

# 1 Massacres in Korea

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In the sweltering July heat of 1950, Daegu's railway station was jam-packed with people arriving in freight trains with bundles of bedding, food, and household utensils. These war refugees had hastily left their homes shortly before the arrival of North Korea's armed forces, which, less than a month into the war, were already closing in on the strategically important town in Korea's southeast region after capturing Seoul only four days into the all-out conflict. On the outskirts of the city, South Korean and US troops were fortifying their defense lines along the Nakdong River. Although feeling triumphant and claiming total victory by mid-August, the North Korean People's Army suffered heavy losses to US firepower, especially during their unsuccessful offensives against the Nakdong perimeter. By the beginning of September 1950, the Northern army had lost nearly half of its personnel and was relying heavily on the labor of Southern youths and students whom it had hurriedly mobilized in the areas of South Korea under its control. Meanwhile, the vicinity of Daegu's railway station had become a huge refugee shelter area. In the public square south of the station, youth groups were assembled on a regular basis – sometimes to protest against “the communist enemy's treacherous ambition to turn the Korean peninsula to a red territory,” and, at other times, to stand in line, surrounded by their anxious families, before they were hurriedly hauled to the front line.<sup>1</sup>

These scenes are familiar from the existing public accounts of the Korean War and as part of the permanent displays in the National War Museum in Seoul. The following is not, however. Ten years later, on July 28, 1960, about 2,000 people were gathered in the same public square. They came from all corners of Daegu, some from nearby, and others from the distant countryside. By 10 a.m., the station's public square was crammed with people, many of whom were women in white traditional dresses. The meeting began at 10:45 a.m. When a schoolgirl came up to the podium and started reading a letter that she had prepared for her father, there was a tremendous stir in the crowd. The girl's father went missing during the early days of the 1950–1953 war. Her letter was

followed by a woman's invocation to her husband who also went missing in July 1950: "You, the broken name; a name that departed to the empty air, name belonging to an unknown, and a name I shall keep calling upon until I myself meet death. Here and now I am summoning your name!"<sup>2</sup> While these initiatory actions were underway, several white-clothed women in the crowd started to wail, which was soon joined by the voices of many others and developed into a deafening collective lamentation. According to a local newspaper the lamentation shook the city center that day, attracting sympathy from many onlookers. People who assembled in the railway square on that day in July 1960 had different concerns from those who had crowded the place in July 1950. The purpose of this second assembly was not to bid farewell to the loved ones who were called to join their compatriots' collective struggle against communist aggression. However, it was related to the country's struggle for survival in 1950 and how this struggle began with a brutal assault against civilian lives. The grievances expressed by these families were widely reported at the time, both locally and nationally. In the subsequent era, such acts of public grieving came to be regarded as a threat to national security and remained outlawed until recently.

### **The State of Exception**

The July 1960 assembly was concerned with a specific class of casualties of the 1950–1953 war. These casualties were not fallen soldiers of the civil war, either on the Southern or on the Northern side; nor were they considered innocent civilian victims at the time. Even today, the inclusion of these casualties of war in the category of innocent civilian victims of war, commonly referred to as *yangmin* (meaning literally "benign subjects" or "benevolent people"), provokes strong objections from certain sectors of the South Korean public. By the time of the Korean War, the category of civilians, as stated in the 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, primarily addressed people inhabiting territories occupied by hostile state powers or those exposed to belligerents' artillery fire or aerial bombardment – that is, the lives of unarmed people potentially under threat, in the condition of war, from the acts committed by armed adversaries.<sup>3</sup> The victims of war addressed by the Daegu assembly did not belong to either of the two principal categories of casualties of modern warfare – combatants or innocent civilians. Instead, they were victims of a specific form of political violence perpetrated prolifically at the outbreak of the 1950–1953 war, which, although it had taken place as part of the broader reality of a national and international crisis referred to as the Korean War, was nonetheless distinct from the forms of

violence familiar from the existing public knowledge of this formative conflict of the twentieth century. The violence perpetrated against them was not the same as the destructive powers exchanged between the two defined state entities and their international allies. It also differed from the coercive violence exercised liberally by both of these entities for the purpose of mobilizing the population behind their respective war efforts. This violence was committed not “in the hands of the adversary,”<sup>4</sup> but by the very state power to which the victims stood as its subjects. The targets of this violence were not armed enemy combatants or unarmed civilians in enemy territory, but people “whose mere presence was deemed to threaten the security of the state and the war effort.”<sup>5</sup>

Such violence of the state against its own society was first unleashed as part of the state of emergency measure implemented throughout the territory of South Korea, following the beginning of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, and before the war transformed into a full-blown international conflict. Mass arrests and killings took place first in areas that were under the threat of occupation by the advancing communist forces. The South Korean combat police and military police carried out killings in remote valleys or in abandoned mines. The victims were mostly people who had been earmarked before the war as harboring some sort of sympathy toward communism or socialism, and they included prison inmates arrested during the prewar political unrest in parts of South Korea. The decision to eradicate these individuals en masse was on the pretext of a preventive measure, allegedly to stop them from providing support to the enemy. It was also a reaction to North Korea’s revolutionary war strategy that combined a frontal assault against South Korea’s defense with popular revolutionary uprisings from within enemy territory. It is believed that about 200,000 lives succumbed to this whirlwind of state terror unleashed at the outset of the Korean War, although the exact number of victims remains unknown to date. Such wanton destruction of civilian lives continued throughout the war, later changing in character to punitive violence (committed against alleged collaborators with the enemy forces), once the tide of war changed and the North Korean forces were pushed back. This followed atrocities committed by the retreating communist forces in their briefly occupied zones, against people who they believed were sympathizers with the Southern regime. The violence committed by one side radicalized the intensity and scale of the violence committed by the opposite side, and this vicious cycle of terror perpetrated against the civilian population devastated countless local communities to the extreme.

