

The JEJU 4·3 Mass Killing **Atrocity, Justice, and Reconciliation**

Edited by Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation

YONSEI UNIVERSITY PRESS

CHAPTER 11.

Reflections on the Jeju 4·3 Incident

Korea's "Dark History" and its Implications for Current Policy

John Merrill

INTRODUCTION

Few Americans have heard about the escalating civil conflict in Korea that occurred after World War II and the 1948 popular uprising on Jeju island, known in Korea as the Jeju 4·3 incident. A major reason for this is that many of the most pivotal episodes in modern Korean history have been concealed because of the political sensitivities related to the country's division. Until recently, even in South Korea, the violence surrounding the Jeju uprising was not widely known. The veil of secrecy shrouding this tragic incident was gradually lifted by a series of official reports, culminating this year in extensive media coverage of the 70th anniversary of the Jeju 4·3 incident.¹ This is a welcome development. Owing up to Korea's "dark history", it can be argued, is a necessary step towards peace and reconciliation on the peninsula.

During decades of right-wing rule in South Korea, even casual mention of the 4·3 incident was taboo. There were times when even mentioning the uprising risked running afoul of the country's draconian National Security Law—which is still on the books although not enforced much anymore.² I vividly remember being cautioned when I arrived in Seoul in the late 1970s to be careful in discussing politically sensitive topics, including pre-Korean War violence—which was unfortunate since that was my primary research topic then. Another Fulbright researcher had to cut short his fellowship the year before I arrived for "indiscreet" remarks about President Park Chung-hee while out drinking. Somehow, I managed to interview many local scholars, retired military officers and even some former communists knowledgeable about the violence of the late 1940s. I had to follow strict ground rules in these meetings and often had to have a "minder" present.

I first became interested in Korea while I was stationed there for a year during my military service in the late 1960s. When I returned to college to finish my senior year, I wanted to know more about the circumstances that led to American involvement in Korea—and ultimately my going there. I decided to study modern Korean history, especially the background to the Korean War. After finishing my undergraduate degree, I entered the East Asian Regional Studies program at Harvard. I decided to write about a little-known aspect of modern Korean history—the Jeju 4·3 uprising. That eventually became the subject of my master's thesis. By default, it happened that I was one of the first persons to write about

¹ Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation, "Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report", December 15, 2003.

² "How a South Korean security law is becoming obsolete amid thaw with North Korea," *Reuters*, December 6, 2018.

these events, for no South Korean in those days would dare to do so.

For my Ph.D. dissertation a few years later, I explored the broader context of political violence in South Korea before the Korean War, including guerrilla warfare, clashes along the 38th parallel, large-scale defections, military rebellions, and naval raids as well as the Jeju 4·3 incident. It became clear to me that the North Korean invasion of June 25, 1950 grew out of a struggle between left and right on the Korean peninsula and could not be adequately understood just as a Cold War sideshow.

After teaching political science and international relations for a few years, I joined the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) in the spring of 1987 as a Korea analyst. By this point, both my master's paper and my Ph.D. dissertation had been translated into Korean and distributed by student activists. I was astonished to learn that because of this the South Korean government had placed me on its list of banned authors. This was all the more ridiculous since part of my job at INR was to liaise with government counterparts in Seoul. Fortunately, my interlocutors felt the same way when I mentioned this. Within days, my name magically disappeared from the blacklist.

DARK HISTORY

The Jeju 4·3 incident was perhaps the most tragic chapter in South Korea's "Dark History."³ For decades under right-wing governments, it was covered up and spoken about only in hushed tones. The silence was finally broken by the 4·3 law of January 2000. This was followed by President Roh Moo-hyun's formal apology to the people of Jeju in October 2003. A memorial commemorating the victims of the incident was established and memorial ceremonies now take place there regularly.

Over the years, the memory of the 4·3 incident has also been kept alive among the large Korean community in Japan, particularly in the Osaka region where many people from Jeju settled. With Korean democratization, there have been more and more academic discussions. Increased media coverage has also spurred efforts by historians and legal scholars seek justice or at least remembrance.

The Jeju uprising was one of many popular resistance movements that sprang up "like shoots after a spring rain" throughout Asia after Japan's defeat in World War II. These movements were primarily nationalist in character and motivated by patriotism—ideology was a secondary consideration. Although many of these occurred around the same time, there is little evidence that they were coordinated. They developed more or less spontaneously as local populations became politicized due to their wartime experiences and resisted attempts by local elites and Western powers to restore neo-colonial structures. Unfortunately, this movement in Korea and similar ones in Taiwan, Vietnam and elsewhere found themselves almost immediately caught up in the maelstrom of the Cold War—and often at loggerheads with the United States. The results were predictably tragic.

