

## Intelligence in Public Media

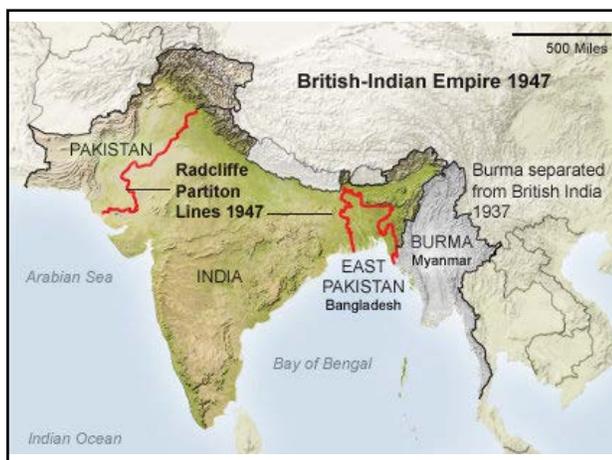
### **Secret Documents of Intelligence Branch on Father of the Nation, Bangladesh: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Volume I (1948–1950); Volume II (1951–1952); Volume III (1953); Volume IV (1954–1957)**

Sheikh Hasina, ed. (Routledge, 2019), 582, 568, 528, and 596 pp., respectively.

#### **Reviewed by Ryan Shaffer**

The first of a 14-volume series, these four books provide unprecedented insight into the life of Sheikh Mujibur (“Mujib”) Rahman (1920–75), the founding president and later prime minister of Bangladesh. Each volume contains more than 200 intelligence reports about Mujib from Pakistan’s Intelligence Branch (IB). More than just primary sources on Mujib’s life, the documents reveal Pakistani intelligence methods and tradecraft shortly after independence. The IB in East Pakistan recorded Mujib’s activities and speeches daily, intercepted letters, and interviewed his associates, tracking his movements and sending the reports to West Pakistan. Mujib’s daughter and current prime minister of Bangladesh since 2009, Sheikh Hasina, is listed as editor of the volumes because she was instrumental in preserving and publishing the records.

During the 20th century, South Asia’s borders were redrawn several times, causing shifting citizen loyalties and massive population migrations. The changes are important context to understand these books and why Pakistani authorities were so concerned about internal threats to the government. When British India was partitioned in 1947, it gave birth to two countries, India and Pakistan. Yet, Pakistan was a country geographically divided into West Pakistan and East Pakistan, the two separated by 1,000 miles of



Indian territory. Gary J. Bass explained, “People joked that only three things kept Pakistan united: Islam, the English language, and Pakistan International Airlines—and PIA was the strongest.”<sup>a</sup> By 1970, Mujib was the de facto leader of East Pakistan and his Awami League won enough seats to govern all of Pakistan, but leaders in West Pakistan refused to recognize the election results. Following a devastating civil war in 1971, the Bengalis in East Pakistan achieved independence, and East Pakistan became Bangladesh in December. After his release from a Pakistani prison, Mujib was elected Bangladesh’s first president and then prime minister, leading the country until his assassination in 1975 by Bangladesh Army officers.

The books are part of a wider public relations effort to promote among Bangladeshis Mujib’s life and ideas, which will include the publication of his unfinished autobiography.<sup>b</sup> The first of these four volumes was released in Bangladesh with much political fanfare in 2018. Hasina said the documents were released so “people will know each and every activity, move and speech of the Father of the Nation from 1948–71.”<sup>c</sup> In early 2019, when Hasina inaugurated a monthlong book fair, she also announced the release of the second volume in Bangladesh.<sup>d</sup> In late December 2019, Routledge started publishing the volumes for a worldwide audience.

a. Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: India’s Secret War in East Pakistan* (Random House India, 2013), 20.

b. “Bangladesh to publish founding father Bangabandhu’s autobiography ‘Smriti Kotha,’” *bdnews24.com*, 12 September 2019. <https://bdnews24.com/arts/2019/09/12/bangladesh-to-publish-founding-father-bangabandhus-autobiography-smriti-kotha>

c. “PM: Book on Bangabandhu with Pak Intelligence info to be a good read,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 7 September 2018. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/09/07/pm-book-on-bangabandhu-with-pak-intelligence-info-to-be-a-good-read>

d. “Doors open to Amar Ekushey Book Fair,” *bdnews24.com*, 1 February 2019. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2019/02/01/doors-open-to-amar-ekushey-book-fair>