These waves of violence that came with the changing tides of war involved not only an extreme abuse of the states’ coercive powers but

also the self-destruction of traditional communities. Villages were turned inside out, becoming a crucible of destruction in the image of the wider theater of war, but in the hands of people who had lived together for generations. In an account by the late Korean writer Park Kyung-li, Ji-young speaks of the situation in her village in September 1950:

The United Nations troops set up tents on the school grounds. Soon, their ration boxes began to flood into the village marketplace. Meanwhile, inside the village, people who had played moles for the past ninety days came out and shouted, "Kill all the reds! Their children and their parents, too! Dry out their seeds!" Then, Ji-young recalled what she had overheard some ninety days ago: "Kill all the reactionaries! Destroy mercilessly the enemies of the people, the puppets of U.S. imperialists!" The village river and hills were speechless in face of these terrifying human voices, the echoes of the blood spilled earlier that return to claim more blood.<sup>6</sup>

In the words of Park Wan-seo, "As the frontline moved back and forth, the order of the world changed as if someone was flipping his hand. Each time the world changed, accusations were made against 'collaborators' or against 'reactionaries'. Then, innocent lives were lost. The villagers underwent this madness repeatedly."<sup>7</sup> Park Chan-sung, a historian who investigated local histories in an island community off the southern coast, describes what he encountered in the islanders' Korean War memories: "These small village wars are not a thing of the past in the affected communities. These wars lasted only two to three months, whereas their shadows are still vigorously alive in these communities sixty years after."<sup>8</sup>

Similar conditions are referred to in the existing literature as the privatization of violence.<sup>9</sup> Stathis Kalyvas investigates, primarily with reference to events during the Greek civil war, what he calls the zone of ambiguity in civil war conflicts – the murky arena in which the violence committed by states or other organized political forces meets with the violence initiated from within local communities. Kalyvas calls the latter a civil war's "intimate violence" to distinguish it from the impersonal violence executed by the coercive forces of the state hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> These two forms of violence – impersonal and intimate – proliferated in the theater of Korea's civil war. They were closely intertwined in local realities and remain sometimes indistinguishable in collective memories. In many testimonial accounts recently made available, it is often impossible to tease out traces of impersonal political violence from those of intimate communal violence. It is also difficult to discover the details of intimate violence in a community where both the victims and the perpetrators of this violence still share the space of communal life today. However, it is clear that these details, rather than necessarily those of impersonal

violence, constitute especially vexing memories within the community. In such milieus, people still struggle with the radical disparities between their distant memory of sharing food and child-minding with a neighboring family before the war broke out, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ever-present memory of their neighbor turning his or her back on them at a time when they needed the latter's support most desperately. If that neighbor also happens to be a relative, bitter memories of betrayal are brought back, for instance, at a gathering for ancestral remembrance. On such occasions, the act of making food and alcohol offerings to some ancestral graves becomes a poignant reminder of the family's wartime division and its enduring, unspoken divisiveness – rather than, as tradition has it, a moment of togetherness and rediscovering the comfort of closeness.

In the initial chaos of war, catastrophic conditions also confronted those who joined the exodus to Daegu and elsewhere in the southeastern corner of the peninsula. Steven Lee insists that the reality of the Korean War is unintelligible if it is approached only from the perspective of conventional military history that focuses on the interaction between organized armed groups.<sup>11</sup> In support of this point, Lee explores how the different armed groups of the conflict related to the confused civilian population. He focuses on the assault by the South Korean state against its citizens, the mobilization of civilian labor for the cause of national liberation carried out by the Northern forces in their occupied Southern regions, and the difficulties faced by the US forces in distinguishing allies from foes, and civilians from enemy combatants. Concerning the last, several recent studies convincingly show gross failures on the part of US military commands in the Korean conflict in protecting the unarmed civilian population.<sup>12</sup>

One well-known example in this regard is the tragedy of Nogun-ri near Daejeon, which was en route from Seoul to Daegu. The massacre of war refugees in Nogun-ri was one of the first incidents of civilian killings in the Korean War to become public knowledge in the mid-1990s, which has since attracted wide attention internationally.<sup>13</sup> It resulted in the killing of several hundred refugees over three days and began with a US warplane opening fire on the refugee columns, which forced them to take shelter underneath a nearby railroad bridge. The refugees were cornered by machine-gun fire from a unit of a US cavalry division that had prepared a defense line there against the advancing People's Army forces. After three days of shooting, only ten out of an estimated 400 refugees – mostly children, elders, and women – survived. The investigation carried out by a group of Associated Press journalists found that the incident was not simply the tragic collateral damage of a military action, resulting from

difficulties in distinguishing genuine civilians from enemy fighters infiltrating the rear line disguised as civilians.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the investigation concluded that the tragedy was the result of a systemic failure in the military command that blatantly disregarded, in the name of a condition of emergency and in that of efficacy in a military operation, the obligation to discriminate unarmed civilians from armed combatants.<sup>15</sup>

The exodus of war refugees was a widespread phenomenon by the time the massacre in Nogun-ri took place in July 1950. The widely executed assaults against refugee groups, most often by aerial actions, made their movements highly precarious. For this reason, among the most common episodes that appear in the testimonial histories of the Korean War are those concerning unintelligible attacks by allied planes against the refugees. This also explains why it soon became general knowledge among the Korean War refugees that in order to stay alive, it was imperative that they move during the night and along rugged mountain paths to remain invisible to American planes, which often meant following the same routes as those taken by the Northern communist forces. This was indeed the case in the experience of five students, whose stories I had the privilege to learn. Consisting of two female high school students and three male junior high school students, all from the same rural area near Daegu, the group joined the exodus to the South toward their birthplace on June 27, 1950. They narrowly escaped the strafing against the refugee boats by US warplanes while crossing the Han River that cuts across Seoul. The North's expeditionary forces were advancing ahead of them, and following advice from other refugees, the students tracked behind the communist troops along the central mountain ranges, traveling only in the dark.

