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Depictions of the Korean War: Picasso to North Korean Propaganda

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Abstract

United States commentary on the state of North Korean- American relations places the Korean War as a mere backdrop to the fierce animosity held by the North Korean government and its people. In so doing, commentary contemporaneous to and directly addressing the war is largely omitted, resulting in slanted narratives that ignore the atrocities committed by all parties involved in the war. However, we may gain more insight into the issues concerning North Korea that the United States faces today by examining depictions of the Korean War. This paper analyzes, visually and historically, four works of art, Pablo Picasso's "Massacre in Korea" 1951; an untitled painting at North Korea's Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities; Lee Soo-eok's, "On Refuge" 1954; and Byeon Young-son's, "Anti-Communist Wandering Spirit" 1952, to expose an episode of inhumane and indiscriminate destruction inflicted upon Korea by the United States. Furthermore, the works of art demonstrate how the later-named Sinchon Massacre has been used to inspire anti-American sentiment in North Korea ever since. In illuminating one facet of the Korean War, a conflict that garnered little international attention, we can see how it has continued to influence our politics today. Lastly, if the entire Korean Peninsula is ever to be restored to a state of peace and prosperity, we must first acknowledge our part in its destruction.

Keywords: Korean War, Pablo Picasso, Sinchon, Byeon Young-son, Lee Soo-eok, propaganda, Socialist Realism

Background

Spanning from the early to mid-twentieth century, Korea was subject to the colonial rule of Japan. Following the defeat of the Axis powers in the Second World War, Korea was liberated from the colonial era that racked its people for thirty-five-years (“Massacre at Nogun-ri”). In Japan’s place, the United States and the Soviet Union moved in and occupied, respectively, the South and North Korean territories, which were divided along an arbitrary boundary at the 38th parallel (Williams). The world’s superpowers similarly divided defeated Germany and the United States would go on to promote a two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The divisions of Korea and Germany, results of the ideological clash between the democratic United States and the communist Soviet Union, set the stage for the ensuing Cold War. On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces, with support from the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea, initiating the Korean, or “Forgotten,” War. Warfare continued until 1953, when an armistice was signed between Chinese and North Korean military commanders and the U.S.-led United Nations Command (Williams). Notably, South Korea was not a signatory of the armistice; South Korea’s exclusion highlights the unusual circumstance that the people of Korea, a people with a shared history, were divided by the United States and the Soviet Union and incited by the super powers to fight amongst themselves in a proxy war between democracy and communism (Young-na Kim). Though depictions of the Korean War are inextricably tied to the political and social ideologies that launched the peninsula into conflict, no matter an artist’s background, his work imparts upon the viewer the indiscriminate ruination the war brought to the people of Korea.

Pablo Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* (see figure 1), finished on Jan 18, 1951, is the only depiction of the Korean War that has received an international audience. The expressionistic painting is an overt criticism of American intervention on the Korean peninsula; however, it is debated which event galvanized Picasso and is represented in his work. The surprise invasion of North Korean forces on June 25 had immediate consequences for nearly two million South Korean civilians who were forced to flee their homes. The refugee crisis was exacerbated as U.S.-led UN forces formed rank, trapping refugees in the middle of the battlefield (Williams). In a panicked attempt to control the crisis, the highest level of command of the U.S. 8th Army issued a callous order to stop all Korean civilians: "No, repeat, no refugees will be permitted to cross battle lines at any time. Movement of all Koreans in group will cease immediately" (Williams). At a bridge in No Gun Ri, South Korea, the order was carried out by the 7th Cavalry Regiment in the form of indiscriminate killings of Korean civilians. From July 26 to July 29, more than four-hundred refugees, most of whom were women and children, had been shot dead or strafed by U.S. planes (Williams). Under the direction of U.S. commanders, U.S. forces continued to target and kill Korean refugees trapped on the battlefield (Williams). The United States repudiated the allegations of a massacre by No Gun Ri survivors for nearly fifty years. It was not until the Associated Press released an investigative report in 1999, and the U.S. government was under heavy scrutiny, that it at last acknowledged the events of July 26-29. An ex-machine gunner, Norman Tinkler, said of the massacre, "We just annihilated them." Those four words fully demonstrate the ruination that the United States and the Soviet Union brought to Korea (Choe).

