

The Post-War Korean Anarchist Movement

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Formation of the League of Free Social Constructors

In the Cairo Conference statement of December 1943, the heads of state of the U.S., Britain and China announced unequivocally: "We take note of the conditions of slavery endured by the people of Korea, and reassure them that, in due course, their freedom and independence will be restored to them." Moreover, at the July 1945 Potsdam Conference on the post-war order, this principle was confirmed. The Soviet Union, in its August 1945 declaration of war against Japan, also expressed its adherence.

With the Japanese emperor's surrender statement of August 15, 1945, the curtain finally fell on the Korean people's 36-year tragedy. For these 30 million people, the death of the Japanese empire and the end of over a generation of brutal colonial exploitation all added up to a sudden, electrifying emotional experience. In every corner of Korea, the moment surrender was announced the people rose as one to set about the building of a new nation. Not just the cities, but even the remotest of villages, saw the spontaneous creation of "Preparatory Committees for Building a New Korea". Simultaneously, "like bamboo shoots after the spring rain," peasant unions, labor unions, cooperative associations and so on appeared. Through these activities the 36-year grudge of a people deprived of a country was finally being settled.

In Korea, the expression "post-war" does not exist. North or south, the appropriate term is "post-Liberation", because for the people of Korea liberation from Japanese rule was the overriding event. Liberation, however, had not brought freedom to Korea. In place of the defeated Japanese army now stood two new armies one American, one Russian, which occupied both north and south Korea and proclaimed military governments in their respective zones of control. If military government was not to become a fact, the people of Korea needed to construct their own representative organs through which to negotiate with their occupiers.

The home town of Ha Ree Rak (see LI-1) is Anwi, a medium-sized country town in central south Korea. Anwi has for years enjoyed a reputation for turning out well-known anarchists. Here too, after liberation, there appeared a "Preparatory Committee for Building a New Korea," centered on local anarchists. Comrades Lee Siu Ryung and Ha Kee Rak were elected chairman and vice-chairman. Ha, at the same time, was also chairman of the Free Peasant Union Committee of Anwi. For its first task, the union began providing food and living quarters and finding jobs for the comrades beginning to trickle back from exile in Japan and China.

The communists, meanwhile, with the help of the Russian army then occupying the north, were moving fast. All over Korea, the Preparatory Committees were speedily re-organized as "People's Committees," which gradually came to absorb all unions. Needless to say, the communists strewed vast sums of money about to expand their organization in this way.

In October 1945, a National Congress of Peasant Union Delegates was called in Seoul. According to Ha Kee Rak, who took part, almost all the bodies represented had already been transformed into red unions, and the Congress was to all appearances a communist party one. Ha himself did not stay long, and the following day he resigned his delegateship.

By this time most of the exiled anarchists had one by one returned to Korea, and it was decided that the anarchists, too, should create a unified organization for rebuilding their country. This was to be the "League of Free Social Constructors." Two precious months had been lost to the communists, a delay that was to inflict a fatal handicap on the Korean anarchists for years to come.

At that time, of course, traffic was open between north and south, and when the call went out to set up the League, anarchists from every corner of the Korean peninsula gathered in Seoul to take part. More than 60 comrades turned up, including the brothers Lee Eul Kyu and Lee Chung Kyu, Kim Hyan Un, Han Ha Yun, O Nam Ki, Pak Ryung Hong and Bang Han Sang. All were fighters with long experience. Ha Kee Rak, too, after the disaster of the Peasant Union Co.. gress, eagerly took part in this new anarchist organization aimed at building a new Korea. Lee Chung Kyu has described the atmosphere at the time as follows:

”By early August 1945, Japanese imperialism’s imminent defeat was obvious, and the tide of liberation was rising daily. Every corner of Korean society was affected. Among the scattered ranks of the anarchists there was an almost telepathic sensation that ”this was it!” So they began busily contacting each other and preparing for the day of decision. When August 15 finally dawned, many more comrades were released from prison, and huddled meetings were convened to debate the future. In all, 67 comrades, some from remote parts of the country, some fresh out of gaol, gathered in Seoul.

