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Salvific Violence: *The Hungnam Evacuation and Anticommunist Rescue in US-Occupied North Korea*

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Abstract

This article disrupts the hegemonic narrativization of the Hungnam evacuation as a self-evidently benevolent event during the Korean War (1950–1953), as depicted in public commemorations and filmic representations. By writing the evacuation into a critical history of the US military empire, this article argues that the anticommunist narrative of Hungnam as a benevolent rescue from a singular threat of violence—the communists—to a free *South Korea conceals the violent conditions of anticommunist occupation—*liberation*—and rescue during the war. For nearly three months in the late fall of 1950, occupied North Koreans encountered and negotiated necropolitical conditions of anticommunist liberation that trace back to the violent political order that emerged in South Korea under the US military government. With China's intervention in the war, however, the liberated* friends*, many of whom were Christians, found themselves becoming a refugee problem for the US military. As this article shows, the US military's violent policing of civilian movements created the need to rescue the city's Christians from being mistaken for* bad *refugees at roadblocks and checkpoints along the roads leading into the city and its port. Through a critical reading of the US military's* refugee problem *in wartime North Korea, this essay also examines the formation of a refugee subjectivity that contains within it both colonial and anticommunist discourses of subjecthood in the making of a US-led free world.*

Keywords: Hungnam evacuation, refugees, Korean War, US empire, Christianity, violence, subject-making

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Introduction

The first flashback scene in the 2014 South Korean film *Ode to My Father* (*Gukje sijang*) takes viewers to panicked Korean refugees scrambling on foot toward the frozen docks of Hungnam Port, where the US troops are hastily evacuating personnel and equipment. The child Deoksu's family of five and thousands of other refugees find themselves stranded, with the menacing sounds of mortars exploding behind them. A Korean voice is heard shouting, "The Chinese have entered Hungnam!" and American military police fire shots into the air to hold the line against desperate civilians attempting to board the ships. Watching the crisis unfold from the deck of a ship, a young Korean civilian officer, alarmed by the callousness of the American troops, beseeches the American commander, "General, I beg you. Please have mercy on these people! If you leave them here like this, there's only death left for them!" When the initially stone-faced General Almond has a change of heart, turning to a ship captain to ask how many refugees he can fit on his vessel, that young civilian officer, Hyun Bong-hak, looks up at the general with relief and wonder. What follows is the story of the *Christmas miracle*. The US military dumps equipment into the sea to make room for thousands of North Koreans fleeing the terror of a returning communist rule in December 1950, with the legendary *SS Meredith Victory* ferrying away 14,500 refugees.

By compressing the frenzied events and contingent decisions leading up to the evacuation of North Korean civilians into the final hour as Chinese troops breach the perimeter, this fictionalized retelling rationalizes Almond's hesitant deliberation over the refugee question by highlighting the urgency and chaos of the military situation. To be sure, the film does not shy away from portraying American troops' compassionless demeanor toward the Korean civilians, like the white soldier screaming and throwing his helmet in frustration and disgust after hearing the general's orders to make room for the refugees. In doing so, however, the film displaces—in fact, erases—the structural, occupational violence of the US military empire in North Korea

onto the individual conduct of a handful of low-ranking soldiers.[1] What further circumvents any questioning of the American *roll-back* occupation of North Korea is the joyous relief that erupts among the throngs of refugees as they see the cargo doors to the vessels lowered, though this mood is soon tempered by the perilous race to the ships as parents lose young children in the stampede and drowned bodies float to the surface of the freezing waters. Despite moments of ambivalence, like the emotional scenes of refugees wailing as they leave behind family members as their hometowns are being incinerated into smoke and ash, the film's narrativization of the evacuation as a heroic act coheres when adult Deoksu, who enlists as a non-combat technician with South Korean forces in Vietnam, overcomes his own callousness to evacuate Vietnamese civilians from a village entrapped by Viet Cong troops. In both flashbacks, refugee flights from the specters of communist terror, off-screen in Hungnam and materialized in the Vietnamese village enable the disavowal of US imperial violence in Cold War Asia.

Two months after its release in South Korea, organizers from US-based human rights groups for contemporary North Korean refugees held a special screening of the film for an audience of American and South Korean veterans and their relatives in Fairfax, Virginia.[2] The affective space of this special screening reinscribed the self-evident morality of the US-ROK alliance, especially the sacrifice of soldiers, and it also enmeshes the wartime refugee movements out of Hungnam in what Christine Hong has described as the "murky epistemological basis of the [contemporary] interventionist rights-based agenda toward North Korea" (Hong 2013, 519). While the film's nostalgic handling of South Korea's postwar modernization has

1. On the ideological fissures within the text of the film and the "sanitized view of American power" in the film, respectively, see E. Kim (2015) and K. M. Hwang (2016).
2. "U.S. veterans of Korean War attend special screening of 'Ode to My Father' in Washington," *Korea Times,* February 12, 2015, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/amp/foreignaffairs/20150212/us-veterans-of-korean-war-attend-special-screening-of-ode-to-my-father-in-washington. Attendees of the screening included the grandson of Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond, commander of the X Corps during the rollback occupation of North Korea and evacuation from Hungnam.

been discussed, the film's representation of violence and rescue in wartime North Korea also presents an opportunity to scrutinize the hegemonic narrativization of the Hungnam evacuation as a miracle from the singular threat of communist violence. I ask: who or what else might the miracle narrative rescue? The narrativizations of the Hungnam evacuation as a miracle in the transpacific cultural memory of the Korean War elucidate the moral politics that have shaped the making of anticommunist South Korea along the hot frontier of the global Cold War, where the US military empire carried out not only armed pacification of communist enemies but also engaged in projects to mold good, thankful subjects. As this article will show, the US military's occupation of North Korea during the war imposed an anticommunist regime of power that inscribed violent relations between the occupiers and the occupied, and the figure of the refugee on the run from communism has helped to maintain the image of benevolent American power by trimming away the frame of the occupation and remembering only the *miracle* at the docks.

In this essay, I *re*-place the evacuation in the larger context of anticommunist occupation to examine what it means to receive the gift of refuge as occupied subjects of the US empire during the Korean War. By magnifying a wartime event that few scholars of the Korean War and US empire have closely examined, I scrutinize the politics of anticommunist, Christian rescue that emerged out of the evacuation to unsettle self-evident truths of American benevolence in transpacific anticommunist memory-making. As I will show, the hour-to-hour decisions made by occupation officials—a group of actors that included American Christian missionaries and US military leaders, as well as a Korean civilian advisor—categorized the Christians as *good* refugees, to be distinguished from potentially *bad* refugees. However, the zone between the good refugees and potentially bad refugees quickly collapsed, and all refugees, Christian or otherwise, faced the violence of the US military's checkpoints, roadblocks, and even air campaigns. Thus, this essay examines the US military's diagnosis of a "refugee problem" in wartime North Korea to question the salvific premises of the evacuation in the narrative afterlife of the event while tracing the formation of a refugee subjectivity that contains within it the enemy subject under

occupation and the reoriented subject of the US-led free world in Korea.

The Korean War and the Violence of Anticommunist Liberation

By October of 1950, many South Korean cities had already experienced two *liberations* as the UN forces recaptured territories occupied by the North Korean People's Army since its rapid overtaking of South Korean forces in late June and early July of that same year. Even before North Korea's escalation of tensions into conventional warfare, the southern regions of South Korea, in particular the island of Jeju, were already experiencing a prolonged counter-insurgency war waged by the nascent anticommunist state against those opposed to the polices of Syngman Rhee and the US military government (1945–1948) as well as the normalization of a permanently divided Korea, with the US-supported southern state's intensifying logic of enmity exposing entire civilian populations to counter-insurgent violence from the spring of 1948 and throughout the war of the early 1950s. The situation north of the 38th parallel was slightly different. While the North Korean state carried out a sweeping socialist revolution and rapidly mobilized its society for war, those in the north did not experience state violence akin to the genocidal campaigns on Jeju Island prior to the eve of the 1950–1953 conflict, even as surveillance and policing intensified. Moreover, from the time the US government and military decided to cross the 38th parallel in an attempt to roll back communism, North Korean civilians anticipated occupation under enemy troops for the first time since the conventional outbreak of the war.

