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## Dilemma Between Definition and Morale: Were Korean Independence Fighters under the Japanese Colonial Rule Terrorists? Case Studies of the Korean Provisional Government and Kim Il-Sung's Korean People's Restoration Army

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# Dilemma Between Definition and Morale: Were Korean Independence Fighters Under the Japanese Colonial Rule Terrorists?

*Case Studies of The Korean Provisional Government and  
Kim Il-Sung's Korean People's Restoration Army*

Uiheang Hur

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## ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on two specific Korean independence movements to analyze if they can be defined as terrorist groups. It is a very controversial and emotionally sensitive topic of discussion within South Korean society. The two selected groups are the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) and the Korean People's Restoration Army. The historical context in which the two groups emerged will be explained in detail, since a clear historical context must be provided to help the reader achieve a good understanding of Korea's unique historical setting. The two groups will then be analyzed in the light of political analyst Bruce Hoffman's definition of terrorism

and the distinction between old and new terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism. The groups' endings will be dealt with by some of the ideas set forward by Audrey Cronin. The paper will end with a brief case study on George Washington to see if he can be defined as a terrorist. A comparison between George Washington and Kim Ku of the KPG shows how emotionally, and intellectually, it is uncomfortable to consider the Korean freedom fighters as terrorists. History is written by the victors. I accept the international norm of terrorism, first to create a starting point for an alternative view to the characterization of the KPG as a terrorist group.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2007, a British professor described the last leader of the Korean Provisional Government, Kim Ku, as a terrorist (*The Korea Herald*, August 29). South Korean students refuted this description, but the British professor did not understand the problem. South Korean people still remember the brutal colonial rule of Japan during the 20th century; the scars are still healing. A non-Korean individual may ask why such anger is still present in the 21st century. The answer is that colonization only ended a few decades ago when South Korean grand- or great-grandparents were still young. Much as it would be intellectually and emotionally uncomfortable for American people to char-

acterize George Washington as a terrorist, it is also difficult for South Koreans to characterize their heroes and patriots as terrorists. Nevertheless, it is true that many of the Korean independence movements did involve violence that Hoffman would define as terrorism. In particular, the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) and the Korean People's Restoration Army (KPRA), selected for case studies, can be defined as terrorists according to Hoffman's definition. It is emotionally uncomfortable to accept the definition, but it is intellectually necessary to acknowledge an established international norm.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### JAPANESE COLONIZATION OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Chosun Empire, under the rule of Lee Dynasty, governed the Korean peninsula for five hundred years. In the late 1800s, Chosun opened up some of their ports to foreign trade. Because of the geopolitical location between China and Japan, the abundance in underdeveloped natural resources and large population size, numerous strong states began to extend their influences into Korean peninsula including the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and Japan. Three of these states were particularly interested in maximizing their power over the Korean peninsula—Russia, China, and Japan. Nevertheless, during this period, China was politically unstable with its own civil conflicts and therefore, their policies toward Korea were insignificant in the beginning. Within two decades of Korea opening some ports, the Russo-Japanese War erupted. Japan had long been interested in occupying the Korean peninsula ever since the 1500s, and had already carried out two invasions that almost succeeded in destroying the Korean empires. In July 1905, the Taft-Katsura Agreement was made between the Japanese government and U.S. government. U.S. President Roosevelt concluded that, “Japanese control over Korea was an appropriate means to prevent the further expansion of Russian power” (Yi 309).

Thus, the agreement allowed Japan to occupy the Korean peninsula as a result of the Russo-Japanese War.

In September 1905, the Treaty of Portsmouth officially ended the Russo-Japanese War and Japan was victorious. Japan consequently proceeded with their imperialism to occupy the Korean peninsula, forcing the Chosun Emperor Kojong to sign the Protectorate Treaty on November 17, 1905. The Treaty allowed the Japanese parliament to send a governor general to take full authority over all of the Chosun’s foreign relations. It completely destroyed Chosun’s standing in the international community as an independent state. Following this, the Japanese government took over the Chosun government and General Governor Ito Hirobumi was titled the chief executive.

