

Peter Kropotkin And Peoples' Uprisings

From the Paris Commune to the Kwangju Uprising

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To more fully appreciate the contributions of Peter Kropotkin, we would be remiss if we did not attempt to extrapolate his thinking into our own time. With regard to the fate of the Bolshevik revolution, such a task is straightforward. Kropotkin himself was able to analyze its development and regression. It is quite a bit more difficult, however, to apply Kropotkin's thinking to the development of revolutionary movements in the latter half of the 20th Century.

While he is vital in importance to contemporary anarchist thinking, Kropotkin is still little known outside the circles of the initiated. In South Korea, Kwangju is central to the development of modern democracy, yet the uprising of 1980, in which as many people as 2,000 people lost their lives, remains at (or outside) the borders of many people's understanding. In both cases, it seems to me that Eurocentrism plays a role in the marginalization process. I feel safe asserting that if Kropotkin had never left Russia and yet still written the same books and articles, outside of Russia we would know very little or nothing of him today!

We may forgive Kropotkin for many things. At the top of the list is his support for the Entente during World War I. Somewhere else in this list is his Eurocentric bias. Today one encounters this category of analysis in Mutual Aid with consternation. His use of "savages" and "barbarians" is curiously antiquated. Moreover, in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, we find oblique references to "Asiatic schemes," mentions of "[...] an Oriental fashion, in an abominable way" and "oriental amusements were looked upon with disgust..." [*Memoirs*, pp. 76, 82, 310]. I assume that Kropotkin would have outgrown these prejudices. In his own day, they were seldom questioned.

Kropotkin was, if anything, an internationalist. Considering the role of *Le Revolte*, the Swiss paper he edited, he wrote: "To make one feel sympathy with the throbbing of the human heart, with its revolt against age-long injustice, with its attempts at working out new forms of life, — this should be the chief duty of a revolutionary paper. It is hope, not despair, which makes successful revolutions" [*Memoirs*, pp. 418]

KROPOTKIN'S NOTION OF REVOLUTION

Alongside the Russian Revolution, and his experiences in Western Europe, Kropotkin developed his analysis of revolution mainly in relation to movements in France, especially the Revolution of 1789 through 1793 and the Paris Commune of 1871. For Kropotkin, the free commune became the ends and means of genuine revolution. He detested representative government and those bureaucrats who sought to take upon themselves the responsibilities and rights of the people. More than once, he blasted those who would sit, like generals from afar, and give directives to movements in the streets [*Memoirs*, p. 282]. One can only imagine what he would have to say about those who sit home today during demonstrations and tomorrow write "handbooks" full of advice for activists. In his own day, he participated in armed demonstrations and thematized cowardice as necessary to overcome inside the movement [*Memoirs*, p. 419].

Kropotkin's faith in ordinary people was boundless. Admiring the "spontaneous organization shown by the people of Paris" in the French Revolution, he noted that each section of the city appointed its own military and civil committee, but "it was to the General Assemblies, held in the evening, that all important questions were generally referred" [*The Great French Revolution*, p. 313]. Over time, observed Kropotkin, these sections were transformed into arms of the Committee of Public Safety (i.e. into instruments of the State). As 40,000 revolutionary committees were swallowed by the State, the revolution was killed.

The sacrifices of thousands of people who lost their lives in revolutionary movements revealed to Kropotkin the form in which a genuine revolution would appear: the “independent commune.” Throughout his writings, Kropotkin understood democratic republics and representative governments as fulfilling the ambitions of middle class radicals, of those who wanted reform of the existing system in order to improve their individual lot rather than to revolutionize all of the existing social order [Conquest of Bread, p. 44, 213–14]. “Representative government has accomplished its historic mission; it has given a mortal blow to court-rule.” [Anarchist Communism, p. 68]. “Absolute monarchy corresponded to the system of serfdom. Representative government corresponds to the system of capital-rule.” [Anarchist Communism, p. 52]

Developing his thoughts in relation to the Paris Commune of 1871, he wrote:

“The uprising of the Paris Commune thus brought with it the solution of a question, which tormented every true revolutionist. Twice had France tried to achieve some sort of socialist revolution by imposing it through a central government more or less disposed to accept it: in 1793 through 1794, when she tried to introduce *l’egalite de fait* — real economic equality — by means of strong Jacobin measures; and in 1848, when she tried to impose a “Democratic Socialist Republic.” And each time she failed. But now a new solution was indicated: the free commune must do it on its own territory...” [Modern Science and Anarchism, p. 164]

The political form of a free society for Kropotkin clearly was the independent commune. “This was the form the social revolution must take — the independent commune. Let all the country and all the world be against it; but once its inhabitants have decided that they will communalize the consumption of commodities, their exchange and their production, they must realize it among themselves.” [Modern Science and Anarchism, p. 164]. In his understanding of the Paris Commune and the Cartagena and Barcelona Communes that followed on its heels, Kropotkin fleshed out the meaning of the Commune as a political form, projecting it into the future:

“If we analyze not only this movement in itself, but also the impression it left in the minds and the tendencies manifested during the communal revolution, we must recognize in it an indication showing that in the future human agglomerations which are more advanced in their social development will try to start an independent life; and that they will endeavor to convert the more backwards parts of a nation by example, instead of imposing their opinions by law and force, or by submitting themselves to majority-rule, which always is mediocrity-rule. At the same time, the failure of representative government within the Commune itself proved that self-government and self-administration must be carried further than in a mere territorial sense. To be effective they must also be carried into the various functions of life within a free community.” [Anarchist Communism, pp. 51–2]

In a later work, Kropotkin proclaimed that after 1871, “[...] the free commune would be henceforth the medium in which the ideas of modern socialism may come to realization.” And in *Mutual Aid*, he traces the form which communal cooperation has taken in evolution and history.

After 1917, he moved back to Russia. Although critical of the Bolsheviks, he published only two short statements about the revolution, mainly aimed at undermining the counter-revolutionary foreign armies being sent to Russia. He did, however, indicate again support for the free commune:

“All efforts to reunite under a central control the naturally separate parts of the Russian Empire are predestined to failure; I see the time coming when each part of this federation will be itself a federation of free communes and free cities. And I believe also that certain parts of Western Europe will soon follow the same course.” [Kropotkin, Letter to the Workers of Western Europe]

In relation to all the revolutions of his time, he established the goal of genuine freedom as the independent commune. But how were people to accomplish this goal? What means were to be used? For Kropotkin, the answer was clear: uprisings would prepare the ground. Uprisings and the free commune were essential to Kropotkin because he believed the people themselves must make their own revolution — not a vanguard party or any otherwise organized small group. For popular mobilization, nothing was more important than a central meeting place, as for example, the Palais Royal during the French Revolution:

“The Palais Royal, with its gardens and cafes, had become an open air club, whither ten thousand persons of all classes went everyday to exchange news, to discuss the pamphlets of the hour, to renew among the crowd their ardor for future action, to know and to understand one another.” [Great French Revolution, p. 61]

One example of the importance of meeting places for popular mobilization was on June 10, 1789. After learning that eleven soldiers had been arrested and imprisoned for refusing to load their muskets to use against the citizens of Paris, over 4,000 people went immediately from the Palais Royal to rescue the soldiers. Seeing such a large force, the jailers complied, and the dragoons, riding at full speed to stop the crowd, quickly sheathed their sabers and fraternized with the people. [Great French Revolution, p. 69] Admiring the spontaneous militancy of people in the streets, Kropotkin noted that thievery ended — that crowds in control of shops did not loot — but only took what was necessary for their collective nourishment and defense. [Great French Revolution, p. 75, 106] As the revolt spread from one city to another — from Paris to much of France, “All Europe was moved to enthusiasm over the words and deeds of the revolution,” Kropotkin traced how the revolts unified France in ways previously not imagined. [Great French Revolution, pp. 95, 177]

After the Paris Commune of 1871, when similar uprisings occurred in Cartagena and Barcelona in Spain, he came close to understanding that uprisings themselves inspired others to rise up — a phenomenon I understand as the eros effect. [See my book, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*] Kropotkin noted that uprisings, while often the product of desperation, were essential to revolution:

“They also rebelled — sometimes in hope of local success — in strikes or in small revolts against some official whom they disliked, or in order to get food for their hungry children, but frequently also without any hope of success: simply because the conditions grew unbearable. Not one, or two, or tens, but hundreds of similar revolts have preceded and must precede every revolution. Without these no revolution was ever wrought.” [Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchism*]

He later proclaimed uprisings to be not only the means but also the key to determining the ends of the revolution: “And it may be stated as a general rule that the character of every revolution is determined by the character and the aim of the uprisings by which it is preceded.”

With these thoughts in mind, I now turn to the Kwangju Uprising of 1980, which offers empirical verification of Kropotkin’s ideas. Despite its central importance to Korean and Asian democracy movements in the 1980s, many people are unfamiliar with the Kwangju Uprising. I will first offer a brief summary, after which I will portray elements of the uprising especially important to what I have described as Kropotkin’s view of the free commune and uprisings in general.

Fundamentally a humanitarian, Kropotkin understood the death and depravity faced by those courageous enough to rise up. Unafraid to maintain his principled opposition to capital-rule despite imprisonment and deprivation, he refused to allow the sacrifices of others to be forgotten.

