

1932-2017: A Murderous History of Korea

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More than four decades ago I went to lunch with a diplomatic historian who, like me, was going through Korea-related documents at the National Archives in Washington. He happened to remark that he sometimes wondered whether the Korean Demilitarised Zone might be ground zero for the end of the world. This April, Kim In-ryong, a North Korean diplomat at the UN, warned of 'a dangerous situation in which a thermonuclear war may break out at any moment'. A few days later, President Trump told Reuters that 'we could end up having a major, major conflict with North Korea.' American atmospheric scientists have shown that even a relatively contained nuclear war would throw up enough soot and debris to threaten the global population: 'A regional war between India and Pakistan, for instance, has the potential to dramatically damage Europe, the US and other regions through global ozone loss and climate change.' How is it possible that we have come to this? How does a puffed-up, vainglorious narcissist, whose every other word may well be a lie (that applies to both of them, Trump and Kim Jong-un), come not only to hold the peace of the world in his hands but perhaps the future of the planet? We have arrived at this point because of an inveterate unwillingness on the part of Americans to look history in the face and a laser-like focus on that same history by the leaders of North Korea.

North Korea celebrated the 85th anniversary of the foundation of the Korean People's Army on 25 April, amid round-the-clock television coverage of parades in Pyongyang and enormous global tension. No journalist seemed interested in asking why it was the 85th anniversary when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was only founded in 1948. What was really being celebrated was the beginning of the Korean guerrilla struggle against the Japanese in north-east China, officially dated to 25 April 1932. After Japan annexed Korea in 1910, many Koreans fled across the border, among them the parents of Kim Il-sung, but it wasn't until Japan established its puppet state of Manchukuo in March 1932 that the independence movement turned to armed resistance. Kim and his comrades launched a campaign that lasted 13 difficult years, until Japan finally relinquished control of Korea as part of the 1945 terms of surrender. This is the source of the North Korean leadership's legitimacy in the eyes of its people: they are revolutionary nationalists who resisted their country's coloniser; they resisted again when a massive onslaught by the US air force during the Korean War razed all their cities, driving the population to live, work and study in subterranean shelters; they have continued to resist the US ever since; and they even resisted the collapse of Western communism - as of this September, the DPRK will have been in existence for as long as the Soviet Union. But it is less a communist country than a garrison state, unlike any the world has seen. Drawn from a population of just 25 million, the North Korean army is the fourth largest in the world, with 1.3 million soldiers - just behind the third largest army, with 1.4 million soldiers, which happens to be the American one. Most of the adult Korean population, men and women, have spent many years in this army: its reserves are limited only by the size of the population.

The story of Kim Il-sung's resistance against the Japanese is surrounded by legend and exaggeration in the North, and general denial in the South. But he was recognisably a hero: he fought for a decade in the harshest winter environment imaginable, with temperatures sometimes falling to 50° below zero. Recent scholarship has shown that Koreans made up the vast majority of guerrillas in Manchukuo, even though many of them were commanded by Chinese officers (Kim was a member of the Chinese Communist Party). Other Korean guerrillas led detachments too - among them Choe

Yong-gon, Kim Chaek and Choe Hyon - and when they returned to Pyongyang in 1945 they formed the core of the new regime. Their offspring now constitute a multitudinous elite - the number two man in the government today, Choe Ryong-hae, is Choe Hyon's son.

Kim's reputation was inadvertently enhanced by the Japanese, whose newspapers made a splash of the battle between him and the Korean quislings whom the Japanese employed to track down and kill him, all operating under the command of General Nozoe Shotoku, who ran the Imperial Army's 'Special Kim Division'. In April 1940 Nozoe's forces captured Kim Hye-sun, thought to be Kim's first wife; the Japanese tried in vain to use her to lure Kim out of hiding, and then murdered her. Maeda Takashi headed another Japanese Special Police unit, with many Koreans in it; in March 1940 his forces came under attack from Kim's guerrillas, with both sides suffering heavy casualties. Maeda pursued Kim for nearly two weeks, before stumbling into a trap. Kim threw 250 guerrillas at 150 soldiers in Maeda's unit, killing Maeda, 58 Japanese, 17 others attached to the force, and taking 13 prisoners and large quantities of weapons and ammunition.