In October 1909, An Joong Keun, a young Korean nationalist, assassinated Ito Hirobumi using a gun. It was the first major Korean nationalist violence as an attempt to protect the nation from the Japanese colonization. In August 1910, the last Korean Emperor, Soonjong, was forced to abdicate from the throne and yield the country to the Japanese parliament. The Chosun Empire officially collapsed (from here on, ‘Korea’ is used instead). The Treaty of Annexation that extinguished Korea as an international personality was signed (Simons 125) and the Japanese annexation of Korea was complete (Yi 313).

### THE RISE OF KOREAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS

Between 1910 and 1919, the Korean people formed some peasant-based movements to liberate the country. The major event that sparked the rise of Korean nationalism occurred when the U.S. President Wilson declared his Fourteen Points, which enunciated the doctrine of self-determination (Lee 101). The idea of self-determination stimulated the passions of educated Korean students and religious leaders.

were all rejected by the Western powers. They were not interested in giving the Korean people self-determination.

However, when Japanese rule did not end after World War I, Korean nationalism for self-determination quickly increased. The Korean patriots in exile organized the New Korea Youth Association in Shanghai and sent its representative to Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to appeal for Korean independence. A few other similar cases followed. However, these appeals

As a result, various religious organizations including Christians and Buddhists decided to proclaim Korean independence to attain international support. These organizations sent their representatives to sign the Korean Declaration of Independence in Seoul. On March 1, 1919, thirty-three Koreans officially promulgated the Declaration of Independence in the center streets of Seoul. A massive street demonstration followed, led by Korean students who shouted, “Taehan tongnip manse!” (“Long live Korean Independence!”). The news of the Declaration of Independence spread out to the whole peninsula and

stirred more than two million Koreans to join the street demonstration (Yi 344).

However, these peaceful demonstrations were brutally crushed by the Japanese police forces, army, and the navies that arrested 46,948, killed 7,509, and injured 15,961 Korean demonstrators (Yi 344). Nevertheless, the Western powers remained quiet toward such inhumane repression. After World War I, Japan's standing in the international community

was strong, and consequently, these demonstrations, known now as the March First Movement, "failed to win the support of the Western powers" (Yi 344). The last resort of peaceful struggle for independence had failed. Such failure led to the formation of numerous independence movements in Korea, Manchuria, and China. Among them were the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai and the Korean People's Restoration Army of Kim Il-Sung.

## CASE STUDY 1: THE KOREAN PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT: IS IT A TERRORIST GROUP?

### CHARACTERISTICS

In April 1919, the Korean Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea (Taehan Minguk Imsi Chongbu, the KPG) was established in Shanghai. The KPG was a structural government that imposed democracy, electing officers such as the Premier (Syngman Rhee) and the Ministers of various departments. Between 1919 and 1925, the KPG actively sought foreign support through diplomatic means. Premier Syngman Rhee put in his best effort to sway U.S. support for Korea's liberation.. However, their appeals once again failed to gain the interests of the Western powers.

In 1926, Syngman Rhee lost the support of the members of the KPG and was ousted. Afterwards, Rhee stayed in the U.S., naming himself the representative of all the Korean revolutionaries. In 1926, Kim Ku was elected as the next President of the KPG. He was a rightist revolutionary who had been a prominent freedom fighter since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kim Ku was one of the more aggressive revolutionaries and he directed several cases of violence for the first time after the establishment of the KPG.

In 1932, Kim Ku directed two events that could be labeled as terrorist actions. First, on January 8, 1932, a young member of the KPG, Yi Pong-Chang, threw a hand grenade at the Japanese emperor outside the Sakurada Gate of the palace in Tokyo. The attempt failed and Yi Pong-Chang was sentenced to death. The second took place later that year on April 29. Another member of the KPG, Yun Pong-gil, threw a bomb in Shanghai at a large-scale military parade. The explosion seriously injured the Japanese minis-

ter, Shigemitsu Mamoru, and many other Japanese government officials.