The Jeju 4·3 uprising was different from the traditional peasant rebellions that swept over the island during the 19th century.⁴ Because of highly developed transportation links, the island's population was

³ There is continuing debate over how to refer to the citizen uprisings that occurred in Jeju and elsewhere in Korea after liberation. In this chapter, I refer to them by the term that most commonly used in South Korea—the Jeju 4.3 Incident.

⁴ See John Merrill, "The Cheju-do Rebellion," *The Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 2 (1980), pp. 139-197.

more heavily exposed to outside influence than the rest of the country. A massive outflow of Jeju residents began in the 1920s as they searched for employment in Japan. More migration from the island occurred in the 1930s, as new opportunities were created by Japan's colonial expansion in Manchuria.

Many of the leaders of the People's Committee (Inminwiwŏnhoe) on the island had been educated in Japan. They developed a highly sophisticated organizational network encompassing all social groups on the island. They were nationalists and strongly opposed to separate elections in the American zone on the Korean peninsula, correctly fearing it would lead to the permanent division of the country. Although many islanders, caught between the guerrillas and the security forces, supported whichever side seemed stronger at a given moment, the leaders of the uprising were intensely committed to it to the end.

The Jeju 4·3 uprising is a testament to the failure of the American occupation to develop viable policies and to create the foundations of democracy in Korea. Violent opposition on this scale to a postwar American occupation occurred nowhere else in Asia or Europe. The U.S. military government allowed a reign of right-wing terror to develop in response to large-scale protests on the mainland against American policies. The American crackdown on the left spread to Jeju after the U.S. military unit on the island and the local People's Committee had a falling out.

POST-LIBERATION DISLOCATION

The Japanese colonial period was a time of rapid social and economic change on Jeju. The island's fishing industry was modernized but dominated almost entirely by Japanese interests. Many farmers lost their land or were forced to sell their holdings to pay increased taxes. Light industries established by Japanese interests were not enough to absorb the large number of unemployed on the island. After direct ferry service to Osaka was established and passport requirements lifted, there was large-scale migration from Jeju to Japan.

The Japanese heavily fortified and garrisoned Jeju during World War II. Countless military fortifications were built. Three infantry divisions plus elements of several other units were stationed there—some 75,000 men in all. After the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, the Japanese built an airfield at Mosulpo that was used to support bombing raids on Shanghai and Nanjing. After the battle of Midway in the summer of 1942, which effectively put an end to Tokyo's ability to wage an offensive war in the Pacific, efforts were increased to fortify Jeju in anticipation that the island might be the site of the "final battle" before a US invasion of Japan's home islands.⁵ Conditions were grim on Jeju as the entire population was mobilized for military service or to build tunnels and defensive fortifications. The unexpected and sudden end of the war with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki might have spared Jeju from a bloody Okinawa-style amphibious invasion.

A small party of American officers flew to Jeju in late September 1945 to receive the surrender of Japanese forces. Though there was some concern that the local commander might resist surrendering, he dutifully followed orders to collect weapon and ammunition stocks. Except for a few guns retained by Japanese guards, most of the military equipment had already been disposed of by being dumped at sea or stored in depots in Jeju City. Consequently, the claim that the island was full of discarded Japanese

⁵ Arirang TV, "The Final Battle Ground in Jeju" (Arirang Prime Ep. 273).

weapons seized by local residents seems greatly exaggerated.⁶

After the war ended, Japanese military and civilian personnel on Jeju were evacuated by landing ship to Sasebo, Japan by mid-November. A much bigger number of Koreans returned from Japan and Manchuria, nearly doubling the population of the island within months of liberation. The United States military government was slow to extend its control to the island. For almost a year, the military government cooperated with the People's Committee which functioned as the island's popular-backed de facto government.

The People's Committee organized a rally on March 1, 1946 to commemorate the anniversary of the 1919 Korean Independence movement. Police and constabulary units peacefully participated in the ceremonies. When cholera broke out in the summer of 1946, the U.S. military government company on the island provided assistance to the People's Committee to control the epidemic. During this period of cooperation, the People's Committee was able to create a variety of local mass organizations.⁷

Relations between the U.S. military government and the People's Committee deteriorated soon after Jeju was separated from the jurisdiction of South Jeolla province and became an autonomous province in August 1946. The People's Committee and the local U.S military authorities on Jeju had lobbied for the island's new provincial status. But the new U.S. military commander on Jeju soon became openly hostile to the People's Committee and the overall attitude of American authorities toward the left began to harden. Jeju found that its new provincial status created unforeseen problems since it placed a new layer of government above the People's Committee and led to increased taxes on the population.