Close to their home village, along a mountain footpath, the students were stopped by a group of armed communist partisans. Although the partisan leader was intent on reeducating the young refugees and recruiting them for the revolutionary war, he let the group of five go free. It turned out that the leader had recognized one of the students. He spoke to this student with these words, which she remembers vividly today: "I am letting you go. Your father is a rightist but I know he is a decent man. You go home and tell him to be kind to my family back home, just as I am kind to you now." By the time the five students reached their home village after eleven days on foot, the area was already under Northern occupation. The parents of one girl were waiting for their daughter, and on the night she arrived, they left the village to join their family who had already evacuated to Daegu. On their way out of the village, they took with them one of the three boys who, having discovered that no one was at his home, happened to come to her place in the late evening to ask for news. The other girl also

found her home empty and went to see the village chief the following morning. There she was greeted by members of the village's hastily organized revolutionary women's association. She later joined the village's revolutionary youth organization together with the two other boys in her group from Seoul. When the girl who moved to Daegu returned home a few months later, she heard that the two boys had left the village, heading north shortly after the communist troops had evacuated the area. The villagers had not heard of their whereabouts since. A year later, she was shocked to see a picture of her dear friend, the girl with whom she shared the arduous journey home, on the front page of the local newspaper. The news was about a female student communist mountain guerrilla fighter captured alive, together with three dead male comrades. In the picture, the captured friend looked exhausted and heavily pregnant.

While these refugees were heading to Daegu and elsewhere further south during a time of great hardship, a state of emergency was declared throughout the territory of South Korea. The presidential decree issued on June 28, 1950 ordered the suspension of the judicial procedure for crimes that concerned national security. The decree specified that these crimes were acts that benefited the enemy in terms of material assistance, and of providing information and voluntary assistance to enemy troops and authorities. However, by the time this executive order was endorsed by the country's parliament and subsequently developed into a formal declaration of a state of emergency on July 8, 1950, the country's police and military police forces had already arrested a large number of individuals on charges of potential collaboration with the enemy and executed them without any due court procedure. The mass execution targeted prison inmates classified as "ideological criminals" as well as members of the so-called Alliance of Converts (*bodo yonmaeing*), the nationwide state-run organization established in 1949, whose stated objective was to bring the former members of the South Korean Communist Party and other alleged sympathizers of communism to "the right way of patriotism and anticommunism."<sup>16</sup> Many of these ill-fated prison inmates and so-called ideological converts were survivors of South Korea's earlier, prewar state-of-exception politics. These locally confined emergency measures were first implemented by the US Military Government in Korea (from September 1945 to August 1948), which targeted specific areas that experienced outbreaks of popular revolt and armed partisan resistance against the Military Government. The politics of the state of emergency continued after the South Korean government was established on August 15, 1948.

The state of emergency that was declared in 1948 in Yösu, amid the crisis of a mutiny in this southern coastal town, ruled: "Individuals who

conceal traitors or those who communicate with the latter shall receive the punishment of death.” The state of emergency declared in June 1950 was, in form, an extension of this and other earlier measures on a national scale. In its character, however, the June 1950 decree was distinct from the prewar varieties in that it was intended principally to justify preemptive violence, which targeted presumed, hypothetical collaborators (“suspected traitors”), rather than actual crimes of treason.<sup>17</sup> These measures were imbued with a profound historical irony, too. It has been observed that the 1948 constitution of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) had no provision for martial law, which obliged the country’s lawmakers, during the political crisis of 1948–1950, to refer back to the Meiji constitution of the colonial era in justifying the state’s right to institute a state of emergency.<sup>18</sup> This observation highlights the critical ambiguity in South Korea’s constitutional power in this sphere, which was, on the one hand, an extension of the power of the US Military Government in South Korea, and, on the other, a restoration of Japan’s imperial constitutional order.<sup>19</sup> As the Korean War developed into an international conflict, involving the intervention of United Nations forces, the rule against collaboration continued to take effect, changing in character from preventive to punitive action. When the territory that had been briefly occupied by the Northern army was recovered by South Korea’s national army, the country’s police, military intelligence, and paramilitary anti-communist youth groups conducted brutal cleanup actions against individuals who were thought to have assisted the occupying Northern political authorities and military forces. These actions were typically indiscriminate, with the punishment falling not only on the individual suspects, but also on the individuals’ families, and sometimes on the entire village community to which the accused individuals belonged.

