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Life and Seoul of the Party: South Korea's Brief Occupation under Communist North Korea

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LIFE AND SEOUL OF THE PARTY: SOUTH KOREA'S BRIEF
OCCUPATION UNDER COMMUNIST NORTH KOREA

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty
Central Washington University

In Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
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August 2017

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

LIFE AND SEOUL OF THE PARTY: SOUTH KOREA'S BRIEF
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This thesis analyzes the North Korean occupation of Seoul through the oral histories of the men and women who experienced the event. At the beginning of the Korean War, North Korean forces successfully captured and held the South Korean capital for three months. Despite the occupation's interesting premise, it has received little attention from Korean War scholars. Interviews with the people who lived through the Korean War though, demonstrate that from their point of view, the occupation was a particularly significant part of their war experience.

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CHAPTER I

SEOUL TRAIN: KOREA DERAILED

Introduction

For the Americans, the Korean War began with a blitzkrieg. On June 25th, 1950, the North Korean People's Army rapidly invaded South Korea, driving the US-backed South Korean government to the south-eastern edge of the peninsula. Tensions on the peninsula had been brewing for months before the communist army made its move across the 38th parallel, with frequent skirmishes near the border hinting that a full-blown civil war between the two Koreas would be inevitable.¹ Shocked yet relieved, American policy makers regarded the attack as a second Pearl Harbor, appreciating that it would allow US forces to finally confront the international tensions that had grown since WWII.² Now that the North Korean army had invaded the south, the opponents of communism could finally unite under this new war and openly work to contain the looming communist threat.³ As the North Korean army continued to succeed though, and with half of the South Korean army either dead or missing, the glorious battle against the growing threat of communism had completely failed to materialize.⁴ Fleeing to the southeastern corner

¹ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2011), 139.

² Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Volume II The Roaring of the Cataract 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 627-628.

³ *Ibid.*, 628.

⁴ Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, 11.

of the peninsula, the defeated South Korean government left the majority of the country under North Korean control from late June until September 28th, 1950.⁵

Communist forces fully controlled Seoul for roughly ninety days, enacting social and economic policies while also attempting to extinguish the city's surviving anti-communist elements; actions that served to prepare the Korean peninsula for reunification under communism. While American forces eventually helped the South Korean army retake Seoul, restoring the pre-war border, Seoul's citizens remained shaken by the occupation. Interviews with Koreans who lived in the city during the war tend to highlight the occupation. Despite the occupation's impact on Koreans during the war, popular narratives of the conflict rarely mention Seoul's communist episode, leaving it a curiously unexplored piece of the war. This thesis argues that while the occupation of Seoul has been largely overlooked by historians, oral histories and documents from the period reveal that for many Koreans who lived through the conflict, the occupation was a particularly significant part of their wartime experience.⁶

As the war broke out, the occupation that followed stunned Americans and South Koreans alike, as they watched Seoul fall within days. While historians continue to pass over the occupation, oral histories on the war seem to frequently stress it in their personal narratives. These recollections demonstrate how the sudden takeover of Seoul disrupted many of their daily lives and brought chaos to the region. As the communists descended on Seoul, foreigners, politicians, and families fled southward to escape the dangers of

⁵ John W. Riley and Wilbur Schramm, *The Reds Take a City: The Communist Occupation of Seoul with Eyewitness Accounts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1951), 4-5.

⁶ These sources have either been translated into English or were originally written in English.

occupation. Although Koreans were now the ones occupying Korea, rather than foreign entities such as the Japanese or Americans, the North Korean army was perceived as an enemy to fellow Koreans with contrasting ideologies. Those labeled as rightists were imprisoned and executed and Seoul's citizens were expected to embrace the invading government as a liberator. While the occupation visibly interrupted their daily lives, the common citizens who remained in Seoul adapted to the war-time situation, forced to adjust to communist expectations and demands. While some citizens genuinely supported the communist ideology and others were more focused on survival than voicing discontent with communism, the occupation had greatly complicated life for everyone living in Seoul.

As an introduction, this chapter outlines the Korean War's historical context by narrating the events that led up to the occupation and demonstrating how Korean history influenced the situation and its eventual outcomes. This chapter also examines the historical debates surrounding the first year of the conflict, as they continue to impact the popular narrative of the Korean War. Lastly, this chapter seeks to emphasize the historical significance of the occupation of Seoul, demonstrating that its analysis is necessary to comprehend the greater narrative of the Korean War. With these goals in mind, this chapter demonstrates how the Cold War lingers, as historians continue to overlook a period that persists within the memories of the war's survivors.

Korea's Independent Legacy: Korean War Context

By the 1950s, “occupation” by a foreign force was not a new experience for the people of the Korean peninsula. While Korea had been an independent kingdom during the Choson dynasty (1392-1910), it had been a tributary state to China during the both the Ming and the Qing dynasties. After the Manchu invasion of the Korean peninsula and the rise of the Qing empire in the seventeenth century, Korea submitted to a hierarchical tributary system under China. Historians have recently demonstrated that this tributary system was especially humiliating for the Confucian elites of the Choson dynasty, as they had traditionally looked down on the northern nomads who they were now forced to pay tribute.⁷ While this system differed from the country's later imperial experience as a colonized state, the loss of autonomy in both situations was frustrating to many Koreans. Some reformists in Korea during the late nineteenth century celebrated Qing dynasty China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, as they viewed the Qing dynasty's loss of autonomy to Japan as Korea's moment to secure the state's independence in the new global context of colonial competition.⁸ With Korea's tributary relationship with the Qing imperium now severed, reformists encouraged Korean independence, inspiring nationalist movements on the peninsula.⁹ Yet the modern imperialism that Japan imposed on the

⁷ Previous dynasties on the Korean peninsula had also been involved in tributary relations with the powerful dynasties of China but in this case, the submission to the Manchus was seen as particularly humiliating to Neo-Confucian Korean elites due to the sino-centric Confucian ideology that viewed nomadic groups such as the Manchus as barbarians. For more information, see JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Great East Asian War and the Birth of the Korean Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.)

⁸ Andre Schmid, *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

country was completely different from what Koreans had experienced with the tributary system in the pre-modern era.

Rather than achieving independence after China's defeat, Korea came under a strict occupation under Japan when it annexed Korea in 1910. Now in control of Korea, Japan employed colonial projects (such as the "Company Law" project and the "Land Investigations" project) that systematically and negatively changed the way Koreans could own land and run businesses.¹⁰ The Korean elites who rejected Japan's colonial rule did so by supporting nationalist liberation, which became a core movement of resistance to colonial Japan. As Koreans became increasingly unhappy with the colonial government, Japan strained to effectively suppress the various anti-colonial liberation movements. By the end of WWII, as the Japanese occupation ended abruptly, Korea's liberation movements remained active and ready to seize the country.

With leading Korean political elites focusing on nationalist liberation, and decolonization occurring worldwide after WWII, many Korean citizens anticipated the return of Korea as an independent state. Post-war politics thwarted those hopeful for independence, and the country was placed under a joint occupation that consequentially split the country ideologically.¹¹ As the US and the USSR retained significant control over the peninsula through the joint occupation, the possibility of reunification weakened as the two major powers sought to control the political situation in the occupied regions.

¹⁰ James L. McClain, *A Modern History of Japan*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002: 341.

¹¹ William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11-13, Kindle.

With the country divided by the joint occupation, the Koreans who had longed for an independent but unified state, were deeply disappointed.

The division and occupation of the peninsula obviously played an important role in triggering the Korean War. As Koreans strained against the Post-WWII system and found their attempts to implement the political system of their choice impeded, the division of the country began to cement. Stueck's statement that the "Soviet-US occupation cast dark clouds over Korean hopes" demonstrates the widespread disappointment felt by Koreans hoping for independence. While Koreans had initially welcomed Japan's defeat, the joint occupation disillusioned many, especially as American and Soviet troops harassed locals.¹² While American soldiers did treat Korean locals more kindly than their Soviet counterparts did, policy makers from both countries manipulated and purged the Korean political parties that did not align with the occupying nation's dominant ideology.¹³ When it came time for the occupying nations to discuss plans for Korea's new government, neither side could agree on a plan. The Soviet Union was reluctant to "risk a unified national government free from Soviet control."¹⁴ Meanwhile, the United States had become increasingly intent on curbing communism and promoting right-wing parties. Reluctantly, US policy makers allowed Syngman Rhee's

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 21.

party to suppress political opponents, hoping that this would at least thwart Korea from reuniting exclusively under a communist government.¹⁵

By the end of the 1940s, through the “guidance” of the occupying nations, the peninsula now contained two governments with conflicting political systems. The government in the south became deeply capitalist, while the northern government had openly embraced communism. The potential for a civil war now loomed over Korea since the “Korean War could break out only when the discrepant post-colonialities were straight-jacketed into two antagonistic nation-state building projects that were at once hegemonic in aspirations and constrained in capacities.”¹⁶ In other words, the US and the Soviet Union had driven the region into civil war through their efforts to mold the peninsula into a government that their respective state would benefit from. Despite the initial excitement many Koreans felt as the Japanese occupation officially ended, the Soviets and the Americans impeded true Korean independence and led the peninsula directly into an internationally involved civil war. Their refusal to cooperate perpetuated the peninsula’s division.

As the Soviets and the Americans began to move their forces out of the Korean Peninsula, and the governments they had cultivated were left behind, the inevitable fighting between the two Koreas escalated. Initially, while working within the United Nations, the US and USSR had agreed to establish a joint council to negotiate the

¹⁵ Jae-Jung Suh, “Truth and Reconciliation in South Korea: Confronting War, Colonialism, and Intervention in the Asia Pacific,” *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (December 2010): 509-510.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 505.

political outcome of the peninsula.¹⁷ Known as the Joint Commission, its purpose was to guide Korea's occupiers on how to best facilitate Korea's independence over the next decade.¹⁸ The Joint Commission would primarily guide the US and USSR towards preparing the peninsula for the general election that would formally (and finally) reunite Korea. Although the Joint Commission began meeting as early as the winter of 1946, the conflicting ideologies between the USSR and the US led to an inability to settle on matters pertaining to Korea's independence. Even as early as the first meeting of the Joint Commission, the Soviet Union harshly rejected American plans to begin integrating South and North Korea, alluding to the growing Cold War situation as well as Korea's future as two separate nations.¹⁹ Four years later, little had changed regarding a unified Korea. If anything, the division between North and South remained strong as the conflict continued.

WWII in Europe left the US government noticeably anxious as communist revolts broke out due to the power vacuums caused by the war's end.²⁰ The US responded to the growth of communism by offering aid to war-torn countries, making it clear to the world that America intended to contain the growing ideology. As a result, the Soviets became increasingly hostile towards the Joint Commission.²¹ With the two governments involved in the joint occupation now at odds, it is unsurprising that the plans for unification devolved into a civil war. As the US and the Soviet Union bickered, conservative Korean

¹⁷ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 41-42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

politician Syngman Rhee took advantage of the Cold War to transform South Korea into a capitalist nation.

Attempting to resolve the violence between the two governments as skirmishes broke out near the 38th parallel, the United Nations offered to sponsor a general election for the peninsula, while also promising to prepare the elected party to govern the reunified Korea. The Americans endorsed the UN proposal, but the Soviets boycotted the plan for a general election, anticipating a disadvantageous outcome since two-thirds of the Korean population were currently under American control.²² Because of the Soviet boycott, separate elections were held, officially dividing the peninsula into two. Unhappy with the decision to hold separate elections, most of South Korea's moderate and left-wing politicians refused to participate, allowing conservative groups (mostly supporting Syngman Rhee) to win.²³ On May 10, 1948, South Korea held the elections that would establish it as the capitalist, democratic Republic of Korea (ROK,) while North Korea became the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) following its own August 25th elections.²⁴ As the Cold War began to intensify, both North and South Korea became entrenched in the international politics surrounding the conflict. The UN had done little to alleviate growing tensions and it instead became the stage for the international aspects of the conflict, as the Soviet Union and US flexed muscles throughout every attempt to negotiate Korea's outcome. As Syngman Rhee lashed out

²² Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, 26.

²³ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 42.

²⁴ Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, 26-27.

against the Koreans who opposed his regime in the South, and as North Korea rejected the legitimacy of the Southern government, relations between the two Koreas worsened.²⁵

By the summer of 1950, the two Koreas had been engaged in sporadic skirmishes at the “temporary” boundary of the 38th parallel for months, leaving it inevitable that one side would provoke the other into a full-out war. Although the June 25th attack took South Korea by surprise, the world had expected an eventual outbreak of violence on the peninsula. On the morning of June 25, 1950, North Koreans marched into South Korean territory and began to hold towns.²⁶ While few were shocked by North Korea’s attack on the south, it was the swift defeat of the ROK army that stunned many, as the communists successfully captured Seoul with 37,000 soldiers.²⁷ By the end of June, the capital of South Korea had been completely overtaken by the North, and Seoul entered a three-month period of North Korean occupation.

Faced with the daunting task of establishing communism within a previously capitalist city, the DPRK found one of its greatest strategies within Korea’s past. Korea’s legacy of liberation movements provided the communist government with a foundation for establishing its own legitimacy in Seoul. The occupying government referred to the Korean War as “the Fatherland Liberation War” stressing that the DPRK was in Seoul to free fellow Koreans from the shackles of foreign control.²⁸ Seoul itself was especially

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶ Alan J. Levine, *Stalin’s Last War: Korea and the Approach to World War III* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2005), 498, Kindle.

