Accountability and Prevention:

An Analysis of Civilian Killings in the Korean War

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The Korean War (1950-1953) resulted in the deaths of literally millions of people. 36,940 Americans, over 100,000 South Korean soldiers, 520,000 North Korean soldiers, and approximately 900,000 Chinese soldiers were killed throughout the course of the war.¹ The most disturbing number however, is the additional 2 million civilian deaths that resulted from this conflict.² A number this large cannot be written off as an accident, and it demands a careful analysis of how such a tragedy occurred. While both sides in the war massacred civilians, this paper will address specifically the massacres committed by the Republic of Korea and the United States against civilians in locations below the thirty-eighth parallel (the area demarcated as South Korea). By viewing these incidents within a more modern framework of the anatomy of mass killings and violence against civilians, we can better understand how to recognize the potential for such incidents in the future. To this end, the events discussed here will be placed in a model that focuses more on the role of authorities, and the smaller groups of people involved directly in the killing, rather than in sweeping ideas about Korean or American society.

Acknowledgement of the wider structure of culture and human nature are pertinent to the subject at large, but have limited efficacy in addressing direct means of prevention due to the massive changes that would be necessary in order to eradicate society-wide symptoms. Similarly, many of the sweeping issues such as racism and human nature that are so often blamed for war atrocities are present in numerous societies and situations in which civilian massacres do not occur, making these issues less reliable as singular indicators of when such grievous crimes will be committed. I will argue that during the

² Ibid.
Korean War the civilian mass killings that occurred happened because individuals holding authority provided specific orders and incentives to the direct perpetrators of these acts.

One of the most common ways the U.S. military was involved in civilian deaths was through bombing, usually by air. In preparation for the Incheon landing, on September 10, 1950 Weolmi Island was hit with “napalm bombs, artillery rockets, and machine guns…the mission was saturation bombing of the area.” The targets of this attack were not merely buildings and forests, but civilians as well—according to a survivor of the attack, “The planes strafed all civilians at random without distinction of age or sex.” About one hundred civilians died as a result. In another incident at Gyeonggi-do, fifty civilians were killed as the Air Force attacked waterways and homes in the area with the intended purpose of stopping Chinese troops from marching south. Of the seventeen bombing runs made in this operation, eleven used napalm. During yet another event in July of 1950, approximately 300 civilians were killed in the bombing of Iri railway station. On September first of the same year, a Navy Destroyer fired on refugees in a seaside camp in Pohang at the insistence of the U.S. Army. AP reporters

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4 Ibid., 576.
5 Ibid., 576.
said that survivors estimated one to two hundred refugees were killed, while Kim Dong Choon places the number for this event even higher, at over 400 deaths.7,8

Perhaps more disturbing than these detached bombing attacks are the incidents in which soldiers on the ground deliberately killed civilians and refugees. One of these incidents was the No Gun Ri Massacre. Though the U.S. denied the incident until 2007, reports by the Associated Press and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Korea revealed many details. Like many of these events, the precise numbers are impossible to know for sure, but the generally understood facts are as follows: In late July of 1950, U.S. soldiers told the residents of two villages to leave their homes in anticipation of the North Koreans’ approach. As the villagers, including women and children, came to the No Gun Ri railroad bridge they were ordered off the road by the soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division.9

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Korea, after the soldiers searched the refugees, they “ordered an air attack upon the villagers.” The strafing resulted in the deaths of “approximately one hundred villagers.”10 The survivors of this attack were driven under the bridge. Over the next three days U.S. ground troops

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killed almost all of them. The estimates of the dead from this incident range from 120 to over 400.\textsuperscript{11}

A similar incident occurred in Dayang County. In January of 1951, refugees were travelling down a route that passed by Nu-Ti village. When they heard that refugees continuing down to the bridge that led to Hyang San village had been shot at by U.S. troops, many of the refugees and villagers took shelter in the nearby Gokgye Cave. Before all were inside however, bombs began to drop, killing those still at the entrance. Some villagers tried to flee the cave, fearing collapse, but were shot at by U.S. ground troops with machine guns. The bombing continued over the village of Nu-Ti.\textsuperscript{12} Estimates of the dead from this incident range between 200 and 300.\textsuperscript{13,14}

