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Sarmila Bose. *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. x + 239 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70164-8.

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Sarmila Bose's new book makes a significant intervention into the historiography of the Bangladesh War of 1971. Bose has based her analysis on dozens of oral histories she collected in India and Pakistan, in part because many of the official sources remain classified. She uses these to launch a critique of the historiography of the war that is very well taken; many scholars would agree that this historiography is badly in need of revision.[1] The 1971 war, in the Bangladeshi nationalist narrative, was a calculated genocide perpetrated by a hypermasculinized Pakistani military to cripple the resistance to West Pakistanâs exploitative economic and political strategies. While this narrative depends on accusations that the military perpetrated indiscriminate and irrational violence against East Pakistani citizens, including women, children, and noncombatants, this national narrative also silences many voices: those of women, non-Muslims, and non-Bengalis. As Bose points out, much of it is "relentlessly partisan," and the personal stories that form the bulk of published material on the 1971 war fall into the realm of literature or memoir and not professional history (p. 5).

In *Dead Reckoning*, Bose introduces new material that complicates representations of the conflict as a war solely between India and Pakistan (as it is seen in both of those countries) or a war of liberation (as it is understood to be in Bangladesh). The war that Bose exposes here is the "civil war" that raged in East Pakistan between pro-liberation Bengalis and those who either disagreed with their outlook (Pakistani loyalists) or represented the "Other" of the Bengali ethno-linguistic identity that the nation of Bangladesh represented (non-Muslims or non-Bengalis). To investigate these stories, Bose had to navigate "conflicting memories," national myths, and deep attachments to entrenched versions of the war/liberation struggle (p. 11). Bose is undoubtedly correct that there is much history left to be uncovered through dispassionate investigations of the 1971 war. It is unfortunate, therefore, that her book proves quickly to be anything but dispassionate or neutral.

Early on, the author states her intention: to "allow the material to tell its own stories" (p. 6). However, this laudable goal is complicated by the fact that these stories are often as partisan as the historiography she critiques. Oral interviews, Bose's main source, are a special kind of source, and any historian who turns to them must be aware of both their tremendous value and their limitations. In *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (1991), oral historian Alessandro Portelli offers a succinct gloss on this challenge when he reminds historians

that oral history is different because "it tells us less about *events* than about their meaning" (p. 50, emphasis in original). That is to say that oral history may not be a good source for determining a sequence of events, the dates on which events took place, how many people were there, or who, precisely, those people may have been. Documentary sources are more of a stable text for interpretation; remembered histories tell us as much about the present and how it is understood as they do about the past. The dynamic interaction of past and present, emotion and event in remembered history gives oral history unique depth and breadth but requires careful analytical attention that can help historians home in on contested meaning better than contested facts.

Much of the controversy about the Bangladesh War is ultimately about meaning, and conflicting narratives, figures, and perspectives are implicated in stories about the meaning of the conflict for different players. Throughout Bose's program of research, she has collected many stories that could help to deepen historical understanding of the meaning of the war and why its history is so fraught, but she frequently leaves the narratives insufficiently analyzed or uses the stories to challenge the prevailing knowledge about the details of the *events*. Bose has deployed memories and stories as facts, with scant attention to the effect of the passage of time on memories. This strategy undermines the value of her sources and exposes her to the challenge that, rather than providing a corrective to the Bangladeshi nationalist historiography, she has instead veered west and created an equally tendentious narrative and methodologically problematic work that privileges a different position.

Bose cites thirty-nine interviews that she conducted in Bangladesh, among whom she identifies ten of the participants as freedom fighters, *muktijoddha* (only in the appendix; throughout the main text she prefers to call them "rebels"). In addition, she cites thirty-three interviews she conducted in Pakistan, of whom only three narrators are not identified by military rank. Surprisingly, despite being Indian, she has not collected any data from either Indian archives or Indian informants. Bose places the stories that she collected in opposition to one another to verify the facts of a variety of events, and with a journalist's and a historian's attachment to the verifiable, the stories that Bose authorizes, more often than not, come from the side that held the authority in the conflict: West Pakistan, and particularly, its army. The striking imbalance in the perceived authority of her informants and the relative weight she gives to their testimony undermine her attempt to portray this work as a history of "how the conflict played out among people at the ground level" (p. 5). It rather appears as a history that uses the remembered stories of participants to fortify a different official narrative of the war. Though the army of West Pakistan could not claim victory in the conflict, it controlled the infrastructure in East Pakistan, deployed a professional army, and even mobilized semi-skilled loyalist militias. Earlier histories have focused on the imbalance of power between the Pakistan army and the Bengali *muktijoddha*, thus casting the Bengali resistance as "just" in the face of state tyranny.[2] Bose shifts the gaze by placing emphasis on crimes committed by Bengalis during the war and by aggressively discrediting the Bangladeshi nationalist narrative that portrays the Pakistan army as irrational and even demonic perpetrators of violence against innocent civilians.