²⁷ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War*, 11.

²⁸ Charles K. Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950-1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 14, Kindle.

important to the North Korean government, as it had been Korea's capital for centuries, offering the DPRK considerable symbolic legitimacy towards controlling a reunified Korea.

After decades of subjugation under a foreign power, Koreans now faced a new (and somewhat bizarre) occupation shaped by a communist ideology that blended well with the peninsula's nationalism. Occupied Seoul was spared from great revolts similar to those seen in Japan's occupation of the country, as communist forces were able to harness local nationalism by promoting their status as fellow Koreans. Even with this advantage, the DPRK actively worked to gain local approval. In order to further appeal to South Koreans, the DPRK initially avoided employing force against Seoul's citizens.²⁹ As a journalist who had been in Seoul during the war explained, "At the beginning of the occupation, they were very kind to the people, saying that they would embrace all except the reactionaries . . . It was a well-known fact that they were well trained to win the hearts of the people."³⁰ The communists worked to win-over South Korean support by openly attempting to address the many grievances South Koreans had held against Syngman Rhee's government.³¹ Since there had been widespread discontent in Korea regarding the US and South Korean government's re-employment of former collaborators of the Japanese empire, North Korea was able to gain support in Seoul by purging those who had been involved with the Japanese occupiers.³² Further facilitating their takeover

²⁹ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 669.

³⁰ *The Reds Take a City*, 66.

³¹ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 24-26.

³² Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation: Unwavering Attempts to Achieve Justice in South Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (December 2010): 530.

of Seoul, The North Korean government's stance on land reform and gender equality impressed South Koreans.³³ The communists enticed women in Seoul by promising employment opportunities while also catching the interest of tenant farmers by explaining their plans to redistribute land.³⁴ By 1950, enough South Koreans had become disenchanted and frustrated with the ROK government that the communists were able to occupy Seoul with relative ease.

The occupation of Seoul meant that it was now Koreans who were occupying Korea rather than foreigners, and this distinction allowed the North Koreans to use the general bitterness against the Japanese, while also using the general disappointment with the failure to reunify, to their advantage. Syngman Rhee's efforts to suppress South Korea's growing support for leftist political movements irritated many Koreans, as the government became increasingly anti-communist and nationalistic.³⁵ Due to the US government's concern with the containment of communism, Rhee was able to stifle the proposed plans for land reform in the south.³⁶ With many Koreans disappointed by the ROK, the communists were able to rule Seoul with considerable cooperation from the locals.³⁷ The foreign occupations had been instrumental in cementing the ideologies of the newly divided states, and it was the consequences of the split Soviet-American rule that set the stage for the ideological battle that has lasted for over half a century.

³³ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 26.

³⁴ *The Reds Take a City*, 35.

³⁵ Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, 23-24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁷ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 669.

The Forgotten War's Forgotten Occupation: Debates in Korean War Historiography

While the Korean War's historical context helps paint a detailed picture of the events that surrounded the occupation, the topic's historiographical debates hint towards why this period has received such little attention in spite of its significance to those who lived through it. Despite its importance to the Korean War, the occupation of Seoul has received little attention from historians. From the American and South Korean point of view, the occupation signified the terrifying yet brief period of the war where the enemy nearly conquered all of Korea, threatening to transform the entire peninsula into a communist state. Despite the magnitude of the situation, and the occupation's substantial consequences, the event is considerably overshadowed by the conflict's other periods and themes. Works on the Korean War seem to jump from the beginning of the conflict to the American victory at Inchon, typically mentioning the occupation of Seoul in less than a paragraph. The relative obscurity of such a dramatic and historically significant event is intriguing.

It is the missing North Korean sources that historians seem to frequently cite to explain the occupation's obscurity.³⁸ While the isolation of North Korea has undeniably affected information regarding the DPRK's assault on the south, this explanation has also allowed scholars to shift the blame onto the current North Korean government. While the current political situation does leave many details unobtainable, there are still valuable and credible sources that explain the occupation, at least from the South Korean point of

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 670.

view. Some of the most vital sources on the occupation have been the oral histories of those who directly experienced the communist takeover. Unfortunately, there is an absence of oral histories that detail the occupation from the pro-communist point of view. The availability and the content of these interviews have been largely influenced by Cold War politics.

Filtered through the eyes of those who were in charge during the conflict, the story of the Korean War has been detailed through an emphasis on the political and military powers involved. Even the terms ‘Cold War’ and ‘puppet war’ illustrate how the conflict has been interpreted through the agency of the foreign powers involved. According to popular works on the topic, the significant actors in the Korean War were men such as President Truman, Stalin, Kim Il Sung, Syngman Rhee, MacArthur, and the other important policy makers who made the conflict’s major decisions. As the policy makers throughout the Korean War, it is the stories of these powerful men and their perceptions of the conflict that have most notably influenced works on the subject. Even now, as the historiographical scene has shifted so dramatically over the past few decades and as numerous archives have become more accessible, historians have only slightly changed the Korean War narrative. Works on the subject have simply moved away from Stalin and Truman’s views, and focused instead on other policy makers, such as Kim Il Sung. These authors attempt to pull North Korean (and sometimes South Korean) agency

out of the actions of the communist leader and his inner circle.³⁹ With the elites still the main focus of Korean War historians, topics like the occupation remain off of their radar.

While there are few scholarly works on the occupation, the historical debates regarding the beginning of the war give some insight into academic attitudes regarding the period the occupation took place in. One of the most relevant debates to the occupation, regards the seemingly simple topic of the date used to signify the beginning of the war. Recent revisionist authors have begun to challenge the official starting date of June 25, 1950. This date has been integral to the study of the occupation of Seoul, as it also marks the beginning of the communist effort to seize the city. The choice of this date has been particularly controversial due to the assertion that it automatically pins the blame of the war onto the North Korean government.⁴⁰ Some historians have suggested that the June date implies that the conflict started from the North Korean move into the south when in reality it was a much more complex situation within a brewing civil war. By automatically portraying the communists as the aggressors, the occupation is just a small detail as the rest of the narrative moves its attention to Seoul's eventual liberation from its captors.

Many of the date's critics demonstrate that the debate is much more than a scholarly exercise in splitting hairs. The debate also helps to expose contemporary academic attitudes regarding the beginning of an ideologically contentious event. Depending on the historian's position, works on the conflict describe it as either a civil

³⁹ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 14.

⁴⁰ Jae-Jung Suh, "Truth and Reconciliation in South Korea," 507.

war, an international war, or a combination of the two. The complexity of the occupation of Seoul is difficult to grasp without first understanding the historical debates that have stemmed from the revisionists' reminder that fighting between the two Koreas occurred for months before the traditional date. The June 25th date has largely concealed colonial Japan's impact on the war, and working beyond the date uncovers deeper levels of the conflict's complexity, by broadening the frame of the war to the colonial impact on the Korean peninsula and to the skirmishes that led to North Korea's southward advance. The traditional date clearly represents a significant point in the peninsula's history, but its usage as a starting point has hindered full historical comprehension of the conflict.

The debate over this date has brought to the war's historiography a new level of complexity, one that had been needed to study situations like the occupation. As one of the top historians on the war, Bruce Cumings' assertion that the "Korean War did not begin on June 25, 1950," has become so controversial that the quote even appears on his Wikipedia page.⁴¹ Well-known as a revisionist, Cumings has contributed to this date by arguing that the war actually began a year earlier in 1949. Cumings stresses that civil wars "do not start: they come. They originate in multiple causes, with blame enough to go around for everyone."⁴² Demonstrating how impossible an exact starting date is, he suggests that the first signs of conflict began in 1945 as the country was artificially divided, and he further mentions that guerilla warfare began in November of 1948.⁴³ Understanding the need to pinpoint a time period for the beginning of the war, Cumings

⁴¹ Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 238.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

concludes that increased fighting began in Korea early in 1949. Although Cumings points to a number of small conflicts prior to June of 1950 to justify his position, he seems most comfortable with the idea that the Korean War began in 1949. He continually stresses that it was the end of the civil war in China that allowed the Korean skirmishes to intensify into an actual war by 1949.⁴⁴ Prior to this date, Korean communists had been abroad helping the Communist Party of China achieve victory in its own civil war.⁴⁵ As the Chinese Civil War ended, communist Koreans returned home, ready to aid North Korea.

While the Chinese Civil War explains why the skirmishes took several years to erupt into war and pushes any possible beginning for the Korean War closer to the traditionally accepted date, Cumings' rejection of it stresses his focus on the conflict as one that began as a civil war. While Cumings uses the traditional date to mark the escalation of violence, he uses his rejection of it as the beginning of the war to emphasize the skirmishes that led up to North Korea's victories. His two-volume work *The Origins of the Korean War* painstakingly details these skirmishes, as the international community both watched in horror and attempted to influence the two Koreas. It is not until 625 pages into the second volume that Cumings reaches June 25, 1950, demonstrating the author's firm belief that the war began much earlier.

William Stueck has utilized the traditional date in a similar manner to Cumings. Stueck seems to acknowledge that while the months leading up to the traditional date

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

consisted of the two Korean armies fighting near the 38th parallel, it is on June 25th that the North Korean army officially crossed the temporary boundary and began to formally occupy lands and cities under South Korean control.⁴⁶ Unlike Cumings though, Stueck avoids commenting any further on the date debate, instead simply naming his first chapter in one of his Korean War books “From Civil War to International Conflict: 25-30 June 1950” to demonstrate his opinion on what the traditional date represents. To authors like Stueck, there was a Korean civil war occurring prior to June 25th, but it is the international nature of the conflict that represents what has been known as the Korean War. By understanding both aspects of the Korean War (international and civil) historians are able to extract Korean agency from the events that have traditionally been overlooked, such as the pre-war skirmishes and the later occupation of Seoul.

Although Cumings has worked to deemphasize the international side of the conflict and Stueck has promoted its international qualities, Charles K. Armstrong has utilized both the international and civil war narratives by describing how the relationships between both Korean powers and their international allies influenced the decisions of the Korean policy makers. Armstrong does use the June 25th date, expressing his belief that the North Koreans began the war as a preemptive strike against the south.⁴⁷ He admits that “there was already a de facto war going on between North and South Korea well before June 25” but he sticks to using the traditional date throughout his works.⁴⁸ To

⁴⁶ Stueck, *The Korean War*, 10.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Armstrong, June 25th seems to represent the day North Korea transformed the peninsula's civil war into a vital conflict of the Cold War.

While the previously mentioned authors have focused more broadly, authors such as Chen Jian, who have narrowed their focus to one country and its role in the Korean War, primarily use the June 25th date. With the war's official outbreak catching their attention, leaders like Mao Zedong were forced to recognize and react to the situation, signifying June 25th as the beginning of the international aspect of the war. Chen's opening paragraph on the Korean War begins with "Sunday, June 25, 1950" but while introducing the beginning of the war, Chen clarifies that it was not until June 27th that the UN condemned North Korea's actions and the Americans began sending forces to "neutralize the area."⁴⁹ It is actually several days after these events, as Chen explains, that "the Korean War quickly changed into an international crisis."⁵⁰ While historians may justify their continued use of the traditional date by pointing out the international shift, it is telling that foreign powers actually entered the conflict days later. With this in mind, it is hard to separate the date from popular perceptions of North Korean aggression triggering the war. Despite revisionist attempts to call attention to the earlier skirmishes on the peninsula, the continued use of the June 25th date continues to emphasize North Korea as the aggressor and to obscure South Korean belligerence.

Jae-Jung Suh provides one of the harsher critiques the use of the June 25th date, referring to it as an aspect of the war's memory that automatically "identifies the West as

⁴⁹ Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1597, Kindle.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the savior of Korea.”⁵¹ Suh asserts that the traditional date “lifts the Korean War out of a complex history, and places it in the realm of state-sanctioned myth, a realm much more conducive to policing and cyclical rituals of anticommunist patriotism.”⁵² According to Suh, the date has given the state power to influence the popular narrative of the war, a point that demonstrates how drastically small details can impact the legacy of such a politically charged conflict. Suh further explains that the date portrays South Koreans as the “innocent victims” of the aggressive communists.⁵³ Suh even suggests that it erases the colonial origins of the war, by strictly narrowing the scope of the war.⁵⁴ Suh’s criticism suggests that the popular narrative of the war has been shaped by reducing its context, a point that hints towards why topics such as the occupation have been disregarded. The occupation likely sits outside the “state-sanctioned myth” as topics more flattering to the US and South Korea have been emphasized.

While Suh suggests a conscious effort to promote the traditional date to control the popular narrative, Armstrong points to a different aspect of Cold War politics. Armstrong reveals that the lack of access to Soviet documents prior to the 1990s led historians to view the beginning of the Korean War as a “carefully preconceived conspiracy among communist leaders.”⁵⁵ To historians outside of the Eastern Bloc, the early North Korean victories were understood to have been the result of a Soviet plot. Without access to Soviet documents, scholars were missing much of the information

⁵¹ Jae-Jung Suh, “Truth and Reconciliation in South Korea”, 505.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 503-504.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 509.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 505.

