The Legacy of Korea’s Hannah Arendt Moment

By Heonik Kwon

1919 marked a seminal point in the history of the current global order, a year in which the twilight of a Euro-centric, imperialist world became visible and a bipolar East-West conflict would eventually emerge. Centennial commemorations in Europe and elsewhere have marked that turning point at the end of the First World War.

In Korea, the centenary of the March 1 Movement in 1919 is no less momentous an occasion in the history of the Korean people. Heonik Kwon looks at the threads that tie together these broad strands of modern history.

THE YEAR 2019 marks the hundredth anniversary of the Paris Peace Conference, and follows the centenary of the Great War of 1914-1918. A number of important public events have taken place during the centennial years across Europe and beyond. One notable event was the commemoration of Armistice Day on Nov. 11, 2018, during which the French president and the German chancellor held a symbolic repeat of the end-of-war signing ceremony at the Forest Glade in Compiegne, 90 kilometers northeast of Paris. Equally notable was an event at the start of the centenary that took place in the St Symphorien military cemetery where fallen German and Commonwealth soldiers rest together. In August 2014, the UK’s political leaders and representatives of the royal family chose this place to inaugurate their own centennial commemoration. The prevailing ethos throughout these events was the imperative of reconciliation and the related celebration of a new identity — the European identity — that has evolved since the destruction of the two World Wars.

The centenary has generated other novel commemorative and reconciliatory actions. Some of these unfolded a long way away from Europe. Particularly notable was the recent initiative of South Korea to hold the centennial anniversary of the March 1 Movement of 1919 together with North Korea — a foundational episode in Korea’s modern constitutional history. Although this initiative failed to come to fruition, here too, the pre-dominant ethos has been reconciliation (in this case, between the two Koreas) and, more broadly, a hope to go beyond what Eric Hobsbawm calls the “age of extremes.” Hobsbawm locates the beginning of this age in 1914, and the end in 1991 — the year that witnessed the disintegration of the Soviet political order and which today we commonly associate with the end of the Cold War. Korea has a unique place in the progression of this age of extremes. The end of the Cold War has not yet materialized on the Korean Peninsula, defying the fact that the political form that defined the shape of the global order in the second half of the 20th century was declared defunct universally almost a generation ago. Considering this disparity in the durability of the Cold War, between its global form and its local manifestation, we may ask how the age of extremes took on uneven temporalities across territories. We may also ask how attention to this reality of plurality in the progression of the age of extremes might contribute to a richer understanding of the centennial moment and its meanings.

RECALLING THE FIRST WORLD WAR TODAY
Is the Great War still part of living, communicative memory three generations after it ended? How can the foundational history of modern Europe be remembered creatively now and in the future? Scholars and public commentators have been raising these searching questions in the context of the centenary. Embedded in these questions about history and memory are more specific issues concerning remembrance. Today’s Europe is not the same entity as the Europe that commemorated 1914-1918 in earlier decades. Most notably, the end of the Cold War radically transformed the structure of European political unity; as a result, the meanings of the First World War have been undergoing substantial changes during the centennial.

These changes are observable within those European nations where remembrance of the First World War has traditionally been an important part of public civic morality. Changes are even more evident, however, if the legacies of the war are considered within a broader context. For European publics across the Cold War’s East-West divide, the First World War does not have the same historical and social significance, nor do they approach the act of commemorating the war in the same spirit. For instance, the start of the centenary in 2014 saw an avalanche of public memorial events in parts of Europe (for example, in France and Britain); yet, elsewhere in the region, public interest in, and memory of, the First World War remain dormant or subdued (for example, in Russia). The key question about the future of First World War memories, then, is how Europe will confront the new disparity within its collective memory. This disparity relates partly to the specificity of the First World War’s Eastern Front history, which is just being rediscovered in recent scholarship. Seen more broadly, however, much of it is the product of Europe’s experience of bifurcated modernity as part of the global Cold War. The experience of the Cold War induced in Europe profound divergences in public historical memory, not merely different, competing pathways of modernization. Taking note of this point, we may approach the commemoration of the Great War, and the centennial commemoration in particular, as a principal site of Europe’s contemporary memory problems — the site in which divergent understandings of the past, or divergent desires to interpret it in specific ways, collide and collide with the moral imperative of shared, collectively meaningful memory.

Earlier, I briefly mentioned the UK government’s decision to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its entry into the First World War in August of this year in Saint-Symphorien, Belgium. In keeping with the chaos of the Battle of Mons, before the war evolved into trench warfare further south and west, the St Symphorien mil-
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KOREA IN 1919

Korea’s experience of 1919 finds its meanings in the trans-national, global historical domain. As was the case elsewhere in the colonial world at the time, 1919 was a time of powerful democratic awakenings and an initiating moment for the politics of self-determination. In line with the experience of other nations in Asia, notably Vietnam and China, the frustration of this initiating action resulted in the bifurcation of the politics of decolonization in the subsequent era, into what historians in Korea refer to as the Left and Right political trajectories. These different roads to decolonization and national independence also took on the primacy of armed resistance versus myriad other approaches that emphasized cultural or moral self-enlightenment instead. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 played a formative part in this political bifurcation, and so did the disappointment with US President Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric of self-determination.

