Book Review

South Korea's State-Sanctioned Violence in Name of Anticommunism Crusade :

Review Essay on *Korea's Grievous War*

By Su-kyoung Hwang. 264 pages. 2016. Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights. University of Pennsylvania Press. ISBN-10: 0812248457. ISBN-13: 978-0812248456

Seong-hyon LEE

Korea's Grievous War is a courageous book that warrants attention. Courageous books are often controversial. This book is not an exception. It deals with state-sanctioned violence in Korea, surrounding the civilian victims of anticommunist campaign in the island of Jeju and other cases during the Korean War. The Jeju Uprising was one of the most violent events in the twentieth-century Korean history; largely a witch hunt for supposed communist agitators. The results of indiscriminate killings were catastrophic; it led to the massacre of 10 percent of the island's population. The book underscores the role of "invisible observers" to the massacres: American military advisors and American photographers who conducted a meticulous "record-keeping" of the gruesome slaughters but did not intervene. They remained, as the author puts it, "silent observers." In fact, the author underscores "the American role" like toppings strewn over a pizza; it's all over the place. The reader forms a sense that the author wanted to raise the question of moral bearing of Washington in a large-scale crime, committed in Korea, which was de facto administered by the U.S. military. Today, South Korea is a major ally of the United States in East Asia. Against the backdrop,

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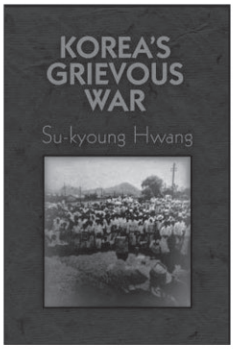
this book may be uncomfortable to some. However, the author's overall aim, in the final analysis, seems to be less political and more humanistic; those neglected human rights abuses during Korea's tumultuous years should be remembered so as to give proper tribute to the fallen and grant them due human dignity they deserve. The Jeju and similar state-run violence during the postcolonial period remain a divisive issue even in today's Korea. The author's role here is, as she puts it, to document its lasting impact by revisiting the past.



During the predemocracy period in South Korea, the government-engineered narratives on the so-called "April 3 Incident" predominantly reinforced the idea that Jeju was the bastion of political subversion. Under the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945–1948), Jeju was called the "red island," or "hotbed of Communism," or even "a cancer of the trouble in Korea" (p. 30). That was a chilling verdict to the beautiful island. Jeju is a Korean version of Hawaii or Okinawa. It is most well known today as the nation's top tourist magnet, especially as a honeymoon destination for its beauty and seclusion. During the Joseon Dynasty period (1392–1910), however, the remote island was used as a seaboard prison for political exiles. It was Korea's Monte Cristo. In 1945, the Japanese troops believed the island to be the last stronghold against the Allies and stored weapons in the island's many caves.

Korea's division following liberation from colonial rule was more than a physical divide. Socialism began to take root in Korea in the form of anticolonialism, dividing the nation between the pro-American right and procommunist left camps. The two camps confronted each other—often militantly. Political rivals were assassinated or kidnapped or brutally lynched. And this is the scene where the book starts, going back some 70 years when the island was soaked with blood by 30,000 residents who were massacred in what began as a counterinsurgency operation that targeted 350 local rebels. In the decades after the uprising, memory of the event was brutally censored

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by the dictatorship governments through strict punishment. As a result, it was not openly mentioned in the public sphere. In 2006, almost six decades after the incident, the South Korean government, under President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), officially apologized for the state's role in the killings of its citizens.

Korea's Grievous War in this aspect explores a question that was not raised much in the past: anticommunist violence in Korea. The book seeks to understand the rationale and legacy of anticommunist violence by treating it as a distinctive phenomenon that deserves attention in its own right. "This is not to say that anticommunist violence was any more tragic or painful than the violence inflicted by the communist side," the author, Hwang Su-kyoung, notes. "However, anticommunist violence resulted in a disproportionately high level of civilian deaths during the conflict" (p. 2).

Korea's Grievous War is filled with morbid descriptions. They include: "speared to death" (p. 44), "a frenzy of mass slaughter" (p. 44), "swollen bodies of the dead lying on straw mats" (p. 47), "a space of death" (p. 50), "dead people, they were like dead cows lying all over the place" (p. 54), "when I woke up, all the bodies were beheaded" (p. 111). Renditions also include: "after he was shot, the person started bleeding in profusion. I drank up so much of his blood" (p. 112), "the skin peeled off like tree bark" (p. 174), "Arms torn out. Necks torn out. Legs torn out. Organs poured out" (p. 175). Bereaved family members, many of whom personally witnessed the massacre scenes suffered the so-called "post-memory," a term coined by Marianne Hirsch in 1992 to refer to the relationship between the children of Holocaust survivors. Evidently, witnessing massacres leave behind deeply scarred emotions and trauma.