AUTUMN UPRISING OF 1946

Anger at the failed agricultural policies introduced by the U.S. military government burst into open resistance on the Korean mainland in 1946. Merging with labor unrest precipitated by a railroad strike in Busan, the so-called "October People's Resistance" rapidly spread to other parts of the country, including Daegu and Seoul.⁸

The main trigger for the unrest was the military government's disastrous handling of its grain collection policy. After liberation, the U.S. military government abruptly abandoned the former Japanese system of grain collection, but failed to replace it with a new system. This led to a period of chaos and severe food shortages. When this became apparent, the U.S. authorities tightened controls and restored the Japanese-era system. With the police again in charge of grain collections, opportunities for confiscation and corruption were rife. Public anger swelled. Violent protests erupted throughout the southeastern provinces. The main targets were the police and more than four hundred of them were killed.

The U.S. military government responded by sending in strikebreakers, police reinforcements, right-wing youth groups, and even American troops. The most violent protests were in Daegu. By the time

⁶ John Merrill, "The Cheju-do Rebellion," *The Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 2 (1980), pp.130.

⁷ Jay Hauben, "People's Republic of Jeju Island 1945-1946," *Yonsei GSIS Journal of International Studies*, Vol. III, Issue III, Fall/Winter 2011, pp. 277-284. http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/jeju/Jeju_Island_1945-1946.doc

⁸ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*. Princeton University Press, 1981.

they were quelled, several hundred protesters had been killed, including the elder brother of the future South Korean leader Park Chung-hee. Alienated by the brutality of the crackdown, Park joined the leftist South Korean Labor Party (SKLP, *Namnodang*), a decision that nearly cost him his life in a subsequent purge of the security forces. He was investigated as a suspected communist, but saved by fellow former Japanese officers.⁹

The Autumn Uprising affected conditions on Jeju. U.S. military forces on the island had earlier adopted an accommodating attitude to the People's Committee by ceding much of the island's administration to it. Shocked by the intensity of the October protests, the new U.S. military commander on the island reasserted his authority, abandoning the policy of cooperation with the People's Committee. A wholesale crackdown was launched by U.S. occupation authorities with the goal of reasserting control and ensuring internal security.

U.S. EXIT STRATEGY

Washington had already concluded that the Korean peninsula was of little strategic value and would be dangerously exposed in a war with the Soviet Union. With the October 1946 protests showing that American forces were sitting on a powder keg, U.S. policy makers concluded that the best course of action was to exit Korea as quickly and gracefully as possible by turning over local rule to Koreans.

This view coincided with deepening tensions in Soviet-American relations that began in early 1947. U.S. policy shifted from seeking negotiated settlements with Moscow to creating "situations of strength" around the periphery of the Soviet Union. As the Soviets searched for appropriate policy responses, negotiations had reopened on the future of divided countries, including Korea. But the reconvened Joint Commission that had been established to help form a Korean provisional government for the entire peninsula failed to reach an agreement.

During the summer of 1947, the Truman administration reached a consensus that Korea was of limited strategic importance and continuing the occupation risked creating a volatile situation. Looking for an exit strategy, Washington decided to utilize the newly formed United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) as a convenient political cover for its departure.

To this end, Washington was determined to push ahead with separate elections in its occupation zone despite the opposition of almost all the political groups, including nationalists on the extreme right such as Kim Koo. They feared that separate elections for a constitutional assembly would be a prelude to a permanent division of the country. Most political leaders boycotted the elections that were held on May 10, 1948, leaving the field clear for Syngman Rhee and his followers to win power. On Jeju, the People's Committee would find itself out of office and under attack by resurgent rightist groups.

There had already been signs of trouble on the island. On March 1, 1947, police opened fire on a large crowd that had gathered in Jeju City to celebrate the anniversary of the 1919 March 1 Independence movement and protest American plans to push ahead with separate elections in the southern zone. The crowd overturned police barricades and surged toward the provincial administration building. To disperse the protestors, police fired warning shots over the heads of the crowd, but some of bullets went astray and

⁹ Editorial, "We must properly understand and define the 1946 Taegu uprising," *Hankyoreh*, 22 January 2013.

killed six people, including a child.¹⁰

Further protests and casualties occurred a few days later when a crowd of over a thousand armed with rocks and clubs surrounded a jail demanding the release of protesters arrested during the March 1 demonstration. Police inside the jail panicked and opened fire, killing five more protesters. Several hundred more police officers and members of a right-wing paramilitary group, the Northwest Youth League (NYL, *Seobukcheongnyeonhae*), were then flown into Jeju.

