

Session I

The Wounds of War and  
Separation  
/ Dispersion and Massacre

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# Mass Killings during the Korean War

–What National Division and the Korean War brought Korean people?–

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## 1. Human Costs of the Korean War

The Korean War was a war in which the percentage of civilian deaths was higher than in any other war of the twentieth century. The lowest estimate puts the number of civilian deaths at more than two million. It was a bloody war carried out with mass killings, shootings, strafing, and indiscriminate bombing against civilians which demolished the precious heritage of Koreans. The human costs of the war are inestimable. Millions of Korean families were forced to separate and have not yet been reunited. More than a million Chinese soldiers were killed and about 37,000 U.S. soldiers were killed or disappeared. North Korea, which lost more than twelve percent of its population, suffered the worst losses.

The Korean War massacres may be an unheard story even for South Koreans as well as Westerners. The larger part of the history of the Korean War massacres has not been released yet except the No Gun Ri massacres that were reported by AP and BBC. Responding to the AP's report, U.S and South Korean government launched the investigation and issued separate reports in it in 2001. But the U.S's report, Pentagon report, denied systematically the existence of order to kill unarmed civilians and deliberate shooting while the some American veterans and Korean survivors alike had testified it oppositely. But both governments didn't raise the question of whether it was an isolated incident during the Korean War.

All elderly Koreans presume that the No Gun Ri incident was just a tip of the iceberg. More than 100 incidents of mass killings by U.S forces and hundreds of illegal

executions by South Korean authorities have yet to be uncovered. Although they have long been an 'open secret' among South Koreans in their seventieth and eightieth, the South Korean authorities tacitly legitimized them under the pretext of the necessity of combating with North Korean communism and have kept them from being raised among public. Nobody including victims' family members in Korean society thereafter dared to bring back that issue and the memory of the massacres has been put under the blanket for long time.

Though human cost of the Korean War was incalculable, the cold war and the national division for about last sixty years have prevented it from discussing in South Korea. On the way toward the national reunification, this issue will take the crucial place to resolve the tensions between the two Koreas. Reviving the closed memories and historical clarification of the Korean War massacres would be the first step for it.

## **2. Three Types of Massacres Before and During the Korean War(1948-1953)**

Based on existing academic research and the testimonies of the survivors, we can categorize the mass killings that took place before and during the war (from June 25, 1950, to July 27, 1953) into three types.

The first type is those cases committed in direct confrontation with military forces in the course of military operations. U.S. troops shot, bombed, and bombarded Korean refugees and civilians as part of their combat activity. Under the aegis of 'maintaining and restoring international peace,' the U.S. decided to send their soldiers onto the Korean peninsula when North Korea's armed forces attacked South Korea. The Eighth Army soldiers who stumbled into action in Korea at the beginning of July 1950 to repel the 'communists' were an ill-prepared lot, pulled away from their job of occupying Japan. The U.S. soldiers were composed of "boys in their teens and early twenties who couldn't understand the nature and immense complexities of the problems in Asia." Nobody taught them that the Korean peninsula had been in turmoil; they were only told that the Soviet Union was behind North Korea's attack.

To further complicate matters, the North's surprise attack generated a severe refugee problem, clogging roads with civilians surging to the south. Fearing North Korean infiltration of these ranks of refugees, U.S. leadership and soldiers as well panicked. Under these circumstances, the U.S. Eighth Army, the highest command in

Korea, issued unreasonable orders to stop all Korean civilian refugees and “fire at everyone trying to cross the lines.” The panic and ill-preparedness of the U.S. commanders might be partly responsible for the savagery that followed - blotting out whole villages and shooting randomly into crowds of refugees, among whom North Koreans were suspected to be hiding. In 1999, the AP and BBC discovered “top secret” papers showing that U.S. commanders issued orders to forces under their control to “[k]ill them all.” The No Gun Ri incident, which might mark one of the largest single massacres of civilians by American forces in the twentieth century, occurred under this condition of confusion and panic of the early days of the war.

