

On the Importance of Survivor Testimony to Korean War History

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While the Korean War has been regarded as having been one of the most destructive wars of the 20th century in terms of civilian casualties, there is no reliable data or figures on the number of casualties, especially the mass killings committed by U.S. and South Korean authorities. The dominant history or narratives of the Korean War are mostly grounded in the official statements, the military documents, the speeches of state leaders, and the statistics of the concerned states, United States, China, North and South Korea. Crucial documents about U.S. military operations during the Korean War have yet to be released. Although we cannot guess the extent of unreleased documents of the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) of the U.S. military during the Korean War period, it is my impression, based on my research experience at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, that more than 90 percent of G-2 (U.S. military intelligence) documents related to the Korean War are still unreleased. This is why so many mysteries regarding the particularly sensitive chapters of the Korean War remain unexplained so far. In this sense, it may be too early to reconstruct the historical realities of the Korean War.

The Nogun-ri killings, in which the U.S. military slaughtered Korean civilians in July 1950, were belatedly brought to light in the United States in 1999 through a series of Associated Press investigative reports, which prompted a U.S.-South Korea joint report. But many U.S. veterans later recanted their previous statements in which they admitted having participated in or witnessed the killings, and the U.S. government, after issuing a Pentagon report on Nogun-ri, indicated its reluctance to pursue a more systemic investigation of other U.S. military incidents in which civilians were indiscriminately killed. While it is known that the South Korean Ministry of Defense conducted a systematic interview with Korean War veterans in South Korea, researchers have no access to these materials. Moreover, we can assume that the South Korean government, much like the U.S. government, would be unwilling to inquire into its military's misdeeds towards the civilians during the Korean War.

However, the testimonies of the Korean survivors who suffered the most during the Korean War can compensate for the many vacant holes that characterize Korean War history. Testimonies of the Korean survivors including low-ranking veterans are especially crucial in assessing the human costs of the war can. Insofar as the historical lesson of the Korean War turns on its most tragic, sensitive, and detrimental chapters, namely, fratricide and mass killings, the truth of the war can be verified largely through two key sources, the testimonies of the victims and their family members as well as the testimonies of the perpetrators. The testimonies of the victims furnish an abundant resource for reexamining the ruling narrative of the Korean War which describes hostile North Koreans invading the "peaceful South" in an attempt at a communist takeover with the support of the Soviet Union, thereby prompting a potential Third World War—that is, until the United States came to rescue South Korea and consequently preserved freedom and democracy.

While sympathetic outsiders, mostly researchers and activists, collected and mobilized victim memories in a concerted effort to bring about justice and to challenge the ruling discourse about the Korean War, ordinary victims' families, by contrast, have largely approached research around mass killings during the Korean War as "family individuals" interested in knowing the truth of their parents' deaths. The installation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea (TRCK) constituted a turning point with regard to the collection of rich oral testimonies not only about the Korean War but also the mechanisms of state violence specific to and the mass killings which originated from the

Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), the American occupation (1945-1949), and the de facto civil war in Korea since 1948. The testimonies about the civilian massacres during the Korean War have confirmed existing arguments of some historians that the Korean conflict was at least in part an extension of civil war—a war triggered by the acquiescence of the U.S. occupation authority in the south in the establishment of a regime made up of Korean exiles and Koreans who collaborated with the Japanese occupiers and, with U.S. support, assumed and retook the main post of the South Korean government.

The establishment of the TRCK by the South Korean government opened a floodgate: more than 10,000 petitions poured in, and several thousand cases are still pending. Investigators have interviewed thousands of survivors and bereaved families, eyewitnesses, and alleged perpetrators. Some written documents of family members, spectators, and ex-policemen contributed to the historical reconstruction of the incidents in question.

With its legal authority, the TRCK could, for the first time since the occurrence of the incidents, compel perpetrator testimony. Through testimonies from a range of perpetrators, including policemen, veterans, and paramilitary rightists, state practices of summary executions, preventive detentions, preliminary inspections, and martial law could be verified even though such practices were officially concealed and any discussion of them effectively taboo during the era of military dictatorship (1961-1987). Given that most South Korean military commanders and the chief of the police had already passed away, the TRCK could find only low-ranking soldiers or police who confessed to past wrongs, which were committed on orders from presumably top-level policy-makers. If the TRCK had not been established, some perpetrators' testimonies might not ever have been heard and might have remained secret forever.

