

# Re-writing the Past/ Re-Claiming the Future: Nationalism and the Politics of Anti-Americanism in South Korea

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By Sheila Miyoshi Jager

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 led to one of history's worst atrocities. Known as the Taejon massacre, an estimated 5000 to 7500 civilian deaths have been attributed to a single incident committed by the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) in late September 1950. The incident, described as "worthy of being recorded in the annals of history along with the Rape of Nanking, the Warsaw Ghetto, and other similar mass exterminations" in the official United States Army report issued at the end of the war, received extensive coverage in the international press which touted it as evidence of North Korean barbarity. (1)

It was not until 1992, nearly 40 years after the event, that a South Korean journalist began to uncover new evidence which suggested that rather than a single massacre occurring in late September 1950 by the NKPA, there had actually been two massacres—the NKPA killings in September that occurred just before the city was re-taken by United Nations forces and an earlier massacre that had been committed in July by South Korean forces just before the NKPA attacked the city in its initial bid to unify the peninsula. In other words, what had been described as a single atrocity committed by the North Koreans was actually part of an unfolding pair of massacres that began when South Koreans forces executed

thousands of suspected leftists and political prisoners just before fleeing southward in July ahead of the advancing NKPA troops. The earlier July massacre appears simply to have been erased from the annals of official U.S. and South Korean histories of the war.

Today's new South Korean intellectual elite, coming of age during the nation's transition to democracy in the 1990s, are actively re-writing Korea's wartime history. The Taejon massacre, once a symbol of communist barbarity, has come to mean something very different from past interpretations of the event. Since not one-but two-- mass killings were committed, the September massacre is now being reconsidered in light of the preceding July massacre. As one journalist of the liberal Han'gyore shinmun put it, "the September massacre by the NKPA was an act of retaliation for the previous killings of leftist prisoners by the Republic of Korea (ROK)." (2) Moreover, the July massacre, according to the same source, "was impossible without the agreement or at least, acquiescence, of the American authorities who held commanding authority during the war." Professor Kang Man-gil of Koryo University voiced these views even more forcefully: "Since pictures were taken and official reports made to the U.S. government by the U.S. military, we cannot but examine the question of American responsibility for the (July) massacre." (3) What was once reviled as a despicable act of wanton violence committed by the North Korean People's Army is now being touted as a rational act of vengeance, while the earlier July killings--the new focus of concern-- are being blamed on the invisible hand of American forces for allowing the ROK soldiers to pull the trigger.

These revisionist accounts of the Taejon massacres were among the first of a new body of historical works that began to emerge in South Korea during the early 1990s. In this genre, formerly off-limit topics are now being written about extensively, including new research on U.S. responsibility for alleged mass killings of civilians during and before the war. The topic of alleged U.S. wartime atrocities—the recent uproar over the No Gun Ri incident is a good example—has created a literal industry of new historical works in contemporary South Korea devoted to re-examining the relationship between the U.S. and ROK governments and their complicity in alleged war crimes. In his massive 800-page study of the war entitled *Korea 1950: War and Peace*, for example, Park Myong-nim, a Yonsei University historian who also serves as an advisor to president Roh Mu-hyon on North-South Korean Affairs, devotes an entire section to documenting these heretofore “forgotten” atrocities (including the July Taejon massacre), something that could never have been discussed publicly just 15 years ago.

The need to revise Korea’s wartime history has many causes, not the least of which was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and with it, the loss of North Korea’s most powerful ally (and source of sustenance). After 1991, the communist threat vanished and in its wake, stood shell of a nation, abandoned by history, and seeking some way to survive. Suddenly, North Korea no longer appeared so threatening, and with the military junta now out of power, South Koreans found themselves able to say things about their northern neighbor that they could not say before. The result of all this is that South Koreans, freed from the imperatives of the anti-communist line, began to think very differently about their former Cold War enemy as well as about the United States. President Roh Mu-hyon’s “policy of peace and prosperity” toward North Korea, building on the approach of the earlier Kim Dae-jung administration, interprets

Pyongyang’s pursuit of nuclear weapons primarily as a defensive strategy, and advocates a policy of engagement with the North to ease tensions between the two countries. These post-Cold War political reevaluations of North Korea, predicated on the recognition of the enormous human costs in the event of a North Korean collapse or resumption of the Korean War, and viewing North Korea as a blighted but basically benign enemy in need of prodding and support, is shared by many younger South Koreans who were born after the war. Their views have had enormous repercussions not only on the way South Koreans now perceive their wartime past, but their future as well. Whereas North Korean brutality was central to the official story of the war until the 1990s, the focus has now shifted to reexamining American culpability and misdeeds during the conflict. This trend has also contributed to the rise of popular anti-American sentiments in South Korea that in turn has fueled tensions between the Roh and Bush administrations as they seek to find a resolution to the North Korean nuclear crisis.