The massacres at No Gun Ri and Gokgye Cave are not unique incidents. According to the AP report on No Gun Ri, “Veterans told the AP of two smaller but similar refugee killings in July and August 1950.”\textsuperscript{15} Another incident, revealed in a declassified narrative by Major General Hobart R. Gay, describes how on August 3, 1950 U.S. forces blew Naktong Bridge after crossing it, even as hundreds of refugees tried to follow after them. As a result, “up in the air with the bridge went hundreds of refugees.”\textsuperscript{16} Earlier the same day, many refugees also died in a similar incident at Tuksong-dong

\textsuperscript{11} Choe, Hanely, and Mendoza, “Bridge at No Gun Ri.”
\textsuperscript{13} TRCK, “Gok-Gye Cave Massacre.”
\textsuperscript{14} Suh, “Atrocities,” 578
\textsuperscript{15} Choe, Hanely, and Mendoza, “Bridge at No Gun Ri.”
\textsuperscript{16} Hobart R. Gay, Narrative manuscript, 1953
Bridge, with estimates of the dead ranging from thirty to “hundreds”\(^{17}\). These bridge explosions not only killed civilians in their initial blasts, but also cut off many more refugees from fleeing the Northern Army. Some refugees became so distraught at being stranded that they tried to forge the large river anyway, many of them drowning in the attempt.\(^{18}\) In all of these events the U.S. military was directly involved in the killing of Korean refugees and villagers, and there are many more reports filed by Koreans concerning these kinds of incidents.

The ROK is responsible for the massacre of many non-combatants as well. Members of Bodoyeonmaeng (National Guidance Alliance/NGA) and left-leaning political prisoners were targeted for mass execution shortly after the onset of the war. The NGA was an organization designed to convert and keep track of leftist sympathizers.\(^{19}\)

Anyone who was an antigovernment or communist activist could find themselves on the “voluntary” membership list of this group. Sometimes police chiefs were given quotas of names to fill, resulting in unaffiliated individuals arbitrarily gaining membership.\(^{20}\) Such a system was of course ripe for use by corrupt officials who wanted to eliminate rivals or blackmail potential “volunteers.”

After the outbreak of the war, there was significant concern within the ROK leadership that individuals on these lists would turn back to their communist and anti-


\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) TRCK, “1,222 Incidents.”

government ideologies and assist the North’s invasion. In response to this perceived threat, NGA members were arrested in the first few months of the war, along with other leftist sympathizers (perceived and real). Shortly after arrest, many of these individuals were taken en masse to locations outside of the place they were arrested and then executed, often by being shot in the head. These executions resulted in the creation of numerous mass graves, such as in the Gyeongsan cobalt mines, a site believed to hold the remains of approximately 3,500 victims. The process of classifying the prisoners varied between the provinces somewhat, but often NGA membership was enough to warrant execution. The Truth and Reconciliation committee estimates that between June of 1950 through February of 1951, 100,000 people were executed across the country because their NGA membership put them on the black list, and some scholars place the death toll as high as 300,000.

This practice of killing potential communists among their own people did not end with the NGA massacre. The initial success of the North Korean invasion meant that most South Koreans found themselves under North Korean control for at least some time during the beginning of the war. After the ROK and U.S. began to regain ground from the North Koreans in September of 1950, President Rhee and the ROK worried once more that traitors, collaborators, new converts, and sympathizers remained in their recaptured

21 Suh, “Atrocities,” 566.
22 Ibid., 567.
24 TRCK, “1,222 Incidents.”
cities. The response was to once more “cleanse” the population of perceived undesirable elements. The massacres that resulted have not been widely documented, but one event did manage to garner enough attention to be officially recognized. In February of 1951 the Eleventh Division of the ROK Army “killed unarmed civilians indiscriminately” in the area around Jirisan in an event known as the Guchang incident.\textsuperscript{26} Thousands died during the course of this cleansing operation.