### TERRORISM BY DEFINITION

Was the KPG a terrorist organization? Bruce Hoffman laid out his definition of terrorism by providing five criteria by which to determine acts as terrorism. The criteria follow as such: Terrorism is:

- 1) ineluctably political in aims and motives, 2) violent—or, equally important, threatens violence, 3) designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target, 4) conducted either by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure...5) perpetrated by a subnational group or non-state entity (Hoffman 40).

First, the KPG certainly had political aims and motives. The primary reason for the KPG's establishment was because, "a government was needed in order to obtain public support at home and abroad and to prepare...attaining independence" (Lee 130). By 1919, there was no Korean government; it was extinct with the annexation of the country. Thus, even though the legitimacy of the KPG is very controversial, the leaders of the March First Movement attempted to establish a rightful Korean government for the Korean people while in exile.

Second, the KPG began to use violence into the 1930s. Two of the main reasons that the KPG chose to use terrorist tactics were the increasing domina-

tion of the Japanese Empire in Northeast Asia as well as the 1931 Korean massacre of Chinese people in Korea. On July 1931, some Koreans massacred many Chinese residents in the Korean peninsula and destroyed their property.

The cause of the massacre was due to exaggerated reports of a dispute between some Korean and Chinese farmers. This degraded the attitude of the Chinese public towards the KPG in Shanghai; it became much more hostile and suspicious environment against the KPG. On the other hand, some Japanese troops attacked Chinese troops in Mukden in December. It signaled to the KPG that the Korean nationalists engaging in independence movements in Manchuria might face extinction if the Japanese troops successfully occupied Manchuria. Within such context, Kim Ku commanded the two terrorist plans in 1932 to fight back against the Japanese expansion and hopefully regain the support of the Chinese public.

Third, the bombings targeted the symbols of Japanese expansionism, the Emperor, and the government officials. These symbols were specifically targeted to show that the KPG was fighting against the Japanese colonization in Korea. It was certainly expecting to bring about a larger goal than merely assassinating the targets—that of Korean independence. Although it is unclear how other members of the KPG were involved in organizing the two bombings, Hoffman's fourth criteria is satisfied by the command of the KPG's leader, Kim Ku.

Last, was the KPG a subnational group or a non-state entity? It was certainly a subnational group. There is confusion as to whether the KPG should be regarded as a state or not. The definition of 'state' as accepted by the international community follows:

The state is a sovereign actor with a central government that rules over a population and territory and protects and represents that population in international politics (Henderson 28).

This is offered by the 1933 Montevideo Convention. Although the convention was held after the establishment of the KPG, the definition of statehood accepted by the current international society is the definition set by the Montevideo Convention. Thus, it is unavoidable to look into history from the es-

tablished, accepted international perspective about a legitimate statehood.

According to this definition, the KPG was a government in exile without a population and territory to protect and represent. The Korean population and the territory were under the direct control of the Japanese colonial government in Korea. It can be argued that the Japanese rule in Korea was illegitimate. However, according to the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, the Protectorate Treaty, and the Annexation Treaty are accepted as international law. Treaty is accepted as "an international agreement concluded between states in written form and governed by international law" (Henderson 65). Therefore, even though the Protectorate Treaty and the Annexation Treaty were signed under the oppression of Japan, the treaties unfairly gave the Japanese rule over Korea legitimacy. Furthermore, it is important to understand that the international concept of colonialism was alive at this point of history. Most of the major powers had their own colonial empires; hence, the Japanese occupation of Korea would not have been seen as exceptional from the international society back then. In short, the KPG was a non-state entity and because it eventually used terrorist tactics to further their goals, the KPG turned into a terrorist group into the 1930s under such a frustrating historical context.