While anti-Americanism is not new to South Korea, what is new is that anti-American sentiments appear to have spread into almost all strata of South Korean society, ranging from elite government policymakers and intellectuals, the middle class and the younger generation. While the sources of tensions are many, it is the changing perception of North Korea that has had the most profound impact on U.S.-ROK relations in recent years.

At the core of the U.S.-ROK alliance is the presupposition of a common North Korean threat. It was the Korean War that led to the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty between the U.S. and ROK in October 1953 and for nearly half a century, the Cold War and the common memory of the war bound the United States and South Korea in a common mission to defend the nation against another North Korean invasion.

But while this threat no longer appears credible to the younger generations of South Koreans who grew up after the war, the Bush administration and many Americans, regard the North Korean regime as a rogue state, intent on pursuing nuclear weapons in defiance of international agreements and posing a threat to its neighbors and even the United States. Whereas the Cold War in the United States quickly morphed after 9/11 into the new War on Terrorism, it has irrevocably “ended” in South Korea. George W. Bush’s denunciation of North Korea as an “axis of evil” in his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, publicly brought to the fore the fundamental disjuncture between the new American hard-line and South Korean engagement policy approaches toward North Korea.

This policy conflict over North Korea in turn has fed into popular anti-American sentiments in South Korea, generating a powerful current that president Roh Mu-hyun rode into the Blue House in 2002. Indeed, in February 2003, Yoon Young-kwan—then a member of Roh’s transition team, later South Korea’s foreign minister who was then ousted for this so-called “pro-American” views—caused consternation in Washington for allegedly preferring a nuclear North Korea to a collapse scenario. Though Yoon later denied that this was the policy of the Roh administration, his statement was widely taken by the Bush administration as illustrating Roh’s “ostrich pacifist approach” —that is, the view that a military solution to the conflict was unthinkable. (4) In a major speech in Los Angeles in November 2004, President Roh shocked Washington by declaring that there was some justification for North Korean claims to a right to develop nuclear weapons and missiles in order to protect itself against external threats (of course, he did not name that threat). In January 2005, South Korean Unification minister Chung Dong-young, in a major speech in Berlin, styled Korea as the “greatest victim of the Cold War” and stated that South Korea would not back down on the

principles of “no war, peaceful co-existence, and common prosperity.” As the conservative journalist, author and well-known critic Cho Gap-che remarked of these changes, “our soldiers will now be confused where they should aim their rifles.” (5)

Perhaps the most interesting thing about South Korea’s new relationship with Pyongyang is that it has encouraged the expression of a pan-Korean nationalism rooted in Korea’s self-image as victim. Park Geun-byung, a teacher at Song Chun elementary school in Seoul, uses a storybook that instructs his fourth grade class about the tale of an evil dragon that prevents two lovers on either side of a wide river from marrying. The evil dragon is clearly the United States and the river is meant to represent the DMZ. Park is a believer in what he calls “unification education.” Such depictions, while unsettling to Americans, resonate with the vast majority of Koreans who, from an early age, are schooled in their country’s long-suffering history of foreign invasions, occupation and national victimization. In the present context of a post-Cold War national division, these sentiments have fueled an intense form of pan-Korean nationalism, inclusive of both Koreas, by finding a common enemy to oppose. (The rise of popular anti-Japanese sentiments in South Korea, sparked by the recent dispute over sovereignty claims to Tokdo Islands, is just the most recent example of this trend). Post-Cold War North-South relations are characterized by sustained and brisk exchanges between the two countries on many fronts. The three main area of economic cooperation-- the business of the Kaesong Industrial complex (KIC), Kumgang Mountain tourism, and the construction of the connection of the inter-Korean railway and roads—have opened up an unprecedented level of cooperation and activity. Many South Koreans are now visiting the North as tourists, separated families, nongovernmental organizations, educators, aid-workers, technicians and more. The ROK’s Korea Broadcasting System (KBS) has also

forged working ties with the DPRK, including several co-productions (6). More recently, South Korea has taken the lead to resume the stalled six-party talks, scheduled to begin July 26, which are aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. South Korea has even offered to take on the burden of satisfying North Korea's electrical energy needs in an effort to persuade Pyongyang to give up on its nuclear energy program.