⁵⁵ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 10.

revisionists such as Cumings have used to argue against the date. Up until the end of the Cold War, there was simply little evidence against the idea that the Korean War began the day the communists poured over the 38th parallel and captured Seoul.

While the June 25th debate has stimulated discussion of the beginning of the Korean War, information regarding the occupation of Seoul remains lacking. The war's most common narrative seems to begin with the North Korean invasion of South Korea, while others begin earlier with the conclusion of WWII and the subsequent joint occupation of Korea. Cumings has heavily criticized works that dive straight into June 1950, lamenting that "in most of the literature, the war for the South resembles a simple game of positional warfare: The North 'struck like a cobra,' ... rolled rather quickly to the Pusan perimeter, tried but failed to punch through American lines, and then was defeated by MacArthur's brilliant landing at Inchon."⁵⁶ Cumings' complaint is evident, as topics such as the occupation have clearly received little to no attention from scholars.

Although revisionists in recent years have done notable work examining the origins of the war, the occupation of Seoul continues to be almost completely absent from the narrative. Historians seem to keep the occupation within the description of the North Korean invasion, rather than making any attempts to unpack it and understand exactly what occurred during those three months of North Korean rule. While the historiography focuses so intently on the debate surrounding the debate, the occupation (and its lack of discussion) remains overlooked. Even William Stueck, in his examination of the war's

⁵⁶ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 686.

international nature, only briefly mentions the North Korean effort to takeover Seoul, completely bypassing the actual occupation.⁵⁷

Despite devoting considerable attention to the events that led to the Korean War, author Alan J. Levine also falls into the positional warfare trap, as he details the military achievements of the North Korean invasion then rushes to the much later battles involving the Pusan Perimeter. Levine does briefly spend a paragraph touching on the North Korean occupation, but it is only to criticize communist atrocities during their control of Seoul.⁵⁸ Curiously, Levine fails to mention the similar atrocities committed during the same period by the South Korean and American troops, who massacred such a large number of civilians that some historians have begun referring to the summer of 1950 as the “Summer of Terror.”⁵⁹ While the occupation was hardly without violence, it is particularly problematic when authors only use its existence to focus on the negative aspects of the communist government. Very few authors detail the occupation, instead choosing to briefly mention it as a low point in the war for South Korea and its allies.

While it is understandable that authors focusing on other aspects of the war have circumvented discussing the occupation of Seoul, it is surprising that Cumings, the champion of North Korean agency in the war, has written so little on the occupation. Even within his multi-volume work *The Origins of the Korean War*, Cumings barely discusses the occupation. Cumings spends hundreds of pages explaining the events that

⁵⁷ Stueck, *The Korean War*, 11.

⁵⁸ Levine, *Stalin's Last War*, 1317.

⁵⁹ Charles J Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang, “Summer of Terror: At least 100,000 said executed by Korean ally of US in 1950,” *The Asia Pacific Journal* 6, no. 0 (July 2008): 1.

occurred leading up to the war. Cumings focuses so heavily on recounting the initial battles between North Koreans and the UN and South Korean forces that even his books typically jump from the North Korean attack into the battles at Inchon Landing.⁶⁰

When Cumings does speak about the occupation, it is very briefly. Considering though that the book has over 1,218 pages focusing on the origins and the early months of the war, the few pages the occupation are disappointing. Rather than trying to explore the occupation itself, Cumings uses it to set the stage for his discussion on guerilla warfare in the South. Much of the short section that includes actual content for the occupation focuses more on the violence that occurred between the opposing armies.⁶¹ The short section does provide some precious details regarding the North Korean strategy to govern Seoul, but there is little if any information concerning the day to day experience of those under the occupation. Cumings' few details regarding the consequences of the occupation reveal that despite the lack of information on it, the occupation of Seoul was a significant period of the Korean War.

Cumings' noble efforts to uncover less explored aspects of the Korean War does expose the reality that sources on topics such as the occupation are difficult to find. Cumings explains that it was documents left behind in the later (and briefer) communist occupation of 1951 that have provided historians with the little information available on the North Korean point of view.⁶² The second occupation had been so turbulent and brief that the communists had been forced to leave behind a small sample of their plans for

⁶⁰ Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, 17-18.

⁶¹ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 688.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 670.

communist Seoul.⁶³ These documents have allowed historians to study the North Korean point of view, but they only provide a small amount of insight into the occupation. With sources regarding the occupation so difficult to obtain, it is unsurprising that historians have avoided the topic. Cumings is left relying on his own anecdotal evidence while discussing the occupation, commenting that he “seems always to be running into Koreans who say the experience was terrible, while also saying that they successfully hid out during the entire three months.”⁶⁴ While it is discouraging that detailed sources are difficult to obtain, Cumings’ anecdote suggests that the key to understanding the occupation of Seoul, is within oral histories.

Primary Sources: Hints from the 1950s

Historiographical debates concerning the Korean War have tended to marginalize ordinary citizens. With works so often focusing on military feats and leadership decisions, it is unsurprising that topics like the occupation of Seoul have received so little attention. Most of South Korea’s government officials had fled Seoul by the time the communists entered the city, leaving the experience of the occupation to the ordinary citizens left behind. While it had been the leadership that set the stage for the greater Korean War conflict, it was primarily the common citizens who were left to experience the communist takeover. Oral histories reveal that Korean survivors are willing to discuss

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 670.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

the occupation but the problem is that few scholars seem interested in delving into this particular aspect of the war.

Prior to the cease-fire, it seems that scholars were actually interested in studying the occupation. *The Reds Take a City* was published in 1951, only one year after the occupation began.⁶⁵ Over sixty years later, *The Reds Take a City* remains the only work that focuses on the occupation. The occupation evidently held more significance to academia during the war, when the growing threat of communism seemed more imminent to Americans. As the Korean War developed into a stalemate though, exciting periods such as the occupation seemed less important to policy makers and scholars, who shifted their focus towards subjects such as the armistice negotiations. With the occupation's significance diminished by the political atmosphere, the topic remains largely unexplored.

While *The Reds Take a City* continues to stand as one of the only English language works on the topic, its contribution to the topic is surprisingly excellent. Despite being outdated and humorously submerged in anti-communist rhetoric, the work's brilliant use of oral interviews provides an important clue for twenty-first century scholars attempting to divulge information about the occupation. The book's ability to stay relevant for after half a century is largely due to its abundance of personal accounts regarding the occupation. Considering the topic's obscurity and the historical value of *The Reds Take a City*, it is evident that the occupation of Seoul can appropriately be

⁶⁵ John W. Riley and Wilbur Schramm, *The Reds Take a City: The Communist Occupation of Seoul with Eyewitness Accounts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1951.)

studied by employing the use of the oral histories of those who experienced the event. This thesis makes extensive use of the interviews included in the book, but more importantly, it will also further the original author's efforts to uncover details about the occupation through oral histories. While historians continue to overlook the occupation of Seoul, it is the memories of those who lived through the communist takeover that offer precious insight into the event.

While the obscurity of the occupation can be easily attributed to the isolationist policies of North Korea as well as the American tendency to promote its successes while concealing its failures, it is still surprising that historians have largely ignored such a significant period. While choosing to focus instead on the war's outbreak, or the success of Inchon landing, historians have missed an opportunity to explore the three-month event that characterized much of the conflict. The following chapter seeks to uncover the details of the occupation through the memories of those who experienced it. Simply put, *The Reds Take a City* has held a monopoly on the story of the occupation of Seoul for far too long.

CHAPTER II

COMMUNIST SOUP FOR THE SEOUL

While the occupation of Seoul has been largely absent from the general narrative of the Korean War, the accounts of those who experienced it reveal a period where Koreans were thrust directly into the center of an ideologically driven conflict. Many of the oral histories examined by this thesis demonstrate how significant the war was to their experience, as they often explain in detail their reactions to the communist takeover of Seoul. It was these ordinary citizens of Seoul who experienced the consequences of the war as their homes became the stage for the worsening international conflict. From their point of view, it was neither the war's military feats or its political issues that would shape their personal memories of the war. Scholarly works may continue to overlook the occupation, but these oral histories make it clear that historians have failed to fairly weigh the events that stood out to ordinary citizens.

By understanding the details of the occupation through the experiences of common Koreans, it is easier to comprehend and analyze the nature of a civil war created by the Cold War, as ideology and outside forces combined to alter the peninsula, making it two contrastingly different nations. Without American and Soviet influences, the Korean peninsula would have likely initiated its own elections, and potentially avoided a civil war. It had, after all, been the consequences of the brewing Cold War that divided and encouraged such a strict ideological split between the two Koreas. While the elites were engrossed in the conflict's politics and ideologies, Korea's common citizens focused on survival. While the correspondences between elites have allowed historians to

analyze the war from the top, it is the recollections of Seoul's common citizens that accurately demonstrate many of the conflicts missing details.

The Northern occupiers came into Seoul to not only control the former capital of the south, but to also implement the new state's form of communism. Seoul's status as a capital of a largely capitalist state meant that the city remained full of people who had opposed communism but were unable to flee the occupation. Further complicating the situation, Seoul's status as the capital of Korea, even during the Japanese occupation, meant that the city remained home to a large number of men and women who had collaborated with the recently defeated Japanese regime.¹ American occupation forces had allowed many former collaborators to remain in powerful positions in the south, which disappointed and angered many Koreans.² Many of the Koreans who embraced communist political parties did so because they rejected former collaborators.³ Because they promised to punish former collaborators, the North Korean government came into the city as a liberator to those who demanded justice for Japan's transgressions.⁴ With such a large number of local citizens who had been in positions that conflicted with the ideology of the occupying government, North Korean forces were pressured to confront more than those who were simply loyal to the capitalist Republic of Korea. Forced to flee south to avoid imprisonment and in some cases death, many former collaborators, wealthy businessmen, and anti-communist politicians survived the occupation of Seoul,

¹ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 25-26.

² Bryan R. Gibby, *The Will to Win: American Military Advisors in Korea, 1946-1953* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 21.

³ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 204.

⁴ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 25-26.

leaving memoirs and interviews that have served as an excellent source of information on the event.

Recent oral history projects have undoubtedly enriched the study of the Korean War, providing a richer understanding of unfamiliar events such as the occupation. The oral histories available demonstrate the complex and problematic positions that the occupation placed many individuals and families into. While this thesis discusses this in depth as it explores a handful of interviews, it is worth noting that many of these sources have been heavily influenced by South Korea's anti-communist rhetoric. Even the interviews with Korean-Americans have been influenced by the on-going politics of the Korean War.

Oral histories, even now, are almost exclusively from South Koreans or those who defected from or left North Korea, leaving the voices of those who support North Korea absent. While some of these circumstances are due to North Korea's tight control over information leaving the country, much of it has also been intentionally manipulated by the South Korean government. The legacy of the Korean War as an ideological conflict is evident as the South Korean government continues to send North Korean defectors to a re-education camp before they can freely reside in the south. While these camps, such as Hanawon, are promoted by South Korea and its allies as facilities simply focused on

preparing former North Koreans for life in a more fast-paced, capitalist society, the camp's existence is both disconcerting and enlightening.⁵

Hanawon has only been in use since 1999, yet its existence demonstrates how the ideology-driven nature of the Korean War continues to affect general information on the conflict. Before Hanawon, such a camp was not even necessary due to the military government that controlled South Korea from 1960 until the early 1990s; in such a dangerous political climate, South Koreans and North Korean defectors were unable to safely express sympathy or even remote support for North Korea. Considering that many defectors have also received government stipends from the openly anti-communist state, it also seems likely that many of the refugees interviewed over the years have been reluctant to upset the South Korean government.⁶ Even those who barely lived in the north are likely to hesitate to speak openly about the communist government due to South Korea's strongly anti-communist climate. With the Korean War is still technically ongoing, and due to its ideology-driven nature, it seems possible that the opinions and experiences of both North Korean defectors and South Koreans have been consciously sanitized.

Although it is completely improbable that the South Korean camps are even remotely as severe as Soviet or North Korean re-education camps, their existence suggests a South Korean desire to censor and control the narratives coming from

⁵ Elizabeth Shim, "North Korean defectors in South Korea leave detention center misinformed, says report," *United Press International*, March 24, 2015, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://upi.com/4211719>.

⁶ Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 247-248.

defectors. American journalist Barbara Demick describes the camps as helpful facilities created to ease the defector's transition, but even from her optimistic point of view, her statement that "North Koreans also must unlearn much of what they were taught before" is revealing.⁷ News articles reveal a similarly unnerving element behind facilities like Hanawon. Unlike Demick, popular news articles tend to avoid her more friendly description of Hanawon as "something of a cross between a trade school and a halfway house" and use harsher terms like "detention center."⁸ One article that refers to the camps as government resettlement centers still uses the term "inmates" regarding the North Koreans sent there.⁹ After reading through paragraphs admiring the facility's attempts to support former North Koreans, one article mentions that, "The education period is required for defectors after they undergo a three-month interrogation procedure held by South Korea's National Intelligence Service. The process is used to determine whether defectors are spies from Pyongyang."¹⁰ While the South Korean government has dealt with North Korean spies since the peninsula's division, excusing a reasonable amount of distrust regarding refugees, Hanawon's use as an interrogation center suggests that the camp uses a much more ideology driven re-education method than many seem to assume.

