

United States War Crimes in Korea

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With the Korean peninsula in the daily news, it is worth recalling a few facts behind the situation today.

Let us begin with the Korean War, with none other than an observation from the U.S. air force. General Curtis LeMay, head of the U.S. Strategic Air Force Command, openly admitted in an [interview in 1984](#):

So we went over there and fought the war and eventually burned down every town in North Korea anyway, some way or another, and some in South Korea, too Over a period of three years or so, we killed off – what – twenty percent of the population of Korea as direct casualties of war, or from starvation and exposure.

Or as Dean Rusk, later U.S. secretary of state, [put it](#): we bombed “everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another.” After running low on urban targets, U.S. bombers destroyed hydroelectric and irrigation dams in the later stages of the war, flooding farmland and destroying crops. To do so, the U.S. dropped 650,000 tons of bombs, including 43,000 tons of napalm bombs (more napalm than they subsequently dropped on Vietnam).

But did the Korean War actually begin in 1950, with an “invasion” from the north? To begin an answer, on my visit to the DPRK, they maintained strongly that it was in fact the U.S. forces in the south that attacked first.

So who is correct? The situation is complex, of course, but as [this article](#) points out:

The attack by North Korea came during a time of many border incursions by both sides. South Korea initiated most of the border clashes with North Korea beginning in 1948. The North Korea government claimed that by 1949 the South Korean army committed 2,617 armed incursions. It was a myth that the Soviet Union ordered North Korea to attack South Korea.

But a fuller answer would point out that the Korean War actually ran from 1945 to 1953, coming to a crescendo in 1950. And that means war crimes extend throughout this period.

At this point, two useful accounts may be read. I copy here from [one of them](#):

On August 15, 1945, the Korean people, devastated and impoverished by years of brutality from Japanese occupation forces, openly celebrated their liberation and immediately formed the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CKPI). By August 28, 1945, all Korean provinces on the entire Peninsula had established local people’s democratic committees, and on September 6, delegates from throughout Korea, north and south, created the Korean People’s Republic (KPR). On September 7, the day after the creation of the KPR, General Douglas MacArthur formally issued a proclamation addressed “To the People of

Korea.” The proclamation announced that forces under his command “will today occupy the Territory of Korea south of 38 degrees north latitude.”

The first advance party of U.S. units, the 17th Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division, actually began arriving at Inchon on September 5th, two days before MacArthur’s occupation declaration. The bulk of the US occupation forces began unloading from twenty-one Navy ships (including five destroyers) on September 8 through the port at Inchon under the command of Lieutenant General John Reed Hodge. Hundreds of black-coated armed Japanese police on horseback, still under the direction of Japanese Governor-General Abe Noabuyki, kept angry Korean crowds away from the disembarking US soldiers.

On the morning of September 9, General Hodge announced that Governor-General Abe would continue to function with all his Japanese and Korean personnel. Within a few weeks there were 25,000 American troops and members of “civil service teams” in the country. Ultimately the number of US troops in southern Korea reached 72,000. Though the Koreans were officially characterized as a “semi-friendly, liberated” people, General Hodge regrettably instructed his own officers that Korea “was an enemy of the United States ... subject to the provisions and the terms of the surrender.”

Tragically and ironically, the Korean people, citizens of the victim-nation, had become enemies, while the defeated Japanese, who had been the illegal aggressors, served as occupiers in alliance with the United States. Indeed, Korea was burdened with the very occupation originally intended for Japan, which became the recipient of massive U.S. aid and reconstruction in the post-war period. Japan remains, to this day, America’s forward military base affording protection and intelligence for its “interests” in the Asia-Pacific region.

Seventy-three-year-old Syngman Rhee was elected President of “South Korea” on May 10, 1948 in an election boycotted by virtually all Koreans except the elite KDP and Rhee’s own right-wing political groups. This event, historically sealing a politically divided Korea, provoked what became known as the Cheju massacre, in which as many as 70,000 residents of the southern island of Cheju were ruthlessly murdered during a single year by Rhee’s paramilitary forces under the oversight of U.S. officers. Rhee took office as President on August 15 and the Republic of Korea (ROK) was formally declared. In response, three-and-a-half weeks later (on September 9, 1948), the people of northern Korea grudgingly created their own separate government, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), with Kim Il Sung as its premier.