It is important to note that the KPG was not organized to perpetrate terrorist acts. In fact, Kim Ku necessarily directed the two terrorist tactics, because the KPG "carried on a tenuous existence in the shadow of the Kuomintang" (Paige 20) in Shanghai. The matter was concerned with the group's survival, as well as the achievement of their ultimate goal. The KPG was an independence movement, pursuing a national independence. That is why the group started as a structurally democratic government, which did eventually perpetrate terrorism because of the historical context it existed under. Therefore, it is incorrect to characterize the KPG to similar, modern, terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda. The two groups are significantly different in their motivations for perpetrating terrorism. For al-Qaeda, they have the "obligation to wage war against the far enemy... whenever possible" (Booth and Dunne 52), which suggests that the main purpose of organizing the group was to perpetrate terrorism.

On the other hand, the KPG partially represented old terrorism. There are two key features that distinguish old terrorism from new terrorism, according to Hoffman. First, old terrorist groups used old media, which was used to attract attention to the group's cause (Hoffman 194). The KPG had their own newspaper publisher, the *Independence News*, which was used to share information and bring nationalism to the Korean patriots in Korea, China, and Hawaii (Simons 136).

Second, the KPG was active before the hijacking of the Israeli commercial flight in 1968, which Hoffman indicates as the end line of old terrorism. Hoffman argues that the event allowed the terrorists to realize that the "operations perpetrated in countries other than their own...were a reliable means of attracting attention to themselves and their cause" (Hoffman 64), which eventually led to the internationalization of their activities. The KPG did indeed hope for the internationalization of their goal; however, the group did not use terrorism to achieve it.

## THE ENDING OF THE KPG

Upon the liberation of Korea on August 15, 1945, the main goal of the KPG had disappeared. However, the legitimacy of the KPG as a rightful government was rejected by the Allied Powers and instead, the Republic of Korea was established with Syngman Rhee as the founding father. Hence, when the leaders of the KPG, including Kim Ku, had to return to Korea on November 29, 1945, they were recognized

as ordinary citizens. It is possible that Syngman Rhee was not keen on accepting his former political rivals as esteemed freedom fighters in his newly established country, Republic of Korea. The KPG was thus disbanded, and it failed to develop into a legitimate Korean government after liberation.

According to Audrey Cronin, when terrorism succeeds "it yields benefits for those on whose behalf it is undertaken" (Cronin 74). It suggests that although Korean independence was not achieved by the KPG's struggle, the Korean people still benefited from the liberation itself and therefore, the core reason for the KPG's struggle for independence was satisfied. Furthermore, the KPG seems to have achieved their strategic aim, but not tactical aims. Audrey Cronin claims that "most organizations have used terrorism as a means to achieve either short-term, tactical (proximate) aims or long-term, strategic (ultimate) goals" (Cronin 77). For the KPG, the short-term, tactical aim of perpetrating the first terrorist act would have been assassinating the Japanese emperor, which failed. However, the KPG was not an organization established for violent motivations. The core goal of the group (the long-term strategic goal) was national independence, which did eventually occur. Therefore, it would be partially correct to claim that the KPG's strategic goal was achieved. It would not be fully correct to say so, because Korean liberation was achieved by the Japanese surrender to the Allies after the U.S. nuclear bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and not by the KPG's nationalist activities.

## CASE STUDY 2: KIM IL-SUNG AND HIS KOREAN PEOPLE'S RESTORATION ARMY

### CHARACTERISTICS

The Korean Communist Party was first established in Seoul in 1925. However, it ceased to exist by 1928 because of the strong repression by Japanese police forces (Paige 19). Many members of the Community Party fled to Manchuria, where they set up guerilla groups, one of which a communist freedom fighter, Kim Il-Sung joined. In September 1931, the Japanese troops invaded Manchuria, which threatened the Korean guerilla fighters. In response, Kim Il-

Sung, organized the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army (AJPGA) in early 1932.