The fact that the TRCK possessed governmental authority also conditioned the comfort level the long-suffering victims' families had in disclosing their untold stories, which could not be spoken before. While the law and mandate of the TRCK was restricted to investigation specific to the petitions filed by the victims, TRCK investigators, in the course of their work, were able to hear the abundant side-stories of the survivors and eyewitnesses of the Korean War. Based on individual victim testimonies and cross-checking by the investigators, the TRCK's investigation could construct the historical trajectories of some communities from the period of Japanese colonial rule up to the Korean War. These collected testimonies and reports, as rich archival materials in their own right, would contribute to the rewriting of national and local histories of modern Korea. In recent years, no less than several academic articles, a PhD dissertation, and books based on the records and testimonies collected by the TRCK have appeared.

Even though the victims asked merely for minimum government recognition that their parents who were killed during the war were "innocent," their memories based on private experience were highly appealing and sympathetic. In the process of becoming public knowledge, these memories were generalized within an overarching account of why the victims were killed and who ordered them to be killed, which was the TRCK's main mission.

This is to say that the TRCK's findings, based on these newly collected testimonies and documents about the mass killings committed by South Korean authorities, were an unprecedented achievement in setting the Korean historical record straight, especially with regard to disclosure around the mass killings of National Guidance League members (*Bodo yeonmang*), collaborators with North Korea's peoples' committees, political prisoners, and the civilians who served in leftist guerrilla groups. The task that remains, however, is a review of the operations of the intelligence organizations and the U.S. bombing of South Korean civilians, and at stake is no less than the dominant narrative of Cold War history in Korea since the 1950s. During the Korean War, some American bombings resulted in the

deaths of thousands of civilians. Nevertheless, these U.S. bombing incidents against South Korean civilians have never been raised as a political issue, even after the TRCK's work came to a close. Under the geopolitical circumstances of the Cold War in South Korea, where criticizing the United States meant running the risk of being branded a communist or a North Korean sympathizer, discussing or even mentioning any U.S. war crimes was and to no small degree is still regarded as "taboo."

Some TRCK findings, based on newly found testimonies and documents about the secret operations of the intelligence organizations or the U.S. bombing of South Korean civilians, demand a thoroughgoing reevaluation of the prevailing Cold War narrative about the Korean War that has served as the founding story of South Korea. Under the long Cold War atmosphere in South Korea in which any criticism of the United States meant running the risk of being branded a communist or North Korean sympathizer, mentioning or discussing any U.S. war crimes in the Korean peninsula was regarded as politically dangerous or even taboo in Korea. Although the TRCK has broken this taboo, much more remains to be done.

The TRCK's findings and decisions have been central to challenging the politics of denial that have obtained for the last 60 years in South Korea, and the impact of this thawing of Korean War historiography has also impacted those within the Korean diaspora to pursue, through survivor testimony, the long-repressed truths about the Korean War. Moreover, the work of TRCK will help to straighten South Korea's distorted history and to rewrite Northeast Asian Cold War history, no matter how sensitive the topic and no matter how few Asian politicians pay attention. The testimonies that the TRCK collected not only shed light on the past politics of Korea and its interconnection with neighboring big powers but also, in disclosing buried and painful truths, illuminated a way forward for Korea's reunification and for peaceful relations in North-East Asia.

The documents and testimonies gathered by the TRCK have been moved to the National Archives of South Korean government and are now being processed. Unfortunately, researchers can access them only through the official TRCK report. This official report should be translated into English or other foreign language if the work of the TRCK is to contribute, in critical global and transnational ways, to thawing Korean War and Cold War historiography. These special documents and testimonies must be preserved in separate, perhaps even non-governmental institution as well so that the peoples' right to know can be honored and fulfilled. Applicable laws must be elaborated to ensure that all documented reports from the TRCK's investigations can be systematically categorized, filed, and stored at an archival institute independent from the National Archives.

Bio: Kim Dong-Choon is Professor of Sociology and director of the Democracy Institute at SungKongHoe University in Seoul, Korea. His most recent book is *This Is War over Memory* (이것은 기억과의 전쟁, Igeoseun gieok gwa ui jeonjaeng ida) (2013).