With the capital city of Pyongyang under the control of the Eighth Army command in the northwest and the X Corps command headquartered in the industrial city of Hamhung in the northeast, the US military's occupation of North Korea from October to December 1950 would be the only time the United States occupied an enemy communist country during the global Cold War, an event that historian Callum MacDonald (1991) called "so terrible a liberation." In his study of the political character of the Korean War, Bruce Cumings has described this "roll-back" occupation as

essentially the ROK government's reign of anticommunist terror south of the 38th parallel extended to the north (Cumings 1990, 716). While a formal agreement placed all ROK armed forces under the operational command of the US military, the US military licensed South Korean troops and combat police, as well as right-wing paramilitary groups, to run the occupation on the ground. Moreover, during the first half of October 1950, the US military was chasing the tail of ROK forces, which were sprinting up the eastern corridor, seizing Wonsan and Hamhung, and unleashing retributive violence against the immensely broad popular base that made up the Workers' Party in North Korea, although by late October the US Army's X Corps was seeking to assert control and shape the narrative of liberation.

Aside from the inquiries into the Sincheon massacre in the wake of novelist Hwang Sok-yong's explosive revisionist narrative in *The Guest*, not enough critical attention has been paid to the US occupation of North Korea until and since Cumings and MacDonald's critical works on the violent character of the occupation in the early 1990s.[3] Notable exceptions include Dong-Choon Kim's examination of licensed mass killings and specifically the counterinsurgent atrocities committed by South Korean police and right-wing youth organizations in occupied North Korean territory to the east and west. In his 2004 article, Kim notes that the character and pattern of anticommunist, rightist massacres during the Korean War may mark "the turning point" toward a new category of policide, and more specifically, "the bridge to connect the old type of massacres under colonialism and the new types of state terrorism and political massacre during the Korean War" (Dong-Choon Kim 2004, 538–539). In thinking between colonial violence and Cold War violence, Kim's study gives flesh and bone to what Heonik Kwon has theorized as the convergence of two color lines in the second half of the 20th century—colonial governance over racial difference and through racial hierarchies, on one hand, and the political technologies of anticommunism, on the other (Kwon 2010). For example, the logic of "associative guilt" along kinship and social ties that undergirded the violent

3. Recently, Adam Cathcart and Luke Thrumble (2023) have reassessed the political reasons for the failure of the occupation. See Cathcart and Thrumble.

excision of alleged communist enemies reveals the imagining of ideological difference as biologically and socially transmitted, thus needing eradication at the seed. As one member of a rightist paramilitary youth organization explained, after executing a group of children in recaptured Seoul around December 18, 1950, the "[c]hildren of Communists [are] bound [to] grow into Red sympathizers."[4]

In fact, throughout the week leading up to the US military's evacuation from Hungnam in North Korea, the South Korean state and paramilitary forces carried out mass executions of men, women, and children as young as eight years old under charges of collaborating with the North Korean forces who had occupied Seoul and much of the country during the first three months of the war. One report tersely recorded that the women had "proven tougher than men requiring up to 8 bullets [sic]." As the US military archive shows, anticommunist liberation brought exceptional forms of violence, policide, to the *liberated*, carried out by the South Korean state while witnessed, documented, and sanctioned by the US military. Not only that, the US military also engaged in mass killings of Korean civilians, as I discuss later in this article. Yet, the Hungnam evacuation narrative as a testament to the benevolence of occupying American troops has worked to sacralize a transpacific memory of Operation Christmas Cargo, as it came to be known, as a miracle that could recover the US's trumpeted mandate of liberation. Since the war, South Koreans, including the northern refugees who resettled in the south, and Americans have narrativized the evacuation as an exodus from communist tyranny and a sojourn toward freedom. With nearly 100,000 North Koreans fleeing over the sea, no single wartime event has been imbued with greater moral if not religious meanings.[5]

4. "Press Reports Allege the Following Atrocities in the Seoul Area," 4, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Records Relating to Anticommunist Measures, RG 554, Box 1.
5. As Andre Schmid (2018) discusses, human movement over the peninsula became hyper-politicized by the time of the Korean War, leaving little room for the complexities and nuances of individual motivations and circumstantial conditions. Any southward flight during the war was narrativized by the US and South Korea as a flight from communism toward freedom.

The Hungnam narrative, however, can also be a site for interrogating the violent conditions of assimilation into the Cold War imaginary of the US-led *Free World* in wartime Korea. For this, the politics of the evacuation cannot be examined apart from the violence of a wartime occupation that sought to pacify and reorient an enemy population and the normalized violence used by the US military to police civilian movements in Korea. Yet, few studies have devoted sustained inquiry into the evacuation outside of a small handful of studies on the operational efficacy and (re-)discovery of heroic figures. While these works shed much needed clarity on the flawed logic and planning as well as the conduct of the American-led occupation, I argue for the need to examine the occupation *and* evacuation as a continuum of violence from anticommunist liberation to anticommunist rescue. More than a failure of US foreign policy and operational execution needing reassessment, the US-led anticommunist *liberation* of North Korea in the autumn of 1950 reveals the US empire's violent making of Cold War subjects in wartime Korea. In locating the *rescue* along a continuum of colonial occupation and colonial war, I re-read the Cold War military and missionary archives, and especially the refugee narratives that are mediated through them, through insights derived from critical scholarship on the Korean War, Cold War refuge(es) and subject formation, and the necropolitics of modern democratic rule, while simultaneously writing a history of the *religious* Cold War as experienced on the ground in wartime North Korea.

Becoming a Refugee Problem

In December 1950, North Korean civilians braced for yet another change of flags. Since the beginning of October of that year, the flags of the United Nations Command, United States, and the Republic of Korea had replaced the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's banner. In a speech to the people of Hamhung in late November, South Korean president Syngman Rhee (1875–1965), himself an early convert to Protestant Christianity (Methodist), publicly narrativized the occupation as a liberation of his

northern compatriots from the communist devils (*gongsan angma*).[6] By making public appearances in occupied Pyongyang and Hamhung in the face of the UN's resolution to confine ROK sovereignty to the south of the 38th parallel, Rhee asserted a masked claim over the occupied territories as the ROK's sovereign-to-be. Still, Rhee was careful to instruct North Koreans to accept the benevolent, democratic tutelage of the US military under the auspices of the United Nations.[7] Not long after, the residents of Hamhung watched nervously as the occupiers began loading cargo planes and ships for what clearly looked like a general retreat in the face of Chinese military intervention. What would become of those who welcomed the *liberation*, certain that the war would soon end with UN victory? For those who chose to see American and South Korean troops as human agents of God's will to liberate the faithful from the yoke of communist rule, would their god so quickly abandon them?

