

Park Tae Gyun and Jung Changhyun, *Amsal* [Assassination]

Jean Do*
Konkuk University

When the Korean peninsula was liberated from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the Korean people across political spectrums and from all walks of life naturally anticipated an independent government. The Korean peninsula, however, was quickly partitioned along the 38th parallel. This was at first a temporary arrangement by the United States and the Soviet Union but then ended up a longstanding fixture and symbol of the unending Cold War on the Korean peninsula. As the post-liberation political landscape polarized into two opposing ideological camps, the question of how to establish an independent *and unified* government prevailed as the most imminent task, both as a *stated* policy of the occupying powers and the national goal of Korean rightists, leftists, and moderates. Ultimately, however, no one found the right answer to this question and the Korean peninsula was officially divided in 1948 with the establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

There are many ways to form questions in searching for the reason that two separate governments emerged on the Korean peninsula by 1948. What made the formation of ROK and the DPRK inevitable? Who was ultimately more responsible for the failure to set up a unified government? When did the separation become irreversible? There is no simple and straightforward answer to any historical

* jeando1966@gmail.com

question. One can only choose to focus or shed light on certain parts of the story, with a view to complementing, refuting, or enriching existing interpretations. Renowned Korean historians Park Tae Gyun and Jung Changhyun, in their latest book *Assassination*, revisit the deaths of five political figures as they explore the reasons for the prevalence of a right-wing anti-communist government below the 38th parallel.

The authors trace the assassination of five political elites, namely Hyŏn Jun Hyŏk, Song Jin U, Yŏ Un Hyŏng, Chang Dŏk Su, and Kim Ku against the backdrop of the volatility, uncertainty, animosity, suspicion, and sheer violence that tainted Korean politics in the post-liberation period. Although the party and ideological affiliations of these figures vary, their elimination from the political landscape from 1945 through 1949 represent the fall of moderation and the ascent of ideological extremism in the lead-up to the establishment of a separate government and subsequently, the Korean War in 1950. In particular, they draw attention to the role of state organs such as the intelligence, police, military, and even the judiciary in engineering political outcomes that would mitigate the criminality of their pro-Japanese collaborationist past and allow them instead to reinvent their significance as anti-communist patriots. By highlighting the role of state organs in the use of violence to defeat the political opposition, Park and Jung show that while the responsibility of national division can be distributed widely, it was the internal split between the anti-communist right supporting a separate government on the one hand and its detractors on the other calling for national unity that made the establishment of the separate government at once inevitable and irreversible.

The five cases of assassination covered in this book still remain controversial and in some cases, unsettled, because the fairness and authority of the investigations and legal verdict were compromised by political meddling. The authors make references to a wide array of official documents from the Soviet and American occupying authorities, Korean government documents, as well as interviews, testimonies and media coverage. These sources, as the authors recognize, fall short of conclusively determining the ultimate culprit whose motives were rooted in the creation of a separate government in which former pro-Japanese collaborationists could shamelessly transform themselves into anti-communist

nationalists. The decisive compelling evidence clearly linking these deaths to the American occupation or Syngman Rhee has not yet emerged to this day. But even if such kind of irrefutable evidence did in fact exist, the prevailing political circumstances then and now make it difficult to settle the score once and for all. Partly, this is because of the acutely divisive legacy of Syngman Rhee, revered as the founding father of the ROK but also condemned for having prematurely sought a separate government in southern Korea as early as spring 1946; partly because such evidence might suggest the complicity of the American occupation; and most definitely because certain evidence might damage the standing of many subsequent Korean political leaders whose family histories are inseparable from the Japanese empire both during and after the end of colonial rule.

