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It's not the arithmetic of genocide that's important. It's that we pay attention

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Every day, foreign conflicts with complicated origins reach us dressed with appealing simplicity



Pro-independence militia in training during the 1971 Bangladesh war. Photograph: Begart Institute
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Ignorance is an easy thing to live with and, perhaps for that reason, common.

Reading a disturbing book this week, I remembered a cheerful scene from my own life: a Chinese restaurant more than 30 years ago, a plate of chicken fried rice, the Bee Gees singing Stayin' Alive on the tape machine.

It was my birthday lunch in Khulna, a town in [Bangladesh](#) that we'd reached that morning by the overnight steamer from Dhaka. I was with a photographer. What interested us? I recall a rickshaw ride in the cool-season sunshine and being paddled across a river in a flimsy boat to look at a steam locomotive on the far bank. We must have had several conversations with people who lived in the town, but nobody mentioned the massacres of eight years before. Then again, we didn't know to ask.

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The details are in a soon-to-be-published book – Dead Reckoning: Memories of the Bangladesh War – by an Oxford academic, Sarmila Bose. As all good history tends to do, it complicates and contradicts the simple, heroic narrative of national struggle. For 40 years, the world's perception of the conflict that gave birth to Bangladesh has been dominated by what Bose calls "the ultimate word-number combination" – the genocide of 3 million people. Bose grew up with the idea, as the child of a well-to-do Bengali family in Kolkata. Roughly, it goes like this. In trying to repress a popular rebellion in east Pakistan, an army from west Pakistan slaughters, rapes and tortures the civilian population until India intervenes and independence is secured. Ethnicity separates a Punjabi army from its Bengali victims. Millions die for no other reason than a difference in identity – in language, diet, dress and customs (though not religion, which is how two places separated by a thousand miles of India originally came to sink their differences in one Islamic state).

What the story forgets is the prelude. At Khulna, for example, there was a kind of genocide, but it was perpetrated by Bengalis against the non-Bengalis they worked beside in the town's jute mills. The non-Bengalis were mainly Urdu-speaking migrants from Bihar, Muslims who had fled India at

partition. On 28 March 1971, their fellow workers slaughtered large numbers of them, sometimes methodically in what Bose calls slaughter houses that had been set up inside the mills. Exact numbers will never be known; a reasonable estimate is several thousand men, women and children. According to testimony collected by Bose, their bloated corpses clogged the rivers for days. This happened before the Pakistan army embarked on its countrywide repression. After its defeat, with Bangladesh's independence established, Khulna's Bengali mill workers repeated their original atrocity of the previous year and sent thousands more non-Bengalis into the rivers. They were seen as traitors who supported the wrong side.

These and many other similar bloodbaths were hardly a secret. The Pakistan government, led as usual by a general, was anxious to project the army's role as bringers of order to a country that was sliding quickly towards civil war. Even in the days of crackling landlines and unreliable telex machines, reports got out depicting scenes of cruelty and confusion. Then, on 18 June 1971, the Sunday Times published a long piece of reportage that more than any other single piece of journalism changed how the world saw, and would remember, the conflict inside Bangladesh. The writer, Anthony Mascarenhas, had been flown from his home in Karachi to Dhaka by the Pakistan military to report on the army's good work, but he returned with a different story, unpublishable by Mascarenhas's newspaper or any other in Pakistan. Instead, he'd flown with it to London to meet the Sunday Times's then editor, Harold Evans.

According to Evans's autobiography, Mascarenhas told him that the army's outrages against Bengalis far outweighed those of Bengalis against non-Bengalis. Hindus in particular were army targets. Senior officers had told him that they were seeking a "final solution", determined "to cleanse east Pakistan once and for all of the threat of secession, even if it means killing 2 million people and ruling the province as a colony for 30 years." His eyewitness testimony and sincerity were impressive. Once his wife and family had been evacuated from Pakistan – neither he nor they could ever go back – the paper ran the story across two pages under the headline: GENOCIDE. Indira Gandhi, then India's prime minister, later told Evans that it had set her on a campaign of personal diplomacy that prepared the ground for armed intervention.

It was a courageous act of reporting, and it may have changed the world for the better; the US never offered more than lukewarm support for its ally, Pakistan, which was defeated in weeks.

Bose's book, however, raises troubling questions about the report's complete veracity – a massacre said to have killed 8,000 Hindus probably killed only 16 at most – as well as its effect. Soon after the war ended, a

prediction (or threat) of 2 million dead had been elevated to the widely publicised fact of 3 million dead, which is still commonly accepted in India and Bangladesh. A truth about the Bangladesh war is that remarkably few scholars and historians have given it thorough, independent scrutiny. Bose's research has taken her from the archives to interviews with elderly peasants in Bangladesh and retired army officers in Pakistan. Her findings are significant.

She estimates that during the conflict of 1971 a total of somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 combatants and non-combatants perished on all sides.

Much beyond 100,000 and "one enters a world of meaningless speculation". As to genocide, it would be more accurate to accuse the Pakistan army of political killing. Many Bengalis remained loyal to the old regime and went unharmed. The army and its paramilitaries (who were mainly Biharis) were at their most genocidal in their persecution of Hindu Bengali men, whom they believed as a group to be disloyal. By contrast, many Bengali Muslim civilians attacked non-Bengalis and Bengali Hindus purely on the grounds of their ethnic or religious identity and/or for material gain. In terms of genocide, their guilt is much clearer.

Does this arithmetic and legalism matter? It happened 40 years ago and it's all very complicated – a shifting kaleidoscope of religious and linguistic difference and political loyalties, animated by old prejudices and fresh desires. The savagery is at times unbearable to read. In the words of Michael Ignatieff on the Balkans conflict: "When people are sufficiently afraid, they will do anything ... ethnic hatred is the result of the terror that arises when legitimate authority disintegrates." But it's not the only human habit that continues. Every day, foreign conflicts with complicated origins reach us dressed with appealing simplicity: a besieged town needs to be relieved, an autocrat removed, a regime changed – do these things and all will be better, if not exactly well. If nothing else, Bose's account warns us of how much we need to find out.