Though the No Gun Ri Massacre has since garnered international attention, in 1950, it was little more than accusations by anonymous, unheard voices. Therefore, Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* is more widely considered a depiction of the alleged Sinchon Massacre in North Korea that

spanned the months between October and December of 1950 (Redmond). Nevertheless, the lack of evidence, aside from personal testimony, surrounding the Sinchon Massacre has obscured the facts, and accounts of the events, the death toll, and on whom to place the responsibility remains contested. In the lead up to the alleged massacre, North Korean units were in the midst of retreating from Sinchon while local communist guerilla units replaced them (Williams). North Korea claims that under the command of the U.S. military, U.S. and South Korean forces began to target air raid shelters protecting North Korean civilians and refugees on 17 October 1950. North Korea maintains that the United States and South Korea continued to systematically massacre the people of Sinchon until December 7, after more than thirty-five thousand North Koreans, or one-fourth of the Sinchon population, had been killed (Redmond). The U.S. government has rebuked North Korea's claims and no evidence has come to light to authenticate them. It is noteworthy, however, that during the course of the Korean War, the United States referred to its involvement as "police actions," feigning moral superiority (Hak Sun Kim). Notwithstanding the lack of evidence, a mass killing of Korean civilians at the hands of the U.S. in Sinchon would have been entirely plausible and, armed with hindsight, not all that surprising either.

Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* draws upon Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (see figure 2), 1814—a response to the execution of Spanish prisoners carried out by the French—for content and form (Lee 120). *Massacre in Korea* is divided vertically into two distinct registers. To the left, four naked Korean women stand in a line at the edge of a mass grave. To the right, naked U.S. soldiers oppose them. Similarly, Goya's composition is split in two; the Spanish mob occupies the left and the French firing squad stands in the far right (Lee 123).

Two of Picasso's women are pregnant, one woman cradles a baby, while the fourth woman uses her hands to shield her breasts and genitalia from sight. The baby's arms are locked around the mother's neck, mimicking the mother's tight hold on the baby. Three children are also present with the women. The child to the far left is perched on her tiptoes, her head is burrowed into her mother's swollen, fully rounded stomach, and her arm is reaching up towards her mother's face. Her mother protectively rests her arm around the child and looks straight on towards the soldiers, her chin raised defiantly. The child on the far right looks back at the soldiers and scream escapes his gaping mouth as he runs to get behind the women. The third child has been pushed by the running child and is braced for the fall.



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso, *Massacre in Korea*, 1951. Oil on plywood. Musée Picasso, Paris, France.

Picasso outlined the women and children in black and renders their skin in shades of white and grey. The rounded belly of the central, pregnant woman, however, is bathed in a bright yellowish light. Likewise, in Goya's *Third of May*, the central Spanish figure is bathed in artificial light (Lee 124). Moreover, Goya's central figure has his arms raised above his head in a Christ-like posture; it is as though he is inviting the firing squad to shoot him (Lee 123). Picasso appropriates both the Christian iconography and the posture of Goya's figure by depicting the central pregnant woman with opened palms held up toward the U.S. soldiers; she, too, is not afraid.

Although anguish registers on the faces of the other women, they do not recoil from certain death either. Goya's and Picasso's paintings denounce, respectively, the actions of the French and the U.S., and simultaneously elevate the anonymous Spaniards and Koreans to martyrdom.



Figure 2. Francisco de Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814. Oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

Picasso has transformed the naked U.S. soldiers from men into machines. The soldiers are colored in metallic greys, their bodies are stiff, and their facial features have been distorted into irregular, geometric planes. Furthermore, they have been emasculated and the weapons they wield—composites of swords, rifles, and lances—have replaced their penises (Young-na Kim). The weapons in Goya's *Third of May* are similarly depicted as extensions of the soldiers' bodies. The U.S. soldier in the immediate foreground replicates the stance of the soldier in the immediate foreground of Goya's painting; his legs are spread wide, he leans into his weapon, his shoulder is raised, and he is poised to fire. Picasso has employed the visual language found in Goya's *The Third of May 1808* to dehumanize and reduce the U.S. soldiers to weapons of war.

Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* is also in direct conversation with his 1937 work, *Guernica*. *Guernica* was a direct response to the Nazi-organized, Nationalist-approved aerial bombings of the civilian population in Guernica, Spain during the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War (Chipp 192).