In striking contrast to South Korean efforts to build warmer relations with North Korea, antagonism toward the United States in South Korea has risen sharply in recent years. The national furor that arose in South Korea over the accidental deaths of two Korean schoolchildren caused by two American soldiers on June 13, 2002, is a case in point. The deaths and later acquittal of the U.S. soldiers responsible for the fatal accident involving an armored vehicle that ran over the girls spurred a wave of anti-American protests. They also prompted an outbreak of conspiratorial theories, ranging from reports that the soldiers had killed the girls on purpose to charges that the soldiers had laughed off the incident. The deaths became linked to South Korea's "neo-colonial" status that fed into the image of Korea as victim.

upon  
 South Korea's latest "victims"  
 Anti-Americanism in Korea, 2002  
 Source: <http://www.base21.org/antibush>

Many viewed the deaths as emblematic of South Korea's "client status" under the U.S., prompting demands to revise the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with militants arguing that American "imperialists" (like Korea's Japanese colonial predecessors) were once again trampling upon the sovereignty of the Korean nation and impeding national unification. Even the conservative Grand National Party lodged a petition demanding a revision of the SOFA. "The aggressive U.S. policy has forced South Koreans to change their perception of what an ally is," said Rep. Kim Won-ung of the Grand National Party. "In the past, a country that helped deter war here was an ally. But now, only those who contribute to promoting inter-Korean peace, reconciliation and unification should be considered our ally" (7). On December 6, 2002, tens of thousands of Koreans held a candle light vigil in Seoul to declare a "National Sovereignty Declaration Day" in mass protest against the acquittals. More South Koreans today see the United States a greater threat to their national security than North Korea.



Figure 1: Cartoon depicting the U.S. trampling



Figure 2: Anti-Americanism in Korea, 2002  
 The sign reads: “Until the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) is revised, Americans are barred from entering.”  
 Source:  
[www.areastudies.org/usinkorea/tragedy/USFKAccidentandAnti-American\\_oryg.html](http://www.areastudies.org/usinkorea/tragedy/USFKAccidentandAnti-American_oryg.html)



Figure 3: Protests for Peace, September 2002  
 Source:  
<http://www.geocities.com/korea911memory>

The intensification of memory and identity struggles in South Korea in recent years is thus part of the growing search for an alternative view of the war years, including new interpretations of U.S.-ROK relations. Attempts to re-write North Korea back into a shared and on-going history of national struggle and triumph over foreign adversity—a familiar theme in Korean history—reveal the growing desire for the “normalization” of relations between the two Koreas. This shift has also brought a fundamental reevaluation in South Korea of U.S.-Korean relations as well as the legacy of the unfinished war that the United States is now seen as perpetuating. Efforts to finally end the Korean War reveal how pan-Korean nationalism and the current struggle over how to best deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis are intimately caught up in the politics of memory and South Koreans’ need to accommodate North Korea both in their past

and in their future.

## NOTES

(1) Stewart Lone and Gavan McCormack, *Korea Since 1850* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 118-131. The authors base their account, in part, on the English Daily Worker reporter Alan Winnington's August 9, 1950 dispatch which was largely ignored by the Western press. Press reports supplement information about the July massacre from Australian military observers.

(2) *Hangyora* 21, January 20, 2000, p. 23

(3) *Ibid*, p. 23

(4) Aidan Foster-Carter, "North Korea-South Korea Relations: A Bumpy Road Ahead,

Comparative Connections, Pacific Forum Center for Strategic and International Studies. [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org), (October, 2003).

(5) Los Angeles Times, August 20, 2003

(6) Aidan Foster-Carter, "Never Mind the Nukes?" *Comparative Connections*, (October 2003): 3-4.

(6) Korea Herald, August 11, 2002

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