Even though the South Korean government in 2003 issued an official report by revisiting the incident, the root cause of the civil revolt in Jeju even today remains controversial in South Korea's highly polarized society. Eventually, the author concludes that the violent insurrection was largely against long-brewing local grievances against police harassment and deep resentment of heavy-handed administration by people sent from the mainland government. Author Hwang observes, "the indiscriminate counterinsurgency

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campaign waged against the islanders reflected a tragic misunderstanding of local history and the island's relationship with the outside world" (p. 4).

After WWII, South Korea was run by a U.S. military government, officially called the United States Army Military Government in Korea. Its three-year tenure (immediately after Korea's liberation) was a turbulent period. In 1945, the U.S. occupation authorities had a limited understanding of Korea and few U.S.-trained native personnel who could guide them. "Instead, those in charge relied heavily on former Japanese collaborators for advice and information on local conditions. The [U.S.] Military Government was quick to restore the colonial bureaucracy and reemployed numerous pro-Japanese sympathizers, including administrators, lawmakers, police, educators, and financiers. This approach made it impossible for the authorities to punish collaborators or even question their past. It frustrated those who had suffered under colonial rule" (p. 9). This aspect is relevant for the author's explanation of why the American military occupiers in South Korea (who were initially welcomed as "liberators") had a hard time gaining the hearts and minds of the local people and why there were mixed feelings about the American occupiers. Together, Hwang delineates the civilian experience of anticommunist violence, beginning with the Jeju Uprising in 1948 and continuing through the Korean War until 1954—the year when the anticommunism campaign in Jeju was officially concluded. It highlights the role of the United States in observing, documenting, and yet failing to intervene in the massacres.

To the uninitiated eyes, this is an eye-opening book, revealing the involvement of the United States in the atrocity. The author subtly raises the question that there were human rights violations in the name of anti-communist campaign in Korea's dark page in history and there were American responsibility. Regarding the complicity of U.S. military, the author makes her point by juxtaposing American role in Jeju with the massacre of Daejeon. This tragedy occurred when South Korean troops shot seven thousand political prisoners in the city of Daejeon in July 1950, under the pretext of "preventing" their collaboration with the North Korean regime. Hwang explains:

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> What is remarkable about these executions is that they were observed and documented by third-party witnesses. An American liaison officer was present at the scene of the Daejeon massacre and took several photos that where circulated among senior military officials. Their records revealed that the victims were often innocent civilians—including women and children—who were summarily executed without trial. While there were many witnesses to these executions, little was done to stop them (p. 24).

Today, the U.S.-side recordings of the history remain a valuable primary material for researchers like the author to understand what really happened in Korea's tumultuous period. However, it wasn't an easy task. The author also mentioned about the widely reported Nogeunri incident and the difficulty she encountered in obtaining the relevant material from a U.S. historical document depository. In 2001, a team of Pentagon researchers had investigated the Nogeunri incident—when American soldiers killed South Korean civilians. They deposited copies of their findings in boxes at the National Archive. The author recalls: "During my first week working at the U.S. National Archives in 2006, an archivist reprimanded me for requesting the "Nogeunri" boxes.... The staff member who admonished me was clearly unhappy with their findings and reminded me that Nogeunri was a closed case. ... I encountered a similar reaction at the U.S. Air Force archives" (p. 13).

The South Korean government's investigation report in 2003 concurred on this point and also mentioned the difficulty in securing the relevant U.S. documents on the matter. "Military commanders refused to testify and there were failures in securing confidential documents from the United States" (Truth Committee 2003).

The question of who was ultimately responsible for exacerbating the cycle of terror in Jeju remains a matter of debate. While the author from the very beginning sides herself with the guerilla fighters, at times she is also seen swaying between the two sides as if she was an undecided judge. She said, "while the rebels had a reason to revolt, their use of violence against civilians could not be justified." Soon, however, she also hastened to add, "yet bloodless rebellions were hard to come by" (p. 44). Nonetheless, it indicates

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that innocent civilians became victims by both the government forces and the guerilla fighters. The Truth Committee also duly points out the crimes committed by the rebels: "It is clear wrongdoing of the armed guerrillas under the control of the Jeju chapter of the South Korean Labor Party that they killed military, police, election managers and civilians, including families of military and police" (p. 651).

The author also explains why the law enforcement organ was targeted by the rebels. "The police and their families were targeted because of the rebels' anger against police brutality since the colonial era, and, in response to the rebel violence, the police [also] took their vengeance against the rebels and civilians, in a vicious cycle of violence." What is even more poignant is that often the victims and perpetrators knew each other in this compact, homogenous, closely knit island community where everyone knew everyone else, inextricably bound by kinship and shared living space.

