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The Forgotten History of South Korean Massacres in Vietnam

In April, Nguyen Thi Thanh became the first Vietnamese to sue South Korea over atrocities that have been largely forgotten.

By Hoang Do

Over 50 years ago, Nguyen Thi Thanh's family was killed by South Korean troops in the Vietnam War. In April 2020, the now-60-year-old woman became the first Vietnamese to sue South Korea for the atrocities that have been largely forgotten.

South Korea and Vietnam's relationship has progressed tremendously since the countries established diplomatic ties in 1992. They now share a strategic partnership, and South Korea is Vietnam's biggest FDI investor while Vietnam is one of Korea's leading tourist attractions. Yet just about 50 years ago, South Korea sent more troops than any country other than the United States to Vietnam to fight the Communists. Those Korean fighters committed roughly 80 massacres resulting in 8,000 to 9,000 civilian deaths. While the massacre by U.S. troops in Mỹ Lai received widespread coverage, memory of South Korea's massacres mostly evaporated, left unmentioned by both side's mainstream media or history classes and forgotten by younger generations.

Make no mistake: this is not because of a successful bilateral reconciliation. Rather, it is the result of foreign policy choices, domestic politics, wartime difficulties, and cultural practice.

First, South Korea's government has denied the killings since the beginning. Involved military leaders imply that the killings were a Communist conspiracy. South Korea's Ministry of Defense claims such systemic and organized massacres didn't happen. Its National Intelligence Service has declined requests to publicize their 1969 investigation into the massacres. Several liberal presidents, including Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, have made apologetic statements, but they never directly mentioned the massacres or admitted to the killings. Such remarks were even contradicted by other presidential statements praising Korean troops' involvement in Vietnam.

Second, domestic politics prevented the issue from making it onto governmental agendas. In the 1960s, South Korea under Park Chung-hee's authoritarian leadership imposed strict regulations on freedom of speech, which helped the military cover up the massacres. Anyone who came out against the troops could be tortured or imprisoned. In modern time, prominent conservatives in South Korea promote Korean troops in Vietnam as "heroes" and prevent liberal leaders, such as current President Moon Jae-in, from making a full apology.

Civil societies are the only hope, but they have limited space to operate in Vietnam. In South Korea, civic life is much more vibrant. Many groups there, such as The Committee for Finding the Truth about Vietnam, Below the Lotus Flower, and the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation, have been trying to push for legal action, most notably with the mock trial in 2017-2018 or the "103 victims" petition in 2019. However, litigation is a long, costly and challenging tactic: South Korea's civil law has a five-year statute of limitations; many survivors are either old or already

departed; and existing evidence is not enough to force state agencies to disclose classified documents or conduct investigation.

Third, the war context made it more difficult to bring the massacres to light. There is no concrete record of the killings or the total number of civilian deaths. An often-cited study done by two American Quaker aid workers in 1972 only covered 45 killing cases and a part of the territory occupied by the Koreans. Compared to the Mỹ Lai massacre, there was no whistle blower or international press coverage at that time. Moreover, these killings were not made through an official chain of command so proof of the military's conduct might have not existed to begin with. The 2017-2018 mock trial in South Korea made the counterargument that guerrilla warfare in Vietnam made it difficult to distinguish between combatant and noncombatant targets.

The United States, which requested foreign backup and transferred these areas to South Korea, was not keen to publicize this issue either. It was reported that the U.S. authorities were not only aware of but also tolerated these massacres (with some even wishing that South Vietnam's forces could match South Korea's "aggressiveness"). There was an investigation by General William Westmoreland, but it stopped at the preliminary stage when South Korea's military leaders denied the killings. Considering the United States' record as a perpetrator of other massacres in Vietnam, such as Thủy Bò (1967), Mỹ Lai (1968), Thanh Phong (1969), and Sơn Thắng (1970), it was understandable that Washington did not want to pursue a thorough investigation, since it could have set a precedent to look into other atrocities.

Fourth, both Vietnam's and South Korea's foreign policies put historical grievances on the back burner. When talks to establish relations took place in the 1990s, Vietnam never pressed on the massacre issue nor asked for an apology, the way it did with the United States. This approach reflected Vietnam's reformed strategy of diversifying relations and promoting economic integration. Currently, South Korea is even more important as it is Vietnam's number one FDI investor, number two official development assistance (ODA) provider, and number two trading partner at a time when Vietnam wants to reduce economic dependence on China. In 2017, when President Moon made a controversial remark about Korean troops in Vietnam, Vietnam's (rare) response was timid, only saying that South Korea should avoid actions that might "negatively affect" bilateral cooperation. Hanoi did not mention the massacres.

South Korea's public diplomacy in Vietnam also contributes to Vietnam's favorable view of Korea. The "wave" of Korean cultural products in Vietnam started in the mid-1990s, when Korean television dramas were sold to Vietnam's national networks almost for free. Since then, South Korea has cultivated massive cultural appeal with its pop music, makeup products, cuisine, and movies. Interest in South Korea rose as Vietnam's national football team, coached by a Korean, won their first gold medal at the Southeast Asian Games in 2019.

Additionally, South Korea subtly used the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) to deliver aid, mostly through school, hospital, and land clearance projects, to provinces where Korean troops had been occupiers. The amount assigned to these areas was unusually much larger than KOICA's average aid (one school received \$2 million, compared to the average \$50,000, in 2000). However, KOICA never publicly clarified that the aid was related to or compensation for the killings..

Lastly, Vietnamese culture can reduce the visibility of the atrocities' victims. Civilian deaths in the massacres had a hard time finding their place between Vietnam's two common death commemoration practices at war monuments and domestic space. The victims, in many cases,

were children and Southern Vietnamese villagers, therefore not revolutionary figures to be considered “war heroes.” Their deaths were too tragic for their “ghosts” to enter a family’s space either. Collective monuments and collective death anniversaries for the victims do exist in some villages, but they often get lost in the public commemoration narrative for fallen heroes that Vietnam promoted after the war.

Moreover, many survivors do not speak up due to social stigma. Some mixed Korean-Vietnamese people (often known with the name “Lai Đại Hàn”) were born out of rapes committed by Korean troops, and often discriminated against in their own society because they are seen a “product” of rape or sharing blood ties with the aggressors. Also, government-issued textbooks reinforce the mindset that there is no need to investigate South Korea’s killings since students often learn from a young age that U.S. imperialism was the main enemy and Vietnam came out as a clear winner.

As Nguyen Thi Thanh’s lawsuit has just started, it is important to look into all of these underlying factors. It is important not only to understand why the atrocities committed by South Koreans during the Vietnam War are usually forgotten, but also to promote the fight for overdue justice that Nguyen Thi Thanh and the other Vietnamese victims deserve, especially when South Korea has been fighting for the same justice for their “comfort women.”

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