Reading his description of the brutality of government, it is difficult to tell whether it occurred in Paris or Kwangju:

“You shall perish, whatever you do! If you are taken with arms in your hands, death! If you beg for mercy, death! Whichever way you turn, right, left, back, forward, up, down, death! You are not merely outside the law, you are outside humanity. Neither age nor sex shall save you and yours. You shall die, but first you shall taste the agony of your wife, your sister, your sons and daughters, even those in the cradle! Before your eyes the wounded man shall be taken out of the ambulance and hacked with bayonets or knocked down with the butt end of a rifle. He shall be dragged living by his broken leg or bleeding arm and flung like a suffering, groaning bundle of refuse into the gutter. Death! Death! Death!” [Peter Kropotkin, Commune of Paris, 1895]

KWANGJU UPRISING

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 unexperienced 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 behavior 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 terrorized the population in unimaginable ways. In the first confrontations on the morning of May 18, specially designed clubs broke heads of defenseless 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 brutalized. 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 paratroop-

ers' 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 brutalizing people. [Kwangju Diary, p. 79]

Despite severe beatings and hundreds of arrests, students continually regrouped and tenaciously fought back. As the city mobilized 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 generalization 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 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 Labor 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 armored 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 neighboring 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 armories, 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 Yonggwang 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 organized that finally won democratic electoral reform in South Korea.

Like the battleship Potemkin, the people of Kwangju have repeatedly signaled 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 democratize 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 into 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.

KROPOTKIN AND KWANGJU

There are three principal ways in which the Kwangju Uprising illuminates and verifies Kropotkin's framework of analysis:

- (1) The independent commune and free distribution of commodities

After the military had been driven out of the city on May 21, everyone shared joy and relief. Markets and stores were reopened for business, and food, water, and electricity were available as normally. No banks were looted and normal crimes like robbery, rape or theft hardly occurred — if at all. Coffins, gasoline and cigarettes were in short supply. While some people attempted to procure more coffins from the army, the CA rationed gasoline, and people shared cigarettes with their newly found comrades in arms, happy to be alive. For some people, sharing cigarettes symbolized an important part of the communal experience. Storeowners who still had cigarettes often sold — or gave away — one pack at a time (to be fair to everyone). Blood was in short supply at the hospital, but as soon as the need became known, people flooded in to donate it, including barmaids and prostitutes, who at one point publicly insisted that they, too, be permitted to donate. Thousands of dollars was quickly raised through donations. All these examples are indications of how remarkably the whole city came together.

For days, citizens voluntarily cleaned the streets, cooked rice, served free meals in the marketplace, and kept constant guard against the expected counter-attack. Everyone contributed to and found their place in liberated Kwangju. Spontaneously a new division of labor emerged. The citizens' army, many of whom had stayed up all night, nonetheless was models of responsibility. People dubbed the new militia the "Citizens' Army" or "our allies" (as opposed to the army, "our

enemy”). They protected the people and the people, in turn, took care of them. Without any indoctrination and none of the military madness that elicits monstrous behavior in armies around the world, the men and women of the CA behaved in an exemplary fashion. Unafraid to impose a new type of order based on the needs of the populace, they disarmed all middle school and high school students, an action for which the Militant’s Bulletin took responsibility. [Kwangju Diary, p. 71] When the final assault was imminent, their leaders insisted that the high schoolers among the militants return home so they could survive and continue the struggle. After many protests and with tears in their eyes, the younger militants departed.

(2) General assemblies at Democracy Square, not representative government, was the highest decision-making body

Popular will was directly formulated at daily rallies around the fountain at Province Hall Square. Renamed “Democracy Square” on May 16, the space was holy even before the liberation of the city. The ability to assemble peacefully by the thousands was a right won through the blood of too many friends and neighbors. Instinctively, the people of Kwangju recognized the square as their spiritual home, and they assembled there every day by the tens of thousands. The daily rallies became the setting for a new kind of direct democracy where everyone had a say. Women’s public roles were impressive, standing in sharp contrast to the everyday subordination they suffered. Many people were able to express heartfelt needs:

“The foundation was now the center of unity. All walks and classes of people spoke — women street vendors, elementary school teachers, followers of different religions, housewives, college students, high school students and farmers. Their angry speeches created a common consciousness, a manifestation of the tremendous energy of the uprising. They had melded together, forging a strong sense of solidarity throughout the uprising. For the moment, the city was one.” [Kwangju Diary, p. 105]

Five rallies occurred during the time the city was liberated, and huge crowds attended each. The first massive rally was a spontaneously organized gathering to celebrate the defeat of the military the day after the army retreated. The next day (May 23), at the First Citywide Rally for Democracy, the crowd swelled to 150,000. It ended with the people singing, “Our Wish is National Unification.” On May 24, over 100,000 people assembled; there were 50,000 on May 25 (where the resignation of the Settlement Committee was demanded); and 30,000 at the end of the final rally on May 26. At this last gathering, the demand for a new government of national salvation emerged.