The behavior of the North Korean occupation forces was overall relatively more restrained during the early days of occupation. This was in part because their war was nominally a revolutionary people’s war, the success of which relied heavily on earning the hearts and minds of the local population. The relative calm did not last long, however. When the communist units were forced to retreat northward in September 1950, they committed a number of atrocities including summary civilian killings in their occupied areas.<sup>20</sup> These killings targeted “the civil servants [of South Korea], members of the rightist organizations, and wealthy farmers,” and were based on the order issued by North Korea’s politburo to remove “all elements that might turn out to be potential supporters of the United Nations forces.”<sup>21</sup> As such, they constituted preemptive violence, the same in nature as the violence committed earlier by their Southern adversary. The victims of this preemptive violence included prison inmates in

North Korea's occupied territories and, in some areas, members of local churches. In the city of Daejeon, 150 kilometers south of Seoul, the UN troops discovered that the withdrawing Northern units had left behind a prison compound where the cells were stacked with several layers of corpses. This atrocity was widely reported at the time in both the South Korean domestic press and the international press. One report described the incident: "More than a thousand patriots were brutally murdered by the communist puppets." These reports did not mention, however, that two months prior to this incident, the same prison had been widely mentioned in the North Korean press and in the international press of the Eastern Bloc countries as the site of a major atrocity committed by "the puppets of American imperialists."<sup>22</sup>

In the southwestern region of the peninsula, the advancing South Korean forces met fierce resistance from the remaining North Korean troops and their local recruits, some of whom had by then transformed into partisan groups entrenched in the surrounding hills. In the village of Gurim, at the beginning of October 1950, the communist partisans set fire to the local school and the village's ancestral assembly hall and Protestant church. On October 7, 1950, according to the local annals prepared by the villagers in 2006:

Part of the remaining forces of the [North Korean] People's Army, together with some elements of the communist partisan forces who had operated during the period of the People's Republic [the occupation regime] and who had lost their senses of reason, arrested the remaining families of the [South Korean] army and police, people who had been wrongly accused of being reactionaries under the rule of the People's Republic, and the followers of the Christian god.<sup>23</sup>

The annals continue that the arrested were subsequently locked up in a private home, which was then set on fire, not knowing "what crimes they had committed to deserve such a cruelty."<sup>24</sup> Soon after this incident, on October 17, the village suffered once more. The village annals mention the second massacre only fleetingly. Hence, I quote from a different source, the report of a local history project conducted in the area in 2000–2002:

In Gurim, another civilian massacre was committed, this time by the [South Korean] police, on October 17, 1950. Hearing that the police were closing in on the village, those villagers who had previously worked actively for the People's Republic had already evacuated the village. The police surrounded the settlement and ordered the villagers to come out of their houses. Those who followed this order were people who believed that they had not done anything wrong. As soon as they were out, however, the police fired at them, and this resulted in seventy-eight casualties. The incident is therefore, rather than a punishment against leftist activists, a mass execution of innocent people who were, despite the fact that they

maintained a neutral position during the conflict, accused of being leftist activists.<sup>25</sup>

The memoir of Park Wan-seo speaks of the precarious living conditions in Seoul at the time of its liberation from the North's occupation. Park's family failed to evacuate the city before the Northern army took control of it. This was hardly unusual for residents of Seoul at that time, many of whom, although feeling confused and uncertain about the future, did not feel compelled to abandon their homes.<sup>26</sup> In fact, of the city's population, amounting to a million and half, less than a third joined the exodus to the South. Of those who did, eight out of ten were refugees who had left their homes in Northern Korea during the prewar partition period of 1945–1950; that is, people whom the communist forces were likely to define as harboring hostility to the state. Park's elder brother, a schoolteacher, had a background in working with progressive intellectuals and leftist groups before the war, which resulted in a host of problems for the family. The activity he was involved in was, according to his mother, "the business of the red" and a sure sign of a forthcoming catastrophe for him and for the family.<sup>27</sup> The son's actions met resistance from his family, particularly from his mother, who moved the family's residence each time their house became a meeting place for her son's entourage. Influenced by his mother's insistent protests, Park's brother eventually abandoned his political activity, found a teaching job in a rural school, and married. The family later found out that before taking up the job, he was forced to sign up to the Alliance of Converts to prove that he had abandoned and renounced communism. Immediately after the North Korean forces took over the town, her brother was approached by his old comrades, who urged him to join the revolutionary youth organization and the patriotic front in support of the People's Army. Park herself was drawn to a similar initiative organized among her college friends. Meanwhile, the liquor store of her paternal uncle and aunt was transformed into a gathering place for North Korean military officers, where the couple had to prepare meals for their new clients. Park's mother saw the family's growing incorporation into the politics and economy of the communist occupation as an ominous sign of a dark future for the family. She was particularly worried about her son's unstable, deteriorating mental condition, which Park believed was related to his bifurcated mind – between his obligations to family as the eldest son and his political commitments as a conscientious intellectual – as well as the shame of embracing an ideology after having renounced it.

The liberation of Seoul was not a celebratory event for Park's family, whose living conditions became even more precarious thereafter. Having

witnessed the roundup of people classified as counterrevolutionaries or supporters of the Southern regime during the early days of the North Korean occupation, this time Park was shocked to hear of the arrest and summary execution of neighbors and other residents, now being branded as *buyŏkja* or “collaborators.” Park’s paternal uncle and aunt were among those arrested, denounced by one of their neighbors as having fed and entertained the enemy combatants. Park Wan-seo herself endured a humiliating interrogation at the hands of an anti-communist paramilitary group, together with other family members accused of being collaborators. Her brother escaped this round of violence because he had already been conscripted into North Korea’s armed forces, and Park struggled to persuade her interrogators that her brother did not volunteer for the enemy’s armed forces but was simply forced to join. Park learned through this experience that in the eyes of her interrogators, the residents of Seoul who experienced North Korea’s occupation were all collaborators with the communists and “people who offered their labor to the enemy.” She realized that the population of the liberated Seoul was divided between the returning refugees and the nonreturnees, depending on whether or not they had evacuated the town before the communist occupation, and that those who failed to leave the city before the occupation were not regarded as proper citizens of the South Korean state and, instead, as disposable elements having no civil or human rights. Hence, she writes, “The life of a ‘red’ is like the life of an insect; the family of the ‘red’ has a destiny no better than that of worms.”<sup>28</sup> Coming to the understanding that the only possible way to preserve life in the liberated city was to join the struggle against communism, Park Wan-seo took the initiative to seek employment with an anti-communist youth organization as a secretarial clerk. She understood the prevailing logic of violence at the time: if her family as a whole faced the threat of appearing impure to the jealous persecutors as an extension of a family member, whom the latter regarded as a seditious and impure element, the only possibility for the family to shake off this life-threatening appearance and to survive was for someone in the family to join the interiority of anti-communist militancy. Also notable in Park Wan-seo’s accounts of vulnerable life in wartime Seoul is the breakdown of communal trust in a state of siege. The summary killing of her uncle was triggered by his neighbor’s accusation. Her own arrest by a paramilitary group was also caused by information about her brother provided by her family’s long-time neighbor. Park’s mother lamented the situation: “How in the heavens’ name is this possible? What happened to the food we used to share? Have people forgotten how we, the rich or the poor, had all taken turns to care for our grandchildren?”<sup>29</sup> The general vulnerability of life and the fear of