The implications of the US military's retreat triggered another wave of human displacement on the peninsula. This time north of the 38th parallel. As the UN forces in the northeast prepared for the evacuation of troops and equipment over water along the peninsula's eastern coast toward Busan, and where possible by airlifts, a large number of refugees began to follow the embattled 1st Marine Division on its retreat from Jangjin (Chosin) Reservoir toward Hungnam Port. On December 11, an alarmed X Corps command responded with emergency measures to the division's report of Korean refugees following the tail of their convoy. Eyeing the refugee movement with suspicion, the command raised a defense perimeter around Hamhung

6. "Yi daetongnyeong Hamheung simin-ege hunhwa" (President Rhee's Instructions to the Citizens of Hamhung), 1950, Daetongnyeong girokgwan (Presidential Archives of South Korea), https://pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp (accessed May 21, 2025). This textual record only gives the year, but articles in the *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* and photographic records by the Bureau of Public Information, while giving differing dates and durations for the visit, place Rhee's speech at sometime between November 20 and 22.
7. In this article, I make specific references to the formal jurisdiction of the United Nations Command where necessary for clarity, but in all other instances I focus on the US military under whose command the UN forces were placed, including those of the ROK. For a critical examination of the transcolonial practices concealed by the multi-lateral, coalition banner of the UN Command, see Sung Eun Kim (2024).

city and ordered frontline forces to "turn back all refugees and not let any enter the Hamhung-Hungnam area."[8] The civilians displaced by the war zone, the X Corps determined, were deemed not only obstacles to military traffic on the roads to the port and airfield, but "a great intelligence threat by the entrance into the area of saboteurs and espionage agents posing as refugees and moving along with them."[9] For North Koreans displaced by the new warfront and intensifying US bombings, this meant possible death, given that as early as late July 1950, US soldiers at all ranks were operating under an "unwritten policy" that sanctioned lethal force against refugees "as a last resort to control their movements" (Conway-Lanz 2005, 58). To be placed outside of the US military's defense perimeter as a suspicious column of refugees marked these civilians as fair targets for lethal discipline.[10]

The anticommunist moral geography imposed over the wartime civilian flight out of Hungnam—that civilians escaped to the South out of the singular fear of communist slaughter—crumbles when accounting for the full range of threats to human life over North Korea, throughout the war but especially during that December. In fact, many wartime refugee movements from north to south were "not necessarily from fear of communism, but principally from fear of the United States' massive aerial bombardment campaign including the threat of thermonuclear destruction" (Kwon 2020, 38). As the frontline passed over villages and towns in North Korea, civilians knew that tailing US troops afforded maximum security from being targets

8. "Headquarters X Corps: Command Report for December 1950," MacArthur Memorial Library Archives (MMLA), Box 1, Folder 2, Papers of Lt. Gen. Edward M. Almond, Record Group (RG) 38.
9. "Refugees," p. 23 of Special Report on Hungnam Evacuation (Inclosure #3) in "Headquarters X Corps: Command Report for December 1950," MMLA, Box 1, Folder 2, Papers of Almond; RG 38.
10. Writing the official history of the Korean War, US Army historian Roy E. Appleman rationalized this as justified force to control the "crazed" refugees who attempted to reach Hungnam Port from Koto-ri pass. See Appleman (1990, 343). Still, Appleman argued that "[e]ven in the midst of a military crisis, the American response was generous in humanitarian terms." On the note of humanitarianism, see also Daniel Kim (2021) for a discussion of the bare-life politics of the US military's conduct toward "raced subjects" on the terrain of cultural memory.

Figure 1. Still of refugees following convoy of US Marines (1950)

Source: *The Hungnam Story* (111-ADC-10380), NARA, RG 111.

or "collateral damage" in the bombing campaigns. Moving images shot by the US military show this clearly. In footage covering US air strikes against Chinese positions and the Marines' retreat toward the port, a group of refugees appear within the frame, walking amidst American troops and their armored vehicles (Fig. 1). All working toward the same direction, the film, titled *The Hungnam Story*, intimates a narrative of rescue and reifies a geography of freedom that is a uniform movement from the treacherous North, engulfed by Chinese communists, to the *free* South. Yet, a closer reading of the footage can connect the air strikes on the mountainous terrain to the women and men fleeing with all they could carry in their hands, on their backs, and atop their heads through the menacing winter conditions.

While the X Corps blockaded the perimeter against refugees approaching from without, many residents within the city began to leave their homes and walk toward Hungnam Port, contributing to the "refugee problem [that] threatened to become a major one" around December 12.[11] Half a decade

11. "Refugees," p. 23 of Special Report on Hungnam Evacuation (Inclosure #3), MMLA.

later, Han Hamyun, who was a child during the occupation, recalled that the sky over his neighborhood "lit up all night" from the US naval bombardment launched from the sea toward his hometown starting around December 15 (KBS 1999). A few days earlier around December 10–11, American soldiers had raised a barbed-wire fence around Han's neighborhood and set up artillery behind the fence. These actions greatly unnerved the residents. In Han's recollection, the town elders feared that their neighborhood would soon become a battlefield and resolved to seek refuge. What is momentarily striking about this segment in the interview is that Han's memory of evacuating points to American bombs, artillery, and barbed wire in explaining people's decision to flee. While mediated through a documentary film that celebrated the discovery of a Korean hero in the evacuation, the refugees' acts of remembering and rejointing the legs of their flight for refuge create fissures in the narrative of benevolent rescue.

When the traffic of refugees on the roads obstructed the movement of tactical and logistical troops carrying out the evacuation, the US occupation forces coordinated to enforce the policy of not permitting any refugees within the perimeter and to control the existing refugee traffic between the city and port and prevent further civilian travel toward Hungnam Port.[12] As military police established checkpoints to control and screen civilian traffic, the roads connecting the city of Hamhung to Hungnam Port, which lay directly southeast of the city, became treacherous. Just two months after the fanfare of the UN *liberation* of North Korea from communist brutality, the occupiers now considered all Korean civilians at best a logistical liability and at worst potential military threats. The US military later claimed that the scale of the "refugee problem" was entirely unanticipated and that it took the planners by surprise, revealing both the frenzied conditions created by the moving war front and lack of foresight in the Truman administration's decision to occupy North Korea as well as the execution of the occupation by commanders of the X Corps and Eighth Army.[13]

In addition to showing the broad consensus in Washington regarding

12. "Refugees," p. 24, Special Report on Hungnam Evacuation (Inclosure #3), MMLA.
13. "Refugees," p. 23, Special Report on Hungnam Evacuation (Inclosure #3), MMLA.

the necessity of pursuing rollback in place of containment in Korea, the guiding policy aims of NSC 81/1, "United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea," gave urgency to the task of "mak[ing] an intensive effort, using all information media, to turn the inevitable bitterness and resentment of the war-victimized Korean people away from the United States and to direct it toward the Korean Communists, the Soviet Union, and depending on the role they play, the Chinese Communists."[14] As David Cheng Chang notes in his examination of US wartime policies and the stunning mass defection of Chinese POWs to Taiwan during the Korean War, these propagandic aims of NSC 81/1 largely targeted enemy POW populations with the goal of inducing mass defections (Chang 2020, 92–94).[15] Still, the urgent aim of reorienting and remolding the enemy populations guided the X Corps command's occupation of northeast North Korea, and the sudden turning of the war's tide suspended North Korean civilians between two temporalities of liberation—a failed liberation of anticommunist victory and an imminent liberation of communist reclamation of North Korean territory. As Jang Youngok recalled, her father gravely suggested that the family should end their own lives if they could not board an evacuation ship, for her father had welcomed UN troops and invited soldiers into their home for meals (KBS 1999). Knowing that a neighbor could report their friendly conduct toward the occupiers to returning North Korean authorities, the Jang family feared they could face violent discipline.

Enfolded within and between Jang and Han's retellings of their flights out of Hungnam, fear of US bombings, fear of ensnarement in the warfront, and fear of the returning communist government surface to texturize the experience of surviving the occupation. As with Cold War Vietnam and

14. National Security Council Report 81, "United States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea," Paragraph 21, September 1, 1950, Truman Library, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/national-security-council-report-81-united-states-courses-action-respect?documentid=NA&pagenumber=1 (accessed May 22, 2025).

