

Reflections on the No Gun Ri massacre by a former US serviceman stationed in Korea

19 November 1999

The WSWS received the following letter in response to the November 17 article "Survivors of Korean War massacre by US soldiers seek investigation" on the revelations surrounding the July 1950 No Gun Ri massacre at the beginning of the Korean war.

I was in Korea from June 1963 to July 1964. It was a standard 13-month tour of duty. I was stationed at Camp Casey, Korea, the HQ for the 7th Infantry Division. I was in a heavy weapons infantry platoon, assigned to 81mm mortar.

I remember the Korean people as a whole as very polite, very congenial, hard workers. Korea was a mountainous, barren, bleak country. I actually cannot remember seeing any trees. Fuel was so scarce that when peasants found a tree, they would cut it down and use it for firewood.

Because the Korean peasants were so poor, they became extremely resourceful. They used everything. When we went on maneuvers in the field, we had fire exercises. A machinegun would be firing with a blank adapter in the muzzle. The shell casings would shoot out of the ejection port; a Korean man or woman would stand right there, two feet away, catching the casings in a wicker basket. They'd take them home and melt them down and make brass jewelry and ornaments to sell to GI's or anyone else.

That's not the only way they were resourceful. Theft was widespread by Korean nationals. They used to call the thieves "slicky boys" because the methods they used were very slick. We had a class on this. We were told, "If you're downtown and see a 19- or 20-year-old man standing on the corner, be careful. Here comes what he has been looking for all day long: a military vehicle with a right-handed driver who is going to make a left-hand turn. Since military vehicles are not equipped with turn signals, the driver would stick out his hand to turn and the boy would snatch the watch

right off his wrist and be gone in a second." They used to have a saying that a slicky boy could steal a radio and leave the music behind. Stealing was so widespread because of the conditions of abject poverty.

Aside from Seoul, the only major city I saw, most of the other villages and hamlets were made up of a couple dozen huts with dirt floors. It was a poverty-stricken country. Modern buildings were going up in Seoul, but that didn't benefit the peasants. If something wasn't locked up, they'd steal it. Men would steal 55-gallon drums of diesel fuel on their backs.

The recent revelation that US servicemen gunned down hundreds of fleeing refugees under the No Gun Ri bridge at the beginning of the Korean War is horrible. But I'm not surprised. There are also revelations about similar massacres at the beginning of the war, both killing hundreds more Korean civilian refugees.

When I was stationed in Korea, the people would ask us continuously, "Why are you here?" We'd say to stop communism or to keep the fighting as far as possible away from "the land of the big PX exchange," the continental US. But we didn't know at the time why we were really there. We were an army of occupation. It was really part of an American colonial policy. We were there to subjugate the people of South Korea for American corporations, for cheap labor.

Look today, Korea has had the fastest growing working class, fastest growing GNP of any Asian country in the last 10 years. American companies have stocks and controlling interests there. And the US still has military forces in the country to safeguard that. The United States sent military forces to Korea to defend and protect its class interests. They feared that the 1949 Chinese revolution would engulf the entire Korean peninsula threatening their ability to exploit the resources and labor of that region.

The casualties of their military aggression were not prominent people, but ordinary working people and peasants. It showed the total disregard and contempt the US had toward the working people when they massacred these refugees. They are willing to sacrifice any amount of workers or peasants to defend their economic interests and achieve their goals. How is that a war for democracy and true freedom?

I see where former lieutenant William Kaluf, who was stationed near the site of one of these massacres, said, "It was the same thing at the Battle of the Bulge. My opinion is that the stories don't mean zilch." But I hear the ordinary servicemen coming out and telling the truth. One said, "We got orders to shoot them all. The officers thought there were guerrillas hidden among the refugees, and the easiest way of dealing with the problem was to shoot them all." You can see there is a class gulf between the officers and the enlisted man.

The policies of the military service desensitize the ordinary soldier and encourage the most backward and racist conceptions. There is a common lack of respect for human life. The common view in the German army was that Germans were superior to all other races. The attitude encouraged in the American military is no different. Democracy and fair play are words that are thrown around by politicians and civic leaders, but on the battlefield they mean nothing. In fact, whenever they deal with a serious class conflict, they mean nothing.

The officers are trained for this: this is why there is such a gap between the enlisted man and the officers. Officers have better quarters, better food and more privileges than enlisted men. This is not for nothing. With these privileges, there comes a price. You must defend the system and all it stands for. Those that defend it with the most vigor are the ones that become the generals and the chiefs of staff, the Colin Powells and the Norman Schwarzkopfs.

The United States government has continuously denied that this massacre ever happened, as is always the case when exposures of this nature bring condemnation of its actions or policies. The South Korean government has denied this atrocity as well, scoffing at the requests of its own citizens for a complete investigation. This is not surprising given the fact that the South Korean government was at that time and still is a US puppet regime.

We always hear stories of the bravery of the American military in war and that a democratic government would never carry out atrocities. However, this revelation belies those claims. It is also not the first exposure of the type of attacks made on civilian populations during war.

Atrocities are a policy of imperialism, no doubt about it, how else could you explain these continuous scandals. Large numbers of civilians, noncombatants being massacred—from Korea and Vietnam, and up to the present day in the US bombing raids that were carried out against the population of Yugoslavia and the bombs repeatedly being dropped on Iraq killing dozens of civilians.

I personally would like to express my sympathy and solidarity to the families of the victims of the No Gun Ri massacre and the many others who lost their lives at the hands of the American army in Korea. I would also like to say that the directive to murder so many innocent men, women and children was the policy of the American government and not that of the working people of this country.

In fact, all working people in this country need to reflect on this experience and understand that the government will be no less ruthless in dealing with American workers to defend its economic interests.

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