At the Dacca Race Course, Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora (left), Chief of Staff of the Indian Army, and Lt. Gen. Assan Ali Khan Niazi of the Pakistani Army sign the papers that would end the war between the two countries and lead to the creation of Bangladesh. © Bettmann/ Getty Images.

A photograph of a surrender ceremony encapsulates the dilemma of a particular, linear, preordained war narrative. This is the arc of the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war that has focused primarily on the role of the Bengali guerrilla army in fighting the Pakistan army. The photograph troubles that story, while also containing its own occlusions. The image is of the cease-fire of December 16th, 1971. Signing for the Pakistan army, humiliatingly defeated after a full-force Indian offensive, is Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi. The signatory for the Indian army is Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Arora.

In a telltale sign of how recent the British partition of India was, both Niazi and Arora had graduated from the British period Indian Military Academy. Both went on to fight on behalf of the British empire in the Burma campaign of World War II, where Niazi was a decorated soldier, earning the nickname “Tiger.” After 1947, the two men found themselves serving the opposed armies of Pakistan (Niazi) and India (Arora). This new “enemy” status led them to be on warring sides during the 1965 India-Pakistan war, and finally in direct conflict in 1971, culminating in this seated surrender ceremony.
during the 1971 war, underlining that the two Generals came from the Punjab province that had been bifurcated in 1947. But there was something much larger (and yet somehow invisible) within this photo’s dominance by two former academy classmates. The surrender ceremony was to ratify the independence of East Pakistan as the new country of Bangladesh. Yet there were no official representatives from the Bangladesh forces at the ceremony. The only small patchwork representation comes from Group Captain A. K. Khandaker, standing in one corner of the crowd behind the table.

Khandaker’s presence too seems fluid and unstable; in several photographs of the same ceremony, he is either pushed aside (in his biography, Prothoma Prokashon, 2014), he writes it was “difficult for guests to stand” [p 211] in the jostling), or cropped out of the final image (for example, in several versions that are on official or private Indian military websites). Twenty five years after Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” speech, this was a second bloody tryst with the main actor absent from the table. In one sign of the Bangladeshi unease with this tableau, Khandaker’s book repeats an anecdote often cited in Bangladeshi memoirs– that Niazi and Arora, in spite of being on opposite sides, “exchanged crude jokes in Punjabi,” (p 208), freezing the Bengalis out of pre-ceremony, sexual banter.

The photograph is a useful starting point to think through how the Bangladesh independence war has almost always been framed as yet another regional struggle between India and Pakistan (often explicitly called “the third India-Pakistan war”), with pivotal (and at times, also helpless) superpower interventions by the United States and the Soviet Union. Two earlier books on the 1971 war, by Gary Bass and Srinath Raghavan, look at the conflict primarily through these optics of regional and superpower dialectic. A third book by Salil Tripathi circles back to the Bangladesh side, but the readers’ own biases and borrowed lenses may cause this book to also tilt toward a top-heavy narrative.

There is a Bengali phrase “ador byapari rakhe na jahajer khobor” (the ginger merchant knows not when the ships arrive), which suggests that the small cogs of human society self-limit themselves into narrow spaces of interest. Since the individual merchants’ load for the day is minuscule, it supposedly concerns him little whether the ship arriving is of British, Russian, or Chinese origin. Something of a similar viewpoint, with a debt to what W.R. Connor calls "commander narratives," suffuses the scholarship around the 1971 war. This war even had, in its finale, a superpower face-off on the high seas–the US initiative of sending the Seventh Fleet from the Gulf of Tonkin was countered by the Soviet dispatching of a nuclear-armed flotilla from Vladivostok. Therefore, war scholars may feel a strong rationale to focus on the commanders, at the high seas and in oval offices.
scholarship—Raghavan in particular is a former Infantry officer in the Indian Army, with a Ph.D. in war studies from King’s College London. Accordingly, the research parses in exhaustive detail the superpower maneuvering in the White House, and war strategy in the subcontinent. These narratives, and the archives that undergird them, are still the main ones in the academy after four decades of this nation’s existence.

Bass’ book pivots off a famous dissident telegram sent by Archer Blood from the Dhaka Embassy, in defiance of the Nixon administration’s support of Pakistan during the war. Bass secured access to declassified documents from the White House tapes, which present Nixon and Kissinger *en flagrante* in a manner familiar from the Watergate investigations. Raghavan focused on the Indian archives, detailing the Indian state’s negotiations with, and maneuvering around, the state players needed to form a coalition at the UN. This was essentially a coalition of the “mildly-willing,” offering enough diplomatic cover for a direct war between India and Pakistan on Bangladeshi territory in December 1971.