15. See chapter 4 for Chang's discussion of the "paramount role of NSC-81/1" in establishing rehabilitation of the enemy, specifically the re-indoctrination of captured North Korean and Chinese POWs, as the second major war aim, which he argues nearly doubled the duration of the war.

the politics of refuge, the plurality of structures of power and violence is particularly critical for writing a history of the Hungnam refugees that turns away the singular narrative of people on the run from communism. From the late colonial rule under the Japanese empire in the 1930s through the UN occupation in the fall of 1950, Koreans experienced conditions of near-continuous total war mobilization, as well as multiple subject-making projects that included imperial subjecthood, socialist subjecthood under the early North Korean revolution, and now, (liberal) anticommunist subjecthood for assimilation into the *Free World* led and guarded by an ascendant US military empire. Negotiating with regimes of power was a learned, everyday practice of political subjectivity, and the precarity of political life for Koreans during the Korean War also meant the disappearing possibility of moral innocence under the supposedly liberatory politics of wartime occupations (Kwon 2020, 39–40). In the fall of 1950, when North Korean subjects experienced enemy occupation for the first time, anticommunist liberation necessitated the drawing of the boundary between friend and communist enemy, and with the displacement triggered by the US military's retreat, now collapsed that boundary into a narrowing zone between liberated friend and suspicious refugee.

In this wartime space where the turning tide of war suspended the project of anticommunist liberation, occupied North Koreans confronted the naked violence of the US military's lethal disciplining of refugee movements, especially those on the run. As the weeks of December unfolded, the X Corps' imposition of roadblocks, militarized checkpoints, and a curfew unmasked the necropolitical rule of the US military's occupation and anticommunist liberation. But one particular community in occupied Hamhung further exposed the violence and colonial nature of the occupation through their passage to refuge and ultimately evacuation to the South. The Christian North Koreans had been deemed not only re-moldable—from communist subjects to good, anticommunist subjects—but as the vanguards of the anticommunist reorientation project underwritten by NSC 81/1 that rationalized extending the "police action" north of the 38th parallel. However, with China's armed intervention and the generalized state of emergency in US-occupied North Korea, the Christians found themselves

in the abject position of begging American and South Korean authorities for safe passage out of the city.

The Politics of Christian Rescue

When the US military entered Hamhung, they found the local Christian communities cooperative if not welcoming. Former missionaries employed as civilian chaplains with the US Army took the lead in establishing relations with church communities and gathered harrowing accounts of life under communist rule. Unlike those who made the initial Christian exodus to the south in the first few years following the division of the peninsula, these individuals and communities experienced the first five years of the North Korean revolution and the early months of the war, the latter of which triggered episodes of preemptive violence against Christian leaders. The most infamous case was the summary execution of around 300 individuals, many if not most of whom were Christian leaders, in a cave in Wonsan by North Korean forces as they retreated northward following the US military's success in turning the tide of the war in mid-September.[16] When the X Corps reached Wonsan, they learned that two individuals had miraculously survived the massacre. The two survivors were a twenty-year-old, "anti-communist" woman identified as Suk Sang Bong and Han Junmyeong 韓俊明, a minister of the local Church of Jesus (Yesu kyohoe), who told his liberators that he had survived "through the Grace of His Lord, Jesus Christ."[17] While Han occupied a tenuous place in the landscape of mainstream Protestantism in Korea—for he and other founders of the Church of Jesus were declared heretical (*idan*) by the Pyongyang Presbytery in 1932—his miracle story was circulated by American missionaries and even appeared in an issue of *Time* magazine (Provost 1952, 20–21 and

16. "At Death Caves Where 300 Koreans Were Murdered, Wonsan" [shot list card], November 1, 1950, NARA, RG 111.
17. "Wonsan, Korea" [shot list card], US Signal Corps, November 1, 1950, NARA, RG 111.

Appendix).[18] Rendered all the more harrowing by the bodies of the slain documented by the US military photographers, stories like Han's were instrumental in affirming a moral mandate for the occupation.

The long-established Christian communities soon greeted the arrival of the Americans as a deliverance from communism. However, it is worth noting that these were not the *wolnam* border crossers who Rhee touted in his speech to the people of Hamhung as model subjects who voted with their feet and deserved to be reunified with their kin and lost property. As numerous scholars have already examined, a significant percentage of Christians in the post-division North uprooted themselves and resettled in the south, establishing themselves as powerful religious actors who shaped the ideological consciousness of Cold War South Korean society (Yun 2015). To be sure, the decision to remain in the north did not necessarily mean support for the nascent socialist regime. Still, those who remained likely arrived at some shade of assent to being participatory citizens of the new North Korean state (Park 2020).

The social and religious landscape of the northeast, however, differed in several ways from that of the northwest. The Hamgyeong region, historically a frontier region during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) and a site for targeted industrialization under Japanese rule, was the mission territory of the more progressive United Church of Canada, with significant German Protestant mission presence also in the region. As Kim Kun-woo has shown, the religious-social milieu of this northeastern Gwanbuk region helped shape one of the overlooked genealogies of Korean Protestantism, namely the Hanshin group that would later include central figures of South Korea's minjung theological movement in struggles against authoritarian rule during the late Cold War (K. Kim 2020). This localized context urges caution when reading US military and missionary-authored narratives about the liberation, even when the Korean Christians appear in the records as thanksgiving subjects. Rather than uncritically accept the narrative that these Cold Warriors were lying steadfastly in wait for the arrival of Americans to deliver

18. See also "Death Cave at Wonsan," October 23, 1950, https://time.com/archive/6615905/death-cave-at-wonsan/.

them from communist tyranny, their thanks-giving speeches and acts should also be read as self-articulations and performances of liberation as people under colonial occupation. Through their acts of thanksgiving, they were also transforming themselves into anticommunist subjects under the gaze of the occupiers.

Therefore, the panic was nowhere more palpable than in the Christian churches when they saw the US military evacuating troops and equipment. The several thousand Protestants and Catholics saw their futures irreversibly jeopardized with what now seemed to be the imminent return of Kim Il-sung's government. In the years and specially months leading up to the war, Christians faced increasingly disciplinary measures as the state attempted to curtail the political reach of the local Christian elite and bring cooperative churches under a state-managed federation. Regardless of their political standing before the war, the churches who publicly welcomed the UN and South Korean troops in October and November would have wagered that the war would soon end with a unified Korea under a US-aligned, anticommunist state. On November 19, several Protestant churches in Hamhung city held a joint special thanksgiving service to celebrate the *liberation* of North Korean Christians from communism, with the Catholics holding a similar service separately. At the well-documented Protestant churches' service, military officials in attendance even included army major and congressman-elect, Alfred D. Sieminski, who accepted a gift presented by the North Korean church leaders for US president Harry S. Truman, promising to display the gift on the floor of the US Congress in the new year.[19] To these Christian individuals and families who had publicly pledged their allegiance to the US-led Free World, the approaching war front and imminent liberation by the returning North Korean state brought horror. However, when they looked to the US military for a guarantee of safe passage to a temporary place of refuge, they realized that official help was not forthcoming. So, the desperate Christians turned to the occupation's civilian officials with whom they were in Christian fellowship.

Within the first few days of December, the desperation grew, and the

19. X Corps War Diary, November 19, 1950, Truman Library, RG 407, Box 26.

Christians turned their pleas to the two American missionaries, Harold Voelkel and Patrick Cleary, who arrived with the X Corps as civilian chaplains who could establish relations with local civilians.[20] These missionaries' wartime positions in the amorphous entity referred to as the Department of Army Civilians (hereafter, DAC) blurred the boundary between civilian and military, and this overlapping of their scopes of authority presented unprecedented opportunities for the missionaries to not only shape the narratives about the occupation of North Korea but to join together the task of the US military's project to reorient North Korea and the task of reclaiming and restoring Christian life in the North. With the decision to retreat, Voelkel and Cleary's dual positions as missionary and military figures of authority became critically important to the Korean Christians. They saw them as figures of authority who could intercede on their behalf, despite Voelkel and Clearly not holding formal operational authority within the military.

