

## **Between Collective and Individual Memory: Korean War (1950-1953) in Fiction and Memoirs**

Maria V. Soldatova, PhD,  
Moscow State Linguistic University, Russia

**Abstract:** The collective memory as the system of notions of a society about its history is of great interest to researchers. M. Halbwachs, P. Nora, J&A. Assmann and others emphasize that group consciousness not only plays an important role in self-identification of group members, but also strongly influences an individuals' understanding of the past, even makes direct witnesses of the events reevaluate and adjust their memories as time passes.

The Korean War (1950-1953), which fixed the separation of the peninsula into two parts, is one of the most important pages of contemporary Korean history. Now when the reunification of the country is often discussed, it would be interesting to analyze literary texts (including fiction and memoirs as well) by South Korean and North Korean authors aiming 1) to disclose and compare the structure, the essence and sore points of the collective memory of South and North Koreans about the War, 2) to figure out the correlation between collective and individual memory about what happened.

Adversaries in a war surely offer conflicting explanations for the developments, but in case of a civil war or a war between parts of the same country, the forming of an unfavorable image of the adversary inevitably goes along with rewriting of the common history and changing of the society consciousness.

It is worth noting that in North Korean texts the war is presented as something well-organized, as a chain of planned and thought-out military operations against the enemy clearly identified, whereas South Koreans are not very enthusiastic about blaming the adversary or praising their army, they present the war as a chaos, pay more attention to the evil nature of war as well as to physical and moral traumas caused by it. It gives us a reason to consider that in case of hypothetical reunification South Korean discourse could stay quite viable in spite of some lack of the logic, which, in terms of psychology, can be explained by suppression of the most unwanted information.

**Keywords:** Korean War, collective memory, memoirs

The phenomenon of “collective memory” has been studied for more than 100 years. By “collective memory” we mean the system of notions of a society about its history. M. Halbwachs, P. Nora, J&A. Assmann and others emphasize that group consciousness strongly influences an individual's understanding of the past and plays an important role in self-identification of group members. In the article “Collective and historical memory”<sup>1</sup> M. Halbwachs noted that the very functioning of individual memory is not possible without some tools – words and ideas, not invented by the individual, but borrowed from the sociocultural environment.

We should remember that all impressions are realized by people through the verbalization. Memory, especially that of men, stores mostly the verbalized information, while unformulated on-the-spot impressions are pushed into the sub-consciousness or expelled at all. Sometimes, with the acquisition of new knowledge and the emergence of new contexts, these unconscious personal impressions are verbalized and get correlated with the collective history / memory. It means that of great importance are concepts and words, through which the impressions and ideas are described, and the field of the description itself, i.e. the historical and political discourse.

In the article “Individual and collective representations”<sup>2</sup> E. Durkheim pointed out that collective representations have a fundamentally different essence than the individual ones. Collective memory, so necessary for the accomplishment of many social tasks, is exclusively verbalized memory. In addition, this memory does not involve random impressions and ideas, and must represent a certain system, reasonable at least from a non-analytic view. Events become the parts of the collective memory being interpreted in some way, and in this interpretation they acquire eternal meaning and value. (Eternal, if such meaning is not intentionally removed from the political discourse through a ban on repetition or, in

---

<sup>1</sup> Хальбвакс М. Коллективная и историческая память // Неприкосновенный запас. 2005. №2-3. URL: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/ha2.html>

<sup>2</sup> Дюркгейм Э. Представления индивидуальные и представления коллективные // Дюркгейм Э. Социология: ее метод предмет, предназначение. Работы разных лет. М.: Канон, 1995. С. 208–243.

extreme cases, destruction of texts as, for example, in North Korea). These meanings are actualized, i.e. re-created and repeated in an infinite variety of journalistic, scientific and, of course, literary texts.

Adversaries in a war surely offer conflicting explanations for the developments, but in case of a civil war or a war between parts of the same country, the forming of an unfavorable image of the adversary inevitably goes along with rewriting of the common history and changing of the society consciousness. The Korean War (1950-1953) fixed the separation of the peninsula into two parts. And now when the reunification of the country is often discussed, it would be interesting to analyze literary works by South Korean and North Korean authors aiming to disclose and compare the structure, the essence and sore points of the collective memory of South and North Koreans about the War. Such analysis could help us to imagine how the discourse on the War could look like after a hypothetical reunification.

First, I would like to present a list of works that made the basis of the study. It should be noted that during the Soviet period, the works by North Korean writers, including those dedicated to the war, were translated into Russian rather actively. As a result, despite the current difficulty of information exchange with the DPRK, we have the unique materials for comparative analysis. After the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea and the collapse of the Soviet Union other translators began to acquaint Russian readers with the South Korean literature.

