The Korean War Refugee Crisis

INST 182 w/ Professor Maria Hoehn.

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Cold War Conflict or Humanitarian Crisis?

American historical discourse has declared Korean War the “forgotten war.” Forgotten by whom? To understand war as a humanitarian crisis is to reframe the way media has overwritten history. The goal is to hold on, simultaneously, the many interpretations of the (ongoing) Korean conflict. As proxy war, as domestic geographic upheaval, as a forced global diaspora.
The Korean War took place from June 25, 1950 to July 27, 1953. An armistice was signed to end the fighting, but no peace treaty was ever created, so the two countries are still technically at war. The war was sparked because there were two governments existing within one country separated by the 38th parallel. Both governments wanted to unify the country under their own control and the war started when the northern forces invaded the south on June 25, 1950. The result of this war was not only the separation of a country into two, but the separation of families because some were left behind in the North and could not travel to the South.
U.S. Involvement in the Korean War/With the Refugees

- Although the U.S. had sided with the southern forces of Korea and fought beside them, the U.S. forces had an informal understanding that they could use force to control the movement of the refugees.

- No Gun Ri Massacre: U.S. forces shot at Korean refugees because they were worried that Korean forces from the north had infiltrated. An unidentified number of refugees were killed.

- Heungnam Evacuation: “From Dec. 19-24, 1950, approximately 105,000 troops and 98,000 civilians” were evacuated from Heungnam, North Korea as northern troops were beginning to surround the southern and United Nations troops and the refugees. This “christmas miracle” was accomplished with the help of the troops and Hyun Bong-hak, a medical doctor.
Due to the air attacks of both the UN forces and the Chinese and northern Korean forces, many bridges leading to the southern part of the country had been destroyed as a precaution to keep northern forces out of the south. However, refugees were still trying desperately to cross into the southern part of the country by those damaged bridges. On December 4, 1950, photographer Max Desfor captured this image of refugees crawling on the broken bridge over the Taedong River in what is now North Korea to try to reach the south.
A majority of the refugees moved to the southern end of Korea in the hope of outrunning the North Korean army. Many thought of the move as temporary, and left precious belongings at their homes to retrieve later. The refugees were pushed into the southwestern end of Korea where the rice fields were located and so that they would not interfere with the military. Some of the main cities that housed the refugees were Pusan, Taegu, Taejon, Ponang, Kojo Island, Kusan, and Cheju.
Journey of the Refugees Abroad

Many of the refugees that went abroad went to the U.S. and were orphans up for adoption or new wives of the army men.

During this time period, Korean culture placed a heavy emphasis on bloodlines, so many of the biracial children fathered by the army men were the first up for adoption.

Many of the other children were orphans whose parents died in the war.

From 1950-1960 approximately 500 Korean women went to the U.S. as wives of American soldiers.
Religious charity organizations and UN Relief funds made up the bulk of refugee relief efforts.

Relief efforts also took form of clothing drives and canned food drives.

Sensationalized terms like “waifs” were used to describe South Korean children refugees.

Assimilation into 1950s America often looked as a pledging to anti-communism, Christianity, and domestic social norms.
Due to American racial quotas on immigration, the North American continent did not receive a large influx of immigrants from the Korean Peninsula until they were abolished in the 1960s. On the Asian continent, the Chinese Civil War ended shortly after the beginning of the Korean War and established China as a communist power. China did not see the Korean citizens as refugees, and to this day maintains a policy of returning North Korean citizens to the DPRK. Russia also supported North Korea, and boycotted the United Nations for a significant portion of the beginning of the war. The United Nations High Committee on Refugees released very few documents concerning the Korean War, as the mandate of the UNHRC at the time did not cover internally displaced persons, and also a Euro-centric view on what constitutes a refugee. There were however several United Nations plans to deal with the displacement of civilians during the war, but Cold War politics and a wide ideological divide on the progression of the war made it difficult for both sides to reach a compromise.
REDS REJECT ALLIED PLAN FOR DISPLACED PERSONS

MUNSAN, Korean, Feb. 1 (Friday) - The allies today offered—and the Reds rejected—a proposal that teams from neutral nations be named to interview displaced persons in Korea to determine where they want to live after a Korean armistice.