The sudden arrival of these large government forces began a cycle of terror and counter-terror. The reinforcements from the mainland were outsiders who represented extreme right-wing forces and had scores to settle.¹¹ Leftists on the island retaliated by killing policemen and the police then responded by carrying out random executions to intimidate the population. Jeju was building toward an explosion.

THE APRIL 3 UPRISING

On April 3, 1948, about 500 SKLP members and several thousand supporters launched coordinated attacks on NYL positions and half of the island's 24 police stations. Thirty police officers and an unknown number of NYL members were killed. In an attempt to find a solution, Lieutenant Colonel Kim Ik-ryeol, the commander of constabulary forces on the island, tried to secretly negotiate a ceasefire with Kim Dal-sam, the leader of the SKLP's military wing on the island. But the two sides failed to reach a compromise. U.S. advisors reportedly urged the appointment of tough South Korean commanders who could get results.

The conflict escalated when hardliner Park Jin-gyeong was appointed the new constabulary commander ahead of the May 10 elections. The military campaign shifted into high gear with a plan to clear the interior of the island. Mt. Halla, which dominated the island, was cordoned off and large-scale sweeps were conducted by combined police, constabulary forces and NYL members. Hundreds of villages in the interior were destroyed, with the inhabitants either killed or forcibly relocated to concentration camps along the coast.

During the week of the constitutional assembly elections, the guerrillas "cut telephone lines, destroyed bridges, and blocked roads with piles of stones to disrupt communication." Arson attacks, violent demonstrations, and fighting with government forces disrupted the polls. The two seats in the legislature representing Jeju could not be filled.

Guerrilla activity declined over the summer but resumed when North Korea held its own parliamentary elections in August 1948, which it claimed included underground voters in South Korea. These elections soon led to the formation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Two rival Korean governments now vied for legitimacy and claimed control over the whole peninsula.

The South Korean government's scorched earth campaign resulted in depopulating the interior of the island as villages were destroyed, including 95% of them on the slopes of Mt. Halla. Cruel atrocities were

¹⁰ Mark Caprio, review of Hun Joon Kim, "The Massacre at Mt. Halla: Sixty Years of Truth Seeking in South Korea," Cornell University Press, 2014 in *Korea Journal*, Autumn 2014, pp. 156-162.

¹¹ Soul Park, "The unnecessary uprising: Jeju Island rebellion and South Korean counterinsurgency experience 1947-48," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 21: 2, pp. 359-381.

committed, particularly by the Northwest Youth League (NYL). Estimates of deaths vary, but the Truth and Reconciliation Committee estimates that up to 30,000 people were killed, most of them by government forces. Some estimates are considerably higher but it is difficult to reach accurate casualty figures. Another 40,000 people may have fled to Japan.¹²

The rebellion did not formally end until the autumn of 1954, when previously closed areas of Halla-san were reopened. Besides the fighting on Jeju, thousands of Koreans perished in the late 1940s due to other protests, uprisings, guerrilla fighting and clashes between regular military forces along the 38th parallel.

THE QUESTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Uppermost in the minds of many Koreans is the question of responsibility for the uprising and the brutal suppression campaign that followed. The Jeju 4-3 incident continues to be a strongly polarized issue in South Korea. It took almost 60 years for the government in Seoul to apologize for its role in the killings. Compensation was promised but has never been paid. In 2006, a report from the official Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided an independent collection of first-hand reports about the violence.

The U.S. has to bear some of the responsibility since South Korea was still under the control of the U.S. military government until August 1948. It also appears that U.S. officers were in charge of some anti-guerrilla operations for months after that. The advisors were often highly focused on results and turned a blind eye to the abuses by the local security forces. There have been growing demands for a U.S. apology—including by demonstrators outside the U.S. embassy this year. But the level of American awareness about what happened on Jeju is so low that these efforts are likely to fail. Moreover, the Koreans also need to share the blame.

The suppression campaign was conducted with great brutality and ruthlessness by local forces, often acting on orders of Syngman Rhee.

Members of right-wing youth groups were mobilized into paramilitary units and their formations was encouraged by the occupation authorities, although few details are known. The education minister, who was in charge of these groups, was a graduate of a German university during the Nazi era and reportedly drew inspiration from the Hitler Youth.¹³ Many members of the NYL were refugees from North Korea with deep personal grudges against communists. They had a reputation for behaving with extreme brutality—being particularly notorious for their cruel use of sharpened bamboo stakes.¹⁴

The SKLP and its leader, Park Hon Yong, cannot avoid responsibility either. Park, who fled to North Korea after the October 1946 Autumn Uprising, later became the DPRK's foreign minister. After the Korean War, Kim Il-sung made him the scapegoat for North Korea's failed invasion of South Korea. Park was accused of misleading the northern leadership by painting a false picture that South Korea's population would rise up in support of North Korea if an invasion took place. He was purged after the war

¹² "Ghosts of Cheju," *Newsweek*, 18 June 2000.