As early as December 4, groups of Catholics began seeking "safe passage testimonials" from Cleary, who had worked in northern Korea from 1923 until the Asia-Pacific War as a Catholic missionary of the Maryknoll Society.[21] Despite the US military's official position on a civilian evacuation, the Catholics under Cleary's spiritual care believed that safe passage *passports* signed by an American missionary, especially one uniformed with the US military, could guarantee space on American vessels in the chance that boarding outbound ships became a possibility. A week later, Cleary recorded in his diary that he had "signed printed testimonials for [another] number of Christians who presented them." As Cleary explained, the testimonials "[were to] be used as a sort of passport for the bearer [to present to US authorities] in case it becomes necessary to evacuate Ham Heung." Alongside requests for safe passage testimonials, the Catholics also asked

20. As I examine elsewhere, the DAC chaplains' work, led by Harold Voelkel, would later focus on evangelizing and ministering to Communist prisoners of war in captivity on camps in Geoje and the South Korean mainland.

21. Formally known as the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, the Maryknoll Society formally designated Korea a mission field in 1923 and subsequently established mission stations in Busan, Seoul, and Pyongyang.

Cleary for letters of appeal that they could present to American and South Korean military police for safe transport out of the city. From morning to night, Cleary wrote in a diary entry for December 12, he was "besieged by hundreds of desperate Koreans for whom it is a matter of life and death."[22]

In Protestant Hamhung, Harold Voelkel similarly encountered the raw desperation of Christians seeking to flee the city. Like Cleary, Voelkel was known to many in the Protestant communities. He had lived and worked as a Northern Presbyterian (PCUSA) missionary in colonial Korea from 1929 until the exodus of American missionaries at the onset of the war between Japan and the United States. Although Voelkel's prewar evangelistic career had been based in Andong, his wife Gertrude was of the Swallen missionary family who had close ties to the Protestant communities in Pyongyang and Wonsan, ties that Voelkel leveraged as he worked to establish relations with churches as an occupation official. As with Cleary's position among the Catholics in Hamhung, the Korean Protestants urged Voelkel to act in his capacity as an official with the US military. On December 5, over a dozen Protestant leaders pleaded with Voelkel for the chaplain to "secure permission from the Army authorities to provide the Christians of Ham Hung, 3,000 of them, transportation in the event of an evacuation."[23] According to Voelkel in one of his countless letters that he mailed from occupied North Korea, the Korean church leaders asked for "room on some ship or a ship for themselves since Christians will be a top priority on the slaughter list of the Chinese Reds." In response to their predicament, Voelkel uneasily countered that there was "little left to do but pray for God in His mercy to deliver." Nevertheless, Voelkel wrote in his letter, he still planned to write them the letters.[24]

Like Cleary, Voelkel could not guarantee that these "quasi-passports" would carry any of the force of its author's intentions, but civilian need for safe conduct passes in US-occupied Hamhung revealed the threat of violence

22. Patrick Cleary, "Korea Diary Korea Diary–Subsequent to the Red Invasion of the South," Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers Archives.
23. Harold Voelkel, "Dear Everybody" letter, December 6, 1950, Princeton Theological Seminary Library (PTSL), Moffett Korea Collection (digitized).
24. Voelkel, "Dear Everybody" letter, December 6, 1950, Moffett Korea Collection; PTSL.

that governed civilian movements as a result of the US military's diagnosis of the "refugee problem." Because any refugee movement could come under suspicion as potential military subterfuge, the civilians of Hamhung seeking passage out of the city faced the risk of being designated as enemy targets, potential or actual. Knowing this, the Christians wished to negotiate out of possible detention and even lethal force by presenting vouchers of their upstanding Christian character to American and South Korean soldiers manning checkpoints and roadblocks. Not unlike combatants who carried safe conduct passes like "precious cargo" to negotiate out of potential death on the battlefields, the Christians wanted to believe that their "quasi-passports" would ensure their safe passage through fields of fire under US gunpoint by vouching that the bearer was a genuine anticommunist by virtue of their religious identity (M. Kim 2019, 18–19). Bearing the ink of American Christian missionary chaplains, these *passports* affirmed the US military's categorizations of *good* refugees and (potentially) *bad* refugees by rendering Christianity a mark of one's innocence in a war that denied the possibility of moral innocence (Kwon 2020, 39–40).

The promise of safety that the refugees saw in these documents echo the salvific promises that proximity to Christian identity offered in wartime Jeju. For Jeju islanders, the violent pacification of the counterinsurgency bled into the years that are conventionally periodized as the Korean War. During this time, Christianity became tethered to an anticommunist political subjectivity, initiating violent processes of subject-(re-)making that Gwisook Gwon has examined in her study on the salvific politics of Christianity on Jeju during the Korean War (Gwon 2015). Gwon shows that as the early South Korean state, with the sanction of the US military government, deployed government and paramilitary forces to expose the people on the island to mass death through the terror of anticommunist counterinsurgency—or the transformation of the island into a "deathworld" to borrow Achille Mbembe's term—people on Jeju began to see Christian authorities as guarantors of safety. In detailing the emergence of a "Christianity-anticommunism" nexus on Jeju, Gwon gives the example of Jo Namsu, a Protestant minister who began a "confession campaign" on the island in late 1948. Through such campaigns, Jo exhorted villagers to

"confess" their "Red" activities to the police in exchange for amnesty, and as a result, many people began to ask Jo to "guarantee their family members' ideological standing" (Gwon 2015, 103). Anticommunist rescue through Christian intercession in US-occupied North Korea was intrinsically linked to the logic of salvation observed on wartime Jeju, and the politics of excepting the quasi-passport bearer from the US military's punitive policy toward civilian movements became an important mode of Christian rescue during the Hungnam evacuation.

However, the encounters in wartime crisis between North Korean Christians and the American missionary chaplains exposed another kind of violence that seeking refuge under colonial occupation could bring. On December 6, Voelkel wrote to fellow missionaries of his increasing discomfort with the Korean Protestants' persistent pleas for help. Voelkel's initial response to the Christian leaders was to question the dubious logistics of their escape plans: where would they escape to and where would they seek shelter? When learning that "they hadn't thought themselves through" and were "concerned merely with escaping," Voelkel doubled down on the official position held by the X Corps command, explaining to the distraught Koreans that the US Army simply did not have the capacity to consider civilians.[25] In the second week of December, the Protestants were still desperately seeking unofficial passports from the chaplains. In a letter dated December 11, 1950, Voelkel confessed to his readers of feeling more hesitant to visit the group of Christians who gathered at the Hungnam YMCA building because of the "frantic" voicings of their fears and pleas.[26] Describing one encounter that perturbed him, Voelkel notes how the Korean Christians "pressed in against me, each one asking for help, some permission or letter to get on an American boat, some guarantee that they wouldn't be left here."[27] While Voelkel later rebuked himself for his insensitivity, the language with which he described the Korean Christians revealed the insidious resurfacing of colonial racial politics. While initially

25. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter, December 6, 1950, Moffett; PTSL.
26. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter, December 11, 1950, Moffett; PTSL.
27. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter, December 11, 1950, Moffett; PTSL.

featured in Voelkel's widely circulated accounts as spiritual giants who kept their faith under five years of Communist rule, the Korean Christians suddenly appear in the records as people with arrested intellectual processes to think and plan rationally.