Despite these issues, the voices of the Koreans who left the North, either during the occupation or those who defected later in life, provide a crucial window into what occurred in Seoul during the summer of 1950. While the experiences of those who

⁷ *Ibid.*, 248-249.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁹ Caroline Gluck, "Korean Defectors Learn Basics," BBC News, May 27, 2002, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2006411.stm>

¹⁰ Shim, "North Korean Defectors in South Korea Leave Detention Center Misinformed, Says Report."

supported and benefited from communist control may not be uncovered until North Korea changes its policies on censoring information or even until reunification occurs (if ever), these oral histories are the closest scholars can get to understanding what happened during the summer of 1950. As early as 1951, American academics were already publishing the experiences of Korean men and women who had faced the occupation, and despite the glaringly anti-communist angle of these early works, the interviews revealed a number of significant trends.¹¹ These interviews reveal that the occupation of Seoul gave many Koreans hope while terrifying many others. Some aspects of the North Korean government appealed to some of Seoul's citizens, such as justice against former collaborators and greedy landlords. Despite the growing number of Koreans willing to at least tolerate communism, the occupying government's efforts to both control and win over the city while implementing communism caused disorder and turmoil for many others. By examining selected oral histories and documents that discuss the occupation, these experiences can be woven into the currently lacking Korean War narrative.

The Reds Take a City

As a compilation of interviews with Koreans who survived the occupation, *The Reds Take a City*, offers vital information regarding the underappreciated event. Published in 1951, as the Korean War shifted into a never-ending stalemate, *The Reds Take a City* stands as one of the only English language works that focuses primarily on

¹¹ John W. Riley and Wilbur Schramm, *The Reds Take a City*.

the occupation of Seoul. Employed by the United States Airforce during the war, sociology professor John W. Riley and renown communications specialist Wilbur Schramm, worked together to assess the occupation of Seoul.¹²

While the major value of the book is its eleven interviews with occupation survivors, the authors also include their own commentary on the situation. Riley and Schramm's war-era insight is obviously valuable to contemporary historians and the book also contains a lengthy foreword and an intriguing translator's note. Every piece included in the book, from the translation notes to the conclusion, offers insight into Korean War-era attitudes on the occupation. Clearly from their era, the included pieces display the prevalent anti-communist rhetoric that America and its allies frequently employed against the enemy during the Cold War. Historian Charles Armstrong has suggested that the authors' work on the occupation of Seoul "offered an unprecedented opportunity for Americans to study the 'psychology of communism'" as men such as Schramm and Riley had access to those who had "lived through the ninety-day communist occupation."¹³ As a relic of its time, the book admittedly has major historiographical flaws, but for this thesis, it is an indispensable source for uncovering the events that took place in Seoul during the occupation.

The Reds Take a City stands as an impressive work detailing the effects of a capitalist city under communist occupation, and it continues to stand as a suitable source regarding the reactions of South Korea's allies as much of the peninsula turned red.

¹² *Ibid.*, vii.

¹³ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 38.

Despite the work's attempt to academically analyze the occupation, the interview pool included only those who were in conflict with the occupying government. While many of the reviews on the book focused on the alarming content the authors incorporated, praising Riley and Schramm for their fascinating warning of the dangers of communism, a smaller number of reviews point out the work's anti-communist slant. These reviews blasted the book for drowning in McCarthyism, providing insight into the diversity of attitudes regarding Cold War rhetoric but also serving as a window into the complicated nature of analyzing oral histories compiled during the Korean War. Riley and Schramm's anti-communist predisposition, likely compounded by their employment by the military, buries much of the occupation of Seoul's history under stories of fear and suffering and anti-communist rhetoric.

Although it was written in 1952, Wilbert B. Dubin's review of *The Reds Take a City* explains the work surprisingly well to a post-Cold War audience, stating that "one should not expect to find in this book a detailed record of the Communists' short-lived occupation of Seoul or an analysis of their plans for this intended "North-South" capital."¹⁴ Steeped so deeply in anti-communist rhetoric, Riley and Schramm fail to analyze much of the actual implementation of the occupation, focusing instead on the perceived horrors of communism. Dubin's review further explains that the work portrays "the plight of the intellectuals, bureaucrats and others whose status attracted the Communists' attention" pointing out that *Reds Take a City* falsely implies that this was

¹⁴ Wilbert B. Dubin, "Reviewed Work: The Reds Take a City. The Communist Occupation of Seoul, With Eyewitness Accounts by John W. Riley, Wilbur Schramm and Hugh Heung-wu Cynn," *Pacific Affairs* 25, no. 2 (June 1952): 186.

the common experience for all classes within Seoul. Dubin's review succinctly demonstrates why the oral histories from this work hardly represent the experience of the average citizen of Seoul, a noteworthy point when similarly utilizing oral histories to understand the occupation's history. Although the review is critical of the book's lack of class representation and the absence of a sophisticated analysis of the situation, Dubin's review points out the work's most useful attribute for post-Cold War scholars. Dubin notes that through their anti-communist focus, Riley and Schramm included a considerable amount of information regarding how the North Koreans conducted "psychological warfare" within occupied Seoul.¹⁵ Impressed by this, Dubin suggests studying the use of North Korean propaganda to deal with political turmoil elsewhere.

Setting the tone of the book, *The Reds Take a City* begins with the question, "what have we learned from the attempted Communist aggression in Korea?"¹⁶ Written by the authors' colleague, Frederick W. Williams, the book's foreword depicts the occupation of Seoul as a cautionary tale. Williams dramatically warns readers that "here, then, is the lesson in Communist intentions, intentions which are being consistently planned for execution in every home – in city and on farm – around the world. In your home, too!"¹⁷ Although the foreword makes it clear that *The Reds Take a City* is a work of anti-communist rhetoric, its unique focus on the occupation of Seoul provides a useful source of information on the event. Riley and Schramm aimed to assess North Korea's actions in Seoul, and despite its political motivation, their initial ambition left the final

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Riley and Schramm, *The Reds Take a City*, v.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

project rich with detail.¹⁸ Williams' addition to the book explains Riley and Schramm's methods while also disclosing the details behind the American government's attempt to study the enemy. Further validating the work's enduring value, Williams reveals the abundance of sources the two authors had access to, such as hundreds of oral histories, classified American and South Korean materials, the expertise of local Korean academics, and even precious documents left behind by the North Koreans.¹⁹ While *The Reds Take a City* includes dramatic passages that sound ridiculous to the ears of readers over half a century after the war, its importance as a genuine relic of the occupation and the Cold War, is undeniable.

In the foreword, Williams advises that while the book sought to understand the occupation, the team created to assess it did not fully begin its work until Seoul had already been reclaimed by the South.²⁰ By the time Riley and Schramm began documenting experiences, Inchon Landing had already occurred and the North Koreans had been successfully pushed north of the 38th parallel (at least until the Chinese eventually entered the conflict.) The fact that the situation had changed so dramatically before the interviews were conducted is worth noting. Had these interviews taken place during the occupation, it would have been easier to assess how Koreans felt about the possibility of the country being reunited under communism. By the time these interviews were conducted though, the UN had made its position clear by coming to South Korea's aid, an action that must have drastically changed the atmosphere in Seoul. By 1951,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, vi-vii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vi.

American and UN forces had made it clear that they would commit considerable military force to ensure Seoul to remain under ROK control.

As an important source uncovering the occupation of Seoul, even the book's translator's note is surprisingly significant. Translator Hugh Heung-wu Cynn, who translated each story from Korean to English, expended his one-page note to mostly denounce the evils of the communists. Cynn's note leaves the impression that the translator was either passionately anti-communist or that he felt compelled to portray himself as such while employed by Americans. Writing exactly a year after the occupation of Seoul, Cynn's note invokes rhetoric hauntingly similar to the post-war propaganda later used by North Korea, stating that Korea had been divided by the exploitation of "an imperialistic neighbor."²¹ While it may feel to a post-Cold War reader that Cynn was criticizing South Korea's imperialistic allies, it becomes clear that the translator was attacking North Korea's relationship with the USSR, as he further adds that "the weapons used by this neo-imperialist are ideological and military. The communists are destroying humanity wherever they go in the name of saving humanity."²² Cynn's rhetoric of imperialists ruining Korea is almost jarring to modern readers used to similar phrases used by, rather than against, communist regimes. In the note's closing, *The Reds Take a City* warns readers once again, stating that "this is the foreshadow of what may come to other countries and peoples unless imperialistic Communism is driven out beyond the pale of human society." Cynn is mentioned in Williams' foreword as a

²¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

²² *Ibid.*

faithful translator “now studying and working in the United States” and considering his attitude throughout the note, there is an unconfirmed possibility that Cynn’s outspoken disgust with communism influenced his translations.²³

While *The Reds Take a City* was undeniably an anti-communist work, its analysis allows historians to move beyond the common binary of communism vs. anti-communism. The oral histories used in this thesis, even those from propaganda-heavy works, demonstrate that the everyday lives of average citizens depended on a deeper meaning than whether or not they supported communism. While the ideological warfare influenced their lives greatly, their experience cannot be simply summed up by their political affiliation.

Oral Histories from *The Reds Take a City*

With the opinions of those who worked on the book already providing considerable insight into the occupation, it is unsurprising that the oral histories included in the work offer rich, crucial information. The stories of those who experienced the occupation first-hand reveal the drama of such an incident, but also its more mundane aspects such as demonstrating how North Korean forces attempted to run the occupied city. The interview of Chin-Ho Yu, for example, begins with the note that the communists targeted him for his role in framing the Republic of Korea’s constitution.²⁴

²³ *Ibid.*, vii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

As the North Korean army took control of Seoul, their attempt to proceed with the communist ideology that they had embraced and promoted, meant openly ousting and punishing their political enemies. Where the ROK government disappointed and angered South Koreans by continuing to employ former collaborators, the communist government was compelled to strike against Koreans such as Yu in order to stake its legitimacy as Korea's rightful government.

Yu's interview begins with his recollection of the skirmishes between North and South Korea as he attempts to convey the intense shock felt by Seoul's inhabitants as the North Korean army descended on the area. Even from a considerably privileged position in South Korean society, Yu only learned of the North Korean attack over the 38th parallel from Seoul's newspapers.²⁵ Like many others living in the area, Yu struggled to process the reality of the attack, even as the sounds of fighting reached the city. One of the most compelling recurring themes throughout many of the interviews is the sense of shock and disbelief that many felt.

While Yu had access to internal information regarding the brewing civil war, he remained lost in shock until he could no longer deny that communist forces had in fact entered Seoul. Yu's explanation of the occupation's eve reveals that the ROK government had been ill-equipped to defend the capital, as even those with strong connections to the government were left depending on the radio and local news outlets. Yu further adds that local radio stations failed to prepare and guide South Koreans during

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

the turmoil, lamenting that “greatly troubled, I kept my seat by the radio, but except for Defense Minister Shin’s short address at about midnight, there was no news or commentary of any kind.”²⁶ According to Yu, it was a colleague, rather than the radio, who informed Yu that the nearby town of Chunchon had been taken by the North Koreans.²⁷ Faced with the fact that the communists were successfully taking nearby villages, Yu’s shock transformed into fear.

Despite Yu’s access to information, the shock that Koreans like him felt demonstrates both how efficiently and swiftly the communists took Seoul but also how such an attack affected those directly in its path. Yu references the early skirmishes between the two Koreas, explaining that he “did not know whether the puppets had started a real war between north and south, or whether this war was nothing more than a large-scale quarrel over the 38th line.”²⁸ The months of sporadic skirmishes over the 38th parallel had evidently numbed locals to the brewing conflict.

Yu was convinced that the communists would never dare to risk the wrath of the United States by attacking the South.²⁹ While North Korea and its allies were initially cautious, by the spring of 1950 both Stalin and Mao had given Kim Il Sung their endorsement to attempt to reunite the peninsula by force. Even Mao, who had been particularly wary of American intervention in Asia, assured Kim that, “as regards the Americans, there is no need to be afraid of them. The Americans will not enter a third

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

world war for such a small territory.”³⁰ While South Korea’s relationship with the US had protected the country for a time, it had also blinded many to the determination of North Korea to reunify the country on its own terms.

Yu also describes how local ROK soldiers regularly boasted during the months that led up to the occupation, claiming that their forces would soon control North Korea and reunite the country.³¹ While Yu states that he was well aware of the ROK Army’s ineptness thanks to his connections within the government, it is reasonable that the general confidence of South Korean soldiers encouraged a false sense of security among civilians. Yu also mentions that southern newspapers and radio announcers falsely proclaimed that American Air Force had swept into the region, preventing the North Korean Army from continuing towards the city.³² With so much misinformation circulating throughout the area, along with the general shock regarding the situation, it is unsurprising that many locals struggled with the reality that Seoul was under an impending attack by the North Koreans.

Yu’s interview also discusses that the Seoul Police Bureau and other state agencies were simply abandoning the city as quickly as possible.³³ Those who recognized their status as enemies of the North Korean state were acutely aware of the dangerousness of the situation, and Yu suggests that they dominated access to vehicles, leaving ordinary citizens behind as they fled the city. Even as a prominent professor with connections to

³⁰ “Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinski regarding meeting with Kim Il Sung.” May 12, 1950. *Cold War International History Project*. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112980>.