Both of these books do commendable work sifting through the American and Indian archives and synthesizing them into a coherent narrative. Bass’ storyline plays out as a struggle between the Nixon-Kissinger duo on the one hand, and principled “bravehearts” such as Archer Blood in the Dhaka Embassy and Keating in the Indian Embassy. We are told early on that Blood, a career diplomat, did not join the dissident group of *Foreign Service Officers Against the War* who wore secret protest buttons inside their jacket. We are perhaps meant to understand that he is not a transformed Nixon-era “peacenik” and, therefore, his horror at the bloodshed in Dhaka is even more principled. Unlike the Daniel Ellsberg of the *Pentagon Papers*, or the chastened Vietnam veteran John Kerry in *Winter Soldier* (dir: Winterfilm Inc., 1972), Blood still believed in the overall mission of *Pax Americana* even if not this particular enunciation.

Blood’s inverse is Nixon, presented here as pathologically unhinged, bristling at East Coast liberals, abhorring American adoration of Indian objects (from Hare Krishnas, to George Harrison’s sitar playing friend Ravi Shankar), and calling Indira Gandhi “bitch” and “witch” multiple times on White House transcripts. Henry Kissinger on the other hand is given to grandiose comparisons to the Second World War, and eventually locks himself into a depression when his carefully calibrated plans go awry. This particular duo dynamic is familiar to readers of numerous books that have appeared about this intensely documented (and lampooned) period in White House history, starting with the 1974 publication of Jack Anderson’s *The Anderson Papers*.

Raghavan’s new history of 1971 has strong and useful similarities with Richard Sisson and Leo Rose’s 1990 book War and Secession. Sisson and Rose’s book is still the earliest, and most comprehensive, history of the war. In particular, that research was conducted mostly in the 1980s, when many of the primary protagonists in India and Pakistan were still alive (in Bangladesh, many key figures were killed during the three military coups of 1975, and a subsequent coup of 1980). By the time Raghavan begins his work, many other survivors have also died of natural causes; his book therefore mines the archives even more assiduously than the earlier Sisson and Rose work.

In both Bass and Raghavan, we gain a view into the power of “the Kashmiri mafia” within the Indian civil service, the contingency plan of transforming the Bangladesh war into a foray into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the contradictions of the Indira government’s assistance of the Bengali war against their own brutal policy of suppressing the Naxalites in West Bengal and insurgency movements in Nagaland, and the sprawling negotiations to build up a coalition of states that would support India’s efforts at the UN. We note, with foreboding, the Yugoslav government’s refusal to support the Indian effort, heralded by Marshal Tito’s comment to the Pakistani Ambassador, “Over here in Yugoslavia, we have solved these problems once and for all. There will be no Balkan question ever again in the world.” (179) The feelings provoked by that quote are probably similar to the bemusement readers will feel at the last anecdote in Bass’ book. When discussing the final, feeble UN resolution that recognized the fait accompli of Bangladesh, Kissinger tells the UN Ambassador, one George Bush, “don’t screw it up the way you usually do.” to which Bush senior replies, “I want a transfer when this is over. I want a nice quiet place like Rwanda.” (324)

As with Sisson & Rose’s book, Raghavan focuses on the war from the Indian perspective, and this matches archive logic because the Indian role, both from the Indian archives, and the UN proceedings, is contained in a dense body of documents. As Bass pointed out at his Brooklyn book launch, and as Raghavan also notes, the Pakistan archives of 1971 have remained closed off to date. The Bangladesh archives are generally open (although of inconsistent quality), but they are largely absent from both books. This is a significant omission in both books – Bangladeshi history, without very many Bangladeshi voices. Some of this is linked to considerations of publishing “hooks” and marketing strategies. Equally important are the authors’ current political projects, and how the stories of 1971 can be made to fit that project (whether elegantly or by force). In public talks, Bass has cited UN Ambassador Samantha Power as a reference for how he thinks American diplomacy should be conducted, and the book includes a reference to the “special American responsibility to make amends to the Bangladeshi people.”
Samuel Moyn points out in a review of Bass' earlier *Freedom’s Battle*, Bass calls the repression of the Greeks “A problem from Hellas” in a riff on Power’s well-known *A Problem from Hell*. Bass’s 1971 book’s Manichean duality between an insecure, friendless, and intellectual hating Nixon, and the principled, educated, and selfless Archer Blood sets up a Cain and Abel origin story that fits with an idea of conflicts such as 1971 as only an exception to a more "principled" path for American power. Bass seems to suggest that the problem is not that American overseas power is destined to make spectacularly bad choices, but only that the wrong hands are sometimes at the helm.

