

# Decentralizing History Writing In Korea

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## Historical Context and the Unresolved Korean War

The Second World War was one of the most destructive episodes in the history of humanity. It gave a chance to various nations to express their hostilities against other nations. It further opened a Pandora's Box of conflicts that lasted until the end of the Cold War<sup>1</sup>. On the Asian front, the East Asian countries fought each other bitterly in a bid to avenge centuries of enmity. This led to the Korean War, which is the successor to Japan's ambitious adventures. This paper discusses how the Korean War has never ended because of the manipulation of history and how this can be changed.

## Origins and International Dimensions of the Korean War

The Korean War was fought between North Korea and South Korea. They were both aided by their allies: China, the Soviet Union, and the United States, respectively. It was the first military action of the Cold War between the Eastern Bloc and the Western bloc<sup>2</sup>. Apparently, Korea was once ruled by Imperial Japan until the end of the Second World War. At the start of the Cold War, the Soviet Union attacked North Korea, declaring it independent of Japanese rule. In retaliation to the invasion, the United States and the United Nations sent a huge force to South Korea. As a result, Korea was divided into two regions, marking the beginning of hostilities.



## Armistice Division and Continuing Hostilities

Both sides declared that they were the rightful owner of the whole of the Korean peninsula. During the war, initially, the North Koreans were successful in pushing the Allied troops to the southernmost tip of the peninsula. That was until the U.N. troops landed to support the allies<sup>3</sup>. They cut off North Korean supplies, forcing them to retreat. The sudden change resulted in China entering the war in support of their North Korean allies. The three years of war led to the formation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone, and an armistice was signed to ensure a peaceful end to hostilities. However, to date, the Korean War has not ended, in reality.



## Decentralizing the Historical Narrative

Apparently, one way to end the Korean conflict is to remove the state monopoly on the written history of the whole chapter. In doing so, decentralize the historical narrative because the suppression of historical information is a Cold War era tactic being used by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to prolong the conflict and maintain their historical narrative. As long as the truth is being held as a political hostage by these two conflicting nation-states, it is not possible to reconcile Koreans on both sides of the peninsula.

## War Trauma and Political Instability

For a long time now, the government and non-government groups in East Asia have tried to find a solution to confront the horrors of the past. Despite the monstrosity of the act, the Koreans began efforts to face their past after they broke away from their imperial masters and entered a new era. To this day, the South Koreans suffer from the change that caused their nation to break up, several families to be divided, and hundreds of lives of loved ones to be lost. The trauma has resulted in the South Koreans not having any stable government in the years after the Korean War. And it took them a lot of time to establish a stable civilian government.

## The Korean War as a Selectively Remembered Conflict

Even though the extreme nature of the Korean War and the lasting impact it had on the lives of Koreans is a heart-wrenching part of history, most people outside of Korea consider it a 'forgotten war.' Though the reality is quite the contrary for the Korean people, even after all these years, they have not forgotten the war. In fact, it has been *very* selectively remembered. For people who live on the peninsula, the war was a type of *police action* in which the United States supposedly came to the aid of the people of South Korea. Apparently, this theory claims that the *evil* communist North Koreans had captured South Korea and had it not been for the United States, all had been lost.



## Competing National Memories of the War

Even though the war has not ended, a comprehensive description of the war has not been produced. The Korean War, unlike the World Wars and Cold War, does not have one specific memory. While the South Korean government shows itself as the *good guy*, it does so to prove its proximity to capitalism and the capitalist West. On the other hand, North Korea has become known to the rest of the world as an evil communist state that hates the rest of the world.

## State-Sponsored Cultural Memory

The government of South Korea has gone to great lengths to introduce some initiatives in the cultural and academic sector to promote the memory that views the war in the good vs. evil prism. For example, the famous poet Pak Du-Jin and the composer Kim Dong-Jin composed a song, “Song of 6.25.” It is a song that very openly supports the government’s Manichean representation of the war. The song is so liked by the government that it is sung every year at commemorative ceremonies of the war.

## Anti-Communist Literature and Government Control

The song’s clear depiction of the government’s Manichean perspective of the war is striking. The song emphasizes taking revenge against the enemies and killing the enemies until the last one is left. During the war, Korean writers were forced to join the War Writer’s Association and write anti-communist propaganda books and novels. These novels would have Manichean views and anti-North Korean bias. This practice by the government did not end the war, but in fact continued afterward as well. Those writers who did not adhere to the government’s policy would face legal action and suffer persecution.



## Education Propaganda and Collective Memory

South Korea uses propaganda to remind the war generation of the horrors of the war and takes sole responsibility for the adverse effects of the war on North Korea<sup>5</sup>. After the war, the topic of anti-communism was used to put fear and anger in the hearts of the locals against the communists and North Koreans<sup>6</sup>. The government introduced a curriculum in both grade schools and high schools. The new curriculum discussed the Korean War and its atrocities at great length. Either it was discussed as a separate subject or was amalgamated as part of any other subject. Every year, school children were made to create posters and participate in speech contests that had anticommunism as the main theme<sup>7</sup>.

The poster competitions and speech contests encouraged the same type of hostile attitudes and emotions against North Korea that were exemplified in Pak Du-Jin’s song. Apparently, civilian activities were throughout, strictly monitored, controlled and censored<sup>8</sup>. It led to the memory of the war, both within and outside Korea, to be highly distorted, while negative experiences and memories were silenced and buried<sup>9</sup>.