complicity influenced close kinship groups, too. Park introduces the following as one of the most painful episodes of the time. While her aunt and uncle were in jail, Park's mother wished to deliver clothes to them, so she asked a favor of a relative who worked as a prison guard. She was shocked to hear him remark sternly that he wished to have nothing to do with a family that was an enemy of the state.

The distortion of communal relations caused by the politics of retributive violence often took a more radical form in rural communities. It has been observed that the Korean War "permitted two antagonistic state powers to penetrate deep into the communities and thereby played a constitutive role in disintegrating these communities."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, recent studies show how the states' systematic terror against civilians developed into a spiral of tragic intimate violence perpetrated within and between communities in which "the victims of violence turned into the perpetrators of violence and the perpetrators to the victims" – a situation that was repeated following the movement of the frontier.<sup>31</sup> These studies show that in many rural communities, the Korean War is remembered primarily as a village war, as briefly noted earlier, a conflict that took place within the community and between local groupings. Two challenging questions arise from the investigation of the Korean War's intimate violence. One of them concerns the circumstances in which the politics of civil war brought a civil war-like crisis into a village community, and correspondingly, the extent to which the violence waged within a local community was related to locally specific historical conditions. The investigators who raise these questions also find considerable diversity in the experience of communal violence across places and even between physically close communities.

The anthropologist Yun Taik-lim's study based in Yesan, a rural area near the city of Daejeon, for instance, asks why between the two neighboring villages she investigated, retaliatory communal violence erupted only in one particular village, not in the other (see later discussion). Other recent studies raise similar questions as to how social groupings within a community, such as lineage groups, came to experience the war's violence in markedly different ways.<sup>32</sup> Similar observations are made in the recent reports prepared by South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see Chapter 6) on its investigation of several dozen incidents of mass civilian killings during the Korean War. The Commission's richly documented reports amply show considerable variance in the patterns of state and communal violence. In a district near Kongju, in the south-central region, for instance, the Commission found that although residents of this area suffered from the preemptive violence perpetrated against alleged communist sympathizers in the early days of the war, the region was fortunate to avoid a subsequent escalation of violence, unlike

other nearby places. According to one local villager who provided testimonies to the Truth Commission's investigation team, this was due to the fact that "the retaliation against the Right rarely took place during the time of People's Republic [in our area], so no retaliation against the Left followed after the recovery [of the village by South Korea]." <sup>33</sup> The Commission's investigation also notes a geographical factor in explaining the relative absence of communal violence in this area – that the evacuation of the North Korean troops and their local supporters involved fewer of them turning into locally based partisan resistance groups, unlike in other places in wartime South Korea, as the region lacks wooded mountains and hills that could shelter partisan insurgents. <sup>34</sup>

The diversity of war experience is observed not only between regions but also within the same locale and even within the same village community. Notable in this respect is Yun's accounts of a village in the Yesan district mentioned earlier. The village was the birthplace of several locally prominent intellectuals, who assumed leadership roles in the wider region's radical social reform movement and political organizational activities during the early postcolonial years. Due to this legacy, the village earned, during the war and afterward, the designation of "Yesan's Moscow" or "another Moscow" among the locals (see Chapter 3). <sup>35</sup> Although the village as a whole was viewed by outsiders as a hotbed of radical politics, relations were more complicated within the village, which consisted of two residential clusters, Gamgol and Bamgol. Even before the outbreak of the war, according to Yun, conflicts were intense in Bamgol. The hamlet was divided between the returning former veterans and labor conscripts of Japan's imperial army from various parts of the Pacific War theater and, on the other, a village notable and his supporters. The latter played a role in conscripting the village youths into Japan's war ventures, so the returning veterans had legitimate grudges against the man and his entourage, who continued to exert influence in village affairs after the end of Japan's colonial occupation of Korea in 1945. By the time the Korean War broke out in 1950, animosity between these two groups of villagers was magnified and took on, according to Yun, "the façade of a left versus right ideological struggle." <sup>36</sup> What Yun means by this remark is, from my understanding, that the polarization of village politics, according to the terms of the Cold War, was partly rooted in the colonial-era conflicts between the collaborators with colonial politics and the victims of these politics. These intra-communal conflicts were less prominent in the village's other settlement of Gamgol, however, according to Yun, who associates this community's relative peace in 1945–1950 with strong leadership within the hamlet provided by two prominent anti-colonial activists and radical intellectuals. <sup>37</sup> These two men enjoyed

great moral authority in Gamgol, not only due to their anti-colonial credentials, but also because they were from families that had long enjoyed prominence within the settlement.