³¹ *The Reds Take a City*, 8.

³² *Ibid.*, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

the government, Yu came close to being left behind until an acquaintance allowed him to cram into one of the last taxis leaving the city (with eight other men already stuffed into it.)³⁴

Yu's status as a supporter of the ROK government and a member of the elite was transcended by the chaotic nature of the takeover, as policy makers left even men like him to scramble for survival. Yu's personal experience and connections paint a chaotic picture of the first days of the city's occupation. As he scrambled to leave the city, the professor chanced upon a group of panicked government officials. The men, Yu included, expressed that "it was maddening, after all we had talked so much about the puppets and the probability of attack, and had believed in our government and in our National Defense army, that in less than two days we had reached our present desperate situation."³⁵ The men's observation demonstrates the enormous disappointment citizens felt as the city fell, especially for those who had helped to create and run the fairly new Republic of Korea. As the occupation began, interviews such as Yu's explain how Seoul's citizens dealt with the disappointment and utter shock, as their entire government bolted south. Yu ends his interview lamenting that "who could have known that Seoul would be left to the iron heels of the enemy for ninety days?"³⁶

The Reds Take a City also contains an interview with another local professor. Kun-Ho Lee, who not only witnessed the beginning of the occupation, but remained in Seoul during the entire ninety days. Lee's memories of the event echo Yu's, as he

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

explains the chaos and shock among his family and friends through their common attitude of “let come what may; if not death, it will be life.”³⁷ According to Lee, occupying forces promptly decorated the city with pro-communist flyers and posters. By remaining in the city, Lee witnessed first-hand how North Korean forces dealt with the opposition. Referring to the People’s Courts as the “liquidation of reactionaries,” he accuses the courts of being publicity stunts where participants felt pressured to support all allegations.³⁸ Considering Lee’s pre-War position as a well-known anti-communist, it is unsurprising that he expected little justice from the courts. Despite his issues with the occupying forces though (along with his reputation and published works attacking communism) Lee remained safe within Seoul until several weeks before the occupation ended, when he decided to flee rather than join their army.³⁹

Providing a helpful timeline of events, Lee explains that about three weeks into the occupation, the occupying government shifted its focus away from winning over the locals; surprised by the United Nation’s swift and severe response to their attack, Lee claims that the North Korean forces began to target problematic individuals.⁴⁰ News-reporter Chul-Hoe Koo’s experience suggests that as the occupation went on, North Korean forces became harsher and hastier. It was not until August 12th that communist forces arrested Koo, for his role as a former candidate for the South Korean national assembly.⁴¹ With ROK and American forces holding onto a chunk of South Korea known

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

as the Pusan Perimeter, communist forces were tightening their hold on Seoul, lashing out at potential capitalist-supporters such as Koo.

Chin-Ho Yu's interview portrays the communists as the enemy, but his stance on communism is left somewhat murky despite his role as a framer of the ROK constitution. Despite referring to the communists as puppets, Yu conveys a moderate stance on the situation rather than the shallow attitude of an anti-communist alarmist. Yu condemns both sides of the war, complaining that "the leftists are battling and pig-headed" while the right suffers from "feudal leaning and ideological poverty."⁴² Contrastingly, Sin-Duk Whang, a teacher in Seoul, refers to the North Koreans with the less flattering nickname "the Red Satans."⁴³ Forcefully moved to Pyongyang by North Korean forces, Whang's interview is far from sympathetic towards the communist government, as she accuses the communist government of manipulation and constant massacres.⁴⁴ Although she had been under who she also refers to as the "cruel puppets" for a month before communist forces moved her north, her interview focuses exclusively on her own torment under the occupation. Whang's interview demonstrates that her personal trauma at the hands of communist forces shaped much of her personal perception of the occupation.

Kun-Ho Lee makes his anti-communist stance clear, as he suggests that their seizure of personal property was possibly an attempt to gather "special presents to Stalin."⁴⁵ He further explains that "these Communists are the real exploiters and enemies

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

of the people” adding that the character of Bolshevism includes animalism, sadism, and deception and that “communism is not one of those political ideas which can be appraised on the same level with countless others. It is an eternal enemy of the human race.”⁴⁶

Lee’s disgust with communism, notably less than a year after the occupation, is clear as he ends his interview with a warning, “look straight at the revealed evil of the Reds.

There can be no compromise, no concession. Here is the clear need for battle. We may have to sacrifice everything, but only by winning this battle can we keep alive the hope for man.”⁴⁷

The interviews in *The Reds Take a City* are undoubtedly the richest source of information on the occupation, as they go into depth discussing how South Korean citizens survived such an ordeal. Nevertheless, every interview used in the book supported the ROK and opposed the occupation. Although they provide little more than the pro-South Korean understanding of the conflict, these stories fill many of the gaps in the occupation’s narrative.

Korean-American Interviews

The Korean American Historical Society’s Oral History Project is a collection of interviews of first generation Korean-Americans living in the Pacific Northwest. Most of the interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011 with elderly Korean-Americans

⁴⁶ Ibid., 63-64.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 64.

who experienced many of Korea's twentieth-century events before re-locating to Washington State. While some of those interviewed were more focused on events in the US, or simply too young to have experienced the Korean War, several men and women were raised in Seoul during the US and North Korean occupations. With the eldest person interviewed still in his teens during the occupation, this set of interviews differs subtly from those in *The Reds Take a City*. While *The Reds Take a City* featured government officials, professors, and reporters, the Korean American Historical Society's interviews represent the young adults and children of the occupation.

While Robert Hyungchan Kim's memories of the war reiterate many of the experiences detailed in *The Reds Take a City*, his situation is somewhat unique as his family faced the occupation as former citizens of North Korea. Kim's parents had been former landlords who had also openly collaborated with the Japanese. By the late 1940s, the terror that landlords in China had faced was well-known and families such as Kim's fled North Korea as it transitioned into a communist state.⁴⁸ Relocating to Seoul in 1948, his family settled in the area until the occupation forced them to flee once again. While discussing his family's plight, Kim briefly mentions that Seoul was the main destination for most of the Korean refugees fleeing communism. Kim explains that while his family remained in North Korea for a few years, his "brother came down to Seoul about a year and a half earlier than us, because my brother was branded as [a] Japanese collaborator immediately after Korea's liberation because everybody in town. . . knew that he worked

⁴⁸ Robert Hyungchan Kim, interviewed by Woonkyung Yeo and Moon-Ho Jung, Bellingham, WA, December 17, 2009.

with [the] Japanese military.”⁴⁹ Kim further elaborates that Koreans living in Manchuria were also resettling in Seoul rather than the nearer Pyongyang. While the Chinese reclaimed Manchuria, after Japanese forces were defeated in WWII, the Chinese Communist Party quickly gained control of the area. Since many local Koreans had collaborated with the occupying Japanese, local Koreans feared the CCP.⁵⁰ With North Korea also “going red,” Seoul became the closest capitalist destination for refugees fleeing communism.

Many Korean refugees were relocating to Seoul prior to the occupation, and accounts of the period such as Kim’s demonstrate that refugees were sharing their fears and anxieties of communism with Seoul’s growing populace as terrifying rumors of brutality preceded the North Korean army. Refugee families such as Kim’s, who had fled the North, were convinced that they would be put to death if the Northern government encountered the family. Kim’s story reveals that even Koreans who had fled the North well before the war had begun feared retribution for immigrating. As a testament to how profoundly terrified many Koreans were of such retribution, Kim explains how his own family spent the first few days of the occupation hiding inside their home’s crawl-space.

With so many refugees fleeing the communists in both Manchuria and North Korea, Seoul’s citizens were well-informed of the potential danger marching towards the city. While many, such as Kim’s family, feared and mistrusted the communist government, others in Seoul welcomed the army. As Kim details the first few days of the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

occupation, he recounts that his family had sent him out of the crawl space and into Seoul to investigate the situation, trusting that his young age would keep him safe from suspicion.⁵¹ Only four days after the Korean War had begun, Kim found Seoul filled with North Korean tanks and troops, but more interestingly, he witnessed “a lot of girls – high school girls, college girls... shouting to welcome North Korean soldiers into the city”⁵² Kim’s amazement regarding the number of girls celebrating the North’s victory is fascinating, as it suggests that this was out of the ordinary. Kim’s observation verifies to some degree, the claim made by revisionist historians that some women in Seoul were impressed and interested in North Korea’s policies regarding gender equality.⁵³

Kim’s memories also provide evidence of how prevailing gender norms influenced the lives of women during the occupation. Kim and the male members of his family prepared to secretly escape from Seoul as the communists gained control of the city, while leaving behind wives and sisters who could then protect family property.⁵⁴ In order to protect the family home, women faced the prospect of being permanently separated from their families.

While Robert Hyungchan Kim’s family was able to survive the occupation by leaving the city, others were unable to escape undetected. Namkung Johsel’s experience illustrates the tragic fate that prominent citizens of Seoul faced under the occupying government. Namkung had grown up in Pyongyang and his father had been a professor

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 27; Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 671.

⁵⁴ Robert Hyungchan Kim, interviewed by Woonkyung Yeo and Moon-Ho Jung, Bellingham, WA, December 17, 2009

with an American PhD in theology.⁵⁵ Despite his father's efforts to relocate the family to Seoul at the end of WWII, Namkung's father was unable to escape North Korean forces.⁵⁶ While he had initially been safe in the capital, when the occupation began, the North Korean government sought him out almost immediately. Namkung recalls that at first the North Koreans diplomatically approached his family, asking the distinguished professor to voluntarily relocate to Pyongyang to be used for propaganda targeted towards Christians. The communists wanted Namkung's father to help entice Christians to embrace the new government and ideology by broadcasting that "Koreans in North Korea [are] allowed to worship."⁵⁷ Namkung's mother convinced the communist officials to wait several days and allow her husband to prepare for his voluntary return to Pyongyang. While her actions had actually been an attempt to stall the communists from taking her husband, the officials returned before the professor could successfully escape south. Found hidden in the family's wood pile, the North Korean agents captured Namkung's father, forcefully taking him to Pyongyang. The fate of his father is unknown as Namkung claims that his family never heard from him again. The Korean War's sudden outbreak altered Seoul from the safe-haven it had been for those fleeing the communists. Families such as Namkung's and Kim's were suddenly forced to flee again or face the wrath of a government that now regarded their families as enemies of the people.

⁵⁵ Namkung Johsel, interviewed by Moon-Ho Jung, Seattle, WA, November 11, 2008.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

William Se Heung Kang's experience differs from Namkung and Kim's as he grew up in Seoul and experienced the occupation as a local. Only ten years old in 1950, Kang's interview also presents the narrative of the occupation through the eyes of a child. His recollection demonstrates a shock and detachment similar to what older Koreans explained throughout other interviews. Kang's memories detail how children living in Seoul reacted to the events as he explains that "even the bomb explosion in the Korean War, we were not terrified with that – we watched it with excitement (we did not know what it was). Yet I cried when [my] elementary school was bombed and burned."⁵⁸ While seemingly naïve, Kang's childlike failure to understand the situation is almost identical to the shocked reactions of many adults such as Yu from *The Reds Take a City*.

Kang's family remained in Seoul throughout the entire occupation, unlike many of the others interviewed. His family had been unable to move south until well after the initial occupation, finally leaving the area as Chinese troops secretly poured into the peninsula to help North Korea retake Seoul.⁵⁹ When Kang explains that his family remained in Seoul until December of 1950, the interviewer immediately asks, "So you could not escape from Seoul earlier than [the] 1.4 retreat. That means that you stayed in Seoul until then. Didn't you have any difficulties in Seoul?"⁶⁰ The fact that the interviewer locks onto this particular detail of Kang's recollection is noteworthy. On the surface, the question is logical, considering that Kang's extended family had been former landlords living in North Korea. Kang assures the interviewer that while his family was

⁵⁸ William Se Heung Kang, interviewed by Woonkyung Yeo, Seattle, WA, March 3, 2010.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

in some danger due to their North Korean accent, they simply “had to be very cautious” to avoid any issues with the communists.⁶¹

Another refugee, Jean Kim, provides strikingly vivid details of the war and the occupation as she describes the ordeal that her family experienced as communist forces entered the city.⁶² A refugee living in Seoul during the war, her family had fled North Korea (also escaping her abusive father) in the late 1940s. Revealing why families like Jean Kim’s remained in Seoul throughout the occupation, she bitterly brings up the South Korean government’s disastrous strategy of blowing up the Han River Bridge. Panicking as the North Korean army moved closer, Syngman Rhee’s men detonated explosives across Seoul’s main bridge as they fled south, stranding many civilians in the city.⁶³ The destruction of the bridge devastated those left behind in Seoul as it trapped families like Jean Kim’s. Her narrative vividly illustrates the experiences of those unable to escape after the bridge collapsed, explaining that “the South Korean government blew the Han river bridge to prevent the enemy's chase but it kept most of [the] citizens in the hands of the enemies who showed up in Seoul within 3 days of the war [and] occupied, controlled and killed many citizens for three months.”⁶⁴ For Kim, her experience with the occupation had been colored vividly by the trauma she experienced as the communists captured the city as well as her disappointment with the ROK government’s actions.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Jean Kim, interviewed by Airyang Park, Seattle, WA, May 8, 1998.

