

Review - The Massacres at Mt. Halla

Written by Peter Brett

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PETER BRETT, JUL 15 2014

The Massacres at Mt. Halla: Sixty Years of Truth Seeking in South Korea

By: Hun Joon Kim

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014

Hun Joon Kim is a former student of Kathryn Sikkink, and has recently co-authored a study with her on the deterrence effect of truth commissions. In *The Massacres at Mt. Halla*, he presents a detailed analysis of a case that is likely to be unknown to most readers: the 'Jeju 4.3 Commission'. This was established to investigate the events of 4th April 1948 and their aftermath in Jeju Province, South Korea. These events were triggered, in part, by the opposition of US occupation forces and Korean right-wing elites to attempts at 'indigenous nation-building' after Japan's withdrawal in 1945 (p. 22). These tensions were particularly acute on the island of Jeju, where such attempts were especially widespread. With the outbreak of the Cold War and establishment of communist government in the North, however, the South Korean Labour Party's role in stoking these tensions was grossly over-estimated. Local nation-builders' clashes with police and the military were interpreted only as communist subversion. The brutal counter-insurgency which followed involved large-scale massacres and led to the deaths of around 30,000 people: approximately ten per cent of the island's population.

Kim's book describes sixty years of attempts to have these events officially investigated by a truth commission or some similar body. As he points out, the Argentinian and South African experiences with such institutions are well-known, but there is almost no literature in English on their Asian counterparts. *The Massacres at Mt. Halla* fills this gap by providing a very detailed and well-written account of the Jeju Commission's genesis. It is clearly an extraordinary tale, involving a small group of activists who dedicated large portions of their lives to demanding such a process in a hostile anti-Communist political environment. There is no sense, notably, that their efforts were for Western or international consumption. Kim also seeks to derive lessons from this experience for practitioners, concluding 'that it is a good strategy to use the local government' and 'the cultural sector' (pp. 174-5). For all of these reasons, Kim's book is an important and, in many respects, welcome addition to the literature.

The Massacres at Mt. Halla, however, is light on political science. Brevity and clarity of exposition appears to have been brought at the expense of theoretical precision and plausibility. Kim, like Sikkink, wants to argue for the power of grass-roots activism, doing away with explanations for politics which focus only on the interests and decision-making of elites. Unlike Sikkink, however, he makes no effort whatsoever to integrate this new emphasis with an analysis of other factors. A particularly strange passage in his conclusion argues, for example, that 'local actors' make 'conscious strategic efforts to create and change... international structures' (p. 164). But this argument is not to be found in the main text. International structures are in fact absent, as is 'human rights discourse', which, as Kim concedes, was 'widely adopted in South Korean society' in the 1990s (p. 110). Democratisation, likewise, is not held to have had any independent effect. This conclusion is based on the assertion that it, too, 'was the result of persistent local activism'; a bold and unsupported claim that Kim makes no effort to situate in the rich literature on that topic (p. 100) [1]. My point here is that whilst local activists may well have been 'visionaries' in some sense – as Kim claims (p. 42) – even the most creative agency is inevitably 'nested' in wider normative and political shifts, as Sikkink herself well recognises [2].

Perhaps these analytical eccentricities can be explained by Kim's belief in 'the power of the truth itself' (p.166) – a

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claim repeated in various forms throughout this book. Now it is certainly not my intention to disparage this belief. Philosophers have long debated it [3]. But any attempt to introduce it into political science must surely come with some kind of justification attached, if not a user's guide. It could also be clearer what the truth actually is. As Kim describes, one of the principal obstacles to the establishment of a commission was that the events were seen through ideological lenses. For anti-communists they had begun with a 'rebellion', whilst for sympathisers they had started with a popular 'uprising'. This political deadlock was only broken, Kim claims, when activists successfully framed events as 'massive human rights violations' or as 'abuses of state power' (pp. 98-9, 110, 114-6, 143). However, these labels, of course, are just (politically-loaded) ways of describing repression. They don't get us any closer to explaining it [4]. *The Massacres at Mt. Halla*, indeed, constantly oscillates between implicitly treating these frames as symbolic politics and as the truth itself (pp. 37, 80, 133, 137). (A case in point is the discovery of victims' skeletal remains in the Darangashi cave, which simultaneously 'revealed the reality of the Jeju 4.3 events' and led the public to see them as 'separated from ideology' (pp. 79, 94).)