These two settlements reacted to North Korea's occupation politics quite differently. Gamgol was incorporated into the revolutionary administration swiftly and relatively peacefully, and some of its residents were recruited for important positions in the village and district-level war administrations of the occupation power. In Bamgol, by contrast, the occupation generated a tumultuous local situation. The villagers who were classified by the occupation authority as counterrevolutionaries had to run for their lives, and their properties were confiscated. Those who failed to escape were put before a panel of summary justice, called the People's Court, and five of them were subsequently beaten to death. Yun observes that this violent episode at the outset of the occupation later led to vicious retaliatory violence against the villagers who had participated in the People's Court, when the North Korean forces left the area, and the people who had escaped the occupation returned to the village triumphantly in advance of the South Korean government forces. This time, the villagers who had taken part in the local administration during the occupation were forced to evacuate the area. People who failed to do so were executed, and their properties were taken by villagers who claimed to be anti-communist patriots. These lethal actions extended to the families of the accused individuals. Although both settlements suffered retributive violence during this time, Bamgol's experience was far more destructive than Gamgol's. In Gamgol, acts of retribution were mainly conducted by the South Korean military forces. In contrast, residents of Bamgol were persecuted not only by the military but also by vengeful villagers who had suffered under North Korean occupation. The latter is remembered by the villagers as the most painful episode of the war, according to Yun, and it continues to haunt village life to this day.<sup>38</sup> A village elder in Gamgol said:

We did not know who was right at that time, whether the Left was right or whether the Right was right. It was only after the war was over that we were taught that communism was wrong . . . Both the Right and the Left were wrong. Each side claimed that only their side was right. Looking back, it occurs to me that both sides were wrong. They both were wrong in what they had done to us.<sup>39</sup>

When the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, the prewar frontier that partitioned Korea into two separate states, and charged through the territory of North Korea, it is reported that the troops found numerous traces of mass killings. The withdrawing North Korean political and military authorities continued their violence against civilians on the grounds of guilt by suspicion, but this time against their own citizens

whom they suspected might collaborate with the Southern forces. In certain areas, the violence specifically targeted members of local church groups.<sup>40</sup> When the northward advance of the UN troops was halted by the Chinese and North Korean forces along North Korea's border with China, which then began to roll back the UN forces from the territory of North Korea and further back to the central region of South Korea, a new whirlwind of violence was unleashed.

China's military intervention in the Korean conflict is a subject of intense investigation among historians of the Korean War today, together with the US decision to cross the 38th parallel, which triggered the intervention. China's involvement changed the character of the Korean War from principally a civil war with elements of an international war to a full-blown international war with a diminishing dimension of civil war. Militarily, it altered the form of the Korean War from a chaotic mobile-territorial war in the second half of 1950 to stagnant trench warfare and hill fighting along the 38th parallel that would last two more years. However, the radically changing conditions of the Korean War at the end of 1950 politically and militarily meant, in terms of social experiences, a return of the chaos of July 1950. During the retreat of the UN forces in the early months of 1951, numerous civilians in the central region of South Korea succumbed to a revived storm of preemptive violence, and these included people who had survived the earlier storm of political violence. It is known that communities in North Korea were also affected by this wave of violence, although details are yet to emerge.<sup>41</sup> A number of rural communities in the environs of Seoul, including those on the island of Kanghwa and in the district of Koyang, were almost completely destroyed during this time by the indiscriminate violence of summary killings committed by South Korea's combat police troops and paramilitary youth groups. In Koyang, local paramilitary groups arrested villagers suspected of having assisted the North Korean occupying forces, executed them en masse on a hill, and threw their bodies into an abandoned colonial gold mine. The paramilitary groups in Kanghwa gathered the islanders who they had previously earmarked as collaborators and conducted a series of executions along the seashore.

In both cases, violence often fell upon the family members of the accused individuals according to the scheme that the locals remember as *daesal*, "substitutive killing."<sup>42</sup> The gruesome logic of substitutive killing was that someone in the family had to take the place of the suspected collaborator if the latter was not available, so that the number of targets in the prepared list of suspects should be identical to the number of people executed. For instance, in January 1951 on the island of Kanghwa, close to the 38th parallel, paramilitary violence against suspected communist

collaborators fell heavily on the families of people whom the perpetrators believed had escaped to the northern part of Korea. The casualties of this “substitutive killing” make up nearly half of the Kanghwa victims.<sup>43</sup> Substitutive killings were widely practiced in other parts of wartime Korea, and the ruthlessness of this violence left particularly deep scars among the survivors. This is evident in the prison diary of Lee Won-sik, a practitioner of traditional herbal medicine who played a pivotal role in organizing the bereaved families’ rally in Daegu in July 1960. Lee received a death sentence in 1961 in a military court, charged with an alleged seditious activity “to characterize leftist elements [victims of massacres] as patriotic individuals,” “to create and assist an anti-state organization [of bereaved families],” and thereby, “to benefit North Korea.”<sup>44</sup> He had joined the bereaved families’ association in his capacity as the spouse of a victim of state violence – his wife had succumbed to substitutive killing in August 1950 in the vicinity of Daegu while Lee was away from home. Lee Won-sik’s prison diaries, kept by his son, abound with his remorseful feelings toward his wife, his regrets over failing to do justice to her innocence, which he knew better than anyone else, and his disbelief over “how I became a prisoner condemned to death because of my love for you who died without a grave.” Lee was found “not guilty” posthumously in a hearing at a district court in Seoul on June 25, 2010. The verdict was later sealed, following the rejection of the prosecutor’s appeal, at a hearing in the country’s Supreme Court on May 25, 2011. Although a similar reinstatement is yet to be extended to Lee’s wife, their children believe that the court decision helped to bring about a closure to the family’s long-held grievances. Shortly after the 2011 verdict, the family held an annual death-anniversary rite for their parents. While Lee’s son was standing up after making a closing bow to the ancestral tablet, his sister urged him, in a hurried voice, to take a look at the table of food offerings. Doing so, he marveled at the scene as the two spoons, each of which he had inserted into the separate bowls of cooked rice meant for his mother and father, were slowly beginning to incline toward each other. The movement stopped when the tips of the handles touched.