⁶³ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 62.

⁶⁴ Jean Kim.

Ikhwan Choe's interview is significantly different from the others, as he not only lived in North Korea during the beginning of the war, but he also fought as a soldier on both sides.⁶⁵ Although Choe experienced the war far from Seoul, he saw firsthand how the communists implemented their ideology and he also witnessed North Korean attitudes regarding the occupation of Seoul from a significant position as a fellow North Korea. While much of his interview strays away from Seoul, his knowledge of the military and communist conduct provides clues regarding the occupation.

Choe's insight into the two opposing armies is surprising, as he reveals that despite his disillusionment with communism, they tended to treat their soldiers considerably better than their enemies had. Although he outright fled the People's Army after being pressured to join, he favorably contrasts them against the South Korean Army. He reveals that his time serving in the Republic of Korea's army was dreadful. Choe discloses that the ROK leaders verbally abused lower ranked soldiers while, contrastingly, in the North Korean army, "even the officers did not use low forms of speech to soldiers. They called the soldiers "comrade" and never used the slangs... usually their hierarchy was weaker than what existed between seniors and juniors in Japanese middle school."⁶⁶ Choe further laments that the ROK army "always used abusive languages and beat soldiers."⁶⁷ Choe's recollections verify what historians have claimed about the two opposing armies. According to Cumings, "ROKA officers

⁶⁵ Ikhwan Choe, interviewed by Woonkyung Yeo, Seattle, WA, January 9, 2010.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

exploited their own men, and beat them mercilessly for infractions” prompting large numbers of desertions.⁶⁸

While soldiers of the Republic of Korea frequently faced misery and injustice, the northern government promoted and enforced a sense of equality that resonated with many lower-class Koreans. Choe makes it clear that he experienced first-hand North Korea’s social policies, but there are few hints in any of the oral histories regarding how communist economic policies were implemented in occupied Seoul. Land reform policies had done especially well in North Korea (surprisingly without provoking much violence) while the government promoted the policies as Kim Il Sung’s gifts to the peasants.⁶⁹ The North Korean government had already experienced how Korean citizens in the north would react to the implementation of such major social and economic changes, so it is unsurprising that similar policies were swiftly initiated within occupied Seoul.

As a former North Korean, Choe’s experiences provided him with a unique vantage point into the communist government’s methods. The authors of *The Reds Take a City*, asserted that there was a visible pattern in communist methods for capturing and governing regions, warning that:

From the very moment of entry, the actions of the invaders followed a carefully detailed blueprint for a Communist state of Korea, to which Seoul was to be the key. It followed the pattern worked out during the five Communist years in North Korea, a pattern which, in turn, found its model in Moscow and the European satellites... In the operation of the plan during Seoul’s ninety days of Red occupation, we have the blueprint of the birth and development of a Sovietized state. It provides one of the best glimpses behind the iron curtain that we have

⁶⁸ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War*, 14.

⁶⁹ Charles Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 145.

been permitted, and its understanding is, of first importance to all peoples who still enjoy a free world.⁷⁰

Although their words are dramatic, there is merit within their comparison to North Korea's initial years and the occupation of Seoul. Riley and Schramm's assertion that the occupation served as a model of communist policies, is evident through the experiences of those who witnessed the occupation, as they share striking similarities with what many North Korean refugees also witnessed. The North Korean government visibly stuck to a formula with how it enacted communist policies across Korea. Understanding the existence of such patterns of operation, interviews like Choe's serve as valuable evidence for the interpretation of the occupation.

Yunsung Lee's interview also comes from the perspective of life in the North, but his experiences shed light more on how the new government implemented communist policies and social change at the local level. Lee offers some context to the occupation, by describing how North Koreans experienced a change in the social atmosphere several months after the area's liberation from Japan. Explaining the change, Lee states that "when high school social science teachers lecture, when they explicate Marx and Communism, it was like a revival meeting at a church." For Lee, right-leaning students like himself felt increasingly uneasy with the ideological fervor that swept North Korea. Lee's experience, although somewhat removed from the occupation, offers some clues

⁷⁰ Riley and Schramm, *The Reds Take a City*, 5.

towards unpacking how many of Seoul's citizens likely felt as the city fell under communist control.

Lee also provides a vivid recollection of the communist assault on South Korea and the takeover of Seoul from the North Korean point of view.⁷¹

On June 25th morning, around eleven o'clock, I turned on the radio. The announcer, with an upset voice, said that they will broadcast critical news. Until then, not once an anchor broadcasted with such a tense voice. Thinking that something might have happened at the 38 parallel, I waited until twelve. At twelve o'clock sharp, when the bell rang, (it is still unforgettable) it said "at 2 o'clock this morning, in the gray of the daybreak, South Korean (Nam Choson) puppet military forces launched an invasion of North Korea in front of the 38 parallel. Then it said our brave people's army promptly resisted and is fighting back, and now we are the ones who are counterattacking them down to the South. Since the North was good at lying, I interpreted on my own; you guys started the war and are being chased now. Only the half of my interpretation was right. It was right that the North started, but my belief on the South coming into the North was a big misunderstanding. I overestimated the South. I was deceived by South Korean politicians' bragging about their situation, listening to the South Korean broadcastings and the US military's Far East Broadcast Company. They, people like Yi Pom-Sok, said that once the fight between the North and the South begins, when the war begins, our brave Korean military will move north quickly, have lunch in Pyongyang, eat dinner in Sinŭiju, and liberate North Korea. They said it will be a speedy war. I did not believe in everything, but I think I did overestimate South Korea.⁷²

Gripped by the shocking news that the ROK had failed to defeat communist troops, Lee listened carefully to the radio as North Korea continued its assault on the south. Struggling to believe that the People's Army was actually defeating ROK troops he was forced to face reality when his cherished Seoul radio station began to broadcast

⁷¹ Yun Seong Lee, interviewed by Woonkyung Yeo, Seattle, WA, April 26, 2010.

⁷² *Ibid.*

communist propaganda.⁷³ Devastated, and now isolated from outside news, Lee groaned, “how should I live if the Reds unify the country?”⁷⁴ The swift success of the People’s Army and the loss of Seoul seemed to communicate to many that Korea was about to be reunified under communism.

The Summer of Terror

Through these interviewees, the communist takeover of Seoul was an important period of the war. On the larger scale, communist control over Seoul gave the North Koreans temporary legitimacy while also giving hope to those who opposed a capitalistic government. For Seoul’s citizens, the occupation meant new levels of chaos and confusion as both sides of the war transformed Seoul into a battleground.

To narrate how the occupation ended, the final chapter discusses the events that occurred both inside Seoul and beyond the city’s borders as North Korean control waned. As the Americans and South Koreans prepared for Inchon Landing, the military feat that would successfully expel the communists from Seoul, those living within the city faced a new, terrifying period of the Korean War. With South Korea and its allies especially nervous after North Korea’s June assault and North Korean troops desperate to hold onto the captured region, civilians suffered enormously. American and South Korean forces lashed out harshly towards potential communists as they began to retake the region,

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

leading to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians.⁷⁵ The beginning of the occupation may have been more memorable to those living in Seoul, but the existing silence regarding the event's conclusion must also be examined to fully understand the entirety of the occupation.

⁷⁵ Hanley and Chang, "Summer of Terror," 1-11.

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLE FOR KOREA'S SEOUL

While this thesis primarily concentrates on Seoul, this chapter expands its focus to the greater communist occupation of South Korea. While personal narratives convey the sense of panic and fear that erupted as communist forces captured Seoul, the events that occurred that summer elsewhere on the peninsula provide extra insight into the occupation's final weeks. Using this insight, this chapter strives to fill in the gaps in the occupation's narrative by detailing the events that led to Seoul's recapture, as well as the aftermath as American and ROK forces drove the communist government north.

Mere weeks after the June 25, 1950 outbreak of war, the DPRK had successfully taken over almost all of the Korean peninsula, reducing the anti-communist state of the Republic of Korea to a tiny region on the peninsula's south-eastern coast. The possibility of a Korea united under communism seemed certain as North Korean forces swiftly removed the ROK government from most of Korea. Despite their initial success, the communist government's chance to conduct reunification vanished as DPRK-controlled Seoul fell to American and ROK troops in late September of 1950.

One month into the occupation, the American government began to deploy troops into Korea, attempting to save the ROK by adding their forces to the defense of the area remaining under South Korean control. While this allowed American forces to eventually retake Seoul and return the southern half of the peninsula to the ROK, Syngman Rhee and General MacArthur began to more openly covet the chance to completely wipe out

North Korea.¹ MacArthur's zeal for annihilating the communist government combined with Syngman Rhee's thirst for control over a unified Korea and transformed the initial plan to simply retake the south into a total assault on the existence of the DPRK.²

Meanwhile, in Seoul, the People's Committees from the late 1940s, that had been dismantled by the ROK, had been able to reestablish under the communist government.³ Rather than being ruled by North Korean party members though, these Seoul-based committees were largely run by South Koreans.⁴ Now that the ROK government had fled, Seoul's once vibrant leftist groups could once again flourish in the former capital. On top of empowering the people's committees, the occupying forces also helped feed the growing numbers of poor living in the area, many of them refugees, by working to redistribute the region's rice supply.⁵ Documents reveal that communist forces were also able to smoothly enact land reform in South Korea (with surprisingly little violence) by placing many of the decisions regarding the land redistribution into the hands of local land owners and tenants.⁶ While for many in Seoul, the occupation had been an especially terrifying period of the war, for others who were able to benefit from the situation, the occupation had been a liberation.⁷

For a considerable number of Koreans, life in Seoul during the summer of 1950 was absolute hell. While the North Korean People's Army redistributed land, wealth, and

¹ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 85-87.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 668.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 669.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 677-678.

⁷ *Ibid.*

food, they left the “administration of justice in the hands of local peace preservation groups” which usually included people who had been political prisoners under the ROK government.⁸ Incensed ex-prisoners were allowed to release their rage onto the men and women who had supported the very regime that had imprisoned them. Kun-Ho Lee pointedly refers to the peace preservation groups and the people’s courts as the “liquidation of reactionaries.”⁹ Many of the stories in *The Reds Take a City*, such as Lee’s, reveal how the brutality of the peace preservation groups affected local opinions regarding the occupying forces. Lee’s grandmother recounted that without warning, government cadres would gather neighborhood residents to take part in people’s courts where they felt pressured to harshly judge accused rightists, unable to safely object to their executions.¹⁰ While the people’s committees had been enacted to empower citizens, in reality, they had mostly just increased tensions between Seoul’s citizens and the occupying government.

The occupying government quickly recognized the growing issues with the citizen-led groups. North Korea actively sought to discourage Seoul’s citizens from abusing the peace preservation system, as the government ordered soldiers to “strictly prohibit arrests and killings without cause” while also forbidding the rampant looting of religious and right-leaning buildings and homes.¹¹ While the communist government attempted to maintain what it referred to as “revolutionary order,” citizens inspired by

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The Reds Take a City*, 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 669-670.

both ideology and opportunity unleashed new levels of chaos in Seoul.¹² Despite the communists' attempts to reduce the chaos, oral histories reveal that the violence continued to influence how many in Seoul regarded the government. To locals such as Kun-Ho Lee and his grandmother, it was the North Korean government that fostered and allowed Seoul to suffer at the hands of the rampant kangaroo courts.

The few documents left behind by the occupiers, confirm that Koreans with ties to anything right-leaning had good reasons to be apprehensive towards the communist government. Families such as Robert Kim's, had suspected that the communists would seek to punish Koreans who had fled North Korea, and one document from July 16, 1950 confirms this, as it directed authorities to "punish spies who are from the North first."¹³ While Cumings argues that the document suggests that accused spies were merely interrogated and punished with property confiscation, it does verify that the government actively targeted expatriates.¹⁴

Offering clues concerning how and why the North Korean occupiers labeled some citizens as "rightists," one document reveals that the government had outlined factors that could bar a Korean from voting in upcoming elections: anyone who had worked with any government, organization, or political group that was in any way opposed to communism could be labeled a rightist.¹⁵ Also, anyone who had supported the American occupation through economic means as well as any Koreans who had been accused of collaboration

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 680-681.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 274-275.

with the Japanese, and as seen through the oral histories, large numbers of Koreans fell into these categories.¹⁶ While the occupation of Seoul may have been surprisingly liberating for many, the communist party had identified the state's enemy well before it took complete control of the city. With so many North Korean refugees in Seoul who understood the ease with which the communists could blacklist citizens, it is unsurprising that many were fearful of the occupation and chose to flee rather than remain under communist control.

For much of the occupation, many of the grievances expressed by locals, concerned the war rather than the communist government. North Korean reports reveal that peasants were grateful for the communist land reforms.¹⁷ The major complaints Seoul's citizens made mostly related to the war-time conditions such as the lack of food and suffering inflicted by the frequent air-raids.¹⁸ The biggest complaint many South Koreans had towards the communists was the government's regular expectation of corvée labor from the peasants without any benefits.¹⁹ Considering that the Americans held one of the best Air Forces in the world, following WWII, it is unsurprising that US retaliation came in the form of air-raids. American bombs devastated villages and led to an extremely large number of civilian deaths during the occupation.²⁰ The occupying government may have introduced positive social programs that benefited some, but

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 682-683.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 685.