”Within the Preparatory Committees, the reactionaries attempted to form a united front with the communists in order to seize total power at one fell swoop. To oppose them, the right wing, typically, flooded the committees with candidates from diverse parties and factions. Among the anarchists, however, some comrades, associated with the just-released Kim Ji Gang (now dead), and Cha Ik Hyun, proposed: ’The first step in the building of a new Korea is to take our revenge on the Japanese!’ Consequently, at the beginning of September, the Japanese police official, Saiga Ichirō, and the Secret Service agent, Harayoshi Tsubouchi, and others, were sentenced to death and successfully assassinated.

”In a period dominated by groups blinded by their lust for total -political power, direct action like this heroic revenge killing of the lackeys of Japanese imperialism represented a shout for joy. Yet we anarchists, who had always advocated a social revolution, had also to take charge of the constructive activities necessary for building the new Korea. Everyone agreed that we had to declare our principles, and produce a positive, constructive plan for a new Korea. And so, after numerous meetings, the following declaration and program were drafted and published at the end of September.

”In the meantime, however, comrades Chul Ri Bang and Lee Yu San were murdered in the continuing struggle with the communists. In December came the further bad news of the UN Trusteeship proposed by the Moscow. Conference of Foreign Ministers. The next day, December 30, was raised the first flag proclaiming the struggle to the death to resist the trusteeship decision.”

Against this background, the first post-Liberation organization of Korean anarchists was formed.

On December 25, 1945, the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers, attended by the U.S., Great Britain, the USSR and China, passed two key resolutions on Korea. The first prescribed a four-power ”Trusteeship” for up to five years (though Roosevelt had originally demanded 40!).

The second created a U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission which, "in order to assist in the formation of a provisional democratic Korean government," would "consult with democratic political parties and social organizations" north and south. To the people of Korea, the (U.S.-engineered) Moscow provisions were a supreme "national insult." Resistance to the accords, released on December 27, sprang up overnight as people of all political views joined forces in a movement to oppose Trust Rule. Serious riots which broke out all over the south were suppressed by the Americans. Yet the very next day, on orders from the north, the communists suddenly announced their support for the Moscow decisions.

Behind these events lay the machinations of the U.S. military command in Seoul, which, seeing the strength of anti-Trust Rule feeling and seeking to steal a march on the communists, had already begun negotiating a deal with the Korean Right. Trusteeship could be bypassed and the Right installed in power if they would support American policy plans for the south. Right-wing politicians were thus able to flourish their "patriotism" by appearing to oppose Trust Rule, while its only supporters, the Soviet Union and its allies in the north, were branded traitors. Left publications which tried to expose Trusteeship as primarily an American creation designed to lay the basis for a U.S. empire in Asia were suppressed.

The communists' about-face was partly an attempt to avoid a U.S.-sponsored Right-wing takeover. Only in the north did it entirely succeed, yet in the south too, racked by famine and unemployment, the holocaust unleashed by American supported death squads brought the communists considerable popular support. Only the anarchists remained firm in their rejection of dictatorship of any hue, and they paid in lost support.

The implications of the communist endorsement were plain. First, the Korean people's inability to govern themselves effectively; second, despite so-called "liberation," continuation of Korea's long colonial history; third, and most important of all, it led to the ultimate tragedy, the still-continuing division into north and south Korea. For the north, Trust Rule meant Soviet manipulation through the structure of the People's Conunittees (LI-3, pp. 24-5). For the south, it meant American Military Government through the still-intact Japanese bureaucracy, using landlords, ultra-rightists, former collaborators and military officers. North or south, the new masters were equally hated by the people.

The indelible stain of the 38th parallel on the hearts and minds of the Korean people began here. The fundamental insistence upon class revolution rather than national independence and liberation led the communists to support Trust Rule. By thus crushing the passionate desire of all Koreans for a *united* independence, the CP turn-around was a clear stab in the back. For all the above reasons, the antiTrust movement from that point on inevitably became fiercely nationalistic and anti-communist.