So instead of asking “Who was really behind the assassination?,” the more relevant question might be “How did the creation of a separate government in Seoul become more and more likely?” Park and Jung provide parts of the answer to this question, as they weave together five different, yet linked deaths of prominent political figures from 1945-1949. Chapter 1 looks into the assassination of Hyŏn Jun Hyŏk, who at the time of his death in September 1945, only weeks into the Soviet occupation of the northern half of Korea, was the vice-chairman of the Pyongyang People's Committee. The chapter discusses Hyun's assassination in the context of the rising anti-Soviet, anti-communist sentiments among nationalist Koreans in the very early hours of the Soviet occupation. The assassin, identified as Yŏm Tongchin, was the founder of a notorious right-wing assassination squad known as the White Angels Society (*Paekŭisa*), which would be linked to the deaths of many other figures in the subsequent chapters of this book. Hyŏn Jun Hyŏk's cooperation with the Soviet occupation authority in disarming right-wing organizations provoked the anger of anti-Soviet/anti-communist elements in northern Korea. Assassination squads such as the White Angels Society made itself available as the hired guns of ideological extremism and political radicalization. According to reports drawn by Major George E. Cilley, an intelligence officer of the U.S. Army 1 Corps, the White Angels Society aimed to assassinate communists and anti-government politicians and consisted of all kinds of Koreans, including the military, marine security, tax officers, police,

fireman, government officials, politicians, businessmen, smugglers, farmers, and ordinary citizens. The authors allude to American involvement by citing the association of the White Angels Society to the U.S. Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) in Korea.

Chapter 2 explores the death of Song Jin U, which occurred only three days after the Soviet-American agreement to establish a trusteeship in Korea in December 1945. The mere idea of a trusteeship by foreign powers in the immediate wake of post-liberation generated massive opposition from the majority of the Korean political leadership. But at a time when the wartime alliance between Moscow and Washington had not yet finally unravelled, some Koreans recognized the need to maintain good relations with the U.S. military occupation regardless of their principled opposition to the trusteeship plan. Within the Korean Democratic Party (*Hanmindang*), men like Song Jin U assumed this position because he realized that cooperating with the occupation was indispensable. As the authors note, however, this in no way meant that Song Jin U agreed with the trusteeship plan. But the severe volatility of the issue left no room for such nuance. The assassin cited Song's alleged support for the trusteeship as the reason for murdering the man who at the time was a top figure in what then was the most influential political party in southern Korea and most closely allied with the US military occupation. Song's leadership role in the Korean Democratic Party, however, placed him at odds with the most revered nationalist in all of Korea at the time, Kim Ku. This was not only because the former president of Korea's government-in-exile, the Shanghai Provisional Government, categorically opposed the trusteeship even at the risk of jeopardizing his standing with the U.S. occupation authority, but also because the Korean Democratic Party's conservative nationalist membership consisted largely of landlords and businessmen whose wealth and reputation had prospered during the Japanese colonial period. The question of pro-Japanese collaboration, therefore, had created an unbridgeable gap that divided the nationalists. These circumstances derailed the first round of the Soviet-American Joint Commission in 1946, leaving the question of unified government unaddressed and paving the way for the formation of separate governing bodies in both the northern and southern half of Korea as the division

among different Korean political camps deepened uncontrollably throughout 1946. In spring that year, Syngman Rhee began to publicly call for a separate anti-communist government in the southern half of Korea, and Kim Il Sung was making significant political gains by implementing Soviet-style reforms in the northern half, including land reform. With a *de facto* government already established in Pyongyang and leaders in Seoul embroiled in an escalating split, the formal division of the Korean peninsula was already becoming very much likely. This was clear even before the complete breakdown of the unification talks in the Soviet-American Joint Commission in 1947.