Unfortunately events such as these were not unique, though most have gone unrecognized. The very same army division committed other mass killings in North and South Cholla province, though these events have not been as well researched.\textsuperscript{27} In Koyang, a mass grave unearthed in 1995 proved the story of residents who asserted that a police-sponsored, right wing youth group killed more than 500 civilians.\textsuperscript{28} This particular incident is endemic of the killings that happened in and around Seoul after it was retaken by the ROK. Many people who had been unable to flee south with President Rhee when the North invaded were branded as traitors and treated accordingly once the ROK retook the South.\textsuperscript{29}

How were these massacres set in motion? There are a number of different orders, specific and general, worth considering when analyzing these events.

In the case of air attacks, I have been unable to find a recorded incident in which an airman went off and bombed an area without direct orders from the U.S. military. The Weolmi Island and Gyeonggi-do bombings mentioned previously were ordered by the

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 532.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 533.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 536.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 536.
U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force respectively.\(^{30}\) The bombing of Gokgye Cave was ordered by the Air Force at the request of the U.S. Army.\(^{31}\) In the case of the two bridge explosions, clear orders are present as well. Major General Gay ordered the bombing of Naktong Bridge, according to his own testimony of the incident.\(^{32}\) The AP investigators who looked into the Tuksong-dong bridge bombing were unable to find the source of the order to blow up the bridge, but they confirmed that there was indeed a specific order sent at 7:01 AM.\(^{33}\) In both incidents, the bridges had already been rigged with explosives, proving that it was not a last-second decision to destroy these passages across the Naktong River.

On the same day as No Gun Ri, a general statement about U.S. Army procedure was explained in the now notorious “Muccio Letter.” This letter, sent in 1950 by the contemporary U.S. Ambassador to South Korea to the Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk outlined the decisions made in a meeting involving other ROK and US officials. Citing the North Koreans’ use of refugees as cover for their agents and soldiers, the letter describes a policy in which “if refugees do appear from north of US lines they will receive warning shots, and if they then persist in advancing they will be shot.”\(^{34}\) The 8th Army also gave orders over radio, which stated “No repeat no refugees will be permitted to cross battle lines at any time.”\(^{35}\) The Muccio Letter was not unique in espousing broad policies of this sort—later in 1951, days before the Gokgye Cave Massacre, Commander


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 578.

\(^{32}\) Gay, Narrative Manuscript.

\(^{33}\) Choe, Hanley, and Mendoza, “Bridge Bombing.”

\(^{34}\) John Muccio correspondence to Dean Rusk (1950).

\(^{35}\) Choe, Hanley, and Mendoza, “Bridge at No Gun Ri.”
of the X Corps, Edward Almond, ordered “without delay the methodical destruction of dwellings and other buildings forward of the front lines which are, or are susceptible of being, utilized by the enemy for shelter. Employ air strikes and available ground means, including Arty and Inf. incendiary Ammo.”36 This of course resulted in the destruction of many villages, and not always empty ones.

The AP report on No Gun Ri also recounts the orders of the nearby 25th Infantry Division’s commander Major General William B. Kean, who said that since South Koreans were supposed to have been evacuated from the battle zone, "all civilians seen in this area are to be considered as enemy and action taken accordingly."37 Though the captain of the 2nd Battalion is no longer alive to confirm what orders he gave directly concerning No Gun Ri, ex-GI’s from the incident recall Captain Chandler “ordered machine-gunners from his heavy-weapons company to set up near the tunnel mouths and open fire.”38

The orders described above make the U.S. Army’s stance on refugees very clear. They were often treated like combatants, and soldiers on the ground were told to fire on many who were trying to flee to the South from the advancing North Korean army. Benjamin A. Valentino, in his text on mass killings suggests, “the causes of mass killing should begin with the capabilities, interests, ideas, and strategies of groups and individuals in positions of political and military power…”39 While incidents like No Gun Ri

37 Choe, Hanely, and Mendoza, “Bridge at No Gun Ri.”
38 Ibid.
Ri and Gokgye Cave do not on their own constitute the sheer number of deaths necessary to be considered a “mass” killing, the fact that these events were characteristic of so many other such incidents and were precipitated by so many distinct orders concerning the victims involved makes this sentiment quite pertinent. So who was making these orders, and why did they take such an aggressive (and arguably illegal\textsuperscript{40}) stance towards non-combatants?

