

## POLICY MEMO

# The Jeju 4.3 Attacks Were Not a Democracy Movement

DR. TARA O

*Adjunct Fellow, Hudson Institute*

*June 2023*

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On April 3, 1948, on the Korean island of Jeju, communist guerrillas went on a rampage, killing police officers, election workers, and others; setting houses on fire; and terrorizing villagers, all to discourage them from voting in the upcoming May 10 elections that would establish the Republic of Korea (ROK). The insurgency—referred to as Jeju 4.3—triggered a government counterinsurgency, forcing the communists into the mountains where they would continue their guerrilla operations for nine more years.

In March 2023, the Democratic Party of Korea (Deobureo Minju Party) introduced a bill mandating that citizens refer to the insurgency only as a “democracy struggle,” with punishments of up to five years in prison. But historical documents, eyewitness testimony, and statements from the perpetrators show that the incident was a campaign of irregular and unconventional warfare, a prelude to the communist military invasion of South Korea in June 1950, and part of the larger Korean War.

### Background

The communist party in Korea—initially named the Chosun Communist Party and later reorganized and renamed as NamNoDang or the Korean Workers’ Party-South (KWP-S)—was the largest party to emerge following Korea’s liberation from Japan. It was based in Seoul with branches all over Korea. Pak Hon-yong, known as the “Lenin of Chosun,” soon took over the party from its initial leader, Yo Un-hyong. Both Yo and Pak were long-time communists, trained in Moscow at the invitation of Vladimir Lenin. They envisioned a socialist Korea led by a communist party.

Jeju is the largest island in what Koreans call NamHae, or the “South Sea.” When Korean students and workers returned to the island from Japan, China, and Manchuria after the end of World War II, its population ballooned from 220,000 to 280,000. Many of these returning Koreans were exposed to or participated in communist movements abroad. Soon after Korea’s liberation, the KWP-S and its

various subsidiaries and affiliate organizations were widely influential in Jeju.

The United States' late arrival on Jeju gave communists more time than in the rest of Korea to expand their influence in the power vacuum created after liberation from the Japanese. The US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) did not arrive on Jeju until November 9, 1945, and even then it did not have a significant presence. Thus, from Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, until at least early 1946, Jeju was administered and controlled by people's committees under the communist party and the illegal People's Republic of Korea.<sup>1</sup> After initially tolerating the communist party, USAMGIK issued a warrant for the party's leader, Pak Hon-yong, in late 1946. Pak fled north of the thirty-eighth parallel but continued directing the party's efforts to undermine stability in southern Korea.

The Jeju branch of the KWP-S, armed with the weapons left behind by 58,000 Japanese soldiers, distributed rice and goods through cooperatives.<sup>2</sup> People's committees also used education to inculcate Marxist ideology in the people, such as by recruiting students via a front group called the Youth League (Cheongnyun Dongmaeng).<sup>3</sup> The night schools the committees created to teach citizens basic reading and writing skills also taught Marxist doctrine to instill critical views of the island's situation. Many teachers were communists, including Lee Seung-jin. Better known as Kim Dal-sam, Lee played a key role in organizing and planning the attacks of the 4.3 rebellion, as well as the push to include Jeju in the elections that created a communist North Korea.<sup>4</sup>

About 60,000 to 70,000 Jeju islanders, including the provincial governor, joined the Jeju branch of the KWP-S.<sup>5</sup> Around this time, 70 percent of Jeju residents were involved with or sympathetic to the left wing (*jwa-ik*).<sup>6</sup> Notable instances of the party's insurrectionary tactics include the "2.7" general strike and riots on February 7, 1948, the Fourteenth Regiment

Mutiny, and the Yeo-Sun communist insurrection of October 19, 1948.

Thus, Jeju 4.3 was part of a larger campaign of armed revolt, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and general strikes to prevent the May 10 elections and instead have the people of Jeju participate in the South Chosun People's Representative Congress held in Haeju, north of the thirty-eighth parallel, to elect the representatives to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), which then created the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).<sup>7</sup> In recent years, politicians on the Korean left have made it controversial to refer to Jeju 4.3 as an armed uprising, rather than a "struggle," or most recently a "democracy struggle." But the attacks were an armed communist rebellion, not of a "democracy struggle," and they sought to prevent the ROK from existing by disrupting democratic elections—quite the opposite of a democracy movement.