The shocking and tragic death of Yō Un Hyōng in Chapter 3 must be considered in light of the significance of the year 1947 as a turning point in Soviet-American rivalry and the division of Korea. In 1946, Korea appeared to be one place where the two superpowers had chosen to not compete with each other, and the Soviet-American Joint Commission was a framework of cooperation, as frail as it was, rooted in what remained of the wartime alliance between Moscow and Washington. In 1947, the United States began to concentrate containment efforts in Western Europe and began to de-emphasize commitments elsewhere, including Asia. The immediate impact of this change on Korea was for the administration of Harry S. Truman to refer the Korean question to the United Nations as a way of pulling out of Korea without damaging American prestige and credibility. The demise of Yō Un Hyōng, a moderate nationalist of leftist leaning who was uniquely revered in both the north and south and enjoyed good standing with the Soviet and U.S. occupation, represented the unfulfilled promise of compromise and cooperation that the Soviet-American Joint Commission at least nominally sought to achieve. His death also put an end to any lingering notion of left-right coalition among Korean politicians, both within southern Korea and between the two Koreas. It was at this time that the United States shifted its aim in Korea from unification to containment, and finally accepted the extreme Korean right headed by Syngman Rhee to form a separate government in southern Korea, one that is democratic, anti-communist, and pro-American with ties to pro-Japanese collaborators inevitably intact. Regardless of whether the United States came to this position reluctantly or eagerly, the authors highlight the fact that there existed

no substantial moderate base for unified Korea among Koreans themselves, particularly after the death of Yō Un Hyōng. By pointing out that the members of the notorious White Angels Society and ultra-rightist anti-communist youth groups operated under the auspices of the U.S. occupation authority, the historical interpretation in the chapter shows how exactly the American aims in Korea shifted from unification to containment at this hour of major transition in Washington's global strategy in the Cold War. At the same time, the unwillingness of the Korean police to investigate the case fully corresponds to the decisive ascent of anti-communism and now the irreversibility of the establishment of a separate government in Seoul throughout the fateful year of 1947.

The last two chapters of the book concern the deaths of men who became embroiled in the struggle for power after a separate government in southern Korea became *de facto* reality. Chapter 4 looks into the assassination of Chang Dōk Su, who as the chairman of the political committee of the Korean Democratic Party, was the closest ally of the U.S. military occupation. Chang's death occurred at a time when the Korean Democratic Party and its increasing turn towards a separate government in southern Korea was under mounting attack from prominent nationalists such as Kim Kyu-Sik and Kim Ku who were making what would be their last attempt to close the gap with North Korean leaders by proposing north-south talks to Kim Il Sung and Kim Tu Bong. It was not at all clear whether the formalization of division by establishing a separate government would receive sufficient popular approval either. However, as the United States was set to withdraw from Korea, the occupation found men like Chang Dōk Su indispensable, which explained the swift and thorough investigation launched after his death in contrast to the cases of Yō Un Hyōng and Song Jin U. The most striking aspect of the investigation and trial of Chang's assassination is how it was designed to undermine the reputation of Kim Ku who was subpoenaed as one of the suspects. Having been the most vocal and influential critic of the Soviet-American Joint Commission and the Korean Democratic Party, Kim Ku thought men like Chang Dōk Su's association with the Japanese formerly and now the Americans in his support for the Soviet-American Joint Commission was costing national unity. Although the trial found no direct involvement of Kim Ku, the mere act of an

unparalleled nationalist hero now defending his innocence in a murder case in itself attested to the dramatic decline of his influence and the infeasibility of north-south compromise for unification. By contrast, Syngman Rhee reaped further benefits from the elimination of Chang Dök Su who had been the favourite of the American occupation to potentially take over the leadership of the Korean Democratic Party after the elections to establish a separate government. Although Syngman Rhee's staunch support for a separate government in the southern half of the Korean peninsula was now closely aligned with occupation policy, Rhee's obstruction and mistrust of the Soviet-American Joint Commission all along had antagonized his relationship with General Hodge who in turn had more confidence in Chang Dök Su and Kim Kyu-Sik. With the elimination of Chang Dök Su, Syngman Rhee was increasingly the only viable option left for the United States to achieve a graceful withdrawal from Korea. Regardless of whether the United States might have arrived at this position reluctantly and only after all other options were exhausted, the authors rightfully point out that the shift in American policy was increasingly made inevitable by the elimination of Korean leaders who could have supported a more flexible solution to the prevailing impasse.