U.S. warplanes also bombed and strafed gathered inhabitants or refugees in Masan, Haman, Sachon, Pohang, Andong, Yechon, Gumi, Danyang and other regions. In dozens of villages across southern South Korea, U.S. planes engaged in repeated low-level strafing runs of the ‘people-in white.’ In the southeast seaside city of Pohang in August of 1950, U.S. naval artillery bombarded the calm villages and killed more than 400 civilians. In addition, another 54 separate cases of attacks equivalent to No Gun Ri are logged with South Korean authorities but have not yet been investigated.

It has been known that ‘saturation bombing’ by American air forces and naval bombardment destroyed some North Korean cities like Wonsan and Pyongyang, leaving them almost completely in rubble with no more than a few buildings standing. As British journalist Reginald Thompson testified, civilians died in the rubble and ashes of their home. Alan Winnington, a correspondent for the British Daily Worker, when he saw how thousands of tons of bombs had obliterated towns and resulted in thousands of civilian casualties testified that “it was far worse than the worst the Nazis ever did.” In every aspect of the war- America’s use of napalm, indiscriminate bombing, and the shooting of ‘voiceless’ civilians of the Third World- the Korean War preceded the Indochina War in many tragic ways.

Directives ordering U.S. soldiers to treat the refugees “enemies” might permit such indiscriminate shooting and bombing by American soldiers. In the end, it is clear that the great uncertainty of the combat situation and the extreme fears of the soldiers who felt they were surrounded by an enemy disguised as civilians helped push American soldiers to commit unrestrained killings. However, neither panic nor the confusion of U.S. commanders can explain the continued killings of Korean civilians. Another factor that may have precipitated these mass killings by American troops may be related to the combination of deep racial prejudices of U.S. soldiers on one hand

and the relative isolation of the conflict on the other. With total ignorance of Asia, young soldiers regarded Koreans (and Chinese) as “people without history.” They usually called Koreans “gooks”, a term reserved only in Korea.

The second type is the cases discussed in this paper: the ROK’s summary executions of suspicious civilians and political prisoners who were expected to rebel or threaten the ROK government following North Korea’s strategy.

It no longer a secret among Koreans that scores of so-called ‘communist traitors’ were killed across South Korea in the early days of the Korean War, at just the same time when thousands of ‘un-American traitors’ began to lose their jobs under the hysteria of McCarthyism in America. Some of the victims were political prisoners and the others were detainees or left-affiliated figures including members of Bodoyeonmang (National Guidance League: NGL), who were arrested on the order of “preventive detention” just after North Korea’s attack.<sup>1)</sup>

On the brink of North Korea’s attack, about 30,000 political prisoners in South Korea were in prisons. Most of them were put in jail for violation of the National Security Law. Except for prisoners in Seoul, most were ‘disappeared’ after the outbreak of war. It is believed that most political prisoners were secretly disposed of together with NGL members from July to August of 1950.

But the killings of NGL members overwhelm other atrocities during the Korean War in size and brutality. NGL was the state-led organization whose purpose was to put former, or “converted,” communists under constant surveillance. While it was declared that to be a member of the Party or not depended on one’s free will, former communist or anti-government activists had no choice but to enter this watchdog group. However, in the course of time the range of potential members was not restricted to active political activists, as the authorities forced those who were even once involved in antigovernment organizations to register with the NGL at the village level. For example, the Bureau of Police ordered the head of the regional police station to fill

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1) op. cit. pp25-28

‘Bodo’(保道) literally meant “caring and guiding.” Originally, under the Japanese imperialist rule, the policy put emphasis on the “caring” rather than the “detaining” because the ex-political prisoners had difficulties in getting jobs and managing their family life. But we can not find any component of “caring” in the case of South Korea’s NGL. Earlier imperial Japan even organized the “The League for Servicing the State” in order to re-orient and rehabilitate the released Korean political dissidents. Later a band of South Korean rightist prosecutors who had been educated under the Japanese rule thought that such organization would be useful in controlling the left-affiliated political dissidents by structuring it to “preserve the national security and maintain law and order.” Finally,

the NGL with a quota of members. In addition, simple uneducated peasants were strongly persuaded to enter . Thus, eventually more than 70 percent of the NGL might be comprised of innocent peasants who had no consistent political will or ideology.

