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Korea at 60 [Korean translation available]

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The Republic of Korea has turned 60. Birthdays are a time for looking back over the past as well as for planning the future. The sad truth, however, is that the Republic that was born in 1948 was only the first of six, and that its record contains little to celebrate and much to lament. It is unlikely that many Koreans today remember it with pride or pleasure.

In the first place, this Republic was uniquely a United Nations (which at that time meant essentially a US) creation. Koreans played a minimal role. The United States entrusted the Korean problem to the UN in 1947 and saw to the establishment of UNTCOK (UN Temporary Commission on Korea) as a body nominally to oversee the creation of a unified, independent Korea, but then pressed for separate elections in its southern controlled zone. Three key members of the committee - Canada, Australia, and India (its chair) - resisted. To conduct elections in half a country was not their mission, and there could be no democratic elections under the then prevailing conditions of police state terror.1) When the Commission voted on 11 March 1948 to observe elections "provided they were held in a free atmosphere," Canada and Australia both voted against, because there plainly was no "free atmosphere," and they deplored what they saw as a step towards entrenching the division of the country But the vote was carried in the Commission because its chair, the Indian diplomat KPS Menon, did a bizarre volte-face. He switched his vote because his love for a Korean woman (the poet Marian Mo or Mo Yun-suk) prevailed over his better judgment. It was, he wrote in his Memoirs, "the only occasion in my service when I allowed my heart to prevail over my head."2) Rarely did greater consequence follow from personal indiscretion.

In the short term, separate elections led to the uprising in Cheju where tens of thousands of people were killed (in one of the great atrocities of 20th century Asia) and in the longer term to the establishment of separate Korean regimes under conditions that that set the scene for war two years later. In December, a UN resolution conferred legitimacy on the Rhee government as "the only legal government in Korea." Australia proposed this resolution, thus abandoning its pursuit of autonomous middle power principle and adopting instead the principle of "Follow the United States," (what in Korean might be known as sadae) which it was to follow thereafter for much of the remainder of the 20th century.3)

Two years after founding the Republic, the UN itself took the unprecedented step of going to war to defend it and now, nearly six decades after that war ended, horrendous details of what that defense entailed continue to come to light.

As the Korean People's Army advanced south the Rhee regime took steps to clear its prisons of possible Northern collaborators and to track down and kill as many as it could of those opponents who were not already in prison. The heart of the Korean darkness was Daejeon.

On July 9, two Australian army officers, liaising between the UN and South Korean forces, were on the road from Taejon to Konju when they saw a convoy of trucks loaded with prisoners going south. One of them, Colonel Stewart Peach, recalled in a 1982 interview with this author: "Before my very eyes I saw at least two or three killed, their heads broken like eggs with the butts of rifles."4) Later, in Konju, he was told that prisoners were being shot. A contemporary photograph in the London Picture Post shows a truckload of such prisoners, described as "South Korean suspected traitors," on the banks of the Kum River "on their way to execution," adding that the matter was under investigation by the UN.5) Days later, on 13 July, the North Korean forces crossed the Kum River, and on 20 July captured Daejeon. With them came the British journalist (correspondent for the communist Daily Worker) Alan Winnington. Winnington saw mass graves at a village called "Rangwul" near Daejeon, and from discussions with villagers, he too concluded that a major massacre had occurred, with approximately 7,000 prisoners from the jails of Daejeon and nearby summarily executed and buried in mass graves dug by locally press-ganged peasants.6) Around the same time that Winnington's report was published in London, the North Korean Choson Inminbo reported the massacre, giving the figure of 7,000 victims.7) The US military attache also reported it to Washington, making clear that South Korean forces were responsible and that the orders to execute the prisoners had come from "the highest authority" (which could only mean President Syngman Rhee).

No investigation was conducted. Instead, somebody (presumably in Washington) decided to turn this into a Northern massacre, the characteristic, single atrocity of the entire war, one worthy (as the US Army described it) "of being recorded in the annals of history along with the Rape of Nanking, the Warsaw Ghetto."8) As that version of events was published around the world in October 1953,9) the Daejeon Massacre became the centrepiece of the case that North Korea was exceptionally brutal, an impression that remains alive today and accounts in part for the designation "Axis of Evil."

It was 1992, more than 40 years after the events occurred, before the South Korean monthly Mal began to tell the true story,10) and it took another 16 years before the South Korean government's semi-official Truth and Reconciliation Commission (established in 2005) began to publish its findings. According to the TRC, during the first months of the Korean War, Year Three of the Republic, at least 100,000 citizens were slaughtered by forces set up and controlled by that very republic.11) Daejeon was only the worst of a litany of horrors. Mass murder took place the length and breadth of the country, countless bodies being dumped in shallow graves or abandoned mines or into the sea. The TRC is also investigating hundreds of cases in which the US military is directly accused of indiscriminate bombing, strafing, or napalming of "people in white" (ie, Korean civilians) mostly from the air.