Raghavan’s book is an insider look at Indian diplomatic and military maneuvering, and its locus is around when India intervened, and whether it should have intervened sooner. What the Bengali rebel commanders wanted is given less attention, and that reflects the nature of Indian documents related to this period. The war planners inside Indira Gandhi’s government were partially motivated by considerations of Kashmir, Naxalite blowback, and which forces inside the Mukti Bahini (Bengali guerrilla army) were likely to constitute a future friendly neighbor, and the book reflects that reality. What is not present in either book is sufficient insight into the motivation and actions of the Bangladeshi protagonists, whether guerrillas, soldiers, politicians, refugees, or the peasants who were the ultimate cannon fodder.

The imbalance of sources is striking in all these books. In the 1990 book by Sisson & Rose, there were 32 interviewees from Pakistan, 49 from India, 39 from the United States, and 12 from Bangladesh. As I have noted elsewhere, Sarmila Bose’s polemic *Dead Reckoning* contains an equally unbalanced list. In the Bass book, Shahudul Haque is the one Bangladeshi interviewee I was able to trace, although there may be others. In Raghavan’s book, although Liberation War Museum director Akku Chowdhury is thanked, the significant Bangladeshi interviewees appear to be senior lawyers Kamal Hossain and Amirul Islam. However, a laundry list of untapped sources does not automatically suggest a path to future research. A more comprehensive set of Bangladeshi sources, if they privilege the elite experience, will also erase the peasant and working class mobilization within the pre-war and war effort. Salil Tripathi’s recent book on 1971, *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent* (Aleph, 2014), goes deeper into Bangladeshi sources—but some of his sources are titans of current civil society and therefore the problems of top-down narrative remain in spite of his efforts.

Tripathi’s book is a significant and welcome shift from the earlier books, focusing much more closely on the Bangladeshis’ own experiences of their war. The one other new book that carries a comparable focus on the experience of 1971, as experienced and memorialized inside Bangladesh, is Nayanika Mookherjee’s *Spectral Wound*.
journalist, Tripathi brings a focus on oral sources and interviews, and his selection of sources inside Bangladesh takes him through Dhaka, and then to the regional cities of Chittagong, Khulna, Noakhali, Kushtia, Bogura, and Sirajganj. With over sixty five interviewees inside Bangladesh, as well as people in the European diaspora, the book definitively inverts the focus of Bass and Raghavan—away from Washington DC and New Delhi and closer to Dhaka (Dacca in 1971); away also from the war room and toward the civilian experience of violence and resistance.

When the book was first announced (in first imprint by Aleph / South Asia in 2014, followed by Yale in 2016), I presumed the “Colonel” in the title would be a Marquezian Pakistani officer who did not, even today, regret the brutality of 1971. In that sense, he would be an inversion of sorts of the Pakistani officers interviewed by Yasmin Saikia for her earlier book. In that work, the officers who served in that war talk of their own experience of violence as perpetrators (this fits with recent scholarship about the trauma faced by perpetrators as well as victims). Saikia deployed the concept of insaaniyat (Urdu for humanity) and placing that phrase anywhere near the Pakistan army was one of several controversies that scuttled the book’s republication plans in Dhaka.

I expected Tripathi to venture into similar territory, but the Colonel of his title is actually Colonel Farooq Rahman. Lieutenant Colonel Farooq was the Bangladeshi army officer who was one of the planners of the brutal 1975 coup that murdered the country’s first Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib and his family. As a young reporter, one of Tripathi’s breakthrough assignments was in Dhaka, where he managed to secure an interview with Colonel Farooq. As political alignments shifted, the coup plotters lost their immunity and in 2010 Farooq along with four other accused were hanged. Tripathi’s interview now sits as a testimony in which the Colonel freely admitted to carrying out the murders— he did not, at that time, repent. By beginning the book with Farooq’s confession, and following it with his eventual hanging, the book extends the frame of the 1971 war to take in its’ unraveling— the violent coups of 1975 that wiped out most of the wartime leadership, both civilian and military. Having prevailed against the Pakistan army, Bangladesh’s stability was fatally damaged by the fratricidal killings of the 1970s.

