

Was He a Spy?
Review of *King of Spies: The Dark Reign of*
America's Spymaster in Korea

By Blain Harden
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When researching a book on Cho Bong Am in 1995,¹ this reviewer was left with many unanswered questions surrounding a suspicious character named “Nicholas,” known only as a member of the Counter Intelligence Corps of the U.S. Air Force. “Nicholas” was known to have played a decisive role at the time in the imprisonment in 1958 and execution in 1959 of Cho Bong Am, leader of The Progressive Party, by providing evidence of his connections with North Korea. But who was this “Nicholas,” really? There was little information to be found.

With the publication of *The King of Spies*, however, questions surrounding this mysterious figure are finally resolved. His real name was Donald Nichols and he was active in Korea from 1946-1957. While originally an auto mechanic in the U.S. Army during World War II, he joined the Air Force upon returning home in 1946. He was then recruited

¹ Park Tae Gyun, *Jo bongam yeongu* [Study of Cho Bong Am] (Soul: Changbi, 1995).

for a twelve-week spy-training course in Tokyo, the extent of his higher education.

His actions were shrouded in mystery, his rank and age, unknown. He was seventeen when he joined the army and twenty-three when he came to Korea. Soon, he became the “son” of Syngman Rhee after their meeting in 1946. The two maintained this familial relationship until Nichols return to the U.S. in 1957. His seeming omnipotence, then, stemmed from the Air Force’s total support as well as Rhee’s faith and trust. He founded ‘the 6006th intelligence squadron,’ an organization free of interference from any military unit and comprised not only of American soldiers but more than 200 Koreans as well. The employment of Korean citizens in the U.S. Air Force is difficult to explain without reference to the power of Syngman Rhee as well as Kim “Snake” Chang Ryong, who exercised absolute authority under Rhee’s protection.

Harden bases his analysis of Nichols’ activities on his autobiography, a work that became known in Korea in 2015 through the *Korea Times*.² Other than that, a Korean researcher had also conducted a study of Nichols’ activities during the Korean War.³ The reason why so little was known about his activities in the 1950s was that Koreans in the 1950s did not even know his age, rank, or whether his name was “Nicholas” or “Nichols.” Besides the fact that he was an American of considerably large physique, little was known beyond that he was a person who had unrestricted access to Rhee and was in charge of the mysterious unit stationed in Oryu-dong.

The author also makes use of many resources other than Nichols’ autobiography. He endeavors to provide a comprehensive account of his

² “‘Doneoldeu Nikolseu’ sarajin hoegorok ipsu jeongyeok gonggae” [Full Disclosure of Donald Nichols’ Lost Memoir], *Hanguk Ilbo*, August 8, 2015. <http://daily.hankooki.com/lpage/politics/201508/dh20150808094707137430.htm>

³ Jeong Sim Yang, “USFA Counter-Intelligence against North Korea during the Korean War—with a focus on Donald Nichols,” *Sarim* 46 (2013): 415-422.

activities through interviews with family members and work associates of Nichols in Korea. These include his personal stenographer as well as many Koreans, many of who went on to fulfill important roles in the Korean armed forces and the KCIA, and some of whom invited Nichols to Korea in March 1987, on the eve of Korean democratization. Some interviewees were also active in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the early 2000s.

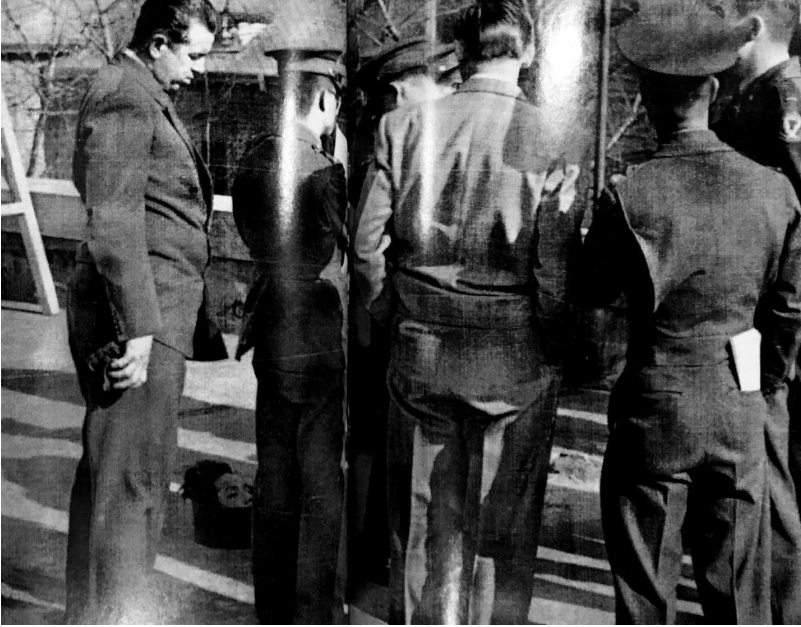
The interviews reveal that the Koreans who collaborated with Nichols believed his actions crucial to Korean security. Not only did Nichols anticipate the North Korean invasion,⁴ it is claimed, but through the procurement of the engine and parts of a crashed North Korean MIG air fighter, he also allowed the U.S. Air Forces an advantageous position in the air war with Soviet fighters secretly engaged in the war.⁵ It is also argued that the U.S. Air Force was able to carry out more effect bombing in North Korea based on intelligence pertaining to key facilities in North Korea obtained by an agent dispatched by Nichols.⁶ Moreover, it is revealed that these operations were made possible by Nichols frequent visits to refugee camps to forcefully mobilize refugees from the North. In turn, not only did he receive numerous commendations from the U.S. but from the Korean government as well. Were his actions truly worthy of

⁴ The author writes that General Charles A. Willoughby, a close associate of General MacArthur, ignored Nichols' intelligence pertaining to the North Korean invasion and that MacArthur headquarters also ignored Nichols' intelligence regarding the large-scale entry into the war of Chinese troops. These two moments set the stage for the greatest failures of the U.S. during the Korean War. However, it is uncertain whether this is true or just a story of Nichols.