Speaking of the figuration of the "refugee" as the US evacuated South Vietnamese in the spring of 1975, Mimi Thi Nguyen deconstructs the "refugee condition" as a "crossing of racial anachronism from its being a sign of subject status for the new friend of freedom, to its making as a symptom of the refugee diagnosed through arrested affect or potentiality, a discursive, medico-juridical disposition" (Nguyen 2012, 53–54). Nguyen identifies the "racialized rhetoric of anachronism" that has crept into the biomedical, literary, and academic figuration of the Vietnamese refugee, who was once the ally-friend carrying the banner of the Free World in the war against communism.[28] To be sure, the Hungnam evacuation was specifically a question of creating an evacuation corridor on the peninsula and not the admission of Asian refugees into the American body politic like the later evacuation from Saigon. Nonetheless, both were wartime operations of US military rescue following failed nation-building projects of military intervention, in North Korea for the few months in late 1950 and much longer in South Vietnam (1955–1975), that were later narrativized as fulfillments of humanitarian virtues. More importantly, Nguyen's reframing of the "refugee condition" as a pathological figuration of subject-making lends critical vocabulary to place the US empire in North Korea within a longer history of the US empire's overlapping projects to *free* and remake subjects throughout the Cold War.

In occupied Hamhung, the model Christians found themselves on a pendulum of subjectivity between being autonomous, self-governing *friends* of the Free World and intellectually arrested refugees. The diagnosis of a "refugee problem" in Korea carried a disciplining power alongside the exercising of militarized violence that pathologized Koreans as unfit to govern their own psyches. The North Korean Christians who were initially

28. For a more critical discussion of the cultural memory of Cold War refuge(es) and US empire and the critique of pathologizations of refugee trauma, see Espiritu (2014).

considered the vanguard of the reorientation project in North Korea suddenly faced the discursive violence that came with being identified with a "refugee condition." The passage from *friend* (or ally) to *refugee* entailed the loss of subjecthood and the return of racial colonial discourse on self-government before the Christians could recover from the "refugee condition" as people to whom the moral mandate of the US empire in Korea owed rescue. As Mbembe also put it, colonial occupation as an exercise of sovereignty entails "relegating the colonized to a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood" (Mbembe 2019, 79). However, the US military's realization of this moral mandate to the people who they *liberated* did not come naturally.

While the identification papers signed by the missionary-chaplains gave a measure of assurance that the Christians could travel within the city to take necessary measures to evacuate, the problem of getting safely to the port still remained. An order from General Almond on December 15 imposed further restrictions on civilian travel; anyone bound for the port needed to have their transportation arranged through authorized channels.[29] With intensified checkpoints along the perimeter and on roads leading to Hungnam Port, an increasing number of people were detained at checkpoints and arrested. Moreover, due to a martial curfew imposed between the hours of 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., civilians traveling on roads after curfew also faced the risk of lethal discipline. In fact, DAC chaplain Voelkel admitted in a letter that "many innocent people, especially women and children have been shot in the dark."[30] While regrettable to the military police, Voelkel reasoned, such tragedies were a result of the "thoughtlessness on the part of the Koreans and the language barrier." This was a rare instance of wartime admission of US military violence against civilians by an American missionary, but the letter justified the necessity of violence to govern the *irrationality* of the Koreans—an irrationality that Voelkel attributed to the panicked Christians at the YMCA several days

29. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter," December 16, 1950 ('written by hand aboard the *S.S. Hunter Victory*, en route from HamHung to Pusan'); Moffett; PTSL.
30. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter," December 16, 1950; Moffett; PTSL.

earlier. Whereas he reflected on his "insensitivity" toward the fear and panic of the Korean Christians, Voelkel's accounting of the unnamed civilians shot to death for violating curfew in this instance points to a simultaneous awareness of the violent conduct of the occupation forces and a hardening of his affective capacity toward Korean civilians in a war zone. Yet, this policy of lethal force against refugees also forced Voelkel to intercede with military police officers "not to fire" on the Christians who were attempting to pass through on the roads.[31] In the same breath that he rationalized the military police's violence against unnamed civilians, Voelkel engaged in rescue missions that created an exception for the Christians. With the US military's exercise of its "right to kill," however, sea-born evacuation for any refugees still required getting them safely inside the inner defense perimeter now tightly drawn around the port, and this larger rescue mission to evacuate the Christians out of the city involved Hyun Bong-hak (1922–2007).

Born into a struggling Christian family in Seongjin not far from the city of Hamheung, Hyun came of age in the prewar mission territory of Canadian missionaries and was able to complete a medical education through missionary-funded scholarships. At the start of the occupation, Almond formally transferred the young doctor to the Corps' Civil Affairs Section to act as a "liaison between Korean civilians and the X Corps."[32] Impressed by Hyun's fluency in English and familiarity with the social politics of the city, Almond tasked Hyun with screening the credentials of local leaders who wished to run for election in the occupation's interim civil government, in addition to establishing relations with local churches, schools, and hospitals as a representative of Civil Affairs. After news of the Chinese entry into the war, Hyun was dismayed at learning that the US military planned to leave behind civilians who supported the occupation.

From November 30 through mid-December, Hyun Bong-hak worked tirelessly to secure a guarantee for a civilian evacuation from the commander, as he was fearful that the city's Christians and others who worked for the occupation would be "tortured and massacred by

31. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter," December 16, 1950.
32. Hyun Bong-hak, "Christmas Cargo," 3, MMLA, RG 5.

the Communists."[33] Finally, on December 15, Hyun saw the first sign of movement from Almond toward a civilian evacuation. In the afternoon on that day, Hyun called out to the two chaplains through a window from across their office, "'The Lord has answered our prayers.'"[34] Hyun had gotten the chief of staff, by Almond's orders, to "grant a special train to bring 3,000 refugees, 30 cars of 100 each, from Ham Hung; 1,000 of them were to be the Christians."[35] In Cleary's war diary and Hyun's later account which consulted Cleary's diary preserved at the Maryknoll Mission Archives, the accounts recorded an allotment for four to five thousand Christians from the city. Whether the directive specified or did not specify a special ratio of Christians among evacuees, Hyun and the DAC chaplains certainly translated the securing of the train as a mission for Christian rescue and immediately set off to shepherd the Christian congregants to the city's train depot. The group decided on a division of labor along the longstanding Catholic-Protestant divide in the missionary enterprise in Korea: the Catholics would be informed by Cleary, and the Protestants, who numbered far more, by Voelkel and Hyun. The Protestant group, however, discovered that many of their Christians had been rounded up by MPs on the roads and were being held in prison on suspicion of being communist spies. Fortunately, Hyun managed to convince the prison guards to release the Christian refugees by vouching for the detainees' Christian character.[36]

In order to ensure that the space on the train would be given to the Christians, a special ticket was issued to every Christian refugee at the station. But someone in charge of distributing the remaining 2000 tickets spread news of the special train and "an avalanche of frenzied people descended on the field in front of the R&R."[37] This "avalanche" of people numbered around 50,000 refugees, as a X Corps report later documented, and these people had rushed to the train depot to board the final train out of the city. For those who could not find a way out of the city due to the

33. Hyun Bong-hak, "Christmas Cargo," 3, MMLA, RG 15.
34. Voelkel, "Dear Everybody" letter, December 16, 1950.
35. Voelkel, "Dear Everybody" letter, December 16, 1950.
36. Hyun, "Christmas Cargo," 13.
37. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter," December 17, 1950 (aboard the *Hunter Victory*); PTSL.

