

The South Korean Massacre at Taejon: New Evidence on US Responsibility and Coverup

Bruce Cumings

The South Korean Massacre at Taejon: New Evidence on US Responsibility and Coverup

Bruce Cumings

In July 2008 the world media heralded the arrest of “the world’s most wanted war criminal,” Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. He had been in hiding for thirteen years, ever since he was charged with genocide by the United Nations war crimes tribunal in The Hague for his role in the massacre of some 8,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica. These events were subsequently termed “Europe’s worst slaughter of civilians since World War II.” [1]



Radovan Karadzic in office and when captured

Fifty-eight years earlier, in another distant July, the North Korean People’s Army bore down upon the city of Taejon, south of Seoul. Police authorities removed political prisoners from local jails, men and boys along with some women, massacred them, threw them into open pits, and dumped the earth back on them.

Somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 died, and their stories remained buried for half a century. American officers stood idly by while this slaughter went on, photographing it for their records, but doing nothing to stop it. In September 1950 the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to keep these photos classified; they were not released until 1999, after a determined effort by a psychologist in New York, Do-Young Lee, whose father had been murdered by southern authorities in August 1950.

Charles Hanley and other colleagues at the Associated Press first broke the story of the Taejon massacre in the American press in 1999. After I was quoted in the media about it, I got a phone call from an American woman in Los Angeles whose father was one of the people slaughtered. In 1947 she was a Korean citizen living under the American Military Government, one of six children of a factory owner in a town near Taejon. He had prospered during the Japanese colonial period, and at liberation thought it desirable to share some of his wealth. He was arrested in the raucous summer of 1947 (when hundreds if not thousands of Koreans died at the hands of the Occupation’s National Police) for giving money to “communists” and was still rotting in prison in July 1950. This woman (a registered nurse) and her four sisters and one brother had never been able to tell anyone outside the family how their father died. For half a century they had agonized over the loss of the family patriarch, but privately even unto themselves—no one ever talked about it. She was weeping over the phone for half an hour about her experience.

Charles Hanley has been following this story for nearly a decade by now, and the two articles herein reflect both a deepened understanding of these distant events, and a maddening paradox about the United States and its citizens: when they finally pay attention, Americans are entirely capable of calling their leaders to account for their actions. Most of the time, however, no one pays attention, and in the worst instance, when awful crimes occur for which the U.S. bears a deep responsibility, they are covered up and buried, and one wonders if anyone cares—even when the truth finally comes to light. Neither of Mr. Hanley's articles was picked up or covered by our paper of record, the *New York Times* (even though the *Times* had run a short version of the original Associated Press story on this massacre). Yet the Los Angeles nurse's father was thrown into prison under the U.S. Military Government (1945-48), as were perhaps the majority of the prisoners in Taejon; this is a direct link between the Americans who held ultimate authority in southern Korea, and the awful events of July 1950. Yet most Americans, including some journalists for the *New York Times* in my experience, are unaware that there even was an American occupation of Korea after World War II.

But is this not a terrible story? I still recall, during my research on the Korean War, coming across a contemporary article in the *London Daily Worker* by Alan Winnington claiming that 7,000 non-combatants had been slaughtered by southern authorities in Taejon. The American Embassy in London denounced his article as a fabrication. I also wanted to chalk it up to communist propaganda, but I had lived through the Vietnam War and had become deeply skeptical of my own government's credibility; I made a silent bet with myself that Winnington was probably not the liar. Later on I discovered archival evidence that Winnington was much closer to the truth than were the American officials who instantly laid the murders at the door of the North Koreans, and indeed have

always denied that any such massacres occurred at any point during the three-year war. The official military history of the war in this period, Roy Appleman's 1961 book, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*, blamed the Taejon massacre (and all other atrocities against civilians) on the North Koreans. Now that we have Hanley's articles and other work based on declassified documentation, we know that Appleman, who had access to all internal documents, was not an honest historian but a participant in the cover-up.

It isn't as if Americans at the time had illusions about their allies. The best candidate for South Korea's leading war criminal—its Karadzic—is Kim Chong-wôn, otherwise known as "Tiger" Kim, and his career opens an individual window on the events upon which Mr. Hanley focuses. Kim epitomized the elite that the U.S. midwifed into power in South Korea, a man capable of anything, no doubt laughing to himself as Americans tried to corral his worst instincts. Charles Hanley links Kim to Lt. Col. Rollins S. Emmerich and the latter's apparent willingness to allow Kim to slaughter thousands more prisoners held in Pusan jails, should the North Koreans threaten the city. In fact Emmerich and Kim go back much further than that.