The communists now resorted to violence to stifle anti-Trusteeship voices, particularly north of the 38th parallel where Soviet troops were in occupation. Drastic measures were enforced to ensure public support for the party line. On January 5, 1946, for instance, Red Army commissars approached Cho Man Sik, a leader of the moderate Korean Democratic Party's Pyongyang branch and representative of the "Five Provinces" Provisional People's Committee, to seek his support: "Adherence to the decision of the Moscow Conference is the correct line for the establishment of a democratic and independent Korea." Cho stood firm, demanding immediate, unconditional independence for all Korea: "I would rather suffer death itself than the humiliation of Trust Rule." He disappeared the next day. The subsequent purge swept away all opponents of Trust Rule, including some communists, and left Kim Il Song in Cho's former position.

The bloody trail of Kim Il Song's career begins here, with the Soviet Red Army backing the policy of the U.S. State Department. Kim later set out to eliminate all his rivals, beginning with the south Korean Workers' Party, led by Pak Hun Yong. Pak advocated unification rather than "socialism in one country." After a long struggle he finally disappeared after the Civil War and was executed in 1955. The next target was the "Yenan Faction," led by Kim Tu Bong and Mu Chong, which had fought with the Chinese People's Liberation Army against the Japanese during the war. The other two principal factions were also purged. With a ferocity and single-mindedness hardly rivalled even by Stalin, Kim flourished his autocratic powers in an orgy of blood.

If the communists flouted the popular will by endorsing the Moscow Accords and resorted to violence to suppress dissent, the Americans in the south had long been doing likewise by mobilizing the Right to suppress what people on the spot admitted was a "revolution involving perhaps millions of people." A vicious purge was instituted against the Left, though it was *rightist* violence which predominated. The Americans, like the British, French and Dutch in Indonesia, the Philippines and elsewhere in south-east Asia, actually ordered the Japanese imperial authorities to *remain in their positions*, and used them to put down the popular movement which they had once encouraged. As Halliday says in his pamphlet (p. 7), to conceive of a parallel would be like imagining the Allies landing in Yugoslavia in 1945, refusing to deal with Tito, reinstating the Nazis and their puppets, and releasing the SS to put down demonstrations.

By 1947 there were more political prisoners in occupation jails than at the end of Japanese rule. Local organizations were crushed by American troops helped by Japanese collaborators recalled (to even their own astonishment!) from hiding in the hills. Labor unions, even reformist ones, were smashed. Rightist-gangster mobs sent to break strikes and beat up workers (castration was their specialty) later formed the basis for the official union after 1948. Concentration camps were built to house strikers. Many starved to death. While events in the north are still shrouded in secrecy so that we must surmise much of what took place as Kim Il Song consolidated his power, the facts of the American and rightist repression in the south are stark, and document one of the little-known but bloody episodes in the suppression of popular aspirations in Asia.

The following March the U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission was finally convened. Naturally enough, there was little room for compromise, for each side had already marked out its sphere of influence in south and north Korea respectively. Moreover, the two superpowers had every right to feel satisfied with the results of their post-war interventions in Korea—at least as long as they confined their economic, political and territorial designs to their own halves. The Americans had seen Korea as a chance to replace the European colonial powers and establish a "bulwark against communism" -i.e., an American Pacific empire. The Russians were primarily concerned with preventing an attack on Russia itself, and were therefore content with the north as a buffer.

With neither side willing to alter the status quo, therefore, it was no wonder that the Commission's "efforts" amounted to a series of stalemates or walk-outs. As early as May 1946 the talks had broken down, and finally, in October 1947, the Commission adjourned without setting a date for its next meeting. Against Russian opposition, the entire issue was handed over by the Americans to their creature, the UN, which proceeded to scrap the Trust proposal altogether and fulfil the promise made to the Right two years before. All but the furthest right of the Korean nationalists opposed the American move, obviously destined to create separate governments for north and south, but were powerless. In May 1948, after a rigged election, an American puppet government under Syngman Rhee was established in the south. That same September the north

followed suit, inaugurating the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea" with Kim Il Song as premier. The Trusteeship issue thus became irrelevant.