²⁰ Suh, "Truth and Reconciliation in South Korea," 519.

American bombings combined with other aspects of the war (such as food shortages) to torment citizens.

Although the occupation itself had been conducted relatively smoothly, its final weeks were gripped by violence and chaos as American and ROK troops converged on the city. Communist forces became increasingly anxious as American and ROK forces moved towards Seoul and in response, the North Korean government began to hastily execute accused rightists.²¹ The American victory at Inchon Landing had produced a sense of panic and urgency within the occupied city and North Korean forces began to behave differently towards Seoul's citizens.²² A housewife in Seoul explained that, "at first, they were somewhat friendly to people, and it was only as the tide of the war turned against them, especially after the United Nations forces landed at Inchon, that they turned into devils doing every savagery."²³ Up until Inchon Landing, Seoul had been somewhat removed from the war's violence as most of the combat was concentrated in the far south. With the North Korean hold on most of the Korean peninsula reversed in mere days, the relationship between the communist occupiers and Seoul's citizens promptly deteriorated.

Many of the interviews in *The Reds Take a City* demonstrate how attitude of the invading government began to change as the communist lost patience with Seoul's remaining right-wing supporters. By mid-August, a month before communist Seoul would fall back into ROK hands, the occupying government began to crack down on

²¹ *The Reds Take a City*, 66.

²² *Ibid.*, 66-67.

²³ *Ibid.*, 68.

those they viewed as anti-communist “reactionaries.”²⁴ Cumings assures readers that “every soldier and official behaved like a political officer, using extensive face-to-face communications...” and that “when people were arrested it was done apologetically and always in terms of the necessity of locating some ‘outside enemy.’”²⁵ While this may have been the case in the beginning, a number of the interviews, especially those from accused reactionaries, recall smug, dismissive, and sometimes outright aggressive attitudes from arresting authorities. In many of the stories, especially those included in *The Reds Take a City*, the soldiers lie to the accused to covertly lure them into prison. While Cumings’ suggestion of a well-behaved occupying army falls short of the truth, the interviews highlight the effect that the instability of communist control over South Korea had on the city’s peace. The closer American forces came to Seoul the worse life became for ordinary Koreans.

By mid-September, communist forces responded to the successful American invasion known as Inchon Landing by brazenly executing large numbers of accused rightists as well as American and South Korean prisoners of war.²⁶ While North Korean leadership repeatedly warned against executing POWs, Inchon Landing visibly unnerved communist forces. Before the retreat north, communist soldiers became increasingly worried about dealing with imprisoned political enemies and captured troops. The closer American and ROK forces came to Seoul, the more often communist soldiers chose to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁵ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 670.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 702-703.

execute both political and military prisoners. Days before American and ROK troops could even reach the city, occupied Seoul was beginning to fall apart.

Retaking South Korea: Cleansing Korea of Communism

The atrocities committed by Korean communists as they returned north and abandoned Seoul haunted the DPRK throughout the war. As the talks for a cease-fire began, the American government and South Korea attacked the communists' efforts in Seoul, using the mass executions and the rampant rumors of anti-rightist terror to condemn the DPRK.²⁷ While the ROK and the US highlighted these atrocities as leverage for reparations and retribution, in recent decades it has become apparent that during the occupation, large numbers of Korean civilians were massacred at the hands of American and South Korean troops. Although many of the more horrific massacres occurred hundreds of miles from Seoul, they are relevant to the occupation, as Seoul eventually would eventually face similar atrocities as troops moved towards the city.

While communist forces were settling into Seoul, the US began sending troops back into Korea, attempting to defend the final slice of the peninsula left under South Korean control. Fleeing the communist assault on the south, ROK troops could only hold onto a fifty-mile-wide region that included the coastal city of Pusan.²⁸ Figure 1 illustrates the Pusan Perimeter, within the blue line on Korea's south-east coast. Fortunately for

²⁷ Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, 245.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

ROK forces, the last bit of land under their control was adjacent to American-occupied-Japan, and US troops could fly directly into Pusan, thwarting North Korea's eager efforts to completely take the peninsula.²⁹ The months defending Pusan wore on American and ROK soldiers though, as North Korean troops spent much of the summer attempting to break through the Pusan Perimeter's defenses.

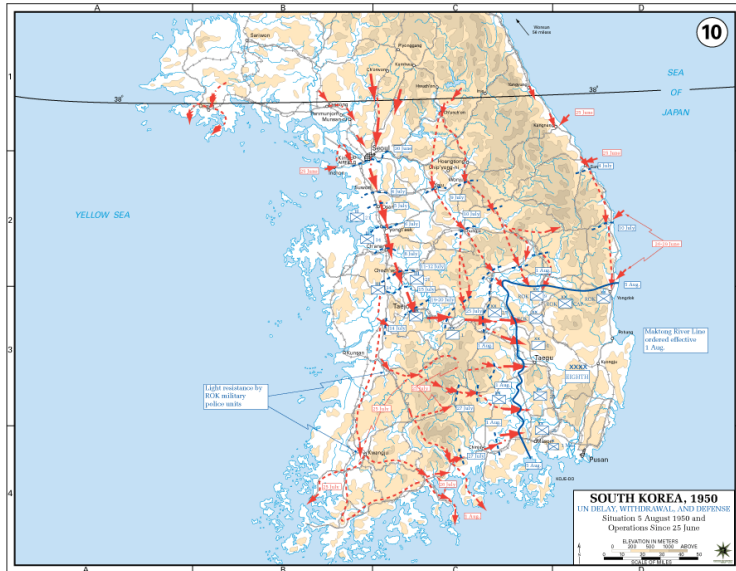


Fig. 1. Potter, William A. *South Korea, 1950: UN Delay, Withdrawal, and Defense*. West Point Department of History, West Point, NY. <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/Korean%20War>

Apparent in figure 2, the ROK army began conducting mass executions of political prisoners during the summer of 1950 as they fled to Pusan.³⁰ This photo, taken by a US army major one month into the occupation, demonstrates the actions taken against those accused of supporting communism.³¹ Considering that both the ROK army and the Americans had been attempting to wipe out the remaining pockets of communists during the march towards occupied Seoul, the accusation that innocent civilians were

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

³¹ George Wehrfritz and B.J. Lee, "Sins of the Brother," *Newsweek*, January 24, 2000, 46.

frequently included in the executions is likely. As the American and South Korean militaries began to retake the south, their attempts to thwart communist guerrillas caused soldiers to regard Korean civilians suspiciously. By the time the ROK would retake Seoul, the US military had already decided to use force against suspected communists, regardless of their status as civilians.



Fig. 2. Associated Press. *Execution of South Korean Political Prisoners*. c. July 1950. Digital image. Boston Globe, Boston. http://archive.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/06/remembering_the_korean_war_60.html

On July 26th, Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk received an important memo from the US Ambassador to South Korea, John Muccio.³² Classified until 1991, the memo reveals the military's exaggeration of the dangers caused by Korean refugees in the south, while also demonstrating how nervous the US military had become during the occupation. The memo informed Rusk that American forces in Korea were adopting a

³² American Embassy, "Letter from John J. Muccio to Dean Rusk, July 26, 1950," *No Gun Ri Digital Archives*, accessed June 20, 2017.

<http://nogunri.rit.albany.edu/omeka/items/show/2>.

risky approach regarding refugees due to their suspicion that communist forces had been manipulating the presence of refugees to thwart and attack American troops.³³ The memo further explained that the military planned to drop leaflets over refugees to warn them that if they moved from enemy territory towards ROK lines or traveled at night, they would be shot.³⁴ The memo (which has become controversial since declassification) demonstrates the troubling attitude the American military adopted regarding Korean civilians, an approach that would eventually influence the fight for Seoul.

In an ironic twist, while the memo blamed refugees for obstructing roadways and wandering too close to defense lines, they had only been in those problematic areas because US soldiers had pressured local Koreans to evacuate from their homes.³⁵ Historian Charles J. Hanley scornfully referred to the memo as a “clear statement of a theater-wide U.S. policy in July 1950 to open fire on approaching refugees” a decision that would lead to the massacres of innocent civilians. As American soldiers prepared to “cleanse” South Korea from communism, troops were ordered to open fire on suspicious refugees.³⁶ With the occupation of Seoul in full bloom, the regions closer to Pusan began to undergo a brutal ideological cleansing as soldiers fought to return it to the Republic of Korea.

As more official Korean War documents became declassified, the public became conscious of the atrocities committed by American soldiers during the war. One of the

³³ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

³⁵ Charles J. Hanley, “No Gun Ri: Official Narrative and Inconvenient Truths,” *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (December 2010): 590.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 600.

most infamous incidents, known as the No Gun Ri massacre, remained relatively unknown until the late 1990s.³⁷ Despite its late discovery, No Gun Ri has been considered by some as the precursor to the infamous My Lai Massacre in Vietnam, suggesting that No Gun Ri's censorship paved the way for such brutality to continue in later conflicts. By late July, the refugee crises in southern Korea had rapidly deteriorated as civilians fled the occupied regions. Although the US government continues to deny responsibility for the conflicting information that sent civilians into peril, individual soldiers have confirmed their role in evacuating South Koreans from their homes.³⁸

With Seoul's continued occupation, and the tension near the Pusan perimeter growing as North Koreans tried to eliminate the ROK's last stand, mistrust overcame their sympathy for refugees. Near the village of No Gun Ri, American soldiers ordered an airstrike on a large group of recently evacuated civilians, even after concluding they were unarmed refugees.³⁹ With about one hundred killed in the airstrike, the remaining refugees were forced to hide under a railroad tunnel-bridge while "U.S. soldiers then fired into both ends of the tunnels over a period of four days... resulting in approximately 300 additional deaths."⁴⁰ Rather than vanquishing the supposed communist guerillas that had been hiding among refugees, female survivors maintain that American forces had instead murdered a group of huddled women and children.⁴¹

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 595.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 598.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 590.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 590.

⁴¹ Suhi Choi, "Communicating Trauma: Female Survivors' Witnessing the No Gun Ri Killings," *Qualitative Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (2011): 27-28.

The existence of incidents such as No Gun Ri and other massacres reveal how chaotic the situation had become during the occupation, as American soldiers reacted appallingly towards Korean civilians, justifying their acts through their shared fear of communists hiding among the refugees. Rather than inspire the American public to harshly criticize the war, as the My Lai Massacre would a decade later, the incident stayed relatively hidden from public scrutiny. The revelation that such brutality had happened in Korea, brought a new element to the legacy of the My Lai Massacre, as many began to wonder if public knowledge of No Gun Ri could have prevented the later incident. Hugh C. Thompson, the American soldier famous for his attempt to save Vietnamese civilians during the My Lai Massacre, was particularly vocal about No Gun Ri's historical impact. Thompson condemned the censorship, suggesting that if the US government had been honest about No Gun Ri and dealt with its consequences "there would probably have been no My Lai."⁴² On the same note, the final days of the occupation of Seoul may also have been less traumatic if the international community had been aware of the recent massacres in southern Korea.

While the US government continues to insist that the killings at No Gun Ri occurred due to the unfortunate circumstances of the "fog of war" situation, supporters of the victims continue to dig up evidence that proves otherwise.⁴³ Owing to a determination to uncover American atrocities in Korea, there has been a resurgence in interest of this early point in the Korean War, which has provided more information regarding how

⁴² Hanley, "No Gun Ri: Official Narrative and Inconvenient Truths," 595.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 594.

American and ROK soldiers retook the peninsula and ended the occupation. The articles and newly unclassified documents detailing the summer of 1950 also give some insight into the North Korean side of the conflict. Inquiries into No Gun Ri reveal that after American soldiers fled the area, it was North Korean soldiers who came to the aid of the massacre's survivors.⁴⁴ While *The Reds Take a City* portrayed the communists as the antagonists of the occupation's narrative, it is interesting to see a scenario where communist forces had to rescue South Korean civilians from their supposed saviors.

While the No Gun Ri Massacre remained unexposed for decades, one month after the massacre at No Gun Ri, an American soldier named John Osborne published an article in *LIFE* magazine that discussed the on-going situation near the occupied zones.⁴⁵ Osborne explained in the article that America could not win a war against the communist if it only attacked through military means. His article moves past the typical critiquing of the overall war effort in Korea by disclosing that the army's current tactics have repeatedly led to the blatant slaughter of Korean civilians. Osborne states the military's unsympathetic and frequently cruel tactics instead led to massacres, "the blotting out of villages where the enemy *may* be hiding; the shooting and shelling of refugees who *may* include North Koreans in the anonymous white clothing of the Korean countryside."⁴⁶ Osborne's article also unveils the atrocities he witnessed from South Korean troops: "They murder to save themselves the trouble of escorting prisoners to the rear; they murder civilians simply to get them out of the way or to avoid the trouble of searching

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 611.