### Planning for the Attack

The KWP-S planned extensively to create as much terror as possible by attacking and killing the police, those who supported the soon-to-emerge ROK, and those involved in the elections—as well as their families. According to the KWP-S's report after the rebellion, the planning phase lasted from March 15 to April 2, 1948. The fact that it could prepare so quickly indicates that there was already a well-organized, structured, and active force from which the KWP-S could quickly draw personnel, intelligence, and resources.

At the top of the KWP-S was the Central Committee, which sent instructions to its next lower-level organization, in this case the South Jeolla Committee, which in turn conveyed the instructions to its next lower-level organization, which in this case was the Jeju Committee. In mid-March 1948, the South Jeolla branch of the KWP-S gave the Jeju branch very specific orders to prepare for the assault: it was to establish a military committee to serve as a command organization; create an

insurgent organization (*jawidae*) of 200 partisans to support the armed attacks; equip the guerrillas with weapons and supplies; and strengthen its propaganda push ahead of the event.<sup>8</sup>

The Jeju branch secretly executed these orders to organize the communist guerrillas. KWP-S documents, found by the Constabulary (Gukbang Gyeongbidae, a precursor to the Republic of Korea Army), indicate that the planning stage—during which the KWP-S would organize, train, and equip its forces—lasted from March 15 to April 2.

By March 28, 1948, the KWP-S had created and armed a 100-person force known as the “People’s Guerrillas” (Inmin Yugyeokdae or Minjung Yugyeokdae) to conduct main attack operations, a 200-person supplemental forces (Inmin Jawidae or Minjung Jawidae) for reinforcement, and a 20-person special security squad for a starting manpower of 320.<sup>9</sup> By April 3, the number of guerrillas increased to 400, with which KWP-S planned to attack 14 police stations.<sup>10</sup> KWP-S also infiltrated the Ninth Regiment of the National Defense Guard (Constabulary), which was based on the Jeju Island. The infiltrated KWP-S member reported that of 800 in the Ninth Regiment, 400 were “certain” (i.e., they supported communists), and 200 could be ordered to do as KWP-S wanted.<sup>11</sup> Further, the mole stated that there were only 18, including officers and non-commissioned officers, who would oppose the communists, so it would be easy to purge them. KWP-S also sent 20 special mission students to the town of Jeju as liaisons for spying activities.

The communist partisans’ documents show the details of the KWP-S’s well-organized military structure. The KWP-S Jeju branch created a military decision-making body with a commander and a deputy commander at the top, and established a military committee under them.<sup>12</sup> The military department fell under the “struggle committee” of the KWP-S Jeju branch. The military department and the military

committees were also created at the township level, and they commanded the tactical-level guerrilla units.<sup>13</sup> These units consisted of 10-person platoons. Two platoons made up a company, and two companies made up a battalion. This make-up is much smaller in scale than typical company- and battalion-sized units of a regular army, but structurally it reflects a typical military organization, with a chain of command and a commander at the top.

Unlike the guerrillas and their supplemental forces, which reported to the local commanders first, the 20-person special security squad (*teukgyeongdae*) reported directly to the military committee of the Jeju branch. Initial camp training for the special security squad began on March 20, with 67 personnel at an inactive volcano in Hallim called Sabyeok Oreum. The special security squad was equipped with bamboo and metal spears, as well as 27 rifles, three pistols, 24 hand grenades, and seven smoke bombs, according to KWP-S guerrillas’ documents.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, this was not a random civilian “struggle,” but a carefully planned paramilitary operation to achieve the political objectives of the KWP-S, under the direction of Pak Hon-yong in collaboration with Kim Il-sung and the occupying Soviet Red Army. With foreign and domestic political support, a centralized command structure, and military-grade weapons, the KWP-S insurgents were prepared to wage their irregular warfare campaign on the still-forming Republic of Korea.

### April 3, 1948: The KWP-S’s Rampage

Sometime between 1:00 and 2:00 a.m. on April 3, 1948, KWP-S operatives lit beacon fires in the lower hills surrounding Mount Halla to signal the beginning of the assault.<sup>15</sup> About 350 armed guerrillas—30 with small arms and 320 with metal and bamboo spears—simultaneously attacked 12 police stations, killed police officers, and, starting at 2:00 a.m., stole weapons, according to the KWP-S guerrilla unit document.<sup>16</sup>

They also attacked the sleeping quarters and residences of the police, government officials, and Seochong youths who had fled Soviet communist oppression in northern Korea. The guerrillas killed entire families and burnt their houses.