Massacre in Korea was similarly a reaction to the U.S.-led massacre of Korean civilians at either No Gun Ri or Sinchon (“*Massacre in Korea* to Make Seoul Debut”). Nevertheless, neither *Guernica* nor *Massacre in Korea* is clearly situated in time or space, and the viewer is dependent on their titles for context. In *Guernica*, light emanates from a central point at the top of the pyramidal composition. Whether the light is natural or artificial cannot be ascertained, therefore, neither can the time of day. *Guernica*'s setting is also ambiguous; the walls appear to enclose the space as though the figures are trapped indoors, but a woman hangs out from a window, implying the opposite (Herold). *Massacre in Korea*, far less ambiguous than *Guernica*, juxtaposes the pale women and machine-like soldiers with vibrant green hills. Nonetheless, the painting is rooted by its title, not in topographical accuracy. *Guernica* is characterized by a combination of cubist and surrealist techniques; the composition has been broken into flat, multiple-point perspective planes, the figures' bodies are fragmented, and their faces have been deformed in a surrealist manner (Herold). Despite the fact that *Massacre in Korea* is an expressionist piece, the faces of the two women on the far left are grotesquely contorted as were the bodies in *Guernica*.

In *Massacre in Korea*, Picasso repurposes certain figures from *Guernica* in order to underscore the extraordinary atrocities that the U.S. military committed against Korean civilian populations. The running child in *Massacre in Korea* and the woman in the burning building in *Guernica* both present codified depictions of suffering—their hands are raised, their heads are back, and they are screaming (Herold). Additionally, in the far left of *Massacre in Korea*, Picasso has twice reproduced the mother and child who occupy the far left of *Guernica*. This imagery forges a connection to Christian iconography of Madonna and Child (Chipp 90-91). Picasso's emphasis on women and children stresses the extent to which violence was carried out against civilian populations in Spain and Korea.

Though he was commissioned by the left-wing, Popular Front Spanish government, and it is speculated that Picasso's sympathies laid with the communists, *Guernica* lacks overt symbols of communism, such as the hammer and sickle, wheat, or raised fists (Herold). By the time the Korean War had broken out, Picasso had joined the French Communist Party; however, *Massacre in Korea* also contains no partisan reference. Moreover, Picasso was criticized by communist parties because his works rejected Socialist Realism, the mainstream artistic style under communist states ("*Massacre in Korea* to Make Seoul Debut").

North Korean Propaganda

An untitled and unattributed, Socialist Realist painting (see figure 3) from North Korea's Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities depicts the alleged Sinchon Civilian Massacre. Socialist Realism was begun in, and became the official style of, the Soviet Union. In other communist states, North Korea included, it was thrust upon the artistic community and quickly became the mainstream. Socialist Realist works of art primarily function as propaganda, typically elevating the common man by depicting his struggle toward a socialist state ("Socialist Realism"). Naturally, this painting exalts the North Korean women in their fight against the United States and imposed democracy. The entire Sinchon Museum, including this painting, is dedicated to the condemnation of U.S. intervention on the Korean peninsula and has been used to strengthen anti-U.S. sentiment throughout North Korea since its founding in 1958 (Redmond).



Figure 3. Untitled painting, North Korea's Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities, North Korea.

The North Korean painting depicts four U.S. soldiers in identical, dark green helmets and uniforms. They carry rifles and the soldier in the foreground has extra cartridges strapped to his waist. Three soldiers aggressively yank children away from their mothers while the fourth soldier tightens his grip around a mother's neck as she tries to shield her baby from him. The homogenized enemy has already slain a Korean woman; she now lays in the arms of another woman as the others continue to fight back against the vicious U.S. soldiers. Two women have their fists raised in anger, pronounced symbols of communism. Another woman has her arm raised above her head, prepared to strike down on a soldier with her slipper. Her posture is a parallel to the posture of Spaniard in Francisco de Goya's *The Second of May 1808*, 1814, who is positioned to slay a Mumluk of the French army with a curved sword (Lee 123). Goya's *Second of May* is ambiguous, but this North Korean painting plainly differentiates the aggressors—U.S. soldiers with democratic values—from the victims—North Korean communists.

North Korea alleges that the Sinchon Massacre took place from October to December when the climate in North Korea is bitterly cold and temperatures fall below freezing (Redmond). In the painting's background, the land is lined with white snow and bare shrubs, consistent with

Korea's winter climate. However, the traditional *hanboks* that the women and children are dressed in are anachronistic. All but two of the women are clothed in *hanboks* with a white top and a dark blue skirt. *Hanboks* with white tops are worn almost exclusively in the spring and summer, whereas colorful, heavy *hanboks* are reserved for the winter (Hak Sun Kim). While anachronistic, the white *hanboks* allow blotches of red blood to stand out against the sleeves of the dead woman and the woman to the left of her, further emphasizing the heinous actions of the U.S. soldiers; the Socialist Realist painting sacrifices accuracy for effect.