¹³ Gregory Henderson, *Korea: Politics of the Vortex*, Harvard University Press, 1968.

¹⁴ "The Northwest Youth League," *Jeju Weekly*, 10 April 2011, <http://www.jejuweekly.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=1435>

on charges of being an American agent and his failure to lead the SKLP successfully.

MILITARY UPRISINGS ON THE MAINLAND

The violence protests on Jeju spread to the mainland. In mid-October 1948, two constabulary regiments ordered to go to the island to suppress the revolt instead rebelled as they were about to embark at the port city of Yosu. The soldiers seized a train and traveled inland to Suncheon. From there, they fled into the nearby Jiri Mountains, where they tried to establish a guerrilla base. But winter soon arrived, which prevented them from establishing a secure base and they were mercilessly hunted down.

Coming so soon after formal establishment of the Republic of Korea, the Yosu-Sunchon rebellion created momentary panic. The situation was uncertain for a while over whether the unrest would spread and the government would be able to put it down or survive.

A Soviet announcement that they would withdraw their occupation forces from North Korea by the end of 1948 added to the uncertainty. The move put pressure on Washington to reciprocate, which would have left Rhee's fledgling regime to fend for itself. Reflecting the gloomy mood, U.S. intelligence estimates painted a bleak picture of South Korea's prospects for survival without substantial American economic and military aid.

In retrospect, the Yosu uprising turned out to be a blessing in disguise for South Korea. The sudden mutiny by the two constabulary regiments destined for Jeju likely upset SKLP's plans for coordinated uprisings within the military. The rebellion exacerbated tensions between the police, many of whose members had served under Japanese rule, and the newly former constabulary, whose members had been inadequately screened and which was heavily penetrated by leftists. There were several clashes between the rival security forces. By revealing how deeply the semi-military constabulary was penetrated by communists, the Yosu-Sunchon rebellion (Yŏsunsagŏn) allowed the government to launch a massive purge to ensure its loyalty. If this had not been done, North Korea might have succeeded in conquering South Korea in 1950 with the aid of leftist constabulary/military elements.

JEJU MOP-UP OPERATIONS

The Yosu-Sunchon rebellion also led to intensified fighting on Jeju and greatly hardened the government's anti-communist attitude. Once the immediate crisis of Yosu was over, the insurgency on Jeju became Rhee's most pressing task. In early November, the new government launched a major and unrestricted mop-up operation on Jeju. The government's claims of high casualty figures for the insurgents indicated that indiscriminate force was applied. The completion of the forced relocation of villagers from the interior to the island's coast brought most of Jeju's population under government control. The remaining guerrillas were forced to regroup into large roving bands to forage and raid villages for food and recruits.

On April 9, 1949, Rhee flew to Jeju. U.S. advisors were delighted with Rhee's performance, describing it as a "public relations home run." The visit to Jeju demonstrated that the government had regained control and suppressed the uprising. The Korean public was unaware of the island's grim conditions,

which otherwise might have led to an outcry. Rhee was very effective in publicizing his version of events. Stories filed from the island by the local and foreign media focused on Rhee's leadership of the anti-guerrilla campaign and the hardships inflicted on the people of the island by the guerrillas. Little was said about the government's extreme brutality and excessive use of force.

In a symbolic action, elections were held on May 10, 1949 on the island to fill the two vacant seats in the National Assembly that had been left empty the year before. A United Nations commission observed the voting and travelled widely throughout the island, although it took a pre-planned route and was escorted by armed guards. Voting turnout was low in an atmosphere that was noticeably quiet and subdued. In another move to signal the situation was returning to normal, the government abolished the Jeju combat command in May and withdrew all but a battalion of troops from the island.

THE MONGGUMPO RAID

The Jeju 4·3 incident is only one of several episodes in South Korea's dark history that have recently come to light. Another is the revelation of the South Korea's naval raid in August 1949 on the then home port of North Korea's west coast fleet at Monggumpo. For almost seven decades, Seoul managed to keep this surprise attack hidden. The reason was that the raid raised serious questions about the official narrative of how the Korean War started.

