

1980: The Kwangju uprising



The history of the week-long uprising of the South Korean town of Kwangju against the regime of the West-backed dictator General Chun Doo-Hwan. Though it was bloodily suppressed it helped ignite a chain of similar rebellions across Asia, winning people many democratic rights.

In the past two centuries, two events stand out as unique beacons of the spontaneous ability of thousands of ordinary people to govern themselves: [the Paris Commune of 1871](#), and the Kwangju People's Uprising of 1980.

In both cities, an unarmed citizenry, in opposition to their own governments, effectively gained control of urban space and held it despite the presence of well-armed military forces seeking to re-establish "law and order"; hundreds of thousands of people rose to the occasion and created popular organs of political power that effectively and efficiently replaced traditional forms of government; crime rates plummeted during the period of liberation; and people felt previously inexperienced forms of kinship with each other.

The liberated realities of the Communes in Paris and Kwangju contradict the widely propagated myth that human beings are essentially evil and therefore require strong governments to maintain order and justice. Rather, the behaviour of the citizens during these moments of liberation revealed an innate capacity for self-government and cooperation. It was the forces of the government, not the ungoverned people that acted with great brutality and injustice.

Events in Kwangju unfolded after the dictator of South Korea; Park Chung-Hee was assassinated by his own chief of intelligence. In the euphoria after Park's demise, students led a huge movement for democracy, but General Chun Doo-Hwan seized power and threatened violence if the protests continued. All over Korea, with the sole exception of Kwangju, people stayed indoors. With the approval of the United States, the new military government then released from the frontlines of the DMZ some of the most seasoned paratroopers to teach Kwangju a lesson. Once these troops reached Kwangju, they terrorised the population in unimaginable ways. In the first confrontations on the morning of May 18, specially designed clubs broke heads of defenceless students. As demonstrators scrambled for safety and regrouped, the paratroopers viciously attacked: "A cluster of troops attacked each student

individually. They would crack his head, stomp his back, and kick him in the face. When the soldiers were done, he looked like a pile of clothes in meat sauce." [Lee Jae-Eui, Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age, p. 46] Bodies were piled into trucks, where soldiers continued to beat and kick them. By night the paratroopers had set up camp at several universities.

As students fought back, soldiers used bayonets on them and arrested dozens more people, many of whom were stripped naked, raped and further brutalised. One soldier brandished his bayonet at captured students and screamed at them, "This is the bayonet I used to cut forty Viet Cong women's breasts [in Vietnam]!" The entire population was in shock from the paratroopers' over-reaction. The paratroopers were so out of control that they even stabbed to death the director of information of the police station who tried to get them to stop brutalising people. [Kwangju Diary, p. 79]

Despite severe beatings and hundreds of arrests, students continually regrouped and tenaciously fought back. As the city mobilised the next day, people from all walks of life dwarfed the number of students among the protesters. [The May 18 Kwangju Democratic Uprising, p. 127] This spontaneous generation of a peoples' movement transcended traditional divisions between town and gown, one of the first indications of the generalisation of the revolt. Paratroopers once again resorted to callous brutality - killing and maiming people whom they happened to encounter on the streets. Even cab and bus drivers seeking to aid the wounded and bleeding people were stabbed, beaten and sometimes killed. Some policemen secretly tried to release captives, and they, too, were bayoneted. [Kwangju Diary, p.113] Many police simply went home, and the chief of police refused to order his men to fire on protesters despite the military's insistence he do so.

People fought back with stones, bats, knives, pipes, iron bars and hammers against 18,000 riot police and over 3,000 paratroopers. Although many people were killed, the city refused to be quieted. On May 20, a newspaper called the Militants' Bulletin was published for the first time, providing accurate news - unlike the official media. At 5:50pm, a crowd of 5,000 surged over a police barricade. When the paratroopers drove them back, they re-assembled and sat-in on a road. They then selected representatives to try and further split the police from the army. In the evening, the march swelled to over 200,000 people in a city with a population then of 700,000. The massive crowd unified workers, farmers, students and people from all walks of life. Nine buses and over two-hundred taxis led the procession on Kumnam Avenue, the downtown shopping area. Once again, the paratroopers viciously attacked, and this time the whole city fought back. During the night, cars, jeeps, taxis and other vehicles were set on fire and pushed into the military's forces. Although the army attacked repeatedly, the evening ended in a stalemate at Democracy Square. At the train station, many demonstrators were killed, and at Province Hall adjacent to Democracy Square, the paratroopers opened fire on the crowd with M-16s, killing many more.

The censored media had failed to report the killings. Instead, false reports of vandalism and minor police actions were the news that they fabricated. The brutality of the army was not mentioned. After the night's news again failed to report the situation, thousands of people surrounded the MBC media building. Soon the management of the station and the soldiers guarding it retreated, and the crowd surged inside. Unable to get the broadcast facility working, people torched the building. The crowd targeted buildings intelligently:

"At 1:00am, citizens went in flocks to the Tax Office, broke its furniture and set fire to it. The reason was that taxes which should be used for people's lives and welfare had been used for the army and the production of the arms to kill and beat people. It was a very unusual case to

set fire to the broadcasting stations and tax office while protecting the police station and other buildings." [The May 18 Kwangju Democratic Uprising, p. 138]

Besides the Tax Office and two media buildings, the Labour Supervision Office, Province Hall car depot and 16 police vehicles were torched. The final battle at the train station around 4:00am was intense. Soldiers again used M-16s against the crowd, killing many in the front ranks. Others climbed over the bodies to carry the fight to the army. With incredible fortitude, the people prevailed, and the army beat a hasty retreat.