The final chapter examines the assassination of Kim Ku, whose demise in June 1949, less than a year after the founding of the ROK, symbolized the end of national reconciliation and but at the same time ironically paved the way for the ascent of unification as a new pressing agenda of President Syngman Rhee. Much has been written about the dubious circumstances and motives of the assassin, An Du hüi, who like other assassins appearing in this book was also a member of the White Angels Society and operated as an agent of the U.S. Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) in Korea. It took more than forty years for the ROK National Assembly in 1992 to conclude that the assassination of Kim Ku was a "crime committed at the government level under the patronage of the Syngman Rhee regime the Liberal Party." No new evidence confirming the possible involvement or at least the knowledge of assassination plans on the part of Syngman Rhee himself or the United States is presented in this book. But this is not really the point. As the authors trace how the creation of a separate government in Seoul become more and more likely, Park and Jung show that Kim Ku's assassination

was a politically engineered attempt to deal a wholesale and final blow to the arch rival of Syngman Rhee in the regime's hour of maximum crisis. While Kim Ku continued to command widespread respect, Syngman Rhee's hold on power seemed tenuous to say the least, faced with a crisis of legitimacy from multiple internal as well as external factors, such as huge popular discontent regarding Rhee's lenient treatment of pro-Japanese collaborationists now manning the police, military, intelligence, bureaucracy, and the business community; pursuit of military unification and rejection of peaceful national reconciliation; fallout with the Korean Democratic Party; anti-government rebellions within the military; withdrawal of American forces; and soaring inflation amidst chronic economic disarray. All these factors would produce highly adverse political outcomes for Syngman Rhee in the parliamentary election of May 1950, in which moderate nationalists of right and left leaning as well as independents scored surprisingly big gains. These circumstances made it imperative for the Syngman Rhee regime to destroy the opposition by rendering pro-unification nationalism wholly incompatible with anti-communism. Kim Ku was hit hardest by this malicious ideological distortion. The death of Kim Ku removed a major political hurdle to Syngman Rhee's military unification campaign. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 finally shattered any prospect of national reconciliation and peaceful unification between Koreans themselves as envisioned by Kim Ku.

Throughout the whole story, Park and Jung reiterate that the tragedy and violence of the post-liberation period is inseparable from the continued influence of pro-Japanese collaborators in the military, police, and the White Angels Society who formed a new, exclusive, and criminal bond as anti-communist patriots. The authors are right to point out the responsibility of Koreans themselves in making the division of the Korean peninsula inevitable and irreversible, thereby facilitating the transition of American aims in Korea from unification to containment. As Koreans look back on the past and try to figure out what went wrong and why they had to be divided, the indistinguishable factors of Japanese colonialism and Cold War ideological conflict figure prominently. However, the problems of pro-Japanese collaboration and its relationship to anti-communist regime consolidation in southern Korea occurred in the context of and as a reaction to

the acceleration of Sovietization and Kim Il Sung's one-man rule in northern Korea. This is one detail *Assassination* is unfortunately thin on. Putting the internal division in southern Korea in the context of political developments in Soviet-occupied northern Korea would have enriched this historical account even further.

Park and Jung's account is not short of accuracy but their interpretation is open to some further reconsideration. Their near exclusive focus the colonial and ideological factors has the downside of leaving the question of historical contention unaddressed. Some Koreans would consider the continued prosperity of pro-Japanese collaborators and their new nationalist role as anti-communists as completely deplorable, but some would see them as regrettable yet justifiable, and still others would even see them as fundamentally indispensable to the stability of the ROK. The reason for such divergent interpretations is that the Japanese colonial rule and ideological war produced not only winners but also victims. But then, there is a whole spectrum of people in the middle who were neither affected seriously nor took a keen interest. Given these variances in the different historical experience of the Korean people as a whole, it is important to try to remember and interpret history in its complex and multi-linear form. In other words, instead of trying to pin down and confine a historical event or figure in one historical interpretation, it might be necessary to take a more nuanced approach based on as many historical facts and contexts as possible. It remains the task of Korean historians to figure out new ways of inquiry regarding the post-liberation period so that they might contribute to uniting different historical interpretations rather than driving them further apart.