The Monggumpo raid was only revealed after the 2010 sinking of the ROK corvette Cheonan, which claimed the lives of 46 sailors. In the aftermath, Washington leaned heavily on Seoul to prevent retaliation, fearing that any military response might escalate into a full-scale war. It appears that President Lee Myong-bak decided to highlight the forgotten Monggumpo raid to signal that any future provocation would prompt a severe response. Although disclosure about the raid might have raised new questions about the circumstances leading to the Korean War, it seemed that no one in Washington's foreign policy elite even noticed—although presumably Pyongyang did.

To drive the point home that future provocations would not be tolerated, South Korea in 2015 erected an impressive memorial in Incheon to the Monggumpo raid. The navy also published a well-produced manwha that appeared to describe the raid accurately and in great detail.¹⁵ According to the manhwa, Rhee, infuriated by the defection to the North of the crew operating the motor launch of the general commanding the US military advisory group, personally ordered the raid. This defection was a serious loss of face and Rhee was determined to get the launch back.

The manwha vividly describe how five ROK minesweepers assembled at Incheon for August 15 Liberation Day celebrations before secretly sailing for Monggumpo and arriving off the port at dawn on August 17. The ships disembarked raiding parties in rubber rafts and fired on shore installations with their deck guns. Although the motor launch was nowhere to be found, the small flotilla inflicted serious damage—sinking 18 North Korean patrol craft. To further humiliate the North, another captured vessel was brought back to Incheon to be used as a naval practice target a few days later.

¹⁵ ROK Navy, "Haegun choechoui ungjing jakjon, Mongeumpo jakjeon" ("The Monggeumpo Operation: Navy's First Retaliatory Operation") 2017. http://blog.naver.com/PostView.nhn?blogId=ilove_navy&logNo=221002618317&parentCategoryNo=&categoryNo=39&viewDate=&isShowPopularPos... 2/17

The Monggumpo operation was carried out in complete secrecy. Rhee deliberately kept his American advisors in the dark. U.S. Ambassador John Muccio was furious over the operation and demanded a stern punishment for all involved. Taken aback by the intensity of Muccio's reaction, Rhee apparently decided his best option was to simply lay low. Pyongyang decided to not let the raid disrupt its plans. Rather than retaliating immediately, it stepped up its anti-Rhee propaganda and launched a fund-raising campaign to buy Russian planes, tanks and artillery. The military buildup that ensued enabled North Korea to achieve decisive military superiority over South Korea, which was focused more on staging raids along the 38th parallel than in equipping and training its forces.

The historical significance of the Monggumpo raid is that it helps to explain why Stalin finally decided to back Kim's proposal to invade South Korea, after initially failing to endorse the proposal when Kim visited Moscow earlier in 1949. The Monggumpo raid may have convinced Stalin that Syngman Rhee was out of control and would eventually pose a serious threat to Soviet interests.

“BODO LEAGUE(BODOYEONMAENG)” MASSACRE

Days after North Korean forces invaded in 1950, Rhee ordered the preemptive nationwide executions of possibly more than 30,000 SKLP members who were in jail. Many had been convicted by summary court martials for their involvement in the Jeju 4-3 incident. Common criminals sentenced for non-political offenses were also executed.

Rhee also ordered the execution of members of the Bodo League(Bodoyeonmaeng), a government-run reeducation program that consisted of former SKLP members. A significant portion of its 300,000 members died in executions that lasted for weeks in multiple locations. The killings were facilitated by the detailed membership lists of the Bodo League. Not all its members had been affiliated with the SKLP, but had been forced to join to meet quotas.¹⁶ Membership now turned into a death sentence as the ROK police and security forces hunted them down.¹⁷ In a BBC interview, a senior ROK naval officer who participated in the killings strongly defended them as a matter of wartime exigency.¹⁸

For decades, South Korea claimed that the advancing North Korean forces were responsible for the killings. But American and British officers witnessed several of the massacres. In one case, advisors observed ROK security forces executing an estimated 5,000 prisoners over several days near Daegu. The South Korea also ordered police on Jeju to quickly execute communist prisoners by firing squad.¹⁹

For decades, the South Korean government sought to cover up the massacres by intimidating anyone who mentioned them with beatings, torture or imprisonment. Accounts instead explained the disappearance of so many people by claiming that they had fled after the prison gates had been opened by the communists or else were killed by them. Muccio urged Rhee and Defense Minister Shin Sung-mo on several occasions to stop the executions, but to no avail.

¹⁶ Hamish McDonald, “South Korea owns up to brutal past,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 15, 2008.

¹⁷ Benjamin Kazeff Silberstein, “South Korea's Own History Problem,” *The Diplomat*, 21 August 2014.

¹⁸ *BBC News*, “New Evidence of Korean War Killings,” 21 April 2000.