The AJPGA was reorganized into the Korean People's Restoration Army (the KPRA) in March 1934. The main goal of the KPRA was "to overthrow the colonial rule of Japanese imperialism in Korea and bring national independence and social emancipation to the Korean people" (Simons 143). Until the early 1940s, Kim Il-Sung led the KPRA and engaged in several guerilla warfare attacks against the Japanese

troops and police forces at Taipingkou, Lao-heishan, and Shantungun (Simons 144). During the 1930s, the Chinese Communist Party commanded many of Kim Il-Sung's anti-Japanese guerilla activities. Into the 1940s, Japanese expansionism strengthened and

Japanese forces marched into China's territory. In response to this, Kim Il-Sung and the KPRA moved into the Soviet Union for protection, where the group was supported by the Soviet Union to continue fighting against the Japanese forces.

### TERRORISM BY DEFINITION

In light of Hoffman's definition, Kim Il-Sung was a terrorist. Through the KPRA, Kim Il-Sung used violence to achieve the liberation of Korea, guerilla tactics to consistently shake the Japanese colonial rule in Korea, and the KPRA was definitely a non-state entity. The KPRA can be seen as an insurgency. Audrey Cronin says, "to assert terrorist organizations and insurgencies can be neatly distinguished would be foolish" (Cronin 153), which suggests that there are not many differences between an insurgency and a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, the KPRA's activities are similar to those of the Ethniki Organosis Kypriou Agoniston (EOKA) of Cyprus that is considered to represent old terrorism. The KPRA used guerilla tactics, but not a full-scale war, which was also widely utilized by the EOKA to fight against the British troops. Moreover, Hoffman's second category says, "terrorism is violent—or, equally important, threatens violence" (Hoffman 40). The existence of the KPRA under the Japanese colonial rule threatened to use violence against the Japanese authori-

ties—which was certainly terrorism from a Japanese perspective. The KPRA was so efficient that when they expanded their activities to a general offensive throughout the country, it was expected that "the whole of Korea would have fallen to Kim Il-Sung in August 1945" (Simons 151) if the foreign powers had not engaged Korea.

The KPRA was supported by the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Union. This can be characterized as state-sponsored terrorism. China and the Soviet Union were both threatened by Japanese expansionism. Therefore, their support for Kim Il-Sung and the KPRA can be understood as state-sponsored terrorism from Hoffman's description, because Hoffman claims that states may "embrace terrorism as a deliberate instrument of foreign policy: a cost-effective means of waging war covertly..." (Hoffman 258). With this view in mind, China and the Soviet Union were utilizing the KPRA as an instrument to oppress the Japan's expansionism from inside the territorial jurisdiction of Japan.

### THE ENDING OF THE KPRA

The ending of the KPRA was similar to the KPG's ending, in that the KPRA's main goal of Korean independence was indirectly achieved with the surrender of the Japanese emperor. However, the KPRA was not disbanded, unlike the KPG. After the surrender of the Japanese emperor in August 15, 1945, there were some Japanese troops who rejected the return to Japan and had ambitions to continue the Japanese imperialism. The Soviet Red Army and the KPRA cooperatively fought against the last Japanese troops in northern Korea. Afterwards, with the support of the Soviet Union, Kim Il-Sung founded the Central Organizing Committee of the Communist Party of North Korea, which established the structural foundation for the development of North Korea.