The proposal was made at Panmunjom by Rear Adm. R. E. Libby after the Reds turned down the allied plan to give the same job to the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Communists said the ICRC was not neutral.

In yesterday's meeting the U.N. command gave the Reds a chance to bring up their pet project—demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops in Korea.

Vice-Adm. C. Turner Joy, chief allied negotiator, attempting to speed the talks, invited the Reds to open immediate negotiations on the final agenda item, although agreement has not yet been reached on other major issues.
Refugee Plans in Korea Spurred; Masses Kept Out of Pusan Area

Barriers Set Up Around a Wide Perimeter in Southeast Sector While Exodus to Near-By Islands Is Speeded

By GEORGE BARRETT
Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

PUSAN, Korea, Friday, Jan. 19 — A chain of roadblocks and rail and river barriers has been sprung up around the city on the announcement, so even to guess at the death rate is impossible. But civil assistance administrators say that the rugged living in Korea
For U.S. policymakers during the Cold War, giving asylum to refugees was not simply an act of conscience: it was also a strategy of promoting American liberal and capitalist viewpoints through assimilation.

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ writing, from political speeches to columns in *Vanity Fair* and *Time*, showcase how rhetoric had shaped the war.
August 18, 1950 Video

An update on the Korean War and its refugees:

http://www.nbcnews.com/video/nbc-learn/52589331#52589331
Kim Jong-Un, following his deceased father’s lead, has instituted totalitarian reign over his state

Freedom of expression is repressed, political opposition is quashed, and anti-state offenses are punished in inhuman prison camps

Between 80,000 and 120,000 people are currently being held in political prison camps

The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which covers the border between North and South Korea, is patrolled by over 1 million soldiers

This border is nearly impossible to bypass and most refugees escape through an underground railroad system that takes them across the River Tumen to China, continues to Laos and Thailand, before snaking back to South Korea

These refugees, mostly women, are vulnerable to deceit, abuse, and sexual trafficking
‘The “pigeon torture”: “[W]e are bound to stay in that position until the jailer feels that you have been tortured enough. So the torture goes on until the time has come to the satisfaction of the jailer. This is the pigeon torture. This is a very strange word in Korea and to you. Your hands are bound back and if they tie you like this, your chest comes out forward and in this position you are tortured.” (Image source: United Nations)’
In Kim’s own word to the U.N. panel: “We are supposed to think there’s an imaginary motorcycle and we are supposed to be in this position as if we are riding the motorcycle. And for this, we pose as if we are airplanes ourselves. We are flying. And if we stand like this there’s no way that you can hold that position for a long time. You are bound to fall forward. Everybody in the detention centre goes through this kind of this torture.” (Image source: United Nations)"
“The State has used food as a means of control over the population. … The State has also used deliberate starvation as a means of control and punishment in detention facilities. This has resulted in the deaths of many political and ordinary prisoners.” (Image source: United Nations)
The Refugee Crisis Today

North Korean refugees are officially considered South Korean citizens according to constitutional law.

Since the late 1990’s, approximately 28,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea.

- Officially the South Korean government states that 13 defectors have returned to North Korea, however it is believed that many more have returned unofficially.

- Adjustment is tough for defectors. They have an unemployment rate that is 3X higher than the national average. More than half of them experience depression and 25-30% of them have entertained thoughts about leaving South Korea because they didn’t fit in.
Moving Forward

If it’s difficult to integrate 20,000 North Korean refugees, how can we possibly assimilate 20 million?

China has repeatedly propped up the North Korean state, partially because it provides a buffer state between China and South Korea, but also due to concerns over hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into Beijing.

When interviewed, North Korean defectors had many ideas on how we can help. Most believe a “carrot and stick” method is the best way to help North Korean citizens.

The international community needs to start paying attention to North Korean human rights. Food aid to the country should be conditional on improved human rights and if that is not enacted, then heavy sanctions should take place.

To do this, public awareness needs to be raised. People need to focus on human rights violations rather than nuclear weapons.