The Muccio Letter specifies a number of people who came to a decision about refugees. Beside himself, also included were “G-1” and “G-2.” These indicated two officers who work for the chief of staff of a division commander, and their jobs focused on matters of Personnel (G-1) and Intelligence and Security (G-2). Next listed is a Provost Marshal, an officer in charge of military police in the U.S. Army, followed by the CIC (Counterintelligence Corps), which was a Cold War era intelligence agency. Also at the meeting were Korean authorities—namely the ROK Home and Social Affairs Ministries and the director of the National Police. What’s most notable about this list of involved parties is that, with the exception of the Social Affairs Ministry, all were directly connected to either the military or the police. Perhaps it seems obvious that wartime policies should be decided by those involved in the fighting, but the outcome of this meeting suggests that military goals were considered more important even than the lives of innocent civilians—no amount of collateral damage was too great.

The NGA mass killing by the ROK was similarly a design of top officials, but it was enacted in a very different way than the massacres committed by American soldiers.

\textsuperscript{40} Choe, Hanely, and Mendoza, “Bridge at No Gun Ri.”
In this event each provinces’ police force was tasked with rounding up NGA members and other political dissidents and placing them under arrest. These were individuals drawn from their homes in cities and towns rather than displaced populations fleeing south. Killing these victims was carried out not on the battlefield, but with the barest pretense of legal process. Though no trials were held for these victims, their deaths were considered “executions” rather than murder, at least by the government officials who ordered these mass killings.

There is no doubt that these massacres were conducted with the full knowledge and intent of top ROK authorities. Suh points to the Defense Intelligence Unit (the ROK Army’s Intelligence Agency) as the organization that is “responsible” for the NGA deaths. Evidence that orders were directed from above is abundant, as the “Security Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent direct orders to the police bureau of each province more than four times to arrest and imprison suspected communists, and the police officers at the city and county level delivered these orders to their branch offices,” (italics mine). 41

It is particularly clear in this case that such large-scale killing could not have occurred without initiation by the state—hundreds of people were systematically executed across many provinces of South Korea, and in this case it was not by a foreign army. Instead, police and military forces arrested their own countrymen—in some cases, their own neighbors. After the U.S. and ROK retook the southern part of the peninsula, the ROK massacres that followed were enacted much the same way as the NGA killings.

41 Suh, “Atrocities,” 568.
The orders that led to these massacres were not made arbitrarily—the people in power had specific goals that lay beyond civilian deaths. In some of the air attacks described in this essay, civilians were not the primary target. Instead they became “collateral damage” in the pursuit of a different military objective. For example, the bombing of Weolmi Island was carried out because it was a strategic gateway from which U.S. forces could enter Incheon. In Gyeongii-do, the goal was to both stop the Chinese advance, as well as assist a U.S. reconnaissance operation.\textsuperscript{42} The bombing of Naktong Bridge, which killed an unknown number of refugees, was described by the commander who gave the order as necessary because “…the refugees were on the heels of the rear guard…there was nothing else to be done…it was a tough decision.”\textsuperscript{43} Tuksong-dong bridge was also blown because the Army did not want the refugees to cross, but could not stop them from trying to push across the bridge.\textsuperscript{44} The primary goal of the U.S. military officers who gave the orders for these air and bridge bombings was not elimination of human targets. However, this concept of “collateral damage” should not be used to hide the fact that those who gave these orders actively decided to sacrifice civilian lives in exchange for pursuing their military goals—even in the absence of hard evidence that the civilians being sacrificed were associated with the enemy.