Tripathi follows this opening with a deep dive into the Bangladeshi experience of 1971 and its aftermath. Here he seems to offer a corrective to my issues with the two earlier books, focusing on the experience of many Bangladeshis in rural settings. Yet, there is a way that the inclusion of certain voices will always carry more weight, and this has to do with which ones have been the most frequently interviewed within the writing of 1971. Among Tripathi’s interviewee list, I noticed especially the following members of the civil society elite: Kamal Hossain (framer of the constitution and the country’s first Law Minister), Mahfuz Anam (editor of the largest English newspaper), Meghna Guhathakurta.
Although Tripathi interviews others as well, the above names do stand out and begin to define the tone and focus of the book (whether Tripathi intended to or not). One issue here is that many of the core war leadership was killed during the violence of 1975 and afterward. These remaining eyewitnesses are often the only remaining protagonists who could speak first-hand to what happened in a room. In that sense they are part of what I have called elsewhere “M.R. Akhtar Mukul history” — a type of oral history of crucial events which are impossible to cross-check, since all protagonists of a remembered exchange are dead. As such, many of the people Tripathi met have been interviewed many times (for magazines, special issues, commemorations). There is a practiced ease to their storytelling–this does not render it inauthentic, but does give it an enhanced citation value.

Moreover, because these individuals were crucial figures in this country’s history, their anecdotes and memories are not commonplace, and certainly not anywhere close to a subaltern experience. Rather the stories are often taking place in the same room as Ministers, Generals, and Presidents, further reifying the achievements and struggles that went on at the very center of events. Kamal Hossain, whom I have interviewed for my own work, is an example of this centrifugal effect. He was, after all, the constitutional expert who was part of Sheikh Mujib’s negotiation team with the Pakistan army (demanding that Mujib be allowed to become Prime Minister of Pakistan as per the landslide election victory of 1970), the man arrested and sent to Pakistan alongside Sheikh Mujib when war broke out, the co-author of the constitution of independent Bangladesh, and the man who began to piece Sheikh Mujib’s Awami League political party back together from exile after 1975. As such, his view was always ringside of the core circle, and his memories, along with several others, have had a dominant effect on Bangladeshi history (they cannot be considered hegemonic because he is no longer a member of the party in power).

Recently, when I met Hossain again, he mentioned in conversation that Stuart Hall had been a student at Oxford at the same time that he began his law studies. Intrigued by the possibility of an undiscovered Afro-Asian linkage at the heart of Bangladesh’s foundational struggle, I asked him at length what he remembered of Hall, and whether they had stayed in communication after Oxford. The answers did not yield what I had hoped for– they had known each other, but had not worked on any extensive campaigns together; nor had they managed to stay in touch after Hossain returned to Pakistan. Kamal Hossain and others have been
such a strong presence in the writing of 1971 history, that even a chance encounter in their life may transform in the readers’ (and researchers’) eyes into a momentous occasion. Tripathi has definitely corrected the absence of Bangladeshi voices in these earlier books, but at least some of the voices he has selected are commanding presence at the center, which can continue to occlude voices on the margin.

Both the dense archives available in the United States and India, and the options of oral history, usually throw up these significant, central figures (living and dead). We are therefore now used to scholarship and reportage on the larger-than-life figures occupying the world stage during the war. Richard Nixon as pathological paranoiac, Henry Kissinger as smooth mandarin, Indira Gandhi as shrewd operator, Sheikh Mujib as endgame negotiator, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto as nervy obstructionist, and General Yahya Khan as drunken maverick—these are portrayals that often suffuse narratives of the war. What continues to be underexplored are the Bangladeshi actors, at the granular level, in their own war. Sheikh Mujib’s negotiation strategy, led by his legal advisor Kamal Hossain, was documented in Sisson & Rose and resurfaces in Raghavan (though less so in Bass). But what were the ground events to which these players were responding? To take just one example, Sheikh Mujib’s decision to arrive at one negotiation meeting flying a black flag was considered an insult leading to a "breakdown." However, what were the forces on the ground that Mujib was responding to, and perhaps even trying to corral and contain? Was he shadowed by the specter of radical student leaders who had already raised the flag of "independent Bangla Desh"—on the university campus? Was he responding to a radicalized Bengali urban population that wanted to go faster than the negotiations allowed?

The fateful negotiations, whose breakdown led to the brutal war of 1971, were always conducted with one eye on the negotiation partners (Yahya, Bhutto) and the other on a roiling urban and rural countryside. Those turbulent street forces are absent even in the Bangladeshi archive that also focuses on grand narrative and brinkmanship negotiations. Simply shifting Raghavan or Bass’ focus to Bangladesh interviewees (as Tripathi has done) would not resolve all the issues of submerged narratives. As Anjali Arondekar has pointed out, gaping absences in the archive can be used to look at the process of subjectification made possible by building that record. If the radical peasant fighter was left out of official records, what national aspirations and exclusionary fears among the record-keepers guided such a process? History’s "ginger merchant" was far more crucial in the buildup and conduct of this war than is acknowledged, and a next step for researchers can be to begin to read into, and against, the many absences in Bangladesh’s history ledgers.