¹⁹ “Jeju massacre,” historychannel.com.au, June 19, 2016.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION: STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS

In the last few years, the veil of secrecy surrounding the Jeju 4·3 incident has begun to be lifted. Several progressive administrations in South Korea have made attempts to uncover the truth of the 4·3 incident and make amends to victims—only to see backsliding by their conservative successors. President Kim Dae-jung began plans in 2000 to create what is now the Jeju 4·3 Peace Park. When the memorial hall and park were opened in 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun formally apologized for the massacre on behalf of the government. But support for the peace park and other related 4·3 projects languished under subsequent right-wing government, probably because Rhee is still revered by conservatives.²⁰

President Moon Jae-in attended the 70th anniversary memorial ceremony of the Jeju 4·3 incident this year. He apologized to the victims and their families and thanked those who had worked over the years to reveal the truth. He said he would support efforts to disclose “violent state oppression” and recover the remains of those killed. He also vowed to work with the National Assembly to introduce victim-support measures. Moon concluded by calling on the nation to “accept history.” That may prove difficult. A spokesman for the main conservative opposition party criticized Moon’s participation in the memorial event and characterized the 4·3 incident as an “armed revolt by communists.”²¹

FAST FORWARD TO A 2019 SUMMIT?

With inter-Korean relations growing warmer and a summit in South Korea planned, Jeju is being mentioned as a possible venue. If a summit occurs there, the symbolism of the leaders of the two Koreas joining hands atop Mt. Halla would be just as monumental an event as when they did the same in September on Mt. Paektu in North Korea. In November 2018, it was announced preparations were underway for such a visit. The announcement came after Seoul airlifted 200 tons of tangerines grown on Jeju to North Korea to reciprocate a gift of North Korean mushrooms after the September 2018 summit.

It is not well known that Kim Jong-un has a personal connection to Jeju, which would make the significance of such a visit go far beyond a mere photo op.

The family of Kim’s mother, Ko Young-hui, had a Jeju lineage. Ko’s father emigrated from Jeju to Osaka in 1929 while in his teens. He reportedly found work in a clothing factory, which may have made Japanese military uniforms. Ko moved to North Korea with her parents as a teen. Pyongyang has previously been chary about discussing her background. As a mark of special favor, Kim Jong Il is said to have allowed Ko to go to Japan by herself in the 1970s for shopping.²²

The move of Ko’s family to North Korea was part of an exodus of some 93,000 Korean residents of Japan—many originally from the southern part of the peninsula—who left for the DPRK between 1959 and 1984. This is a little-known example of how Tokyo used the Japanese Red Cross to facilitate what

²⁰ “Jeju Remembers,” *Korea Herald*, March 29, 2018.

²¹ “Moon Apologizes for State Oppression in Jeju,” *Korea Herald*, April 3, 2018.

²² Kosuke Takahasi, “Young general comes out as Mother’s boy,” *Asia Times*, July 14, 2012

could be viewed as a type of “ethnic cleansing.” Tokyo appeared to want to get rid of as much of its ethnic Korean minority as possible, and consequently encouraged migration to the DPRK. This is probably the only example of a voluntary mass exodus to a communist country—testimony to the discrimination historically faced by Koreans in Japan. That they chose to go to the North rather than the South is also testimony to the profound alienation of Koreans in Japan from conservative South Korean governments.²³

If Kim’s visit to Jeju does materialize, Pyongyang’s handling of his mother’s connection to the island will be interesting.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Jeju 4·3 incident shows how rapidly violence can escalate. In the late 1940s, a peninsular dynamic shaped by competing regimes was compounded the deepening Cold War conflict. Although inter-Korean relations and possibly Washington-Pyongyang ties now appear to be on the mend, Jeju 4·3 serves as a somber reminder of how rapidly things can deteriorate if not properly attended to. With modern conventional weapons and the likelihood that any future conflict could escalate to the nuclear level, the stakes have simply become too high.

Another lesson suggested by Jeju is that once an action-reaction dynamic takes hold, it can quickly escalate to catastrophic levels. Despite attempts at negotiation, both sides in the Jeju case were unable to extricate themselves from a seemingly endless cycle of violence. As a divided country caught up in the Cold War, Korea has not been able to free itself from this sort of negative dynamic for over seven decades.

North Korea’s push to develop nuclear weapons is an example of such a negative dynamic. North Korea did not suddenly decide to acquire a nuclear weapons capability because it was a rogue state—rather, its weapons program was initiated in response to decades of American nuclear intimidation going back to the Eisenhower administration.