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Each volume contains the same preface, written, in Bengali and English, by Hasina and dated November 2017. It describes how she originally collected the files in 1997, after becoming prime minister in 1996, by having Bangladesh's Special Branch (SB) make three sets of copies, which were declassified, with one sent to the Bangabandhu Memorial Trust—the trust sponsored the original publications in Bangladesh.<sup>a</sup> In the years since, Hasina lost power but recovered it in 2009. She then “assigned the SB to type out these documents and make arrangements to publish them, and scan and preserve the main documents digitally” with the team working “day and night.” (Vol. I, p. xiv) She explains the documents were “preserved in the same way as they were prepared,” including errors and older spellings of locations and people. (Vol. I, p. xv) The volumes credit 22 Bangladeshis with compiling the books and include brief abstracts of the contents and photographs of Mujib taken at the time the intelligence reports were written.

The volumes have a one-page introduction—without a byline—that situate the documents in Mujib's life, for example, years spent in school, his arrests, and roles in organizing demonstrations. In the front matter of the first volume is an image of the original cover of Mujib's file, while the books are organized in chapters with each year, such as 1948, being its own chapter. The records reveal Mujib's life by detailing his daily activities, speeches and correspondence, reports about searching his property, and interviews with associates. Additionally, the books include internal government memorandums about arrests, summaries of interrogations with Mujib, messages about officers “shadowing” him, and correspondence on sharing that information within the government. Most of the reports include an image of the original file as well as the typed English reproduction or translation. Furthermore, intelligence officers who authored many of the reports or memorandums are named and the text has footnotes with further information about places, people, or intelligence terminology.

While Mujib's life in these documents is significant to understanding his role in shaping the political geography

of South Asia, these volumes provide important primary sources about intelligence in early post-colonial Pakistan. Though containing much information about meetings, speeches and arrests, the records contain little analysis. For example, a July 1948 report about his activism opposing a Pakistani effort to make Urdu the official language of the country, Mujib complained “that he along with other Muslim workers did tremendous works [*sic*] at the risk of their lives to achieve Pakistan, but now they were called ‘Fifth Columnists’ and that they had now been deprived of the privileges of becoming Muslim League members.” (Vol. I, p. 37)

Some records reflect police interrogations of Mujib. For example, in February 1951 the police officer who interviewed him reported, Mujib “was sure that [the] Awami Muslim League would defeat the Muslim League by an overwhelming majority if there would be any general election in East Bengal.” Furthermore, “He was not willing to execute any bond for release even if the detention would cause him to face death. His attitude was very stiff.” (Vol. II, p. 13) By 1953, reports included details that his speeches described preparing for a “countrywide agitation for the inclusion of Bengali” as an official language as well as the “release” of “political prisoners” and forcing particular West Pakistani politicians from power. (Vol. III, p. 41) In later volumes, the Intelligence Branch also included open-source intelligence, making use of newspaper articles that quoted Mujib's criticizing West Pakistan's “undemocratic act” in July 1956 that banned “public meetings” in response to efforts to protest food shortages. (Vol. IV, p. 470)

Price and specialized subject matter will limit the market for these books, the release of Pakistani intelligence documents by a major publisher marks a significant contribution for scholars seeking intelligence records from South Asia.

There are some problems with the books, notably the font style and size are inconsistent and some of the introductions and explanations are not credited. Those aside, these books are—and the series will be—a primary source treasure for scholars of the region and Mujib.



**The reviewer:** Ryan Shaffer is a writer and historian. His academic work explores Asian, African, and European history.

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a. The Special Branch is a key intelligence agency in Bangladesh operating under the police. M. Shahidul Islam Chowdhury, “Chronology of Police Training,” Bangladesh Police, undated. <https://www.police.gov.bd/storage/upload/announcement/yyntKokfjZ1TnMIEPva81pn3k-J3DKbCBbqKykMOW.pdf>