Although 1919 was a defining time across the colonial world, Korea’s experience, especially in the form of popular uprisings in March 1919, demonstrates some distinct elements. In South Korea’s public historical discourses on the March 1 Movement, two idioms stand out: “peaceful marches” and “young and old or men and women” (that is, everyone). An understanding of these expressions with regard to the constitution of the public sphere generated by the March 1 uprising may require recourse to political theory. Notable here is the idea of a public world that Hannah Arendt elicited in her 1958 work, *The Human Condition*. Central to the March 1 Movement were ordinary “stateless people” — this is important — claiming their sovereign rights, and doing so primarily in speech acts and by peaceful means.

GLOBAL LEGACIES

The Great War draws long shadows on the global horizon as well as over contemporary Europe. It was a war among nation-states, but it was also a conflict among empires and states that aspired to become empires or wanted to defend them. It mobilized enormous human and material resources from the colonial world and also provoked the rise of forceful voices for self-determination throughout this world. The Great War also gave birth to two other world-changing events, the 1917 Russian revolution and the Wilsonian moment of 1919, which helped trigger the subsequent anticolonial movement and the long decolonization process. These events also complicated this process by splitting it into radical versus liberal political visions. The 1914–1919 era, therefore, constitutes the distant origin to broaden its horizons beyond Europe and engage with the First World War’s double legacies in the global domain — unimaginably destructive, yet powerfully generative. Contemporary Cold War historical scholarship has struggled to generate a fresh gaze at Europe’s (and the transatlantic international community’s) experience and interpretation of global political bipolarity.

The military cemetery is distinctive among First World War cemeteries in western Flanders and northern France, which are organized in discrete national groupings. The place is a mixed graveyard where fallen soldiers of Germany and British and Imperial (now Commonwealth) soldiers are buried together. The choice of this place as the location of an important centennial event and related messages of reconciliation and international friendship were reported widely in the media. Also relevant are the centennial efforts to reach out to diverse ethnic populations in Europe. Whereas the common focus on Europe’s experience of the First World War may not be sufficiently meaningful (or may even be alienating) for some prominent ethnic groups in EU member-states (for example, people of South Asian origin in Britain or those of Turkish origin in Germany), innovative institutional initiatives can make a great contribution to generating and strengthening social solidarity. Notable in this regard is the recent initiative by the National Archives and the National Library of France to reinvigorate and expand their collection of letters and other memorabilia from 1914–1918. A large number of French families of North African and Indochinese origin responded enthusiastically to this campaign. This not only proves the global nature of the First World War, but also shows what magical results the centenary, or what follows it, can achieve should it be conscious of the fact that the First World War was a seminal event in modern world history as well as a foundational episode of modern Europe and make efforts accordingly to bring the world into its Europe-focused performance.
this action. “Language” in this context is not the same as language in a cognitive sense that makes the human a distinct speaking and thinking animal species. It also differs from language understood in a rhetorical or communicative sense. The speech acts of March 1 come close instead to what is discussed in the anthropological literature about the “magical power of words,” in which language comes to have a world-creating, world-initiating power — that is, the power to turn the orientation of the lived reality to the hopeful direction enunciated by the words. Such words are purely political in the sense that by speaking them, I take part in transforming the public world and do so by the act of speaking together with a multitude of other speaking subjects.

WORDS OF FREEDOM
Arendt contrasted this idea of political action, grounded in the speech acts of free political subjects, to that of power, which in her work often appears to be synonymous with violence. The free and democratic political actions of March 1919 were frustrated by the power of the imperial state. The confrontation between action and power continued in the ensuing era, however. Notable incidents took place on the island of Jeju, along Korea’s southern maritime border, in March 1947, where the islanders set out to protest against the United States’ Military Government that was then occupying the southern half of Korea. The Jeju uprising in March 1947 was peaceful, just as the uprising in March 1919 was. And like the latter, it was violently crushed. The failure of the peaceful protest, as was the case in 1919, subsequently developed into an armed insurgency, and the tragic confrontation between the small group of insurgents and the government’s brutal counterinsurgency warfare in 1948-1953 devastated the island communities.

It is argued that 1919 constitutes the origin of decolonization in the global domain. Looking back, it is extraordinary to find that the first step along the road to decolonization was taken in a remarkably peaceful way rather than through violence. The initiating step also took an extraordinarily democratic form, involving voluntary and generative participation by a plurality of subjects. 1919 also makes up an important threshold in the struggle between violence and peace. In Europe, the year marked the resurgence of the idea of perpetual peace — the ideal that was pivotal to Enlightenment thought in the 18th century, which was brought back to political reality after the universal destruction of 1914-1918. This is a history of a failed peace in that the act of peace initiated a slow march toward another period of colossal destruction in 1939-1945. While Europe’s political leaders were deliberating on forms of international peace in Paris, on the streets of Korea, ordinary people were experimenting with the formation of a free public world. They were experimenting with peace as social reality rather than as a diplomatic deal. In doing so, the protesters of 1919 were not taking part in a movement for self-determination merely as Koreans, but also as global citizens. Korea’s history of 1919 features many stories of women who suddenly found themselves in the public space of March 1, away from the space of the domestic routines that had not long before captivated them. It is a delight to see their faces and the gestures they make, and to witness the delight they are expressing with these gestures. We hear in these faded pictures the silent words of freedom. We witness in them the power of a free political life and the concepts that Arendt long struggled to deliver. With some imagination, we may also see in them a multitude of Hannah Arendts in action.

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