Revelations about these horrors have flowed steadily during 2008. Yet they have met little response: no comment from senior political leaders of the Republic itself, or the United States, or the United Nations, nor (so far as I am aware) has there been a single newspaper editorial or significant "opinion" essay in Korea itself. Coverage outside Korea has been patchy. The story as painstakingly told by Associated Press has been carried by some US newspapers and by the BBC, but rarely with a focus on the American and UN responsibility.12) While we unequivocally denounce atrocities in Serbia or in Darfur, and human rights denials in Tibet or in Georgia, or for that matter North Korea, those for which we ourselves bear responsibility seem too painful to contemplate.

Two grim reflections therefore cast their pall over the birthday celebrations: first, that the South Korean state was a US creation, imposed on the United Nations and on the Korean people, whose raison d'etre was neither nationalism nor democracy but simply anti-communism, and, second, that the first president of the republic was guilty of war crimes far exceeding those of which the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karazic is accused today. That responsibility is shared by General Macarthur, President Truman, UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie, and by the governments and citizens of all those countries that knew, or should have known, but turned a blind eye to the way the war of 1950-53 was fought in our names.

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Notes

[1] The Australian delegate on UNTCOK referred to the torture and murder of political opponents as "accepted and commonplace." See my Cold War Hot War: An Australian Perspective on the Korean War, Sydney,, Hale and Iremonger, 1983, resumed in subsequent books, including Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe, New York, Nation Books, 2004 (Korean edition from Icarus Media, Seoul, 2007).

[2] K.P.S. Menon, Many Worlds Revisited: An Autobiography, Bombay 1981, p. 259. Menon's waxed poetic and nostalgic in his memoirs, describing the accord he felt with Mo on "such elemental things as the sun and moon and stars, love and grief and joy." Mo pinned all her hopes on him and wrote poems to him as "saviour of Korea." He did not disappoint her.

[3] J.W. Burton, The Alternative, Sydney, 1954, p. 90. (Burton, Secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs between 1947 and June 1950, was the first to describe Australia's foreign policy shift in these terms.)

[4] Interview with this author, Sydney, 14 August 1982.

[5] Stephen Simmons (journalist) and Haywood Magee (photographer), "War in Korea," Picture Post, vo.l 48, No. 5, July 1950, p. 17. (The caption describes the incident as a matter "which has been investigated by a United Nations observer.")

[6] Alan Winnington, "U.S. Belsen in Korea," The Daily Worker, 9 August 1950. (The British government gave serious consideration to trying Winnington for treason over this report.)

[7] Park Myung-lim, [Pak MyÅng-nim], Han'guk 1950: ChÅnjaeng-gwa P'yÅnghwa (Korea 1950: War and Peace), Seoul, Nanam, 2002, p. 324 (According to Park, these orders were issued "at the highest levels" and were not limited by geographical area.).

[8] "Korean Historical Report," War Crimes Division, Judge Advocate Section, Korean Communications Zone, APO 234, Cumulative to 30 June 1953, Copy in Australian Archives, Victorian division, MP 729/8, Department of the Army, Classified Correspondence Files, 1945-1957, File 66/431/25.

[9] See, for example, Daily Telegraphï¼ˆSydney), 30 October 1953.

[10] No Ka-Won, "Taejon hyongmuso sachon sanbaek myong haksal sakon" (The massacre of 4,300 men from the Taejon prison), Mal, February 1992, pp. 122-31.

[11] Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea, "Alleged communists massacred under the eyes of American soldiers," Seoul, 16 June 2008, (with photographs released on 5 May 2008 by US National Archives and records Administration).

The Associated Press has made great efforts to investigate and publish this story. See especially Charles Hanley, "Fear, secrecy kept 1950 Korea mass killings hidden," May 18, 2008, and Charles J Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang, "Impact: Thousands killed by US's Korean ally" Associated Press, 18 May 2008. See also the remarkable "Inter active" file, with its video testimony of one of those involved in the mass killings.

Gregory Henderson, then employed in the US embassy in Seoul and later prominent historian and author of a classic study of Korean politics (Korea: the Politics of the Vortex, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1968, p. 167) also put the figure of "probably over 100,000" on those summarily executed at this time.

[12] Despite Australia's involvement in the events surrounding the establishment of the Republic and in the War itself, the findings of the Commission are yet (as of late August 2008) to be reported there.

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