In the village of Gu-eom, which suffered the greatest damage on the first night of attacks, about 100 communist partisan rebels were divided into four to five teams and went door to door for three hours to seek out and brutally murder their targets, before setting the victims' houses on fire.<sup>17</sup> In Gu-eom, five family members were killed, about 10 family members were injured, and one policeman was seriously wounded. Two armed rebels were also killed.

Below are other firsthand accounts of the initial wave of attacks in various towns on Jeju Island:

- Communist guerrillas stabbed Sin-eom substation policeman Song Won-ha eight times with swords and bamboo spears. He barely escaped death, but his father died after guerrillas attacked him. At a Namwon police substation, assisting member Bang Sung-hwa was instantly killed; Kim Seok-hoon's arm was cut off with an axe; policeman Ko Il-soo's throat was cut and was killed; and Bang Sung-eon was injured. The guerrillas seized firearms and bullets from the weapons armory and fled.<sup>18</sup>
- About 100 guerrillas ambushed the home of Moon Young-baek, a figure on the political right, in the village Gu-eom, but Moon already fled and was not there. Communist guerrillas killed Moon's 14-year-old daughter Moon Suk-ja and 10-year-old daughter Moon Jung-ja by stabbing them with bamboo spears as they pleaded for their lives. Mun Ki-chan, who lived in the same village, was also stabbed to death with bamboo spears, and Moon Yong-joon was stabbed with bamboo spears and died a few days later. In addition, guerrillas beat the pregnant wife of Ko Chil-gun with clubs, injuring her, and stabbed 34-year-old Moon Chang-soon to death.<sup>19</sup>

- On April 4, 1948, guerrillas killed 36-year-old Oh Seung-jo, a member of the Korean Youth Corps (Daecheong), a youth group on the right, at Yeonpyeong village. On April 6, guerrillas killed 37-year-old Yi Ho-ri and 32-year-old Yang Nam-ho, the leader and a member, respectively, of the Korean Youth Corps, while saying, "Don't participate in the May 10 elections."<sup>20</sup>

By the end of the first wave of attacks, the KWP-S had killed 10 policemen and 17 civilians, injured eight more, and taken five hostages. Four guerrillas were also killed, according to the KWP-S's report.<sup>21</sup> This rampage was only the beginning of a much larger communist guerrilla insurgency.

### Recruitment by Kidnapping

KWP-S's recruitment process was horrifying. The guerrillas attacked villages with a "kidnapping team" that quickly searched houses to find teenage boys, whom they tied up and took to their bases in the mountains. The guerrillas interrogated the teenagers for their background and labeled one or two of them as "reactionaries." The communists then gave metal spears to the other teens and coerced them as a group to kill those marked as "reactionaries," thereby creating an atmosphere of fear, deterring them from escaping, and extracting loyalty. The KWP-S would then repeat this process.<sup>22</sup>

### The Aftermath of the 4.3 Communist Rampage

The KWP-S report in the immediate aftermath of the event described the attacks. It also revealed KWP-S infiltration of the National Defense Guard (Constabulary). The report states:

**On April 3 between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m., the first armed attack struggle on Jeju Island post-August 15 liberation was unleashed. Operationally, we wanted the National Defense Guard [which was infiltrated by communists who tried to take control] to be in charge of annihilating the**

anti-communist stronghold in the town of Jeju, Sungnae, especially the inspector general's office and the First District Office's police substations, and we infiltrated 20 students, who are secret agents, as liaisons, and deployed 400 people to the rest of the 14 substations. As per the earlier report, annihilating the [anti-communist] stronghold failed due to the National Defense Guard (9th Regiment) not participating, but the raids on 12 of the remaining 14 police substations were overall successful.<sup>23</sup>

The KWP-S would go on to hold Jeju Island, using fear to control the population, until late July 1948. During this period, the communists' reign of terror and brutal killings continued and included the following:

- Insurgents buried alive Pastor Yi Do-jung, the first Christian pastor born on Jeju Island. He was murdered on June 18, 1948, according to Yi Dong-hae, the pastor's grandson.
- Kang Hak-song, a resident of Namwon-eup, testified that his father, who was the supervisor of those guarding his village, was kidnapped when the KWP-S attacked his village. Kang later found his father's body covered in blood and in pieces, with his limbs dismembered from the body and his penis cut off and inserted into his mouth.
- Kim Sung-suk recalled that the KWP-S searched his house and took all the food. When his mother protested, saying she and her family would have no food to eat, the communists repeatedly stabbed her with bamboo spears. She survived but suffered severe injuries.
- Kang Byung-ok, yet another survivor, stated that his father and his brother were taken by the KWP-S. He found his father's body with a rope-like piece of cloth wrapped around his neck, indicative of death by choking. His brother's body had been decapitated.<sup>24</sup>

After the wanton murders in the first days of April 1948, the military committees of the KWP-S hid out in the Halla Mountains. In their report, the partisans boasted that every day they used small-squad attacks, killed the police, and quickly escaped to melt into the mountains, creating a "chilling effect on the minds" of the government forces and the police.<sup>25</sup> The communist guerrillas continued their attacks, and the government had to respond with counterinsurgency operations. During the communist insurgency and the government's corresponding counterinsurgency, many civilians were caught in the middle and died, with some cooperating with one side or the other, or sometimes both sides, depending on the situation. The left in modern Korea, which insists on calling the insurgency a "democracy struggle," focuses on these civilian casualties, which KWP-S also caused, and blames only the government in order to question its legitimacy, while completely ignoring the KWP-S's role and aims in conducting its terror campaign. Instead of truth, the left seeks to create a narrative that the ROK government is bad and illegitimate, and by extension, that the ROK should have never existed, which was the KWP-S's goal from the start.

### The Alternative Elections in North Korea

The larger goal of this terror was to convince the citizens of Jeju to eschew participation in the May 10, 1948, elections, and instead take part in the formation of a communist state in northern Korea. To help create the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the KWP-S Jeju chapter, led by Kim Dal-sam, held secret elections of its own, visiting villages and forcing people to cast ballots. It then took the ballots to the August 25 South Chosun People's Representative Congress held in northern Korea to select representatives to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) to create the DPRK.<sup>26</sup> The SPA officially established this communist country on September 9, 1948, about three weeks after the ROK was established. On December 11, 1948, the presidium of the SPA presented Kim Dal-sam with an award, the Flag Medal, for his efforts in the Jeju 4.3 rebellion.<sup>27</sup>

## The KWP-S's Anti-US Provocations

The KWP-S was also anti-American, seeing the US as an obstacle to a unified socialist Korea under North Korean control, as shown in their propaganda. The KWP-S's *Jawidae* distributed letters, one directed at the police, urging them to change sides and join “the anti-US struggle.” Other leaflets were aimed at the general public, calling them “fathers,” “mothers,” “brothers,” and “sisters,” cajoling them to join the “national liberation” from the “American imperial cannibals and their puppets.”<sup>28</sup>

Military committees disbursed leaflets that called for the withdrawal of the US military, expressed opposition to the establishment of the ROK, demanded the departure of UN election monitors, lobbied for the release of their comrades from prisons, and endorsed the overthrow of President Syngman Rhee and his party. These demands all served the goal of “Chosun unification,” under the communist rule of Kim Il-sung, who answered to the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> In effect, the KWP-S's efforts, if successful, would have turned Korea into a freedom-less satellite communist state, as happened to numerous countries around the periphery of the USSR after World War II.

## History Warfare

This episode was a sad chapter in Korean history, but it was also a dangerous time for the Korean people, who face an existential threat. It began with the KWP-S's plans for the insurgency. Tragedy was part of their calculation. After the communist rebellion on the Jeju Island, the subsequent

guerrilla insurgency and the government's counterinsurgency went on for nine years, including during the Korean War. In fact, before, during, and after the conventional war was waged from 1950 to 1953, communist forces waged an irregular and unconventional war in South Korea with North Korea's materiel, instructions, and personnel support.

The facts of these communist guerrillas' grisly acts are not taught in history classes. Interest groups on the left refer to this incident as the 4.3 Jeju “struggle,” and most recently as a “democracy struggle,” but that is a misnomer. Jeju 4.3 was an attempt to terrorize the people of the island and deter them from participating in the elections or joining organizations that sought to create a democratic system of government based on freedom, which is antithetical to Marxism-Leninism.<sup>30</sup> The communist regime based in Pyongyang wanted the entire Korean Peninsula to be a socialist state under its rule, and it saw elections that would establish the Republic of Korea as a challenge to its goal.