In September 1939, when Hitler was invading Poland, the Japanese mobilised what the scholar Dae-Sook Suh has described as a 'massive punitive expedition' consisting of six battalions of the Japanese Kwantung Army and twenty thousand men of the Manchurian Army and police force in a six-month suppression campaign against the guerrillas led by Kim and Ch'oe Hyon. In September 1940 an even larger force embarked on a counterinsurgency campaign against Chinese and Korean guerrillas: 'The punitive operation was conducted for one year and eight months until the end of March 1941,' Suh writes, 'and the bandits, excluding those led by Kim Il-sung, were completely annihilated. The bandit leaders were shot to death or forced to submit.' A vital figure in the long Japanese counterinsurgency effort was Kishi Nobusuke, who made a name for himself running munitions factories. Labelled a Class A war criminal during the US occupation, Kishi avoided incarceration and became one of the founding fathers of postwar Japan and its longtime ruling organ, the Liberal Democratic Party; he was prime minister twice between 1957 and 1960. The current Japanese prime minister, Abe Shinzo, is Kishi's grandson and reveres him above all other Japanese leaders. Trump was having dinner at Mar-a-Lago with Abe on 11 February when a pointed message arrived mid-meal, courtesy of Pyongyang: it had just successfully tested a new, solid-fuel missile, fired from a mobile launcher. Kim Il-sung and Kishi are meeting again through their grandsons. Eight decades have passed, and the baleful, irreconcilable hostility between North Korea and Japan still hangs in the air.

In the West, treatment of North Korea is one-sided and ahistorical. No one even gets the names straight. During Abe's Florida visit, Trump referred to him as 'Prime Minister Shinzo'. On 29 April, Ana Navarro, a prominent commentator on CNN, said: 'Little boy Un is a maniac.' The demonisation of North Korea transcends party lines, drawing on a host of subliminal racist and Orientalist imagery; no one is willing to accept that North Koreans may have valid reasons for not accepting the American definition of reality. Their rejection of the American worldview - generally perceived as indifference, even insolence in the face of overwhelming US power - makes North Korea appear irrational, impossible to control, and therefore fundamentally dangerous.

But if American commentators and politicians are ignorant of Korea's history, they ought at least to be aware of their own. US involvement in Korea began towards the end of the Second World War, when State Department planners feared that Soviet soldiers, who were entering the northern part of the peninsula, would bring with them as many as thirty thousand Korean guerrillas who had been fighting the Japanese in north-east China. They began to consider a full military occupation that would assure America had the strongest voice in postwar Korean affairs. It might be a short occupation or, as a briefing paper put it, it might be one of 'considerable duration'; the main point was that no other power should have a role in Korea such that 'the proportionate strength of the US' would be reduced to 'a point where its effectiveness would be weakened'. Congress and the

American people knew nothing about this. Several of the planners were Japanophiles who had never challenged Japan's colonial claims in Korea and now hoped to reconstruct a peaceable and amenable postwar Japan. They worried that a Soviet occupation of Korea would thwart that goal and harm the postwar security of the Pacific. Following this logic, on the day after Nagasaki was obliterated, John J. McCloy of the War Department asked Dean Rusk and a colleague to go into a spare office and think about how to divide Korea. They chose the 38th parallel, and three weeks later 25,000 American combat troops entered southern Korea to establish a military government.

It lasted three years. To shore up their occupation, the Americans employed every last hireling of the Japanese they could find, including former officers in the Japanese military like Park Chung Hee and Kim Chae-gyu, both of whom graduated from the American military academy in Seoul in 1946. (After a military takeover in 1961 Park became president of South Korea, lasting a decade and a half until his ex-classmate Kim, by then head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, shot him dead over dinner one night.) After the Americans left in 1948 the border area around the 38th parallel was under the command of Kim Sok-won, another ex-officer of the Imperial Army, and it was no surprise that after a series of South Korean incursions into the North, full-scale civil war broke out on 25 June 1950. Inside the South itself - whose leaders felt insecure and conscious of the threat from what they called 'the north wind' - there was an orgy of state violence against anyone who might somehow be associated with the left or with communism. The historian Hun Joon Kim found that at least 300,000 people were detained and executed or simply disappeared by the South Korean government in the first few months after conventional war began. My own work and that of John Merrill indicates that somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 people died as a result of political violence *before* June 1950, at the hands either of the South Korean government or the US occupation forces. In her recent book *Korea's Grievous War*, which combines archival research, records of mass graves and interviews with relatives of the dead and escapees who fled to Osaka, Su-kyoung Hwang documents the mass killings in villages around the southern coast. [1] In short, the Republic of Korea was one of the bloodiest dictatorships of the early Cold War period; many of the perpetrators of the massacres had served the Japanese in their dirty work - and were then put back into power by the Americans.

Americans like to see themselves as mere bystanders in postwar Korean history. It's always described in the passive voice: 'Korea was divided in 1945,' with no mention of the fact that McCloy and Rusk, two of the most influential men in postwar foreign policy, drew their line without consulting anyone. There were two military coups in the South while the US had operational control of the Korean army, in 1961 and 1980; the Americans stood idly by lest they be accused of interfering in Korean politics. South Korea's stable democracy and vibrant economy from 1988 onwards seem to have overridden any need to acknowledge the previous forty years of history, during which the North could reasonably claim that its own autocracy was necessary to counter military rule in Seoul. It's only in the present context that the North looks at best like a walking anachronism, at worst like a vicious tyranny. For 25 years now the world has been treated to scaremongering about North Korean nuclear weapons, but hardly anyone points out that it was the US that introduced nuclear weapons into the Korean peninsula, in 1958; hundreds were kept there until a worldwide pullback of tactical nukes occurred under George H.W. Bush. But every US administration since 1991 has challenged North Korea with frequent flights of nuclear-capable bombers in South Korean airspace, and any day of the week an Ohio-class submarine could demolish the North in a few hours. Today there are 28,000 US troops stationed in Korea, perpetuating an unwinnable stand-off with the nuclear-capable North. The occupation did indeed turn out to be one of 'considerable duration', but it's also the result of a colossal strategic failure, now entering its eighth decade. It's common for pundits to say that Washington just can't take North Korea seriously, but North Korea has taken its measure more than once. And it doesn't know how to respond.

To hear Trump and his national security team tell it, the current crisis has come about because North Korea is on the verge of developing an ICBM that can hit the American heartland. Most experts think that it will take four or five years to become operational – but really, what difference does it make? North Korea tested its first long-range rocket in 1998, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the DPRK's founding. The first medium-range missile was tested in 1992: it flew several hundred miles down range and banged the target right on the nose. North Korea now has more sophisticated mobile medium-range missiles that use solid fuel, making them hard to locate and easy to fire. Some two hundred million people in Korea and Japan are within range of these missiles, not to mention hundreds of millions of Chinese, not to mention the only US Marine division permanently stationed abroad, in Okinawa. It isn't clear that North Korea can actually fit a nuclear warhead to any of its missiles – but if it happened, and if it was fired in anger, the country would immediately be turned into what Colin Powell memorably called 'a charcoal briquette'.

But then, as General Powell well knew, we had already turned North Korea into a charcoal briquette. The filmmaker Chris Marker visited the country in 1957, four years after US carpet-bombing ended, and wrote: 'Extermination passed over this land. Who could count what burned with the houses? ... When a country is split in two by an artificial border and irreconcilable propaganda is exercised on each side, it's naive to ask where the war comes from: the border is the war.' Having recognised the primary truth of that war, one still alien to the American telling of it (even though Americans drew the border), he remarked: 'The idea that North Koreans generally have of Americans may be strange, but I must say, having lived in the USA around the end of the Korean War, that nothing can equal the stupidity and sadism of the combat imagery that went into circulation at the time. "The Reds burn, roast and toast."'

Since the very beginning, American policy has cycled through a menu of options to try and control the DPRK: sanctions, in place since 1950, with no evidence of positive results; non-recognition, in place since 1948, again with no positive results; regime change, attempted late in 1950 when US forces invaded the North, only to end up in a war with China; and direct talks, the only method that has ever worked, which produced an eight-year freeze – between 1994 and 2002 – on all the North's plutonium facilities, and nearly succeeded in retiring their missiles. On 1 May, Donald Trump told Bloomberg News: 'If it would be appropriate for me to meet with [Kim Jong-un], I would absolutely; I would be honoured to do it.' There's no telling whether this was serious, or just another Trump attempt to grab headlines. But whatever else he might be, he is unquestionably a maverick, the first president since 1945 not beholden to the Beltway. Maybe he can sit down with Mr Kim and save the planet.

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P.S.

* London Review of Books. Vol. 39 No. 10 · 18 May 2017, pages 17-19:
https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n10/bruce-cumings/a-murderous-history-of-korea?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=3910&utm_content=ukrw_nonsubs

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Footnotes

[1] Pennsylvania, 264 pp., £56, August 2016, 978 0 8122 4845 6.