# Democratic Transition and Reassessment of the Past

During the 1990s, the policy of silencing and creating a selective memory began changing in South Korea<sup>10</sup>. These changes came with the ousting of dictatorial regimes and the establishment of a civilian government. The National Assembly passed several acts that were intended to launch investigations into past wrongdoings. Through these acts, the government apparently wanted to repair the past sins committed by the nation, including the massacre of civilians during and after the war.



## Establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In December 2005, a milestone was achieved when the government of South Korea introduced a new law, the Framework Act, leading to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Korea (TRCK). It was a temporary government body that comprised as many as 15 commissioners with a staff of 236 people. The entire staff was to serve a two-year period, while the body had a four-year term. The main objectives of the Truth Reconciliation Commission were to receive complaints of victims and investigate them without any support or influence from the government<sup>11</sup>.

## Mandate and Scope of the Commission

The scope of the Truth Reconciliation Commission was to include wrongdoings by the state and the illegal mass murders both before and during the Korean War. It also included all forms of human rights violations because of the violations of the constitution. It further included tampering with truth and other evidence that can be used in a court of law.

## Early Caseload and Institutional Limitations

In the first four months of its launch, the TRCK received as many as two thousand applications for investigation. Almost 80 % of these were related to the civilian massacre during and after the war. Even though its formation was a milestone in South Korea, its limited authority was a disgrace to it.

## Contested Goals and Political Criticism

The goal of the TRCK is *“reconciliation through the truth,”* though, from the very start, people have questioned its ability to solve a decade decade-long problem. While some people attacked the law as a political move aimed at attacking political enemies, others questioned its credibility and power<sup>12</sup>.

## Strengths and Limits of Truth Commissions

Experts who have studied Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have strong views on the limitations and strengths of the commission’s capacity to seek the truth. It is quite hard to generalize the results and analysis of the earlier research because every truth and reconciliation commission has had a different result. The majority of the commissions express their main objectives to be fact-finding. However, studies have proved that the goals cannot be fully achieved because of the many unwanted problems that are a part of the investigations of such nature<sup>13</sup>.

## Lost Evidence and Investigative Constraints

Among the main problems is the fact that due to the time difference between these investigations with the actual events, most evidence is already lost. The material evidence, documents, and victims are lost long before the investigation starts. The few survivors and witnesses who are still present, their memories are now so vague and unreliable that they cannot form a part of the evidence. Hence, the facts in such situations are often decided through investigators’ votes, which weakens their value as substantial scientific facts. Furthermore, most of these truth-finding commissions have a deadline, and if the witness or victim misses it, his case will never be considered again.

## Public Trust and State Credibility

Besides, the most pressing question is that of trust. How much the victim trusts the state to be a just judge and determine the truth is the main question. Because the thing is, will the state be able to establish the whole truth? Such questions may not negate the Truth Commission’s authority, though they do weaken the truth sought by it.

## Political Pressure on the Commission

In a recent interview, Kim Dong-Choon said that the current leadership holds different views regarding the need for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While he considers it important to use the commission to close the chapter of the Korean War once and for all, the current leadership is considering shutting down the commission without achieving its objectives. While about 75% of cases

of war crimes conducted during the Korean War are completely handled, a large amount of the cases remain unattended. For example, the cases that relate to terrorism done by the American forces against ordinary Korean civilians remain unattended.

This might be because the new commissioner supports the U.S. and its bombing of the Korean cities. Hence, the most important issue will be the writing and submission of the Commission's final report. It is mainly because the current government has decided to bring the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to closure before time instead of giving it a two-year extension because the final report might disclose the Commission's most important discovery.

## Lack of Institutional Cooperation

One more difficulty that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission faces is the issue of lack of support from the government bodies. Neither the Intelligence services nor the police is cooperative. It has affected our work very deeply. The previous government had put a lot of importance on the Commission and valued its accomplishments a lot. Their continued support to us made us dependent on governmental institutions, though the sudden change has impacted our work a lot.

## Legal Justice and Alternative Accountability

He further said that during the start of the work, the commission's role was to build a favorable situation for the government to give both political and legal justice to the concerned people. However, just like all other truth commissions, our commission also did not impart justice through the proper channel: the legal system. He said with a lot of pressure that the atrocities committed during the war had not been resolved through the legal system. It may be because of the large scale of terrorism against the Korean people during the war.

## Counter-Narratives and Victim Testimony

Hence, instead of enhancing the legal system, we have brought a counter-narrative forward to voice the casualties of the victims through our investigations, military records and other records attained from unofficial sources like media and the internet. Though, we chose not to emphasize the grievance of victims and their perpetrators. It is part of our experiment that we have come up with. We have done a lot of investigation and research on this matter, and I believe that such an experiment will be successful.

During the 1990s, the Korean government had victims from Kwangju who sought compensation. As a result, we divided the victims. Apparently, money was a more important factor than truth and compensation was overshadowed.

# Conclusion on Historical Truth and Reconciliation

During the Cold War, several human rights abuses were committed under the guise of fighting the communists against democracy. United States presence in the region has contributed to the bringing up of old enmities to an extreme level. Almost all the East Asian nations have suffered in one way or the other, though few have faced the dark past the way Korea has<sup>14</sup>. It is Korea that launched the truth commission to effort and solve the wrongdoings of the past. South Korea's efforts should be cherished. Though we couldnot deny the fact that the present regimes have written history in a way that has seriously affected the minds of the people. South Korea's current government needs to be lauded for the efforts they are making to negate those of their predecessors.

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