The revolt on Jeju Island and the guerrilla warfare that followed were not a “democracy struggle.” The KWP-S started the attacks on Jeju on April 3, 1948, as part of a larger insurgency to disrupt the UN-supervised elections that occurred below the thirty-eighth parallel on May 10, 1948, in order to prevent the creation of the Republic of Korea. Rather than liberal democracy, the insurgents wanted North Korea's communist regime to be the legitimate government over all of Korea, with the north's communist system extended south to create a unified socialist Korea republic, a system without freedom.

## Endnotes

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- 2 Yang Jeong-sim, "A Study on the Jeju 4·3 Resistance" (濟州4·3抗爭 研究) (PhD diss., Sung Kyun Kwan University, 2006), 18.
- 3 Yang Jeong-sim, "A Study on the Jeju 4·3 Resistance," 19.
- 4 Yang Jeong-sim, "A Study on the Jeju 4·3 Resistance," 21.
- 5 Park Jin-yong, *Seventy Years of Korean Contemporary History*, 157.
- 6 Park Jin-yong, *Seventy Years of Korean Contemporary History*, 157.
- 7 Yang Jeong-sim, "A Study on the Jeju 4·3 Resistance," 65.
- 8 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report" (제주도 인민유격대 투쟁보고서), NamNoDang, circa 1948, 7.
- 9 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 7.
- 10 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 8 and 17.
- 11 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 9.
- 12 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 8.
- 13 Examples include the *Minjung Yugyeokdae* and *Minjung Jawidae*. *Minjung Jawidae* is also referred to as *Inmin Jawidae*.
- 14 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 8.
- 15 Kim Chang-hu, "The Forty-Fifth Anniversary of the Jeju 4.3 Struggle, The Whole Story of the April 3 Struggle, Rebellion and Massacre" (제주 4·3항쟁 45주년 특별기획 1948년 4·3항쟁, 봉기와 학살의 전모), *Yoksa Bipyong (Critical Review of History)* 22 (February 1993), 135; Yang Jeong-sim, "A Study on the Jeju 4·3 Resistance," 66. Kim Chang-hu wrote that it began at 1:00 a.m., while Yang Jeong-sim wrote that it began at 2:00 a.m. Since time pieces and long-distance communications were not prevalent at that time, the beacon fires were the signals, which explains the differing times. The attacks probably started somewhere in between 1:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m. Kim and Yang's article both claim 11 police stations were attacked, but other sources, including the official report as well as those written by Kim Sa-ryang, a communist, say that 12 police stations were attacked. See Zhou Chun-hong, "A Study on Kim Sam-ryang's Work Translated into Chinese during the Korean War, *The Korean Literature and Arts* 30 (2019), 334.
- 16 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 26.
- 17 Kim Chang-hu, "The Forty-Fifth Anniversary of the Jeju 4.3 Struggle," 135–6.
- 18 The Korea Institute of Electrical and Electronic Material Engineers, "The Truth of the Jeju 4.3 Incident: We Denounce the Distortion and the Illegality of the Prime Minister's Jeju 4.3 Incident Report, Which Denies the Legitimacy of the Republic of Korea" (제주4.3 사건 진상은 이렇다: 대한민국 정통성 부인한 국무총리 제주 4.3사건 보고서의 왜곡과 불법성을 고발한다), *Monthly Korea Journal* 174, no. 0 (April 2004), 88.
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- 21 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 27.
- 22 Kim Yong-jung, *Question and Answer on Jeju April 3 Incident*, Rev. ed. (Goyang-shi: Nanumsa, 2022), 65.
- 23 "Jeju Island Guerrilla Operations Report," 26.
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- 27 Zhou Chun-hong, "A Study on Kim Sa-ryang's Work Translated into Chinese during the Korean War, *The Korean Literature and Arts* 30 (2019), 334.
- 28 Yang Jeong-sim, 66-67.
- 29 Kim Chang-hu, 138.
- 30 Hyun Gil-eon, *An Island's Rebellion on April 3, 1948: The Truth behind the Jeju 4.3 Incident* (Seoul: Baeknyeon Dongan, 2019), 36.



## About the Author



**Dr. Tara O** is an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute. She is an expert on issues related to the Korean Peninsula and a retired Air Force officer with decades of significant security experience.

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Fourth Floor  
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