Socialist Realism and the reality of the South

Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, Lee Soo-eok was working as a member of an artists' alliance and living with his family in the North. In October 1950, at the onset of war, Lee and his family fled to the South (Young-na Kim). There, he became an official war painter in a unit under the Ministry of National Defense. Lee was sent to the front, where he sketched what would later become his *Night Battle*, a realistic depiction of the trenches, in 1952 (Young-na Kim). Lee, having worked in North Korea, was familiar with Socialist Realism and cognizant of the fact that it was the pervasive artistic style in the North. The influence of Socialist Realism is evident in *Night Battle*. However, in post-war, South Korean society, there was a need for artists to distance themselves from the North, and by extension, Socialist Realism (Young-na Kim). Lee's oil painting, *On Refuge* (see figure 4), was begun in 1954 after the war had ended and represents Lee's foray into the European avant-garde.



Figure 4. Lee Soo-eok, *On Refuge*, 1954.

On Refuge illustrates the experiences of Korean refugees, including those of Lee and his family, during the Korean War. The painting has a horizontal composition that guides the viewer's attention from left to right, following the movement of the refugees. The refugees are situated around a cart that carries cargo, a mother, and her breastfeeding child. This imagery, which draws from Christian iconography, is especially poignant as the Korean refugee mother reminds the viewer of Mary's struggle to find a place to stay on the night that Jesus was born. Among the refugees on the ground, there is one man pushing and one man pulling the cart, a child piggybacking her sibling, and woman balancing a tremendous bundle upon her head. The figures of *On Refuge* have been simplified into amalgamations of brown, rounded shapes as part of Lee's experimentation with Cubist techniques. The fact that Lee chose to represent the Korean War through the life of refugees, rather than fighting, is significant. As Lee Joon, a Korean artist who was active during the war, explains, "There was little desire to invest an anti-communist ideology in our work or to encourage people's morale... I also believe that we wanted to avoid using paintings to document the tragedy of our people fighting one another" (Young-na Kim). Lee's omission of violence in *On Refuge* reveals the cruel reality that the Korean War ruptured a nation for the sake of foreign superpowers.

Byeon Young-son conveys the inhumane and indiscriminate destruction of the Korean War in his 1952 oil painting, *Anti-Communist Wandering Spirit* (see figure 5), by appropriating style and forms found in Picasso's *Guernica* (Young-na Kim). In *Guernica*, Picasso fragmented his figures as part of an effort to condemn the civilian bombing of Guernica without overtly depicting the Spanish Civil War. In doing so, he aligned subject and form (Herold). In contrast, Young-son fragmented several human figures into a nearly unrecognizable state before attaching them to weapons of war, which they carry across a battlefield. Nonetheless, Young-son achieves an alignment between subject and form by depicting his figures in a manner that typifies the destruction Korean civilians experienced. Picasso created *Guernica* prior to joining to the French Communist party, at a time when his body of work was considered apolitical even though it was suspected that Picasso had communist sympathies. Similarly, the political beliefs of Young-son are unknown, but based on the content of *Anti-Communist Wandering Spirit*, it is plausible that he, too, had communist sympathies.



Figure 5. Byeon Young-son, *Anti-Communist Wandering Spirit*, 1952. Oil painting.

Conclusion

Depictions of the Korean War serve to illuminate a conflict that garnered little international attention, but whose long-lasting ramifications continue to dictate world politics, especially pertaining to the United States, today. The events depicted in Picasso's *Massacre in Korea*, North Korea's Sinchon Massacre painting, Lee Soo-eok's *On Refuge*, and Byeon Young-son's *Anti-Communist Wandering Spirit* are crucial to understanding the rupture of the Korean peninsula and the legacy of the Korean War. When stripped down to its core, the Korean war was a proxy war between the democratic United States and the communist Soviet Union and China. This ideological clash of superpowers spilled into Vietnam in 1955, resulting in another catastrophic war. Peace on the Korean Peninsula has yet to be reached, and in light of the atrocities committed by all parties involved in the Korean War, it is not difficult to understand why. While the North Korean regime installs hatred of the U.S. and its allies into its people, the United States and South Korea have taken up a just as damaging program of ignorance and denial. In order to restore the entire Korean peninsula to state of peace and prosperity, we must first acknowledge our part in its destruction. It is not too late to amend the narrative, to remember the war as it ought to be remembered.

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