Even more confusingly, Kim concludes that the 'fundamental factor' behind the success of the Jeju Commission was that it worked 'to create a comprehensive and historical truth about the civilian massacres besides the individual truths' (p. 161). A 'master narrative', that is, accompanied 'forensic' facts to reveal their 'historical and political structure, political, social and ideological context' (pp. 135, 161). The problem with this, once again, is that no such overarching narrative is actually outlined in the text. We are left to assume that all of this context was provided by describing the events as 'rights violations' and 'state violence'; the very vocabulary that historians have adopted in order to escape from the 'master narratives' once provided by communism, fascism, and all of liberalism's other defunct alternatives [5]. Whatever the South African Commission said about the matter, these historians are now likely to regard all such claims to comprehensive truth as dangerous lies [6].

By focusing on truth and its power, finally, Kim perhaps provides us with a rather colourless picture of human agency. Beyond the courage of local activists and the obstructiveness of national elites, he tells us little about the ideas, interests, ideologies, and culture of his central cast. Anti-communism, notably, dominates South Korean politics and society for most of this book. Yet the power of this ideology to shape historical understanding to is never really explained. The reader has to piece together an account from between the lines. This implicit account has three main components. Anti-communist intellectuals, historians, and activists, firstly, always appear as in some sense connected with the government or military (e.g. pp. 64, 99, 136). This fits with Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink's recent argument that effective 'counter-discourses' to human rights will be 'regime-based' [7]. In an unflattering portrait, secondly, national society is characterised by 'prejudice' and 'ignorance', 'passively accept[ing] the government's account of the Jeju 4.3 events' (pp. 53, 97, 99). Kim's third claim appears to be that this ignorance and passivity resulted directly from both fear of coercion and the 'forced oblivion and distorted understanding' imposed by the regime and its intellectuals (pp. 53, 61, 69, 124, 148-9). In some places, indeed, Kim goes so far as to describe the 'red-complex' as a kind of mass orchestrated irrationality (pp. 53-4, 69). None of this is necessarily implausible, of course. But once again, these are bold claims, often associated with South Korea's Northern neighbour. They deserved more extensive and explicit defence.

Even the heroes of Kim's tale float rather detached from their historical and cultural context. Throughout most of the book, 'local activists' appear only as 'individuals and visionaries pursuing ideals such as justice, truth, and compassion' (p. 42). Only on rare occasions are we told anything more substantive. On page 108, for example, we learn about the 'sensational success' of rituals and monuments dedicated to 'exorcising evil spirits' and appeasing 'the souls of dead'. As an afterthought, meanwhile, Kim inserts a brief description of the 'significant role' of ghosts into his conclusion – even if he excuses himself at the outset by claiming that this is not 'a proper social science explanation' (pp. 168-170). These are tantalising glimpses of the kind of fuller and more satisfying account that Kim might have provided. There is no good reason why such 'unconventional' topics should not be made central to an analysis of transitional justice actors and outcomes [8]. As it stands, however, *The Massacres of Mt. Halla* represents a welcome and well-written, but ultimately very partial, view of the search for 'comprehensive truth' in South Korea.

Notes

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[1] E.g. Samuel S. Kim, *Korea's Democratization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, Kong, Tat Yan (2003) 'Politics, the State and Business in the Democratic Transition of South Korea.' In: Amann, E and Chang, Ha-Joon, (eds.), *Economic Crisis and Restructuring: Brazil and South Korea*. London: ILAS. pp. 202-221, and Yooil Bae and Sunhyuk Kim, "Civil society and local activism in South Korea's local democratization." *Democratization* 20:2 (2013): 260-286.

[2] Kim's evidence about demands for truth commission as the 1960s – before the emergence of Latin American and global templates – deserved fuller analysis here (pp. 45-50). Sikkink has provided this for pre-existing practices of trials for political leaders in Greece and Portugal.

[3] E.g. Richard Rorty, "Davidson between Wittgenstein and Tarski." *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía* 30:88 (1998): 65.

[4] Oddly, Kim states that the Jeju 4.3 events should be seen 'as a social movement' (p. 171).

[5] Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, "Review of Ferro, Marc Ed. *Le livre noir du colonialisme. xvie-xxie siècle : de l'extermination à la repentance* and Courtois Stéphane, et al. *Le livre noir du communisme : crimes, terreur et répression*." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 2004, 455-463, available at <http://etudesaficaines.revues.org/4694>, and John Torpey, *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. pp. 32-37.

[6] Extreme but influential versions of this hypothesis were famously advanced by Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973. But even White's strongest critics now focus on historians' ability to recover 'forensic' not 'comprehensive' truths (in Kim's terms). See, for example, Perez Zagorin, "History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now." *History and Theory* 38:1 (1999): 1-24.

[7] Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink's Eds. *From Commitment to Compliance: The Persistent Power of Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 15-21

[8] Tim Allen has done this for spirits in his study of the Lord's Resistance Army and transitional justice in Northern Uganda. See his "Understanding Alice: Uganda's Holy Spirit movement in context." *Africa* 61 (1991): 370-99, and *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, London: Zed Books, 2006.

About the author:

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