At 9:00am the next morning (May 21), more than 100,000 people gathered again on Kumam Avenue facing the paratroopers. A small group shouted that some people should go to Asia Motors (a military contractor) and seize vehicles. A few dozen people went off, bringing back only seven (the exact number of rebels who knew how to drive). As they shuttled more drivers back and forth, soon 350 vehicles, including armoured personnel carriers, were in the hands of the people. Driving these expropriated vehicles around the city, the demonstrators rallied the populace and also went to neighbouring towns and villages to spread the revolt. Some trucks brought bread and drinks from the Coca Cola factory. Negotiators were selected by the crowd and sent to the military. Suddenly gunshots pierced an already thick atmosphere, ending hope for a peaceful settlement. For ten minutes, the army indiscriminately fired, and in carnage, dozens were killed and over 500 wounded.

The people quickly responded. Less than two hours after the shootings, the first police station was raided for arms. More people formed action teams and raided police and national guard armouries, and assembled at two central points. With assistance from coal miners from Hwasun, demonstrators obtained large quantities of dynamite and detonators. [The May 18 Kwangju Democratic Uprising, p.143] Seven busloads of women textile workers drove to Naju, where they captured hundreds of rifles and ammunition and brought them back to Kwangju. Similar arms seizures occurred in Changsong, Yoggwang and Tamyang counties. The movement quickly spread to Hwasun, Naju, Hampyung, Youngkwang, Kangjin, Mooan, Haenam, Mokpo - in all, at least sixteen other parts of southwest Korea. [The May 18 Kwangju Democratic Uprising, p. 164] The rapid proliferation of the revolt is another indication of people's capacity for self-government and autonomous initiative. Hoping to bring the uprising to Chunju and Seoul, some demonstrators set out but were repulsed by troops blocking the highway, roads, and railroads. Helicopter gunships wiped out units of armed demonstrators from Hwasun and Yoggwang counties trying to reach Kwangju. If the military had not so tightly controlled the media and restricted travel, the revolt may have turned into a nationwide uprising.

In the heat of the moment, a structure evolved that was more democratic than previous administrations of the city. Assembling at Kwangju Park and Yu-tong Junction, combat cells and leadership formed. Machine guns were brought to bear on Province Hall (where the military had its command post). By 5:30pm, the army retreated; by 8:00pm the people controlled the city. Cheering echoed everywhere. Although their World War II weapons were far inferior to those of the army, people's bravery and sacrifices proved more powerful than the technical superiority of the army. The Free Commune lasted for six days. Daily citizens' assemblies gave voice to years-old frustration and deep aspirations of ordinary people. Local citizens' groups maintained order and created a new type of social administration - one of, by and for the people. Coincidentally, on May 27 - the same day that the Paris Commune was crushed over a hundred years earlier - the Kwangju Commune was overwhelmed by military force despite heroic resistance. Although brutally suppressed in 1980, for the next seven years the movement continued to struggle, and in 1987 a nationwide uprising was organised that finally won democratic electoral reform in South Korea.

Like the battleship Potemkin, the people of Kwangju have repeatedly signalled the advent of revolution in South Korea - from the 1894 Tonghak rebellion and the 1929 student revolt to the 1980 uprising. Like the Paris Commune and the battleship Potemkin, Kwangju's historical significance is international, not simply Korean (or French, or Russian). Its meaning and lessons apply equally well to East and West, North and South. The 1980 peoples' uprising, like these earlier symbols of revolution, has already had worldwide repercussions. After decades in which basic democratic rights was repressed throughout East Asia, a wave of revolts and uprisings transformed the region. The 1989 revolutions in Europe are well known, but Eurocentrism often prevents comprehension of their Asian counterparts. Six years after the Kwangju Uprising, the Marcos dictatorship was overthrown in the Philippines. Aquino and Kim Dae-Jung had known each other in the United States, and the experiences of the Kwangju helped to inspire action in Manila.

All through Asia, peoples' movements for democracy and human rights appeared: an end to martial law was won in Taiwan in 1987; in Burma a popular movement exploded in March 1988, when students and ethnic minorities took to the streets of Rangoon. Despite horrific repression, the movement compelled President Ne Win to step down after 26-years of rule. The next year, student activists in China activated a broad public cry for democracy, only to be shot down at Tiananmen Square and hunted for years afterward. Nepal's turn was next. Seven weeks of protests beginning in April 1990 compelled the king to democratise the government. The next country to experience an explosion was Thailand, when twenty days of hunger strike by a leading opposition politician brought hundreds of thousands of people in the streets in May 1992. Dozens were killed when the military suppressed street demonstrations, and because of the brutality General Suchinda Krapayoon was forced to step down. In 1998 in Indonesia, students called for "people-power revolution" and were able to overthrow Suharto. Interviews conducted by an American correspondent at the universities in Indonesia determined that the people-power slogan was adopted from the Philippines, as was the tactical innovation of the occupation of public space.

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Taken from the North-Eastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists