roared with guns all around. The military

³⁰ Umar, *Emergence of Bangladesh*, vol. 2, 324.

³¹ *Ibid.*

had started firing fiercely at the dormitory . . . and our building shook repeatedly with the sound.³²

Rahman goes on to describe how he could hear the gunfire and cries as several professors staying in other flats of his building were next rounded up and systematically shot. He was spared because he had returned from a trip abroad the same day and everyone thought his apartment was empty.³³ Across the campus, each of the residence halls was swept and the students inside were gunned down.

The US Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood, sent an official telegram the Department of State on 28 March 1971 in which he stated:

Here in Dacca [sic] we are mute and horrified witnesses to a reign of terror by the Pak [sic] military. Evidence continues to mount that the . . . authorities have a list of Awami League supporters whom they are systematically eliminating by seeking them out in their homes and shooting them down . . .³⁴

The next day Blood sent another telegram, this time describing more specific events, perhaps in hopes of stirring up an emotional response from the US. He described having seen a “tightly packed pile of approximately twenty five corpses. Was told this was last batch of bodies remaining, others having been disposed of by army” at Dhaka University.³⁵ He further described the grim scene that had unfolded on campus:

Major atrocity took place Rokeya Girls' Hall, where building set ablaze and girls machine-gunned as they fled building . . . Girls had no weapons, forty killed. Estimated 1,000 persons, mostly students, but including faculty members resident in dorms, killed . . . At least two mass graves on campus . . . rain [on] March 29 exposed some bodies. Stench terrible.³⁶

This account is corroborated in the memoir of a West Pakistan soldier in Dhaka at the time. Syed Shahid Hussain writes,

32 Muhammad Anisur Rahman, *My Story of 1971: Through the holocaust that created Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Liberation War Museum Press, 2001), 31.

33 *Ibid.*, 31–34.

34 U.S. Consulate (Dacca) Cable, “Selective Genocide,” March 28, 1971, *The Tilt: The U.S. and the South Asian Crisis of 1971, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79*, ed. Sajit Gandhi (Washington, D.C.: The National Security Archive 2002), Record Group 59, Subject Numeric File 1970–73, Pol and Def, Box 2530.

35 Department of State, Telegram, Marc 30, 1971 *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79*.

36 *Ibid.*

Troops set the hostel known as Rukayya Hall ablaze and machine gunned the girls in their rooms, including those that tried to flee. I found confirmation of this crime in a verbal account given to me Major Saeed Jung of the Pakistan Army some years later, who claimed to have participated in the carnage. He described the horror of the massacre and said there was blood all over the rooms of Rukayya Hall. No one was allowed to escape. The boys had weapons but the girls had nothing.³⁷

Blood sent two more telegrams shortly thereafter. In the first he informed the State Department that casualties in Dhaka up to that point were estimated at 4,000 to 6,000.³⁸ In the other cable he recounted reports of systematic assassinations of students and other East Pakistanis, and described “truckloads of prisoners seen going into . . . camp at Peelkhana. Steady firing heard in area yesterday and today . . . approximately 1 shot per ten seconds for thirty minutes.”³⁹ In addition, Blood gave more gruesome details of the atrocities occurring at the University. He described that he “saw six naked female bodies at Dacca U. Feet tied together. Bits of Rope hanging from ceiling fans. Apparently raped, shot and hung from fans.”⁴⁰ Witness accounts of the atrocities on campus the night that Operation Searchlight was launched abound, and all illustrate voracious and merciless attack on the students unlike any the campus had seen before.

In Operation Searchlight, Dhaka University, above all other places in East Pakistan, was designated at the main priority for West Pakistani military control.⁴¹ The symbolic importance of the place is confirmed in the ferocity of the military attack, as not only students, but the important places on campus were destroyed. The meeting place of many movements past, the *Amtalla* was lit on fire by troops. The Madhur Canteen, another important site of student collective meetings and gatherings that had been a main gathering place during the anti-Ayub movement, was also set on fire, and the owner, Madhusudan Dey, and his wife and children were dragged into the road and shot.⁴² In a particularly pointed recognition of the importance of the place in the hearts and minds of East Pakistan, soldiers were ordered to destroy the Shaheed Minar. Bose interviewed

³⁷ Syed Shahid Hussain, *What Was Once East Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 175.

³⁸ Department of State, Telegram, March 31, 1971 *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79*, 2002.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 50–61.

⁴² “Madhur Canteen: A Place of Historic Significance,” *The News Today*. Accessed January 14, 2012. http://www.newstoday.com.bd/index.php?option=details&news_id=49947&date=2012-01-14 (post removed by March 20, 2017).

Capt. Sarwar of 18 Punjab, a West Pakistan soldier, and he described his encounter with the destruction of the memorial,

His wanderings during the night brought him to the Shahid Minar, which was being demolished. It took some time to bring down the Shahid Minar—an act of vandalism that added fuel to Bengali rage, and a pointless waste of time and resources, it would seem, as there was no military reason to demolish a memorial to the language movement of the 1950s.⁴³

Jahanara Imam recounts driving past the destroyed monument, and confirms the effect of fueling the outrage suspected by the West Pakistani soldier Bose interviewed. Imam describes,

Rumi slowed down in front of the Shaheed Minar. The broken pillars had been totally leveled to the ground. Only the foundation of the pillars could not be uprooted. I cried, “Oh Shaheed Minar, we shall take revenge for this indignity someday.” I could see Rumi’s jaw hardening and lips tightening in silent resolve.⁴⁴

While there may have been no military reason to attack the symbolic spaces of the campus, it reveals the symbolic importance of the campus places in the imaginations of both the students and the government.

As the days passed, the violence escalated and the war spread across the entire city, and into the rural areas. The campus was secured militarily, and the students that had been there were either dead or had fled to safety in nearby villages. The systematic nature of the killing was also becoming more clear and the war took on chilling dimensions. Robert Payne gives the testimony of an eyewitness describing the process,

The place of execution was the river edge, or the shallows near the shore, and the bodies were disposed of by the simple means of permitting them to flow downstream. The killing took place night after night. Usually the prisoners were roped together and made to wade out into the river. They were in batches of six or eight, and in the light of a powerful electric arc lamp, they were easy targets, black against the silvery water. The executioners stood on the pier, shooting down at the compact bunches of prisoners wading in the water. There were screams in the hot night air, then silence. The prisoners fell on their sides and their bodies lapped against the shore. Then a new bunch of prisoners was brought out and the process was repeated.⁴⁵

⁴³ Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 58.

⁴⁴ Imam, *Ekaturer Dinguli*, 49.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 229.

The war spread from the city into the countryside. No longer a matter of political mobilization, the situation was now a full scale war. Students and their political identity transitioned from activists waging street demonstrations to soldiers training for combat.

Guerilla War and the Birth of Bangladesh

The war waged for nine months and during that time, the idea of “student” seemed like a thing of the past. A poem written by Sufia Kamal, a former Dhaka University student activist and leader in the women’s cultural movement, captures the transition from youthful hope to hardened warrior that many students were forced to undergo:

There’s no more laughter in blossoming girls, or in young widows.
 Their mouths and lips are firmly pursed in strong resolve.
 Restless now, like the sharp edge of a sword
 Are the tender eyes, now piercing and raised.
 Not like the frightened doe are these eyes anymore.
 They are searching, like a hunting hawk.
 Their bitter hearts have turned cold, savage, hard
 To take revenge on the brute ravagers.⁴⁶

In her historical fiction novel based on Imam’s autobiography, Tahmima Anam also provides a depiction of the moment when a young student turns from idolizing revolutionary figures to joining the forces himself:

In the afternoon Rehana watched as he packed his bags. Her fingers itched to help him so she focused on something else. The books on his shelf. The posters on the wall. Mao Tse-tung. Che Guevara. Karl Marx. He wouldn’t tell her when he was leaving, or how he was planning to get out of the city. “It’s better if you don’t know,” he said.⁴⁷

As the war escalated students faced a new reality and many joined the military force fighting the West Pakistani troops. Students trained alongside peasants in rural camps along the Indian border and battled for the next nine months in a guerilla war of intense causality and brutality.