The all-Korean anarchist congress, April 23, 1946

In the fierce propaganda war between proponents and opponents of Trust Rule, the overwhelmingly anarchist League of Free Social Constructors (LI-3, pp. 26-7) had stood consistently in the front line of the latter, keeping in fine with its insistence on *national* liberation before *social* revolution. Huge demonstrations supported by the League had filled the streets of Seoul almost daily.

Amid the buffets of the Trust Rule storm, the anarchists decided to hold an All-Korea Congress in the spring of 1946. The site was Anwi in Kyong-sang Namdo province, the heartland of the Korean anarchist movement. Comrades returned from China, from Manchuria, from Japan, and those just released from Japanese jails and young post-Liberation recruits all got together in this great meeting of the libertarian left. Many of them renewing long-sundered friendships, nearly 100 delegates attended. They included Yu Lim (Yu Hwa Yong), Shin Pi Mo, Lee Eul Kyu and Lee Jung Kyu, Pak Sok Hong, Bang Han Sang, Ha Chong Chu, Lee Shi Yan, Han Ha Yan, Kim Hyan U, Yang 11 Dong, U Han Ryong, and Choi Yong Chun. The Anwi Congress was the greatest demonstration of strength ever achieved by the Korean comrades throughout the history of their movement, before or since. That alone should be testimony to the hardships endured by the Korean anarchist movement, for whose members it is to this day all but impossible to create horizontal relationships between different areas.

The Anwi Congress saw excited debates concerning the future of the anarchist movement in Korea, how best to promote the anti-Trust Rule movement, and so on. As the most pressing issues of the day, these were bound to demand attention. But boiling point was only reached in the fierce arguments centering on the Yu Lim group's advocacy of an *anarchist political party*: should anarchists form, or even take part in, political activities? And what position should the Congress take?

Before Liberation, Yu Lim had been in charge of the China branch of the General League of Korean Anarchists. At the same time he had been a cabinet member of the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) organized by various radical and moderate independence movement groups in Shanghai in 1919 (later moved to Chungking). In December 1945 he had returned to Korea with the rest of the KPG, still retaining his cabinet membership. The participation of anarchists in government, like Yu Lim in Korea or Federica Montseny and company in Spain, has confronted the international anarchist movement everywhere. The Yu Lim group's case was as follows:

"The situation in Korea is a very special one. . . . In other words, the Korean people today have neither a free country nor even a free government. Therefore, without the ability to govern themselves, the very right to do so has been torn away from them, and they are about to fall under the rule of a foreign Trusteeship. Under such conditions, even anarchists are bound to respond to the urgent desire of the Korean people to build their own country and to set up their own government. Therefore, the anarchists must create their own political party, and play a positive part in building a new Korea. Should the anarchists stand by with folded arms doing nothing, Korea will surely fall into the hands of either the Stalinists to the north-or the imperialistic compradore-capitalists to the south..."

Yu Lim and his supporters, fretting for the future, felt a deep sense of impending crisis. "Only we anarchists can ensure for Korea a future of freedom, liberation, unity and independence. That is precisely the reason why we must play a positive part in politics. And in order to do so, we anarchists must create a political party of our own to wage that struggle."

In the end the Congress voted to accept the Yu Lim proposal. Still, product of unique Korean conditions or not, this decision's effect on the Korean anarchist movement would be felt right up to the present day, For as a result, the movement split into two tendencies, those who joined Yu Lim in organizing the Independent Labor-Farmer Party, and those who took the side of the brothers Lee Eul Kyu and Lee Jung Kyu, established the Autonomous Village League and the Autonomous Workers' League, and followed the line of slow but steady socialist revolution.

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