According to the recollection of survivors, ROK military police and police called up the NGL members and detained them 'preemptively' just after the outbreak of war, even though they did not plot any protest against the threatened South Korean regime. The executions of the political prisoners and the 'suspected communists' may have been practiced without due process in every isolated valley of South Korea. Initiated from Suwon and Inchon on June 28 of 1950, three days after the first attack of the North's invasion, the killings were separately practiced until about the end of August 1950. Now that several graves have been found, the pattern of killing across the country has resembled testimony offered by the recollection of the survivors. The 'traitors' were confined in jails for several days, and finally were dragged to valleys to be shot.

North Korean troops also killed many POWs and rightists when they retreated toward the North. The state-sponsored political or personal reprisals committed by paramilitary youth groups and civilians themselves. Oftentimes, when a family member was killed in a village by a band of paramilitary youths under the authority of the occupying force, the victim group would avenge itself by killing all the family members of their foe when the attackers eventually retreated. This sort of village-level mutual revenge occurred in every corner of the Korean peninsula during the war.

"Counter-insurgency" atrocities in North Korean territory were also terrible. When ROK police and rightist youth groups crossed over the 38th parallel following the U.S. military, they found many "communists" and collaborators active there. The Sinchon massacre (a county located in southern North Korea) was a typical case. North Korea has long argued that American troops killed 35,380 civilians in Sinchon, but a newly released document disclosed that it was mainly the right-wing civilian security police and a youth group that was responsible for killing their neighbors.<sup>2)</sup>

Mass killings committed by ROK soldiers in "cleansing" areas in which there was reported 'enemy' activities were brutal and devastating. That operation had been also been labeled the "three-cleanse-all" operations (kill-all, burn-all, loot-all), after tactics

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2) Summer 1990.

Some reporters argued that American CIC ordered the massacre, but it is not verified (Hangeore21

which had been developed by Japanese imperial forces fighting against anti-Japanese leftist rebels in China. From the fall of 1950 to the spring of 1951, we can roughly guess that about 10,000 civilians may have been killed by South Korean soldiers in the mission of cleansing the base of left-wing guerrillas.

### **3. Aftermath of the Massacres**

South Korea's anticommunism since 1953 have forced the collective amnesia over the Korean War mass killings committed by ROK and U.S forces. The South Korea's official name and characterization of the Korean War, 6.25, the very date when North Korean troops invaded South Korea, blocked any room for uncovering hidden story of the Korean War that may threaten the official explanation of it. Existing politicians and main stream media have reluctant to bring back the incidents of mass killings by South Korean troops during the Korean War. They have never answered or gestured to investigate the truth hearing the repeated plea of the victims. Most South Korean media just quoted the AP's report about the No-gun-ri incident. The Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not commented any word after the release of U.S's No-gunri report which denied the incident occurred in the midst of combat situation and tacitly legitimized the mass killings by American forces.

The silence prevailing America and Korea may not just be of a lack of memory but in some respects appalling ignorance. Reviving the memory of the war and changing the attitude of intentional ignorance should be carried out by academics and reporters.