⁴⁶ Sufia Kamal “*Bennibinash Shomoy to ar nei*” (No More Time for Braiding Hair) translated by Abrar Ahmed in *Under the Krishnachura: Fifty Years of Bangladeshi Writing*, ed. Niaz Zamman (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2003), 9–10.

⁴⁷ Tahmima Anam, *A Golden Age: A Novel* (London: John Murray, 2007), 83.

As a result of the widespread of massacres, millions of refugees fled East Pakistan and flooded into neighboring India. *Time* magazine estimated the flow of refugees into India at 50,000 a day.⁴⁸ The report by the International Commission of Jurists on the matter described the refugee situation:

Faced with the mounting flow of refugees, the Pakistan Government declared variously that they were lured into India by false promises, that they were prevented by India from returning to Pakistan, and that only 2.2 million of the people in the camps were refugees, the rest being homeless Hindus from the streets of Calcutta. Dr. Homer Jack . . . particularly investigated these claims and found them all to be without foundation . . . All the refugees left their homeland because of killings and lootings.⁴⁹

India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was increasingly concerned over the millions of Bengalis that now fell under her jurisdiction. In a public speech, Mrs. Gandhi declared that India was "fully prepared to fight" if provoked too far. Indian ambassadors also warned that India might have "no choice" but to act in its own self interest in response to the flood of refugees.⁵⁰ The Pakistan government declared that India was fomenting the resistance and aiding the *muktibahini*.

Mayur, a student at Dhaka University who had left campus before the invasion, went to India at the outbreak of the war. He then travelled to the border where he was trained to use a rifle in a camp run by Bengali military officers.⁵¹ Adnan, a student who trained in the camps explains the relationship with India as he understood it.

They did not train us or give us arms. But they had these barracks on the border and at the last minute they decided they did not need those there. So they left them empty and we used them to train. So it was never officially given by India. It was sort of clever.⁵²

Hassan, who had been attending Dhaka Medical College at the outbreak of the war, stated forthrightly that he had been trained in India, although he did not state explicitly who provided the training. "When the war broke out," he explained, "I went to India where I learned to fight and then I returned and did my duty to fight."⁵³ There were also interesting rumors among the young

⁴⁸ *Time*, August 2, 1971.

⁴⁹ International Commission of Jurists, *Events in East Pakistan*, 40.

⁵⁰ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), 856.

⁵¹ "Mayur" Personal Interview, 2010.

⁵² "Adnan" Personal interview, 2010.

⁵³ "Hassan" Personal interview, 2010.

students that reflected remnants of the global imagination of the campus period, but linking them with new imagined identity as revolutionaries more so than students; Adnan had heard, along with several other interviewees, that “Fidel Castro was building a training camp for young people to go to Cuba and learn the methods of guerilla war.”⁵⁴

While Castro may or may not have had any actual interest in the ongoing war (there are no references to this in any recorded remarks by Castro) many others did. The brutality of the West Pakistani military had gained international attention from both political and cultural figures. Indira Gandhi was also growing more and more frustrated with the continued flow of refugees and the accusations of war-baiting from Pakistani officials. Finally, in the midst of a complex period of international negotiation and posturing on behalf of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China regarding foreign involvement in the war, the threat of the India-Pakistan War came to fruition on 3 December 1971.⁵⁵ Yahya Khan launched an air strike against several Indian airbases, one of which was located 330 miles inside the Indian border.⁵⁶ Yahya cited Indian aggression as the reason and argued that the attacks were in self-defense. India responded predictably and invaded Pakistan on both the eastern and western fronts. At the same time, India officially recognized Bangladesh as an independent state on 6 December.⁵⁷ Though the situation had the potential to escalate enormously, the war between India and Pakistan only lasted twelve days.⁵⁸