### **Impossible Citizenship**

The Korean War’s terror against civilians changed in terms of its perpetrators as well as in its character, from preventive to punitive violence and back to the former. As the frontier of the war moved, first to the southern reach of the peninsula and then to Korea’s northern border with China and then again southward, new waves of organized terror were unleashed against civilians. Each side in the war defined their action as an act of

liberation. From the perspective of the local community, however, each act of liberation was hardly a liberating and joyous event, but one that generated an extremely precarious situation. Families who had lost their loved ones to the “white terror” were coerced into the propagation of the subsequent “red terror” and vice versa. Communal relations were distorted and strained to breaking point with the imposition of the binary order of “families of patriotic individuals” versus “red families” (by the Southern authority), or “democratic families” versus “counterrevolutionary families” (by the Northern authority). The war’s changing tides of violence induced the civilian population, caught in the cross fire, into an impossible position of having to survive in between the two ideologically opposing yet structurally identical forces that commonly hammered society with a zero-sum logic. Each side in the war defined the other as an illegitimate authority and as an “antinational grouping,” thereby making any act of accepting or even acknowledging the authority a crime against the national community. North Korea’s postcolonial state authority initiated the war, among other reasons, primarily on the basis of the belief that only it had the mandate to represent the entire nation, and the same idea governed the leaders of the South Korean state before and during the war. As a civil war, the Korean War was a conflict waged between two nascent postcolonial national states that hoped to become a singular nation-state worthy of the name by negating the competing state’s claim to sovereignty through violent means. As a global conflict that was waged in the form of a civil war, it was fought between two opposing international forces, whose mutual ideological negation was brought to bear in the form of an armed conflict in Korea. In the arena of the war’s violence against civilians, the global dimension of mutual ideological negation and the national dimension of exclusive sovereignty formed a lethal fusion, turning it into an unimaginably uncivil conflict, tearing apart the moral fabric of numerous traditional communities.

For those people who survived the waves of impersonal and intimate violence that came with the changing tides of the war, the preservation of life often meant radical displacement from home (see Chapter 2). The result was, when the war was over, a widespread dispersal of family and kin across the bipolar political border, which remains to this day one of the most enduring human legacies of the Korean War.<sup>45</sup> The mass exodus of war refugees southward to escape the communist occupation became frequent images in the international reportage of the Korean War. Popular songs in postwar South Korea feature the sorrow of witnessing loved ones in the columns of prisoners being forcibly marched to the North, or of having to part with their family during the evacuation of residents in North Korea to the southern regions.

Episodes of wartime family separation continued to be a main theme in the art, music, and literature of postwar South Korea. Most of these episodes are related to escaping from communist occupation or rule. When they are about human displacement in the opposite direction, the drama of separation is typically featured as one of coercion, such as in the above song about prisoners on the forced northward march. In reality, however, the Korean War's human displacement took place prolifically in both directions. The move to the South was not always "in search of freedom"; many residents of North Korea who fled to the South did so not necessarily from fear of communism, but principally from fear of the United States' massive aerial bombardment campaigns, including the threat of thermonuclear destruction – a threat that remained real from the early days of the Korean War.<sup>46</sup> As for people who joined the exodus to the North, they were not always coerced by the Northern communists but often conditioned by fear of retributive violence by the opposite side. The Korean War's human displacement and family separations were products of the reciprocal actions committed by both parties in the conflict to contain the civilian population away from the influence of the enemy side through violent means. Within the ideologically charged, mass-mobilized civil war, control of the civilian population was not a secondary issue to military action but rather constituted the main objective and instrument of war. Ideological purity was the necessary property for the preservation of life in this milieu; for the civilians, it was impossible to attain such purity within the war's chaotic, shifting frontiers.

Against this historical background of generalized terror and assault against civilian lives and communal moral order, kinship relations in postwar Korea rarely constitute a discrete, genealogically unbroken, or politically homogeneous entity. This is amply demonstrated in the biographical and literary accounts of the Korean War in South Korea, which typically depict the reality of war in terms of an acute domestic and communal crisis. The choice of political positioning that individuals and groups made during the war was sometimes voluntary, based on moral and ideological commitments, but it was much more often one of coercion, imposed on the family and the community by forces beyond their control or comprehension. The politics of civil war brought a radical crisis into the moral community of kinship and the traditional village community; yet, existing kin- or place-based solidarities were also made into instruments of war, as we will see in the following chapters, mobilized to collective political actions in the service of the business of war-making. The violence of war left scars in local communities not merely in terms of the brutality of violence but also because of the forms it took; in particular,

the measures of collective punishment it enforced upon the communal world, in which the community as a whole was to take responsibility for an individual action believed to benefit the enemy. Death and separation were common in the dynamic theater of a mass-mobilized total war with prolific foreign interventions, and these included the death events of close relatives, whose stories remain a taboo subject within the family and the local community because they involved the actions of neighbors or relatives as the immediate cause. How to remember these deaths and to account for their histories is, therefore, not a simple question, and this has been one of the most challenging questions for the moral survival of a community in the postwar era. Many separated families and families with missing persons from the war continued to face a testing time even after the war ended. They lived with the risk of being considered politically impure groups within society, due to the possibility (or the reality) of being related to someone who had moved to the opposite side of the bipolar border. Whether people crossed the border voluntarily or against their will mattered a great deal, and many postwar families took the view that their relative's move had been purely one of coercion. In actuality, people's "voluntary" crossings were typically coerced moves, made in fear of the retributive violence against their lives, as we will see in the next chapter, and often in the hope that their departure might help their remaining family members escape from the violence.