Korea was now clearly and tragically split in two. Kim Il-Sung had survived as a guerrilla fighter against the Japanese occupation in both China and Korea since 1932 when he was twenty years old. He was thirty-three when he returned to Pyongyang in October 1945 to begin the hoped-for era of rebuilding a united Korea free of foreign domination, and three years later, on September 9, 1948, he became North Korea’s first premier. The Rhee/U.S. forces escalated their ruthless campaign of cleansing the south of dissidents, identifying as a suspected “communist” anyone who opposed the Rhee regime, publicly or privately. In

reality, most participants or believers in the popular movement in the south were socialists unaffiliated with outside “communist” organizations.

As the repression intensified, however, alliances with popular movements in the north, including communist organizations, increased. The Cheju insurgency was crushed by August 1949, but on the mainland, guerrilla warfare continued in most provinces until 1959-51. In the eyes of the commander of US military forces in Korea, General Hodge, and new “President” Syngman Rhee, virtually any Korean who had not publicly professed his allegiance to Rhee was considered a “communist” traitor. As a result, massive numbers of farmers, villagers and urban residents were systematically rounded up in rural areas, villages and cities throughout South Korea. Captives were regularly tortured to extract names of others.

Thousands were imprisoned and even more thousands forced to dig mass graves before being ordered into them and shot by fellow Koreans, often under the watch of U.S. troops.

The introduction of U.S./UN military forces on June 26, 1950 occurred with no American understanding (except by a few astute observers such as journalist I.F Stone) that in fact they were entering an ongoing revolutionary civil war waged by indigenous Koreans seeking genuine independence after five years of U.S. interference. The American occupation simply fueled Korean passions even more while creating further divisions among them.

In the Autumn of 1950, when U.S. forces were in retreat in North Korea, General Douglas MacArthur offered all air forces under his command to destroy “every means of communication, every installation, factory, city and village” from the Yalu River, forming the border between North Korea and China, south to the battle line. The massive saturation bombing conducted throughout the war, including napalm, incendiary, and fragmentation bombs, left scorched cities and villages in total ruins. As in World War II, the U.S. strategic bombing campaign brought mass destruction and shockingly heavy civilian casualties. Such tactics were in clear violation of the Nuremberg Charter, which had, ironically, been created after World War II, largely due to pressure from the U.S. The Nuremberg Tribunal defined “the wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages” to be a war crime and declared that “inhumane acts against any civilian population” were a crime against humanity.

From that fateful day on September 8, 1945 to the present, a period of 72 years, U.S. military forces (currently numbering 37,000 positioned at 100 installations) have maintained a continuous occupation in the south supporting de facto U.S. rule over the political, economic and military life of a needlessly divided Korea. This often brutal occupation and the persistent U.S. support for the repressive policies of dictatorial puppets continues to be the single greatest obstacle to peace in Korea, preventing the inevitable reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Until 1994, all of the hundreds of thousands of South Korean defense forces operated under direct U.S. command. Even today, although integrated into the Combined Forces Command

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(CFC), these forces automatically revert to direct US control when the US military commander in Korea determines that there is a state of war.

This account is really the short version. For the most insightful analysis, it is worth reading carefully Steven Gowans's [detailed account](#) (I was drawn to this piece by [Prole Center](#)).

All of this makes sense of one of my initial impressions when I visited the DPRK. Time and again, they referred to the “brazen American Imperialist Aggressors.” While this initially may have seemed like hyperbolic propaganda, our visit to the DMZ was revealing. We were free to walk about, joke and take photographs from the northern side. By contrast, on the southern side were but two forlorn South Korean soldiers. They were surrounded by numerous U.S. soldiers.