Police Chief Chang Taek-sang with a man who may be Tiger Kim (left)

Kim Chong-wôn got the name “Tiger” for his service to the Japanese Army, and after 1945 he liked journalists to call him “the Tiger of Mt. Paekdu.” He volunteered for the Imperial Army in 1940 and rose to sergeant, “a rank which epitomized the brutality of the Japanese Army at its worst,” in the words of John Muccio, the U.S. Ambassador to Seoul in 1950; Kim served the Japanese in New Guinea and the Philippines. By 1946 he was in the Korean National Police, and for eight months in 1947 was the personal bodyguard of Chang T’aek-sang, head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police under the U.S. Occupation, and one of the most powerful men in Korea. Kim later entered the Army, where he rose quickly through the ranks in guerrilla suppression campaigns. Americans remembered him for his brutality in these

campaigns (Muccio called it “ruthless and effective”), and for his refusal to take American orders. An American in 1948 termed him “a rather huge, brute of a man,” after witnessing Kim and his men “mercilessly” beat captured rebels, including women and children, “with cot rounds, bamboo sticks, fists.” By August 1949 he was a regimental commander, and when the war began he was stationed along the 38th parallel.

Shortly thereafter an American advisor went “berserk with the idea of killing Kim,” according to Muccio. This officer was none other than Lt. Col. Emmerich, and he was not berserk: he said he would have to shoot Kim, “if no one else will get rid of him.” Kim was berserk: he had killed some of his own officers and men for alleged disobedience, avoided the front lines of fighting like the plague, and had beheaded fifty POWs and guerrillas (said to be just “one group” among others that had received this treatment). Soon Emmerich was transferred and Kim was temporarily relieved of his command under American pressure. When the Red Cross subsequently made representations about his murder of POWs, American officers said they “would not like to see it get in the hand of correspondents.” Kim’s furlough proved to be brief. President Syngman Rhee promoted him to Deputy Provost Marshal, and he soon commanded the martial law regime in Pusan, where as Hanley shows he again met up with Emmerich, and distinguished himself in the squalid terror of the “conscription campaigns”, which consisted of “shanghai-ing the required number of young men off the streets.” He also prided himself on being a “one-man censor of the press,” which he indeed was in one instance where he personally administered a beating to two reporters for the *Yônhap Sinmun*. Although he was clearly, on this evidence, a war criminal, Tiger Kim was part of President Rhee’s bestiary of close and trusted confidants. Once South Korean forces entered Pyongyang in the fall of 1950, Rhee placed Kim in charge of the initial

occupation, naming him Deputy Provost Marshall General for the northern capital. [2]

After the war another Korean officer in the Japanese military, Park Chung Hee, seized power and ruled until an October day in 1979 when his own intelligence chief, Kim Chae-gyu, murdered him over dinner. Kim was also a former Japanese officer. Indeed, both men had graduated in 1946 from the American military academy set up in the early years of the US occupation. A young protégé of Park's, Chun Doo Hwan, mounted his own coup in May 1980 over the dead bodies of hundreds of Kwangju citizens. President Jimmy Carter, known for his human rights policies, supported Chun's rise to power because he feared the North Koreans might take advantage of rebellions in the South. The Kwangju massacre was not a crime on the scale of Srebrenica: but Taejon was. And as always in our relations with Korea, it seems, Americans were just uninvolved bystanders, doing nothing—and therefore blameless, and therefore innocent. Someday the depth of American responsibility for the tragedies of postwar Korea will be fully known, but it is doubtful that Americans will be paying attention.

*Bruce Cumings teaches in the History Department and the Committee on International Relations at the University of Chicago and is the author of the two volume work *The Origins of the Korean War and North Korea: Another Country*.*

Bruce Cumings wrote this article for Japan

Focus. Posted July 23, 2008.

See the accompanying series of stories by Associated Press writers Charles J. Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang. **Summer of Terror: At least 100,000 said executed by Korean ally of US in 1950** (http://japanfocus.org/_C_J_Hanley_J_S_Chang-Summer_of_Terror_At_least_100_000_said_executed_by_Korean_ally_of_US_in_1950).

Notes

[1] "A Leader turned Ghost," New York Times (July 22, 2008), p. A10. [Note that this AP report carried no byline.]

[2] Most of the information and quotations in the text are in Ambassador Muccio's report, State Department 795.00 file, box 4267, "'Tiger' Kim vs. the press," May 12, 1951. On the beheading incident, see Record Group 338, entries for July 26 and Aug. 2, 1950. On Rhee and Tiger Kim, see the Matthew Ridgway Papers, box 20, draft of a message Muccio planned to present to Rhee, May 3, 1951, chiding Rhee for relying on Tiger Kim and his ilk for intelligence information, rather than the established agencies. On the occupation of Pyongyang see Truman Library, PSF, CIA file, box 248, daily summaries for Oct. 19, 25, 1950; *ibid.*, NSC file, box 3, CIA report for Oct. 25, 1950; 795.00 file, box 4267, Muccio to State, May 12, 1951.