The grassroots experience of the Korean War was, therefore, primarily about an extreme existential crisis in intimate social relations. The crisis took a number of concrete forms: the burden of collective culpability, and the division and dispersion of families and local communities into separate political paths and state entities. Yet, these diverse forms were all related to a single most important issue in the lived social reality of Korea's civil war: "the impossibility of performing the business of citizenship in this land," as one historian wrote in his wartime diary on September 23, 1950, while living in Seoul under North Korean military occupation and when the city was about to be recovered by South Korean and US forces.<sup>47</sup> The history of the Korean War, in this sphere, is also about what ordinary people, such as the author of this diary, did to survive the war and how they set out to take on the impossible task of performing citizenship under the two states that vehemently negated each other's *raison d'être*. These people struggled to carve and recarve niches of innocence in the war's turbulent, changing waves of violence and shifting loyalty claims that systematically destroyed the spaces of physical and moral survival. Each time the front line changed and the identity of the occupying (or liberating) forces changed accordingly, the very possibility of moral innocence was under threat, as the new liberators viewed the

community they had just liberated with extreme suspicion, as being collectively culpable for having colluded with the enemy. They questioned how the community could have otherwise survived the enemy's occupation. For the author of the diary, the question was not merely about what he had done during the occupation, such as changing the national flag of South Korea to that of North Korea on the flagpole on the door of his family home or having to attend public meetings in order to avoid the risk of being labeled reactionary. Rather, it concerned his entire bodily being and his entire relational world of family, relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Under North Korean occupation, he felt that his family in Seoul and his father and other relatives living down in a Southern region became the subjects of different states. After South Korean troops recovered Seoul, he discovered that the townspeople became tainted and impure as a whole: having breathed the air of North Korea's People's Republic, they were unfit for life in the Southern republic.<sup>48</sup> Everyone was deemed guilty, he recognized, and the only way to assert innocence seemed to be by joining the machinery of accusation. Even in this extremely precarious condition of a radicalized zero-sum logic of civil war threatening to overwhelm the possibility of personal and communal survival, the villagers and townspeople of wartime Korea set out to find ingenious pathways and niches of survival, and to confront the war's consuming ideology and physical force in remarkably inventive ways. Very often, the road toward physical and moral survival was paved on the basis of existing communal ties.

### **The Right to Be Related**

Many did find small alleyways of survival and helped one another along the way; others were less fortunate and joined the yet unrecorded list of numerous nameless victims of one of the most brutal wars of the twentieth century in Asia. Across the widely variable spectrum in the structure and agency of survival, however, the experience of the Korean War had a single common consequence for a great number of Koreans in the war generation. Histories of survival typically involved coping and living with the claims and demands made by two political forces that vehemently negated each other's moral grounds. Histories of nonsurvival were mostly related to the same difficult existential conditions, only with added elements of higher structural rigidity within the given structure of enmity and of disempowered agency for survival coerced by that structure. Both streams of history were closely intertwined in their unfolding, and they both involved painful episodes of separation in familial and communal lives. Many histories of survival include the displacement

from home of family members whose presence at home threatened the survival of the family as a whole; the life histories of individuals who did not survive the war often have an unspoken dimension within the surviving family, in which the family, during and after the war, strove to sever its ties to those individuals whose historical and genealogical presence threatened the family's collective survival. The history of survival also involves, as shown by the family gathering in 1960 at Daegu railway station, the long and arduous efforts of families in the postwar years to reinstate the status of their dead relatives to that of innocent victims of war and state violence, away from the dark zone of the law of the lawless war, according to which the dead were neither enemy combatants nor innocent civilian victims. Family and kinship ties were, therefore, an important site of a struggle for life in the theater of Korea's civil war, and this struggle continued, for many, long after the guns went silent.

Before the assembly at Daegu railway station in July 1960, some family representatives joined a public hearing in the presence of the commander of the provincial military forces, from whom they hoped to solicit permission to hold their memorial gathering. In this meeting, the commander argued that he would not consider the assembly to be about *yangmin* ("innocent civilians"), pointing specifically to the family of Mr. Shin, one of the organizers of the railway gathering, to prove his point. Mr. Shin's son had joined the Alliance of Converts before he was killed in July 1950, the commander said, and his younger brother later escaped to the North during the war. These actions made it impossible, according to him, to consider Mr. Shin's family as one of innocent civilian victims of war and, therefore, the activities of the assembly of the bereaved families that Mr. Shin was part of as innocent activities.<sup>49</sup> In response, the family representatives argued that the military commander's distinction between innocent civilians and noninnocent civilians was purely of his own imagination. The intention of their assembly was instead, they said, to achieve the right to commemorate the dead. In order to do so, it was necessary to find out the date of their death and to recover their scattered remains.<sup>50</sup> They also demanded "resolving complications in family records" and "an end to the police surveillance of bereaved families" based on these records – that is, an end to the practice of associative guilt and collective culpability (see Chapter 4).<sup>51</sup> The newspaper column that reported the July 1960 meeting said that the deafening lamentation of women in white clothes dwarfed the ear-piercing whistles of a steam-powered locomotive that day. For those who took part in the collective lamentation, the day is remembered as a rare liberating experience, when they were free from the fear – the fear

that a family's act to remember the dead may make the family as a whole an outcast from political society as an extension of the dead. The distant echo of their voices still rings true today, and the confrontation between the ethics of commemoration and the politics of sovereignty is not over yet, two generations after the war ended. The same is true of disputes over what constitutes innocent death in the ruins of that old yet unfinished war.