roadblocks, this was the final opportunity for safe passage to the docks. As the panicked crowds attempted to board a train designated for five thousand at the most, the Christian ticket-holders became lost in the crowds. The loss of the Christians among the desperate crowd prompted Voelkel to wonder how "the Christians [could] ever be separated from the mob and who would care enough [and have the power to do it]?"[38] Twice in the letter detailing the his final days in the evacuation, Voelkel's language slipped into setting apart the Christians who deserved rescue from the "mob" of "frenzied, unidentified people."[39] And when Voelkel learned the next morning that a military officer by the name of Hammond "screen[ed] the crowd five times for the Christians," he thought that "God had raised up this man to meet this need."[40]

In that week leading up to December 24, 1950, the US military completed the evacuation of 98,100 North Korean civilians ('not including babies on mothers' backs') from the docks of Hungnam, with the *SS Meredith Victory* and *SS Virginia Victory* carrying an astonishing 14,500 and 14,000 refugees, respectively.[41] As the final vessels departed Hungnam Port on December 24, Christmas Eve, abandoning the short-lived nation-building project in North Korea, the refugees and evacuating troops looked on as the port exploded, sending mushrooms of smoke into the winter sky (Fig. 3).[42] As Pak Shinnyeo remembered it decades later, a "sea of tears" broke out in the dark, cold belly of one cargo ship as the people wondered when or whether they would be able to return to their homes (KBS 1999). The sights and sounds of the exploding port as they sailed away weighed heavily, sorrowfully on the refugees who were not only leaving their city, but relatives and friends who now had to live through the destruction and

38. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter," December 16, 1950; "and who would have the power to do it" was added in Voelkel's rewritten letter on December 17, 1950.
39. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter, December 16, 1950.
40. Voelkel's "Dear Everybody" letter, December 16, 1950.
41. "Summary of the Evacuation of UN Forces from Northeast Korea," p. 4, MMLA, RG 38.
42. To prevent their utilization by inbound Chinese and North Koreans forces, the 10th Engineer Battalion and Underwater Demolition Teams of the US Navy destroyed the remaining infrastructure and facilities that might have military or industrial value.

Figure 2. Refugees waiting to board a US vessel, December 19, 1950

Source: Still from "Activities in Hungnam Harbor" (428-NPC-189), NARA, RG 80.

another change of flags as the war entered a new cycle of violence. And now, North Korea was once again enemy territory under enemy control and subject to re-intensified US aerial campaigns.[43] Between late December 1950 and late January 1951, North Korean cities became the targets of massive US air strikes that continued throughout the remainder of the war. By the time of the armistice, the early air strikes of industrial targets prior to the occupation, the planned demolitions, and the scorched-earth tactics of US air power for much of the wars' three years had left 85 percent of Hungnam and 80 percent of Hamhung destroyed (Cumings 2010, 160). So,

43. Historian Su-kyoung Hwang describes the "Korean War [as] a virtual showcase for aerial destruction" (S. Hwang 2016, 153).

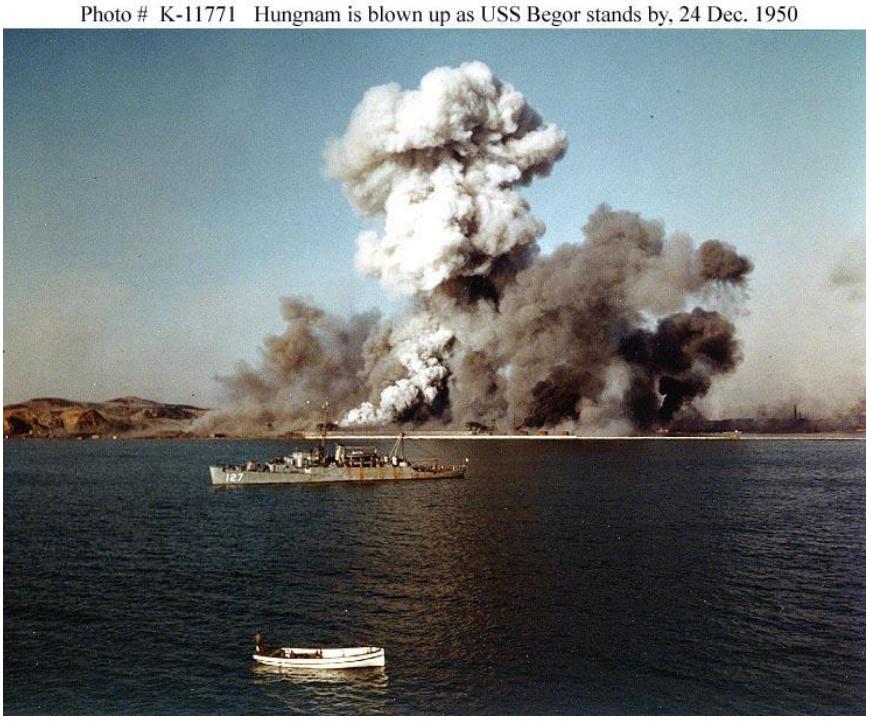

Figure 3. Demolition of Hungnam, December 24, 1950

Source: US Navy photograph, NARA, RG 80.

with the smoke of wrought destruction and more destruction to come, the refugees sailed over the waters not knowing they were making a permanent, irreversible crossing of the warfront.

The Miracle's Afterlife and Empire Rescued

Nearly 67 years later, on June 28, 2017, South Korea's then president Moon Jae-in and first lady Kim Jung-sook laid a wreath atop the recently unveiled monument erected in remembrance of the Jangjin Reservoir Battle during the first winter of the Korean War (1950–1953) at the National Museum of

the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia.[44] Many of the remarks delivered by Moon at this commemorative site were not particularly remarkable; Moon's conservative successor Yoon Suk-yeol later echoed much the same ethos in remarks delivered at the battle's commemoration at the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul in October 2023. As expected during his first overseas trip since taking office, Moon sung a panegyric to the noble sacrifices of American soldiers and the two countries' alliance "forged in blood in the fire of war" on the battlefields of Korea. Folded into this standard-fare diplomatic performance, however, was a heartfelt narrative of how the sacrifice and heroism of US Marines at Jangjin intersected with the circumstances of Moon's birth. Moon's parents were among the refugees evacuated by American troops from Hungnam that same winter. They made the frigid voyage to Geoje, an island that is now a city connected by bridge to Busan, on the *SS Meredith Victory*. Speaking of his birth on the island two years later, Moon explained that had it not been for the valor of American marines at Jangjin he would not exist today. "So," he asked, "How can I fully express my gratitude for your sacrifice and devotion with any words in any language in this world?" However, Moon emphasized, this went beyond his personal and family history. He expressed gratitude for the "love for humanity" that American service members displayed for the Korean refugees, retelling his mother's memory of sailors gifting candy to each refugee as a Christmas gift despite being "in the throes of a devastating war."[45]

In the immediate aftermath of the evacuation, however, a good measure of ambivalence overshadowed the evacuation, despite the tightening censorship regime imposed by MacArthur that attempted to control the

44. This memorial project received US$300,000 (half of its budget) from South Korean funding sources: US$150,000 from the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs and the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council. Yi Seunghyeon, "Mi beojinia-eseo 'Jangjinho" jeontu ginyeombi gigongsik yeollyeo" (Unveiling Ceremony for 'Jangjin Reservoir' Battle Monument in Virginia, US), *Tongil News*, last modified July 28, 2015, https://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=112985 (accessed May 23, 2025).

45. "Yoon vows to sternly respond to N. Korea's threats through S. Korea-US alliance," *Korea Herald*, https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20231012000809October 12, 2023, https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3233176.

narrative around the evacuation as "a Christmas gift to the nation and to the free world."[46] On December 26, 1950, the *New York Times* reported on the completion of the massive operation out of northeast Korea. The withdrawal from Hungnam was not an evacuation but a "redeployment," the paper suggested. It urged readers to see the evacuation of more than 200,000 people, 17,000 vehicles, and 350,000 tons of materials as a true miracle, even in a modern, industrial world accustomed to such dexterity in military movements. The article even saw it necessary to rationalize that "the evacuation at Hungnam brought off not a pitiful force of defeated refugees but a strong, solid, still-equipped army."[47] The parallel sojourn of nearly 100,000 North Korean refugees out of Hungnam with the 105,000 UN troops, the author seemed to fear, a liability to constructing a narrative of the successful "redeployment."