Just two days before surrender, however, in a last effort to punish the students and intelligentsia of Dhaka University, on 14 December 1971, West Pakistani troops in Dhaka launched a campaign to seek out and kill the leading intellectuals of Dhaka. Over 900 former professors and intellectual figures were rounded up, killed and buried in a mass grave near the edge of town. A memorial now stands in the place of the grave listing the names and academic disciplines of the victims.⁵⁹ The Pakistani military still denies the

54 “Adnan” Personal Interview, 2010. This rumor that Castro was a supporter of the muktibahini was mentioned in casual conversation with several interviewees, and seemed to be common knowledge among many others I encountered, however I could find no verification of the rumor in any way other than hearsay. As it is, even with no means of verifying the claim, it is an interesting testimony to the global imagination of the students at the time.

55 For a detailed analysis of the international dimension of the war, see Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*.

56 International Commission of Jurists, *Events in East Pakistan*, 43.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 “Killing of Intellectuals,” *Banglapedia. National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*. Accessed March 20, 2017. http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Killing_of_Intellectuals

accusation of the systematic killings on the eve of surrender although there are numerous accounts of witness and the proximity of the event to the end of the war made covering it up virtually impossible. The Liberation War Museum collection includes numerous photographs of the killing field. The vicious attack on the intelligentsia was undoubtedly an attempt to cripple the new nation by destroying its intellectual infrastructure, but it illustrates the continued place that the campus held as the origin of the spirit of defiance that the West Pakistani military had not been able to squelch.

Pakistani troops surrendered unconditionally on December 16, 1971 to Indian troops.⁶⁰ In January 1972 Sheikh Mujib took the helm of the newly independent nation Bangladesh. Students could finally return to their beloved campus and did so in jubilation. Students-turned-*muktibahini* gathered on the steps of the former Shaheed Minar and raised their rifles in victory. As Mujib began to establish the infrastructure of the new nation, student leaders were called into a new role, filling the spaces of murdered intellectuals at university positions and in political offices. Mujib quickly established a government that was dominated by the Awami League, and the national myth of the nation was increasingly tied to the victory of students. The *Shaheed Minar* was rebuilt, along with many other monuments to the national heroes of student activism.

Conclusion

This case study highlights the myriad ways in which identity, politics, and mass violence converge, even within a singular conflict. The mass violence that occurred during the Liberation War certainly had profound effects on many layers of society, but the transformation that took place among students was particularly focused on the political history of the institution of Dhaka University. As students shifted from young political activists that may have held revolutionary fantasies (as many young political activists across the world did at the time) to serving as full-fledged guerilla warriors, the effects of the genocidal campaign were placed into the historical timeline of social movements and youth activism not only in Bangladesh, but in the broader world history of the Global Sixties as well. Indeed, in addition to the historical and symbolic role of Dhaka University student activists being a key motivator for the brutal attack on the campus, it was also a motivator for international solidarity and attention toward the plight by young activists elsewhere.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Countercultural icons in the Western world such as Joan Baez, Allen Ginsberg, and George Harrison brought attention to the crisis, with Ginsberg especially connecting it into larger issues such as the Vietnam War.⁶¹ In cases of genocide, or any level of mass violence, institutional identity factors such as student are not as frequently highlighted as ethnic or religious factors, but as this case demonstrates, when considered in the local context, considerations of sub-categories and labels are highly relevant in understanding the full dimension of the violence both in terms of the motivation of perpetrators as well as the effects on victims.

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⁶¹ See Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) and Samantha Christiansen, “From Help! to ‘Helping out a Friend’: Imagining South Asia through the Beatles and the Concert for Bangladesh,” *Rock Music Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 132–147.

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