The reader may justifiably ask why the "American role" was, in particular, highlighted when there were other "observers" in the killing scenes as well? For instance, the execution of civilians was observed also by U.N. troops, foreign war correspondents, and members of the International Committee of the Red Cross, in addition to American military advisors. Then, why it is the U.S. military that becomes the subject for scrutiny? The author did not address this question. It perhaps has to do with so-called "identity politics." Gi-Wook Shin (2010, 10) of Stanford University puts it this way. "To South Korea, the United States is not simply 'another state' in the international system with which it shares interest. Rather, the United States has been 'a significant other,' shaping South Korea's national identity in the post-1945 era. The United States and its anticommunist banner heavily influenced South Korea's constructed identity. For the United States, however, South Korea served principally as a strategic bulwark against regional communist advancement during the Cold War era. Thus, while the U.S.-South Korea relations became a pillar of national identity for [South] Koreans, for Americans, the alliance was a matter of policy with little, if any, particular bearing on the national psyche." In other words, for South Korea, the United States is its only ally, while for the United States, South Korea is one of the "many" allies. Shin calls this "one alliance

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two lenses."

The investigation by the Truth Committee[1] over the Jeju April 3 Incident concluded as follows: "The U.S. Military Government and the Provisional Military Advisory Group (PMAG) are not free from being responsible for the occurrence and suppression of the April 3 Incident. Such incidents occurred under the U.S. Military Government regime and the U.S. Army Colonel in Jeju directly commanded the Suppression Operation. The U.S. Army continued Operational Control in Korea after the establishment of the Republic of Korea under the US/Korea Military Convention and supplied weapons and observation aircrafts for the Suppression Operation" (Truth Committee 2003).

The committee also found that during the Korean War, several mass killings of civilians were committed not only by the North Korean military, but also by South Korean and U.S. Armed Forces. Kim Ik-ryol, the commander in charge of suppressing the uprising, later penned in a memoir that the Jeju Uprising was not a communist revolt but was "communized" by the USAMGIK (p. 50). In addition, operations by the U.S. Air Force produced the heaviest civilian toll of the war. Taken together, from the violent suppression of the Jeju Uprising to that of the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, major decision concerning the deployment of the South Korean military required the consent of the commander of the U.S. military in Korea (p. 52).

In the end, however, Hwang's aim appears to be less political and more humanistic. Hwang wants those human rights abuses during Korea's tumultuous years to be remembered. She wants to grant public space for grieving and to show human sympathy. The author wants the victims' voice to be heard, pointing out the tragedy is also even more tragic because of a lack of sympathetic audience: "Although [bereaved family members] wanted to speak out, they lacked a sympathetic audience, and their words were not taken seriously" (p. 17).

Korea's Grievous War serves as an important contribution to correcting

1. The investigation report was published by the government body after a six-month review and revision for objectivity and fairness.

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the widespread state-centered narratives on the April 3 Incident from the nation's predemocracy era that routinely stigmatized the bereaved family members. The Truth Committee characterizes the Jeju April 3 Incident as "a tragic incident the casualties for which are second only to the Korean War in modern Korean history."[2] The painstakingly researched book, is an important reading that may best be suited for upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate seminars that encourage open discussions. It can also serve well those scholars whose research covers the Cold War history in general.[3] The book is also for human rights researchers in the context of the U.S.-Korea relations, as the subject of civilian deaths under the U.S. military occupation of Korea and American complicity in them occupies at best a marginal place in the American memory of the Korean War.

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2. Words by then prime minister Goh Kun, chairperson of the Truth Committee. From the preface of the report, available from http://www.jeju43peace.or.kr/report_eng.pdf.
3. The book can be read together with "Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report" by the Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation. The 656-page long report includes comprehensive chronologies and political events of the Korean Peninsula at that time (available in English).

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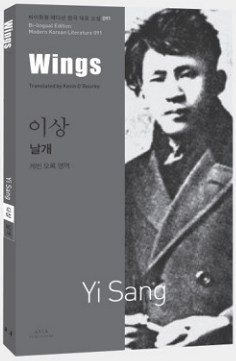

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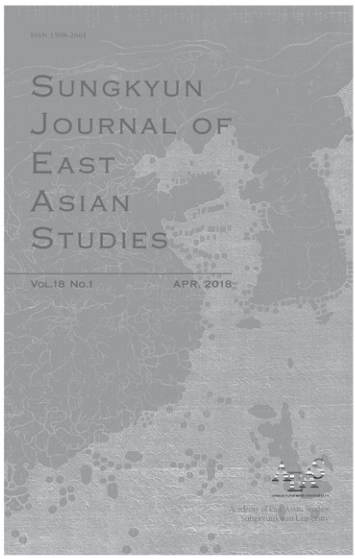

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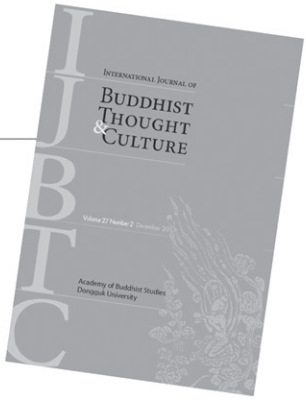

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