The Muccio letter contains a clear description of their reasons for the policy on refugees: the enemy was using refugees to clog roads, hide their agents, and “most dangerous of all by disguising their own troops as refugees, who after passing through

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 575 - 576
\textsuperscript{43} Gay, Narrative Manuscript.
\textsuperscript{44} Choe, Hanley, and Mendoza, “Bridge Bombing.”
our lines proceed, after dark, to produce hidden weapons, and then attack our units from the rear. According to the letter, this tactic resulted in the defeat of the 24th Division at Taejon. Nevertheless, taking such extreme measures cannot be condoned by anyone even remotely familiar with the concept of human rights and war crimes. Orders as sweeping as “fire on people in white clothes” will clearly result in the slaughter of many innocents in a country where white clothing is the traditional garb.

Valentino writes “mass killing occurs when powerful groups come to believe it is the best available means to accomplish certain radical goals, counter specific types of threats, or solves difficult military problems.” This clearly applies to the Korean case. Wide-ranging orders indicating that refugees should be shot is a radical step, and one taken due to the particular circumstance the leaders in the Muccio letter found themselves in. Faced with an oncoming army of North Koreans, most of whom were far more prepared and ideologically assured of their purpose than the American and ROK soldiers, the U.S. rapidly adopted extreme measures to try and counter the North Koreans’ early success. Fearing infiltration and guerilla-like tactics, leaders convinced themselves that military necessity justified their actions, which no doubt seemed entirely reasonable to the people involved.

The experience and state of mind of the American soldiers are often blamed as one of the primary reasons for these massacres. Concerning No Gun Ri, the U.S. government initially ascribed the incident as the unfortunate result of the “confusion of

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45 Muccio, Personal Correspondence.
47 Valentino, Final Solutions, 1444.
combat” rather than the result of soldiers following orders.\textsuperscript{48} It is true that many of the direct perpetrators of these killings were “mostly insufficiently trained, poorly equipped recruits led in many cases by inexperienced officers.”\textsuperscript{49} However, I would argue that it is the orders received, both directly and about policy towards refugees in general, that drove many of these soldiers to kill. Their very inexperience in combat made many of them reluctant to carry out the acts that their officers asked of them. One man interviewed by the AP reported firing above the refugees’ heads, while another said he simply would not shoot at them because “it was civilians just trying to hide.”\textsuperscript{50}

The idea that uncertainty alone would have driven these men to kill civilians is a convenient excuse that belies the need to assign blame on people of greater importance. This is not to say that the soldiers were blameless or lacked some of the racism and inexperience so often assigned to them. However, the very propaganda that dehumanized the North Koreans and communists in general, inspiring racism and hatred in the troops, was also an invention of people working higher in the government. These authorities remained safely removed from direct contact with the people they were killing, even as they psychologically prepared their soldiers for murder and then gave the direct orders that set these soldiers to their task. While the direct perpetrators should certainly not be excused from all blame for their acts, pretending that they were the only responsible party is both inaccurate and dangerous.


\textsuperscript{49} Hanely, “No Gun Ri,” 590.

\textsuperscript{50} Choe, Hanely, and Mendoza, “Bridge at No Gun Ri.”
The motivations of the ROK leadership were similar in some ways to the Americans, namely the fear of communists. While the U.S. was concerned about North Korean soldiers hidden among the refugees however, the ROK was fighting against those they knew were South Koreans, but suspected of being communist sympathizers who would rise up in rebellion, or join the North Korean army once it reached them. Their concerns about communist ideologies among the victims was not always unfounded according to Suh—in some areas as many as ninety percent of NGA members “had enrolled or participated in the Workers Party of South Korea, the Association of National Youth (Mincheong), or the National Farmers’ Union (Cheonnong).” But this involvement was not universal among the victims, nor is involvement with these associations tantamount to joining, or even supporting the invading Northerners.

After the retaking of Seoul, the ROK leadership’s fears were much the same, as they now had a population that had been occupied by the enemy. Almost everyone who was not killed or imprisoned by the occupying authorities could be seen as a collaborator—at the very least, they had not actively fought the occupiers. This logic ignored the fact that many of the inhabitants were almost certainly just trying to survive. Like the U.S., the ROK government espoused harsh anti-communist propaganda, with President Rhee himself using rhetoric such as “exterminating the traitors,” “rooting out the reds,” and removing the Soviet puppet” when discussing communists. This primed the ROK police forces to view anyone they thought was a communist as less than human,

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52 Kim, “Licensed Mass Killings,” 529
creating a mindset the would be willing to carry out execution orders passed down by the leadership.