⁴⁵ John Osborne, "Guns Are Not Enough: Korea Teaches Us to Save Asia We Must Know About the People," *LIFE*, August 21, 1950, 77-85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

and cross-examining them.” Weeks away from Inchon Landing, Osborne’s confession came at a time when American soldiers had been suffering two months of constant assault from South Korean communist guerillas and North Korean soldiers. With the end of the occupation drawing nearer, the US military continued to use the same methods against the communists as they pushed into Seoul.

Atrocities were committed by forces on both sides of the conflict, but the violence caused by communist troops has been heavily stressed in American literature since the outbreak of the war (as seen in works such as *The Reds Take a City*.) The US government’s work to conceal incidents like No Gun Ri from both the public and the ROK, has also affected information on the final weeks of the occupation.⁴⁷ Although the No Gun Ri Massacre occurred far south of the occupied capital, it marks an important period in the war that affected communist Seoul’s final weeks. By August, the new anti-refugee stance of American soldiers had shocked both the enemy as well as the international community. Even American newspapers reported on the callous attitudes of US troops, with one New Jersey paper warning, “It is not the time to be a Korean, for the Yankees are shooting them all . . . nervous American troops are ready to fire at any Korean.”⁴⁸ With the knowledge that US soldiers were so callous towards Koreans, it is less surprising that the final weeks of the occupation were filled with an unprecedented amount of violence.

⁴⁷ Hanley, “No Gun Ri,” 602.

⁴⁸ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 705.

Landing in Inchon and Retaking Seoul

The one part of the occupation that has received considerable attention from scholars, has been its conclusion. Part of this due to the excellent documentation of the military feats that overcome the communists. While the feats at Inchon have captivated historians, who have already exhausted the subject thoroughly, the military feat is significant to the narrative of the occupation, as it explains how the communists lost Seoul and what occurred during the final days of communist Seoul. Figure 3 demonstrates the beginning of the end for the occupation as American tanks crashed through communist barricades and entered the city.



Fig. 3. Associated Press. *American Tank in Seoul*. Oct. 7th, 1950. Digital image. Boston Globe, Boston.

http://archive.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/06/remembering_the_korean_war_60.html

Seoul had been under communist control for three months by the time American forces could successfully move past merely protecting the Pusan Perimeter. After months

of struggling to maintain the perimeter, on September 15th, General Douglas MacArthur led the military feat that would restore the ROK's control over the southern half of the peninsula.⁴⁹ Inchon, a port only twenty-five miles from Seoul, offered American troops the chance to surprise the enemy with a massive military assault on the occupied city.⁵⁰ By striking at the port of Inchon, the US military brilliantly launched over 70,000 troops directly into the area surrounding Seoul.⁵¹ Although Kim Il Sung had been warned by the Chinese government that the US would most likely attempt this type of attack at one of the ports near Seoul, the choice of the difficult Inchon over other ports took the North Koreans by surprise and troops were able to infiltrate the occupied city.⁵² As one of the operations commanders explained, "Inchon may have been the worst possible place we could bring in an amphibious assault, but it was also the only place where our assault would carry out its purpose: to cut off and destroy the enemy."⁵³ Echoing the attack that had overcome the ROK in June, Inchon Landing altered the war significantly. After the success at Inchon it seemed possible that once again that Korea would be reunified, but now it would be under the guidance of a capitalist government.

Chul-Hoe Koo, one of the prisoners mentioned in chapter II, describes the panicked executions of political prisoners following the Inchon Landing. Arrested by occupation forces because of his reputation as a conservative reporter, Koo describes how the anxious communist forces dealt with prisoners unable to join the retreat north. The

⁴⁹ Levine, *Stalin's Last War*, 1168.

⁵⁰ Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, 85.

⁵¹ Levine, *Stalin's Last War*, 1247.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1234.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1172.

officers assured Koo and other sickly prisoners from the infirmary that “we are taking you to the army hospital to protect you. If we left you here, you may be massacred when the Americans and the remnant National army come.”⁵⁴ Rather than actually moving Koo and his sick fellow prisoners, they were told instead to line up and abruptly executed.⁵⁵ While Koo was able to hide under a friend’s body and eventually escape, there are countless other incidents where communist soldiers chose to execute prisoners rather than release those who had only committed political crimes. With the enemy at the gates, North Korean soldiers forced prisoners to move to Pyongyang.⁵⁶ In figure 4, American soldiers can be seen hiding from North Korean snipers during the chaotic battle to end the occupation.



Fig. 4. *Dresfor, Max. US Marines hiding from communist snipers. Sep 27, 1950.* Digital image, The Atlantic, Washington, D.C.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/02/the-extraordinary-career-of-photojournalist-max-desfor/470373/>

⁵⁴ *The Reds Take a City*, 95.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

With mines in the streets and executions behind doors, the liberation of Seoul was much more violent than the communist takeover three months before. UN forces from countries other than the US and South Korea complained about frequently witnessing unnecessary violence from ROK soldiers.⁵⁷ Reginald Thompson, a British journalist who had been accompanying UN forces in Korea, remarked darkly that the ROK army behaved so violently that “few people can have suffered so terrible a liberation.”⁵⁸ Even American troops vocalized their distaste with the violence in Seoul. One Arkansas marine named Carl Lamb has spoken out about his experience during Seoul’s liberation, where he was severely traumatized after witnessing a basement filled with the massacred bodies of North Korean POWs.⁵⁹ As figure 5 reveals, the battle devastated the city.



Fig. 5. Dresfor, Max. *UN Forces in Seoul*. Sep 27, 1950. Digital image, The Atlantic, Washington, D.C. <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/02/the-extraordinary-career-of-photojournalist-max-desfor/470373/>

⁵⁷ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 36.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Eric Longabardi, Kit R. Roane and Edward T. Pound, "A War of Memories," *U.S. News & World Report* 135, no. 15 (November 3, 2003): 28.

By September 25th, 1950, American and South Korean control of Seoul had been secured as US tanks poured into the area and communist forces fled north. With North Korean troops out of the way, the US and ROK governments began to concentrate on restoring the occupied areas. Experience in Germany and Japan had prepared the US army for the daunting feat of persuading local civilians to turn against the ideology of the defeated government.⁶⁰ With anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist education heavily pushed on Seoul's citizens throughout the three months of occupation, American and ROK forces worked to counter it. In figure 6, the state of Seoul's citizens after the battle can be seen.



Fig. 6. Associated Press. *Civilians in Seoul During the "Liberation."* Oct. 7th, 1950. Digital image. Boston Globe, Boston. http://archive.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/06/remembering_the_korean_war_60.html

⁶⁰ Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 37.

Efforts to cleanse the area of communism was termed “reorientation,” as American and ROK forces worked to erase the negativity the communist government had attached to the capitalistic governments.⁶¹ The American and ROK governments again borrowed post-WWII terminology by referring to the retaking of Seoul and the occupation of Pyongyang as “reconstruction.”⁶² Armstrong reveals that ROK forces began almost immediately to remove the communist cultural elements (such as posters) that had been left behind; the anti-communist government appointed painters to destroy communist murals and also musicians and theater directors to create anti-communist propaganda.⁶³ Focusing more on utilizing religion to combat the remains of communism, US forces made plans to “unleash missionaries on North Korea.”⁶⁴ With so many of North Korea’s missionaries being recent refugees who had fled the regime, it is unsurprising that American forces were able to utilize their situation to fight against the widespread support of communism. With the South Korean government back in control, communist sympathizers (such as the man in figure 7) became the targets of post-occupation vengeance.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.



Fig. 7. Dresfor, Max. *One Man Striking a Supposed Communist Sympathizer*. Sep 27, 1950. Digital image, The Atlantic, Washington, D.C.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/02/the-extraordinary-career-of-photojournalist-max-desfor/470373/>

As the fighting in Seoul died down, American forces in Korea established an agency to deal with the rumors of massacres and executions. Only three months after the beginning of the war and barely days after Seoul's liberation, the War Crimes Commission was established within the city.⁶⁵ The US military had learned from WWI and II that waiting to investigate until the end of the conflict would only make things more difficult. In the military's prior attempts to convict war criminals "many of the witnesses had disappeared, and much of the documentary evidence had disappeared."⁶⁶ Rather than uncovering incidents like No Gun Ri though, the WCC focused largely on the communists, accusing the North Koreans of massacring Seoul's civilians during the final weeks of the occupation.⁶⁷ While it is true that the American military and

⁶⁵ "Korean War Atrocities: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Korean War Atrocities," *Committee on Government Operations*, New York (1954): 151.

http://www.loc.gov/r/r/frd/Military_Law/pdf/KW-atrocities-part3.pdf

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

government hid their own atrocities from both the public and their South Korean allies, the WCC's wartime findings further illustrate the madness of the final weeks of the occupation. What the communists had considered to be a liberation in June, had been calm compared to the traumatizing events that took place during the September liberation.

Conclusion

By the end of the communist occupation of Seoul, it seemed certain that reunification under anti-communist forces was about to occur. General MacArthur, falsely confident after the success at Inchon, moved his forces into North Korea while bragging that US troops could be home by Christmas.⁶⁸ Instead, Chinese troops flooded into Korea and Seoul suffered a second (but shorter) occupation while the opportunity for Korean reunification lapsed. Just as the ROK would have faced total defeat if not for the hasty arrival of American troops months earlier, the Chinese Communist Party thwarted American plans to reunite the country and eradicate Korean communism by sending over 100,000 troops to the peninsula.⁶⁹ With the massive numbers overwhelming US and ROK troops, the front lines of the war eventually returned to the 38th parallel, beginning a stalemate that would last for several years before the armistice.

⁶⁸ Levine, *Stalin's Last War*, 1841.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1643.

As the first major conflict of the Cold War, the Korean War's own violence would last for three destructive years. In reality though, the two Korean states remain at war, with combat essentially paused since the 1953 signing of an armistice agreement. While the armistice did initiate a cease-fire, officially the Korean peninsula has been locked into the state of a civil war for over six decades.⁷⁰ The three years of fighting devastated Korea, transforming its temporary division at the 38th parallel into a permanent border. The death toll from the American and ROK liberation of South Korea included 111,000 South Koreans, 2,954 Americans, and possibly around 70,000 North Koreans.⁷¹ As a war with no foreseeable end, the Korean War continues to haunt the two states, a situation that has encouraged the persistence of Cold War rhetoric.

With the ongoing nature of the Korean War, topics that focus on events where the North Korean government was the major player (such as the occupation) remained obscured by the war's politics. Without open access to North Korean documents, a large degree of the occupation remains a mystery. At the same time, the anti-communist stance of the South Korean government has also hindered discussions on North Korean topics, promoting a sanitized version of the war that hinges on the communists' role as the antagonist.

Fortunately, these ongoing consequences of the political situation have been unable to completely alter the memories of the occupation. The political situation and ideological nature of the war has plainly restricted the public from important details,

⁷⁰ Christine Hong, "The Unending Korean War," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 597.

⁷¹ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 707.

while also influencing how interviewees discuss their memories, but the effects appear to be surprisingly insignificant. Despite the influences of politics and the passing of time, the recollections of those interviewed seem primarily impacted by their actual experience more than anything afterward. From the chaos to their mundane experiences, the 1950s interviews are similar to the Korean-American interviews that were conducted half a decade later. While the rhetoric used to discuss the war is considerably different (as the early interviews condemn the communists more regularly) the story remains largely the same: The first few days were chaotic and many who feared the communists fled south, then the communists controlled Seoul for a few months, and later the occupation ended violently. The interviewees' attitudes have been softened somewhat, but their recollections of the occupation are strikingly similar.

The commonalities between the interviewees' experiences suggest that the big question should not be a politically loaded inquiry over whether communism was beneficial to Seoul. Instead, scholars should focus on how Korean civilians survived the trauma of experiencing the physical consequences of the ongoing ideological conflicts. It was not communism itself that uprooted so many ordinary Koreans, despite the goal of *The Reds Take a City's* attempts to suggest this, but the complex situation created by post-WWII decolonization on top of Cold War politics. Both the communists and their enemies contributed to the misery of those ordinary citizens caught living within the grand stage of the Korean War.

While this thesis discusses the occupation of Seoul in as much detail as possible, it must be further stressed that the event remains largely un-studied and underestimated.

With the already mentioned political issues meaning that the communist side of the war remains hidden beyond the 38th parallel, historians are, for the most part, confined to sources already well-known to academics. The opening of former Soviet archives in the 1990s gave scholars studying the Korean War a taste of the future, as historians could access communist documents that had been classified for decades. If reunification should occur, or the more likely scenario of improved relations with North Korea, the communist occupation of Seoul will be a much less complicated topic to study. Scholars will be able to digest the details regarding the communist design for Seoul, while also enjoying the details lost to outsiders as the DPRK fled South Korea and returned north.

Despite the lack of information on the event, and the political and ideological influences present, the occupation of Seoul remains a significant period of the Korean War, especially to the Koreans who experienced it. As the historical record of academic works have left the occupation as a mere footnote, the memories of ordinary Koreans further exemplify the occupation's significance. From those who fled Seoul in June, to those who remained in the city throughout the "summer of terror," the occupation clearly left a substantial impression on their memories, as so many oral histories prominently feature the event. Whether or not historians begin to acknowledge it, the occupation remains one of the Korean War's most fascinating and exciting periods.

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