Under the forced amnesia by anticommunism, the survivors and family members of the victims could not dare to reveal their long unspoken story. The suffering of the victims' family members thereafter was more than the loss of their lovers. The political and economic hardships the survivors have endured were more unbearable than the direct sufferings caused by loss of fathers and husbands because South Korean authorities since then have labeled them 'reds' who are not entitled to enjoy full citizenship. Those who miraculously survived prewar and postwar massacres and those who were accused of betraying the state and almost killed say that they "don't even want to think about it". Those who lost their families and survived alone cry, "Being alive to this day is pain itself," and, "I regret that I could not die with my loved ones". Even after half a century, these survivors have not yet recovered from

the trauma and terror of witnessing the most brutal act mankind could commit upon mankind. They still live with the terrible memory of being treated like dogs or pigs and refer to the massacre as “outrageous”, “the most terrible act of brutality in world history”, and “the biggest incident of the late 20th century.”

The basic questions of the victims’ family members were concerning who killed them, why they were killed. For last half a century, they have remained silent with denying their identity and relinquishing their human dignity. This is because the more brutal the massacre and the more the assaulters’ deeds are mythologized by ruling political forces, there is a possibility that the more physically and mentally devastated the massacre victims become. Under the tough anticommunist regime, the few survivors and families who have lived with the abominable memory all their lives have not been able to make their voices heard through any political channel. The victims’ experiences that friendly troops killed innocent people are completely disparate from the official memory the winner has disseminated, and have been sidelined or buried deep in their hearts. The losers’ memory has been forced to be forgotten under the spiritual terror of anticommunism.

It can be said that the victims have been killed three times by South Korean authorities. First mass killings before and during the Korean War (1948-1953), second in 1961, the military coup d’etat, by suppressing the mass asking for answering the truth of the disappearance or killings of their family members,<sup>3)</sup> 4) and third by branding the families and descendents of the victims as ‘reds’ and disadvantaging them under the guilt-by-association system till the year 1980. As it is said that the denial of genocide is the final stage of genocide,<sup>4)</sup> the South Korean victims experienced more terrible stage of massacre, guilt-by-association, than the outright denial. Although the system of guilt-by-association is the legacy of traditionalism, it has worked to exclude alleged political dissidents and remove their very base of subsistence in modern Korea. In this sense, the guilt-by-association system was equivalent to direct killing.

Although some residents of Mungyeong, North Gyeongsang Province of South Korea, were massacred by the military in December 1949, the victims’ family registers say that they were killed by communist guerillas. In addition, the family registers of the

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3) Right after the April 19th student Revolution of 1960, there appeared a movement in the cities of Daegu and Busan. It was organized those people who had lost family members in the massacres during the Korean War. Some leaders of the movement were accused of being ‘Reds’ after the May 16th Military Coup of 1961.

4) <http://www.facinghistory.org/campus/reslib.nsf/all/C8DA494906B70997852572650062FF78?Opendocument>

victims of the military's massacre in Geochang, South Gyeongsang Province, record the cause of death as 'unknown'. Publicly raising this issue was seen as a direct challenge to the myth of anticommunist state and any such actions were suppressed. So, those who knew the truth had to remain silent to survive safe. The residents of Jeju, after the April 3 incident of 1948, also even had to support the ruling conservative party in repeated elections to avoid accusations of being 'reds', and their children had to suffer social disadvantages due to guilt-by-association.<sup>5)</sup> Some survivors or families of the victims could not even tell their children about the facts of massacre. Their sufferings were excruciating. What had they done so wrong to be watched over by the government and discriminated against?

This is why the mass killings during the Korean War have been unknown for half century in Korea and the efforts to resolve them launched in 1990s.

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5) The Jeju is a island located in the south of Korean peninsula. In 1948 at Jeju, hundreds of partisan forces were active in its' mountainous area refusing the general election that was destined to legitimize national division. The South Korean military and police sponsored by American troops went to subdue the rebellious guerilla. But about 30 thousands out of the 150 thousands residents were known to be killed under the guilt of serving the guerillas. This incident signified the prelude of the Korean War massacres. In 1996, the Special Law for Recovering the Dignity of the Victims of April 3 Incident passed and a final report describing the 18,000 applicants were innocent victims has released after 4 year's investigation. South Korean President Roh Mu Hyun officially apologized for the incident as a head of state in 2005.