In this same December 26 issue of the *New York Times*, there was a feature story that signals how the Korean War was actually "a hard sell" for many Americans (Bradley and Dudziak 2021, 39–40). Alongside the miracle narrative that was awkwardly assembled in the aforementioned article, a story of the ruins left in the wake of the evacuation also reached the American public.[48] In Hungnam, the article detailed, a North Korean family of four watched as soldiers bulldozed their house into rubble so that the US Army could have a "clear field of fire" for the rear guard of the retreating UN troops. As the mother carried belongings out of the house, she dropped a jar of millet and "broke into great, wrenching sobs," prompting her young daughter to console her parent.[49] When a news correspondent offered candy,

46. "Teamwork at Hungnam," *New York Times*, December 26, 1950, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1950/12/26/89761519.html?pageNumber=19.
47. "Teamwork at Hungnam," *New York Times*, December 26, 1950. Several days earlier, the *New York Times* reported on the formal censorship imposed by MacArthur "on dispatches from Korea and on accounts of the United Nations operations written in Tokyo" ('Censorship is Put in Force on Korea: Application Ends Free Flow of News Under Voluntary Code—G.I. Mail Untouched,' *New York Times*, December 21, 1950, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1950/12/21/82086709.html?pageNumber=3).
48. As Marilyn Young has argued against conventional wisdom, the US intervention in Korea did in fact draw opposition from the American public. See Bradley and Dudziak (2021).
49. "Hungnam Retreat Engulfs a Family: Koreans Dazedly See Home Destroyed to Open

the child "struck his hand away."[50] By mid-morning the next day, the family's house was a "mound of debris," and the "United Nations forces abandoned Hungnam" two days later. The juxtaposition of this story of a North Korean family in Hungnam dispossessed by the US Army alongside the censored reportage on the military "miracle" and soldierly gallantry reveals not only the tightening grip of the formal military censorship that became effective between December 1950 and January 1951, but also the gaps of air that some American correspondents found to convey moral ambivalence about the US military's conduct as an occupying power.[51] Perhaps, the child comprehended that a gift of candy could not console the grief inflicted by the destructive violence of an occupying army.

For others, however, the evacuation remains a debt that can only be repaid through acts of gratitude. Ironically, Moon drew criticism for remarks delivered at the unveiling of Hyun Bong-hak's statue in downtown Seoul in December 2016, six months prior to his official visit to Quantico and while he was still a presidential-hopeful. Speaking to a reporter, Lee Gyeong-pil called Moon's remarks about Hyun's heroism impressive but criticized the candidate for not "address[ing] the humanitarian generosity of the US forces enough."[52] For Lee, it was the US military that deserved highest praise for the rescuing of refugees from the frozen Hungnam Port, and it is the US military that Lee thanks for his life. Born aboard the famed *Meredith Victory* that left the port carrying more than 14,000 refugees, Lee's self-making as "Kimchi 5," the public moniker by which he is known, brings to mind Yen Le Espiritu's insight that the "precarious nature of refugee life means that refugees, like all people, are beset by contradiction: neither damaged victims nor model minorities, they—their stories, actions, and inactions—

Alley for Defenders' Guns," *New York Times*, December 26, 1950, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1950/12/26/89761172.html?pageNumber=3.

50. "Hungnam Retreat Engulfs a Family," *New York Times*, December 26, 1950.
51. On the progression of the US military censorship regime over the course of the war, see Fazio (2007).
52. Bo-gyoon Park, "Moon Jae-in and Kimchi 5," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 19, 2017. https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2017/01/19/columns/Moon-Jaein-and-Kimchi-5/3028865.html.

simultaneously trouble *and* affirm regimes of power" (Espiritu 2014, 13).

While speaking to another reporter two years later, Lee explained how he initially "didn't really like" the name "Kimchi 5"—the serial name that American soldiers gave to the five babies who were born on the "Ship of Miracles."[53] "But when I thought of it deeply," Lee was quoted saying, "I didn't mind it and now I thank the person who named me." Lee's gradual realization of gratitude toward the US military speaks to the affirmation of US imperial power as a process of overcoming the self's own doubts and unruly feelings about what receiving the American "gift of freedom" exacts (Nguyen 2012). Rather than offer a neatly cut frame for the Cold War refugee, Lee's personal narrativization and his ongoing commemorative projects show that the subject-making process did not end with the withdrawal of the US occupation in the winter of 1950. More than half a century later, the memory of the Hungnam evacuation still compels Lee to give thanks to American soldiers who christened him with a name that he had to learn and teach himself to accept and embrace. With so much Christian symbolism found in the evacuation—the "Ship of Miracles," the Christmas Miracle, Operation "Christmas Cargo," and not to mention, the rescuing of North Korean Christians—one could even reason that the name "Joshua" might have been appropriate. What may be more certain, however, is that the US empire is the one rescued by the miracle narrative.

Conclusion

With the enemy's gunfire and mortar closing in, the US military ferried nearly 100,000 refugees across the wartime border to South Korea. This story of the Christmas miracle has been told and retold as a Cold War parable of universal freedom, American benevolence, and the individual tenacity of Koreans on the run from communism. This narrative has also been endowed with religious meanings—finding "God's own hand …

53. Laura Bicker, "The US Ship of Miracles that Saved 14,000 North Korean Refugees," *BBC*, December 23, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50805106.

at the helm," as one narrative account put it (Gilbert 2000, 129).[54] This narrativization of the evacuation as a miracle—a distinctly Christian one even—and the refugees (and their descendants) as recipients of freedom has enabled the South Korean state and the US empire to claim an ongoing moral victory in the face of an unresolved war. For nearly three-quarters of a century, this hegemonic, anticommunist narrative about the evacuation remains largely uncontested in popular and official memories between South Korea and the United States, despite moments of disruption like the various truth commissions in the early 2000s that initiated public reckonings with the history and legacies of anticommunist violence during the war and throughout the Cold War in postwar South Korea.

Disarticulating the evacuation from the moralizing language of "miracle," however, calls into question the mythical bonds between Koreans and the US military, the stories of candy, gum, chocolate, and, of course, rescue. Across more than a dozen vessels, nearly a hundred thousand North Koreans found themselves the human cargo, squeezed into freezing cargo holds and exposed decks of freighter and tank landing ships. They were the human remainder between the "liberation" of the American occupation and the "liberation" of returning Communist governance. Far from being uncomplicated, natural allies of American power, the "liberated" people in occupied North Korea demonstrated not the success of the reorientation campaign but its attendant regime of anticommunist violence and the precarity of being recognized (or unrecognized) as a friend during the war.

In this article, I have argued that the refugee exodus out of North Korea tells us as much about the violence of the anticommunist occupation as it does about Communist violence during the Korean War. In fact, on-the-ground decisions leading to the evacuation prioritized the evacuation of Christian communities, which was made possible through the provision of safe passage through military roadblocks that exposed other civilians to lethal discipline. And while scholars have examined the systematic pattern of anticommunist violence carried out, documented, and legitimated by South Korean and U.S.-led forces during the war, resituating the Hungnam

54. The book was first published in 2000 and translated into Korean in 2004 and 2015.

evacuation in the larger war for rollback and longer nation- and empire-building project to make anticommunist subjects, by means of violent pacification and benevolent reorientation, also reveals the various registers and sites of colonial violence in the making of a liberal anticommunist subjectivity in wartime Korea under the US military empire.

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