(3) Spontaneous organization

The capacity for self-organization that emerged spontaneously, first in the heat of the battle and later in the governing of the city and the final resistance when the military counter-attacked, is mind-expanding. In the later part of the 20th Century, high rates of literacy, the mass media, and universal education (which in South Korea includes military training for every man) have forged a capacity in millions of people to govern themselves far more wisely than the tiny elites all too often ensconced in powerful positions. We can observe this spontaneous capacity for self-government (as well as the deadly absurdity of elite rule) in the events of the Kwangju Uprising.

In Kwangju, no pre-existing armed force like the Parisian National Guard led the assault on power. Rather a spontaneous process of resistance to the brutality of the paratroopers threw forward men and women who rose to the occasion. Many had little or no previous political experience. Some had little or no formal education. All emerged in the concrete context of unfolding historical events. Liberated Kwangju was organized without the contrivance of governments or

planning by political parties. Kropotkin would have made no less of those who responded to the call to seize vehicles at the rally on Kumnam Street than he did of the crowd from the Palais Royal freeing the prisoners.

Not only was there no pre-existing organization to stage a coup d'état, almost all the leaders of the movement were either arrested or in hiding when the uprising began. On the night of May 17, military intelligence personnel and police raided homes of activists across the city, arresting the leadership of the movement. Those leaders not picked up went into hiding. Already at least twenty-six of the movement's national leaders (including Kim Dae-Jung) had been rounded up. Nonetheless the very next morning, people spontaneously organized themselves — first by the hundreds and then by the thousands.

The emergence of organization appears to have happened quite naturally. The process was obvious to everyone. Even the government publicly referred to the uprising as “community self-rule.” At about 10:30am on May 22, a group of eight evangelical pastors met to appraise the situation. One of them was Arnold Peterson, a U.S. Baptist missionary who happened to be in Kwangju. He later remembered the pastors' appraisal:

“The consensus of their feeling is summed up in the phrase “This cannot be.” It was unheard of that the citizens of a city should rise up and throw off their government with no conscious planning and leadership.” [Peterson, p. 49]

There were a small number of pre-existing groups like Wildfire (a night school for workers), Clown (an activist theatrical troupe), and the National Democratic Workers' League, whose members came together to publish a daily newspaper, the Militants' Bulletin, which they used to stiffen and inspire the armed resistance. They successfully outmaneuvered the mayor and more conservative members of the council. Making an alliance with the emergent groups of armed fighters, they created an energy center, as a spectrum of militant individuals merged together and devoted themselves to a single focus — continued armed resistance.

Significantly, many of the members of this more militant group had previously participated in study groups about the Paris Commune, some with poet and activist Kim Nam-Ju. [Interview, November 29, 1999] In 2001, I conducted twenty-nine interviews with participants in the uprising, and many persons indicated that they had been part of study groups that for a time focused on the Paris Commune before the Kwangju Uprising. Yoon Sang-won (one of the key leaders that emerged in liberated Kwangju) attended a 1976 speech given by Kim Nam-Ju at Nokdu bookstore in which he discussed the Paris Commune. [Interview, November 7, 2001] During the uprising, Yoon Sang-won spoke publicly at least once about the Paris Commune in his discussions with other leading members of the university. [Interview, June 22, 2001] At least a dozen other key activists had studied the Paris Commune.

That activists studied the Paris Commune prior to the Kwangju Uprising illustrates how the legacy of uprisings, whether in Paris or Kwangju, consciously or not is to empower the human species to struggle against oppression. Even when an uprising is brutally suppressed — as in both cases here — their being experienced publicly creates new desires and new needs, new fears and new hopes in the hearts and minds of participants and all those standing in the path of the ripples sent out by the uprisings.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

These brief remarks on the Kwangju Uprising indicate how much Kropotkin's thinking continues to offer revolutionary movements. To his credit, his categories of analysis, gleaned from the blood and sacrifices of so many, remain germane to contemporary struggles.

While Kropotkin's insights have relevance today, it would be foolish to apply mechanically his thinking. Particularly when the cost of error can be thousands of lives, revolutionary theory, while bringing to consciousness the legacy of previous waves of revolution, should empower people to create their own destiny.

Happily, one way in which Kropotkin was wrong was his statement that bloody agents of repression "never are arraigned" [Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets, p. 138]. Incredibly, after the victory of the June 1987 struggle in South Korea, former presidents Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae-woo (masterminds of the Kwangju Massacre) were both tried and imprisoned. Seldom in history have the authors of such bloodshed been held responsible. Let us hope that in the future, Kropotkin's dream of freedom and prosperity will replace our current nightmare of corporate domination, war and militarism.

* * *

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