In February 1946, the North Korean Provisional People's Committee was established with Kim Il-Sung as chairman, which became the People's Committee of North Korea a year after. By September 1948, Kim Il-Sung was no longer a terrorist. He was the Premier of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Thus, Kim Il-Sung achieved statehood, which he built using the foundations of the KPRA. Since terrorism must be perpetrated by a non-state entity, Kim Il-Sung and the KPRA were no longer terrorists and thus, their terrorism came to an end. Nevertheless, it may be argued that North Korea is now perpetrating terrorism on its own people. Cronin argues that "when they deliberately target innocents...that behavior is wrong and...is 'terrorism'" (Cronin 164), which can be used to argue that the current North Korean regime's suppression over their citizens using

indoctrinations, cult of personality, and various restrictions in the lives of the innocent North Korean people can be characterized as terrorism. Therefore, to a certain extent, the terrorism that had begun with

Kim Il-Sung's independence movement during the Japanese colonial era seems to have passed down the generation to this day.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SOUTH KOREAN PUBLIC'S EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT IN CHARACTERIZING THE KPG AS A TERRORIST GROUP

### WAS GEORGE WASHINGTON A TERRORIST?

George Washington (1732-1799) became the first President of the United States of America after six years of leading the Continental Army against British rule on the American continent. He is respected by the American people as the founding father of the country. According to Dr. Victoria Farmer, George Washington can be defined as a terrorist (October 25, 2013). However, it would be very uncomfortable for the American public to acknowledge that Washington may fit into Hoffman's definition of terrorism.

First, George Washington's Continental Army was driven by political aims and motives to oust British rule in America. Second, George Washington's Continental army did use violence, and did threaten violence by its very existence against the British authority. Third, the various attacks the Continental Army launched against the British were aiming for the independence of American people, rather than merely defeating the British troops in certain regions. Fourth, the Continental Army was a very well organized group of militants under the leadership of George Washington, and the support of the Continental Congress. Last, the Continental Army was certainly a non-state entity. By Hoffman's definition, which is definitely widely accepted by the current

international society regarding terrorism, George Washington may well be a terrorist.

However, the general view of George Washington is that he is not a terrorist. Moreover, I personally do not consider George Washington as a terrorist. Thus, if the KPG and Kim Ku are perceived from a similar point of view, I believe it would be easier for the American people to sympathize with the South Korean public when it comes to deal with the definitional dilemma. It is socially difficult to recognize people who fought for our rightful freedom, the rightful Wilsonian self-determination, as terrorists.

The main reason that George Washington is respected as a hero is because he successfully ousted the British rule from America and attained the statehood of his nation. Is it not similar to how Kim Il-Sung used the KPRA to establish the statehood of North Korea? Nevertheless, we do not consider Kim Il-Sung and George Washington equally as heroes. They are almost the two contradicting political figures in history. As such, if Kim Ku had been successful in his leadership as the president of the KPG and achieved Korean independence, Korean history would be different. The KPG would not be considered as a terrorist group anymore, because it would then be considered as the foundation for the Republic of Korea by the current history.

## CONCLUSION

Because of its geopolitical location, Korea has experienced many tragedies throughout history. During Japanese colonialism, numerous Koreans stood up to protect their country from being annihilated by Japan. Among those Koreans were strong leaders, such as Kim Ku and Kim Il-Sung, who organized separate independence movements in different forms.

Kim Ku's Korean Provisional Government started off as a democratic institution without legitimacy. But it eventually used some terrorist tactics for the survival of the group and the desperate desire for national independence. On the other hand, Kim Il-Sung started off as a terrorist. His Korean People's Restoration Army was a guerilla militant group, which used similar tactics to those used by the EOKA in Cyprus. However, even though the two sides were active dur-



ing the same time period, and for the same cause, the KPG and the KPRA ended differently. The KPG was disbanded upon the liberation of Korea for failing to attain acknowledgement from foreign powers as the legitimate government of Korea. The KPRA on the other hand, achieved statehood under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung, and large support from the Soviet Union.

It is always difficult to acknowledge the heroes of independence as terrorists. For us South Koreans, considering Kim Ku as a terrorist is exactly the same as when Americans have to accept the fact that George Washington can also be defined as a terrorist. However, it would be important to accept what has been set up by the international norm to function as an independent state, with good standing, and effectively assert for our legitimate rights in the international society.

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