One could do no better to understand this context than to look at news photos of the 280mm “atomic cannon” that rolled down Pennsylvania Avenue during Eisenhower’s 1953 inaugural parade. In these photos, the Old Post Office Building (now the Trump International Hotel) is in the background.²⁴ The decision to include the atomic cannon in the parade was perhaps intended to send a message to Pyongyang that it needed to end the Korean War or risk nuclear escalation.

The United States bombed North Korean cities incessantly during the Korean War—to the point where there was hardly a significant structure left standing. From 1958 to 1991, the United States deployed tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea—there were 950 US nuclear weapons on the peninsula at their peak. On September 27, 1991, President George H.W. Bush announced the US decision to eliminate its worldwide inventory of theatre nuclear weapons. All nuclear weapons and bombs in South Korea were

²³ “Kim Jong-un’s Jeju blood confirmed,” *Jeju Weekly*, February 4, 2014

²⁴ “M65 Atomic Cannon on Pennsylvania Ave in President Dwight Eisenhower’s Inaugural Parade,” January 20, 1953. reddit.com. The the atomic cannon was tested on May 25, 1953 with a nuclear shell at the Nevada Test Site—the only nuclear shell fired in the US nuclear weapons test program.

removed by the end of the year. Since then, the US nuclear umbrella over South Korea and Japan has relied on dual-capable fighter-bombers and submarines.²⁵

Fortunately, the US policy of “maximum pressure” to persuade Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program now seems to be easing a bit, especially with the prospect of another Trump-Kim summit. What that hard-line approach shows is the danger of political rhetoric designed for American audience overtaking serious policy deliberation. If maximum pressure had been pursued to its logical conclusion, there is no telling how North Korea would have responded. The dangers of miscalculation and unintended escalation would seem to be unacceptably high—especially given the long history of hostility and mistrust among all sides.

Over the past 70 years, Jeju has gone from a backwater to a regional hub. It has a thriving economy based on tourism and is well positioned to contribute to a new era of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. Not only does it have world-class tourism facilities, it is also diversifying into medical and educational fields. The annual Jeju Forum attracts prominent participants from all over the world—including many former heads-of-state and leaders in other fields. With its support of in-depth research and discussions exploring the lessons of the 4·3 incident and conflicts elsewhere, Jeju has become a leading global center for peace and healing studies. Jeju will never return to the time when it was forced to suffer in silence because of its geographic isolation—a major factor that allowed the security forces to resort to barbarity in handling the 1948 uprising.

Progress is being made on the island in fostering dialogue between families of victims and those of security forces. The same spirit of reconciliation is spreading more slowly to inter-Korean relations. The fact that hardliners on both sides of the Pacific have sought every opportunity to slow down progress has not helped.

More broadly speaking, American foreign policy elites do not always fully understand the history of the countries they are dealing with. This is certainly the case for Korea, which is now one of Washington’s most pressing foreign policy problems. Korea is also a country where right-wing regimes for decades deliberately hid or distorted key episodes in its modern history.²⁶ The inherited database US policymakers rely on to make judgements turns out to be incomplete and corrupted. The result is an oversimplified, almost cartoonish image of North Korea as a “rogue” nation that should be dealt with using a “crime and punishment” model.

Unexpectedly, President Donald J. Trump seems to have broken this mold and made what appears to be significant progress in finding ways to ease tensions and avert a potential nuclear catastrophe.²⁷ A day after the G20 summit in Argentina, President Moon, who is playing a middleman role between Washington and Pyongyang, told reporters that Trump had asked him to reassure Kim that he wants to

²⁵ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “A History of US nuclear weapons in South Korea,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (Vol. 73, 2017).

²⁶ The most recent attempt to fiddle with Korea’s modern history was President Park Geun-hye’s failed attempt to rewrite “leftist-influenced” school textbooks. The project fizzled out after she was impeached and forced from office.

²⁷ John Merrill, “Inside the White House: The Future of US-DPRK Policy,” *Korea Observer*, Vol.47, No. 4. Winter 2016, pp. 881-902.

fully implement their June 2018 Singapore agreement.²⁸

It goes without saying, however, that the historic window of opportunity now before us will not stay open indefinitely. The question is whether other U.S. officials are fully on board, whether Trump will stay personally involved on North Korea, and whether he will be able to build a broader consensus across party lines. The challenges for Seoul in forging a domestic consensus may be even greater. Only when a broader consensus is established, will Washington and Seoul be able to reach an overall accommodation with North Korea, establish a peace regime on the peninsula, and reduce the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program.²⁹

²⁸ Will Kim Jong Un visit S. Korea before the end of the year?, *Hankyoreh*, December 3, 2018.

²⁹ "Trump 'likes' North Korean leader and will 'fulfill Chairman Kim's wishes." *The Guardian*, December 2, 2018.

