

Book Reviews

Truth and Reconciliation in South Korea: Between the Present and Future of the Korean Wars. Edited by Jae-Jung Suh. Routledge, 2013, xii, 170 pp., figures, notes, references, index, ISBN: 978-0-415-62241-7.

THAT IS NOT A MISPRINT IN THE TITLE. Positing “the Korean Wars” right up front alerts the reader that this collection will challenge the dominant perspective on the violent events that unfolded on the Korean peninsula in the twentieth century and which continue to frame Korean social and political life even today. The dominant narrative is well known, and is reinforced with every new eruption along the “demilitarized” zone that still divides the peninsula: On 25 June 1950, communist North Korea broke the peace by a sudden and unprovoked invasion of democratic South Korea, which was saved from a terrible fate by the generous, UN-sanctioned response of the “free world” led by the United States. South Korea’s amazing post-war economic recovery (with a few hiccups along the way) puts the seal of approval on the historic path followed by the South, just as famine and crimes against humanity confirm North Korea as history’s loser and reinforce the righteousness of the war whatever sacrifices it entailed.

This collection of six articles (originally published in 2010 as a special issue of *Critical Asian Studies*) reveals this narrative for what it is—a convenient simplification imposed, sometimes by force and at great human cost, as a condition for establishing domestic order, integrating with the larger Cold War military and economic structures, and mobilizing South Korean society for its forced march toward the economic heights. That march, however, took place over several layers of human rubble (as graphically detailed in chapter two by Suh Hee-Kyung): the actual bodies,

as well as the memory, of thousands massacred in the suppression of leftist groups (and others swept up by mistake) in the pre-war period (1945–50), as well as those executed during the war, and thousands of civilians who died under indiscriminate U.S. bombing and on battlefields such as at No Gun Ri. Another war began after the formal armistice in 1953 against those who sought to tell these inconvenient stories and seek justice. As Dong-Choon Kim (chapter one) notes, these victims were killed three times: first, by the physical massacres, then by suppressing the families' pursuit of justice in the post-armistice period, and most grievously, by placing the families under surveillance and restricted civil rights for decades. Their truth was a serious threat to the ideological foundations of the modern Korean state.

In this context, the pursuit of truth, justice, and reconciliation in Korea has faced daunting obstacles. That a degree of satisfaction has been achieved, albeit only after 60 years, illustrates, as Lisa Yoneyama (chapter five) highlights, “what long-term, victim-centered social activism can accomplish” (123). As Kim details, over the six decades from the end of Japanese rule in 1945 to the establishment of the official Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRCK) in 2005, whenever political space opened, victims and their supporters, braving taunts of “communist sympathizer” and worse, attempted to tell their stories and seek redress. The post-liberation effort to bring to account military and economic collaborators with the Japanese was shut down by the dictates of the U.S.-led, anticommunist united front in East Asia. In the political space opened by the student revolution of 1960, efforts to expose the massacres before and during the Korean War were quashed by Chung-Hee Park's military coup in 1961. Rather than opening a new space for truth telling, the assassination of Park in 1979 was followed by another horrific state crime, the massacre of the citizens of Gwangju. The air began to clear with the transition, in 1987, toward democratic politics. However, it was not until Kim Dae Jung, himself a victim of the military dictatorships, was elected president in 1998 that official steps were taken to examine the long-hidden histories stretching from the colonial period to the democratic transition.

One factor that clearly sets the Korean case apart is the role of the U.S. military in this history: in the post-liberation period, overwhelmingly in the Korean War, on military bases, and in war exercises today. The role of the U.S. in committing or ignoring atrocities against Korean civilians (South and North) is an issue that has surfaced periodically but for which America's political and military dominance has precluded a full accounting. Charles Hanley's new revelations (in chapter three) about the length to which the U.S. government has gone to cover up command responsibility for the No Gun Ri massacre reveals the serious obstacles that face those seeking to hold the U.S. accountable for its questionable actions in multiple conflicts today. The fact that the TRCK was not empowered to address accusations of U.S. military wrongdoing underlines this point.

The last 50 years have witnessed many judicial efforts in different national settings to seek truth and justice following large-scale human rights crimes and abuses. Few have been judged satisfactory even though most followed relatively closely after the events they examined. The process in Korea, one that stretched back for more than a lifetime and which took place under the shadow of continuing national division, was no exception. The mandate of the commission was limited to four years and initiatives to extend it were blocked by a return of conservative governments. Only a limited number of victims filed cases and the full docket was not completed. Nevertheless, because of efforts realistically focusing on establishing the truth of long concealed or denied events, using transparent and forensic processes, surviving victims and society at large obtained a basis for the beginning of a process of reconciliation.

Dong-Choon Kim and Hee-Kyung Suh provide ample details on the TRCK process and on the crimes that it examined, enabling the reader to compare the Korean process with others. In his introductory article, Jae-Jung Suh explains (17) the stakes involved in the process of seeking truth in Korea ("not only state legitimacy but also national identity"), while in Lisa Yoneyama (chapter five) considers the Korean process in light of the search for historical justice in many societies. Enriching the collection

is an article (chapter four) by Seung-Hee Jeon, which examines representations of the Korean division, war, and incomplete reconciliation through various art forms.

While this collection is an important contribution on a critically important topic, the reader must be ready for distractions arising from poor editing, including multiple and haphazard systems of Romanization of Korean. Nevertheless, this book is a valuable addition to the international discourse on advancing efforts for human reconciliation by truth telling and transitional justice.

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