Finding themselves faced with what they believed to be enemies among their own ranks, the ROK leadership decided to take extreme steps, preferring the extermination of some of their citizens to the threat of dissidence. According to Kim Tae Sun, the chief of the Seoul Metropolitan Police at the time of the NGA massacre, when the war began killing political prisoners who were suspected communists was an “inevitable” preventative measure. 53 This sentiment shows how mass killing occurs when the leadership views such measures as necessary and unavoidable.

The common themes of military necessity and inevitability that we find in official commentary about these incidents (once denial is no longer an option) demonstrate how the leadership of a country or military can justify the choices that lead to significant civilian casualties. First, they use the excuse that “this is war”—the implied inevitability of death detracts from their responsibility for the orders they give, because people were bound to die anyway. Second, the idea that something is “necessary” allows for a tragic decision to be made, because it implies that they had no choice—they may have made a decision that resulted in civilian deaths, but with no other option, how can they be blamed? Yet what is important when looking at these incidents is to acknowledge that there was a choice. Denying the human agency that was present in setting these events in motion will only ensure that responsible parties avoid justice, and the system will repeat itself the next time the leadership faces a difficult situation.

53 Ibid., 534.
Tragically, we can already see this happening in the modern era. A study done on the causes of violent civilian deaths during the Iraq War showed that U.S.-led coalition forces were responsible for twelve percent of violent civilian deaths between March 2003 and March 2008. The exact number of dead this represents is 11,516. The vast majority of these deaths occurred in the first year of the war, during the initial invasion, and almost 2,400 of these deaths were due to aerial bombardment. These numbers are sobering—for they are clear evidence we have not made the necessary changes in how we conduct war. These statistics show that the U.S. leadership is still content to choose strategies and employ tactics that result in massive civilian deaths. This matter should be considered no less carefully by the current South Korean government—the cost in civilian life seen in the 1950’s war demands that considerations be made for how future war will be conducted on the peninsula. It is commonly agreed that war is horrific, but international bodies have designed rules to try and humanize an inherently inhumane event. If nations truly value human life and wish to pursue an increasingly civilized and benevolent global society, they must also be willing to sacrifice certain goals rather than pursue them at the cost of violating international standards of humane conduct—namely, at the cost of innocent lives. It then follows that if we want to insure these regulations are adhered to, we must also hold accountable those who would discard them because they feel the situation allows for an exception. In order for a permanent change in the way we conduct

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war to become reality, it must be made clear that there are no exceptions—when large numbers of innocent people are killed it is an atrocity, and those who order such atrocities must face certain consequences.

When massacres of civilians are discovered, often the first questions people ask is how it could have happened, and who is to blame. If we look at mass killings from a perspective of prevention, the answer to both questions is much the same—a small group of authorities decide that they have no other sufficient options for accomplishing their goals. Civilian killing appears to be the best, most expedient, and most permanent solution to the problems these leaders face. In some cases the U.S. military leadership decided that civilian deaths were justified by the strategic importance of their goal. In broader policy, they also decided, consciously or not, that it was too difficult to try and make more exact distinctions between refugees and the Northern troops that were sometimes hiding among them. Making a blanket statement about not letting anyone past a certain point was a straightforward order, and when they came upon this solution they looked no further.

In the case of the ROK, they were fighting a civil war whose line had been created almost arbitrarily by outside forces—within their own geography lived those who sympathized to varying degrees with the invading force. Fearing that they would only feed the strength of the Northern Army, they decided that elimination of anyone who had the slightest chance of joining was the best solution. The U.S. GI’s were inexperienced and scared, and the right wing police forces throughout Korea had been taught all about the evils of communism, but these predispositions were not enough on their own to result
in the large scope of violence that targeted civilians during the onset of the Korean War.

A focus on the responsibility of those giving the orders at the highest levels must be central to understanding what happened, and we must use that accountability to discourage such orders in the future.
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