The anxiety that seeped through the earlier historiography, however, was rooted in a history of at worst oppression and at best neglect during the period between 1947 and 1971, when East Pakistan was a marginalized province of a developing state. Bose does little to contextualize the 1971 war within the longer history of Pakistan and the movement that created it. If she had, the ethnolinguistic nationalism that distinguished pro-liberation Bengalis from others during the conflict would not seem so inexplicable. Rather, this movement would emerge as one of resistance to a homogenizing narrative of citizenship in Pakistan that had been deployed against Bengalis since 1948 and that created a tension between the east and west wings of the state. The history of the relationship between East and West Pakistan is important. It is the foundation for the conflict that resulted in the violence Bose examines–the violence that one Pakistan army general characterized in the epigraph to the first chapter as spontaneous.

In what is undoubtedly one of the most controversial aspects of the book, women are conspicuous in their absence in this narrative. The issue of the rape of women by the Pakistan army serves as the emotional lightning rod that has typically been deployed to generate sympathy for the Bangladeshi cause. It is often argued that the Pakistan army raped 200,000 women.[3] While Bose rightly takes issue with this use of unsubstantiated enumeration in her closing chapter, she offers little in the way of concrete and new information to challenge it. In avoiding the question of re-enumerating the rape statistics, Bose has obscured the question of the victimization of women throughout the book. Rather, women only appear when they do not appear. In the village of Satriarchora, when the Pakistan army crushed a rebel unit, "the soldiers did

not harm women in any way" and in Chuknagar, after the army massacred fleeing Hindus, an informant told Bose, "he did not see any molestation or abduction of women by army personnel" and in several cases "female casualties â¦ appear to have been unintentional" (pp. 88, 119, 164). The conspicuous absence of women obliquely challenges the narrative that the Pakistan army spent a good deal of its time raping women, but does not offer an alternative interpretation of this pillar of the Bangladeshi state narrative.

Bose's examination of the Bangladesh War of 1971, and her concentration on the question of the violence between Bengali nationalists and others (non-Bengalis and non-Muslims), is much needed. She has uncovered many gems. Her sources offer much that is useful and new, and they go a long way to prove the importance of her argument that a full picture of the 1971 war must include analysis of the fratricidal war in East Pakistan that is otherwise overlooked. She is able to reveal the extent to which Bengalis themselves were involved in organizing and perpetrating violence. However, Bose's approach often robs the oral historical sources of their dynamic value, and she frequently authorizes the "official" line at the expense of exploring the implications of the passage of forty years, the role of collective memory, and the power of national mythology. She frequently neglects the effect of trauma, the role played by fear, and the challenges of remembering. The reader is not left with the satisfaction that she has excavated a largely untold, controversial, but deeply important history that challenges the Bangladeshi narrative of the war by revealing additional complexity. Instead, what remains is a frustration that Bose's handling of the sources has minimized the value of the work as a whole.

Dead Reckoning offers little theoretical insight to the field of memory studies. It is a work of historical critique that employs remembered narratives as source material to contest the widely accepted, but sparsely documented, nationalist version of the 1971 Bangladesh War. Memories are not treated as social or cultural phenomena here but as artifacts overlooked by earlier versions. As such, these memories are not implicated in broader cultural contexts. When she attempts to address problems posed by memory, as when she questions the "narrative of victimization" typical of the Bangladeshi story, or when she tries to understand why Pakistani soldiers who showed mercy were believed to be *Beluchi* (as opposed to "Punjabi demons"), her analysis comes up short. There is much rich memory work still to be done on this conflict and these works must take seriously the complications of memory as a cultural experience.

Notes

[1]. Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); and Bina D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2011). The 2007 and 2011 pre-conference academic gatherings on 1971 and Bangladesh at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin, provide additional evidence that scholars are rethinking how to think and write about this history.

[2]. Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangladesh* (Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971); Archer Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (Dhaka: University Press, 2002); and Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

[3]. Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); and Yasmin Saikia, "Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh," *History Workshop Journal* 58 (2004): 275-87, 277.

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