⁵ Perhaps the procurement of intelligence pertaining to Soviet MIG fighters was Nichols' most important achievement during the war. However, Harden points out the controversy over Nichols' precise role therein.

⁶ According to Kim Tae Woo, American bombing was completely ineffective throughout the war, a point reiterated by Harden. See Kim Tae Woo, "Limited War, Unlimited Targets: U.S. Air Force Bombing of North Korea during the Korean War, 1950-1953," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012). At the time, precision bombing was technologically impossible, and since the U.S. preferred to use Napalm, target areas were destroyed indiscriminately. Thus, it would simply be unreasonable to conclude that intelligence led to more effective bombing.

Picture 1



Picture 2



commendation?

While the primary significance of the book consists in its revelation of Nichols' activities, its many interesting photographs are surely also a highlight. Two of these photos are shown above.

The first of these depicts Nichols looking at the beheaded guerrilla leader, Kim Ji-hoe, who refused to give in to the suppression of the Jeju guerrilla movement and was a leader in the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion. The second picture depicts Nichols and some American soldiers observing the site of communist executions in a village.⁷ The communists were communist cells in South Korean forces, who were arrested due to the confession of colonel Park Chung Hee in 1949 shortly after the suppression of the rebellion. Both of the photos belonged to Nichols.

Up until the release of Harden's book, Nichols' activities were unknown outside of those related to the Korean War. However, in the book, Nichols' complicity in a number of massacres and political events in Korea is revealed, as the pictures above show. Nichols was proficient in Korean and was involved in the destruction of communist organizations even before the Korean War. He was deeply involved in: the arrest, interrogation and torture of leaders in the South Korean Labor Party in 1947 and 1950; the purge and execution of communists within the Korean military in 1949; the massacre of the National Guidance alliance, also known as the Bodo League Massacre, at the outset of the Korean War; and the interrogation of North Korean defectors determining whether they were spies or not. Within his own memoirs, Nichols admitted being party to an "unforgettable massacre."

The book's noteworthy claim is that U.S. intervention in

⁷ Captain Hausman, a member of the US Military Advisory Group in Korea (KMAG), was also present. There is also video footage of the executions available in the Hausman Collection at the Harvard-Yenching Library. The picture above, taken from Nichols' collection, depicts the scene from another perspective.

intelligence and military activities, massacres, and political affairs is not a supposition but a fact. Despite the many revelations pertaining to U.S. espionage in Korea after 1945, however, the book is not without a few shortcomings. For example, it does not reveal the concrete connection between Nichols' activities and Korean politics. There are a number of post-1945 political events that yet defy explanation. This is particularly so with respect to events involving the left or nationalists, examples of which are the assassinations of Yo Un-hyung and Kim Gu. In particular, testimony at the trial of An Du-hui claiming that Kim Gu's assassination was related to the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion supports this point. Looking at the latest documents⁸ showing that An Du-hui was an agent of the U.S. Combat Information Center demonstrates the extent of the influence of U.S. counterintelligence over Korean politics.

The same is true for history after 1953. Opposition politicians were subject to countless instances of oppression. Always accompanying such oppression, moreover, was the label of "communist." This oppression culminated in sweeping measures under the aegis of the National Security Law on December 24, 1958. Coincidentally, this occurred right after Nichols left Korea in 1957 due to his absurd and inappropriate behavior during the 1950s.⁹ Might not have the weakening power of counterintelligence, exercised by the likes of Nichols to render opposition politicians into "communists" without any recourse to a "Security Law," engendered the government's need for such a legal framework?

Although the author himself is not a researcher by profession, through various interviews with Nichols' associates, he provides the most

⁸ "An duhui neun migun bangcheob daeweon" [An Du-hui U.S. Military Counterintelligence Agent], *Hangyeore Sinmun*, September 4, 2001.

⁹ There were two cases in which his counterintelligence squadron was reported in the mass media during the 1950s. One report concerned the North Korean agent who tried to open a pub in front of his unit in order to get information; the other concerned a crime regarding counterfeit bills, which are mentioned in the book several times.

detailed account of Nichols' activities to date. And while there may be some aspects of these activities that yet require uncovering, one cannot but acknowledge the author's detailed understanding not only of Korea after 1948 but 2008 as well.¹⁰ This book is thus a necessary read for any researcher concerned with Korean politics or Korean-U.S. relations. More research on the details of counterintelligence activities both by South Koreans and the U.S. unit in South Korea should be carried out by scholars in near future.

¹⁰ The author's impressive understanding of Korean society is clear in his treatment of land reform and collaborator issues after 1945 and his pointing out the ineptitude of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission since 2008.