#### **North Korean Literature:**

Translated into Russian:

김일성 «자유와 독립을 위한 조선 인민의 위대한 해방전쟁», 1951

«조선은 투쟁한다»: 중편소설, 단편소설, 오체르크. 한설야, 리태준, 한봉식, 김사랑 등에 의한 작품이 들어감, 1952

«승리»: 단편집, 1955

황건 «행복»: 장편소설, 1955

«조선 영웅들의 단편집», 1956 (with the story by Chinese pilot Zhao Baotong included) (this is a collection of stories by soldiers who took part in the battles of the Korean war on the northern side, translated by Russian military men)

«가장 사랑하는...»: 조선에서의 중국 인민 지원병들에 대한 중국 작가들의 단편 소설과 오체르크 (Translated from Chinese), 1957 (this is a collection of stories by Chinese soldiers who took part in the battles of the Korean war)

천세봉 «싸우는 마을 사람들»: 중편소설 (Translated from English), 1958

«나루터»: 단편집. 박운걸, 김만성, 김북향, 병희근, 홍파, 김재규 등에 의한 작품이 들어감, 1960

황건 «불타는 섬»: 단편집, 1960

육세중 «시련속에서»: 장편소설, 1960

한설야 «대동강», 1961

박운걸 «조국»: 장편소설, 1962

박운걸 «교환원»: 단편집, 1963

The former Russian Ambassador to DPRK (2006-2012) V.E. Sukhinin kindly provided us with some North Korean books from his personal library:

«철벽의 요새»: 시집, 1968

김재규 «전선 지구», 1969

정창운 «포성», 1971

김봉식 «적후의 수리개», 1973

#### **South Korean Literature:**

Translated into Russian:

황순원 «학», 1953

오상원 «유예», 1955

손창섭 «비 오는 날», 1956

하근찬 «수난 이대», 1957

박경리 «불신 시대», 1957

최인훈 «광장», 1960

박완서 «그 살벌했던 날의 할미꽃», 1977

박완서 «공항에서 만난 사람», 1978

박완서 «그 많던 싱아는 누가 다 먹었을까», 1992 (the book is based on real events from the life of the

writer and we can classify it as memoirs)

이호철 «남녘 사람, 북녘 사람», 1996

구효서 «소금 가마니», 2005

For widening the basis of the study I chose some more notable works by famous South Korean authors have not been translated into Russian yet.

김동리 «홍남 철수», 1955

황순원 «너와 나만의 시간», 1964

박완서 «부처님 근처», 1973

이문열 «사과와 다섯 병정», 1981

이동하 «과편», 1983

김연수 «뿌넝썰», 2005

And also I am going to pay attention to two books by Western authors. One of them named “Soldier” is the memoirs of General M. Ridgway, American professional military man who is famous for commanding the United Nations forces in Korea, another one is the memoirs of British soldier J. Tunstall “I fought in Korea”.

Objectively, the Korean War according to the military and political results can be divided into four stages:

I) The beginning of the war by the North Korean side, the onset of the Korean People’s Army (KPA), in which South Korean forces (ROKA) were close to being completely crashed. (June 25 – September 14, 1950)

II) The counter-attack of South Korean and UN forces under American command, resulting in a near victory over the North Koreans. (September 15 – October 24, 1950)

III) Over half a million Chinese people’s volunteers entering the war and launching several offensives that pushed the UN forces back to the 38th parallel. (October 25, 1950 – July 9, 1951)

IV) The armistice negotiations. This final and longest phase of the Korean War (more than 2/3 of the entire war) is characterized as a stalemate. Both sides made overtures towards peace, but continued to fight in order to gain ground and test the enemy’s resolve. (July 10, 1951 – July 27, 1953)

Literary life in DPRK was controlled by the ruling Party. From the very beginning of the War the concrete propagandistic tasks were set for the authors, and these tasks determined the specifics of North Korean war literature.

In his address to the Korean people on 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 1950 Kim Il Sung clearly points to the enemy – it is the United States. He refers to the government of Syngman Rhee as a “puppet” (in some paragraphs he mentions this word several times), use in relation to it such phrases as “anti-national, fascist puppet government of Syngman Rhee”<sup>3</sup>. He says that the people of South Korea are eager for reunification, suffering from exorbitant taxes.

The head of DPRK poses the question: “Will the Korean people become the colonial slaves, or fight for the preservation of freedom, independence and dignity?”<sup>4</sup> After the Chinese People’s Volunteers enter the war, Kim Il Sung increasingly asserts: “The aim of the Americans is to turn Korea into a staging ground for the invasion of Asia, and, above all, of the great China”<sup>5</sup>. So it is not about China’s help to Korea, but about Korea and China’s fight against a common enemy.

It is noteworthy that in the memoirs of the British soldier Tunstall we read about the contemptuous attitude of the Americans toward all Asians, Tunstall writes that the white people called the Chinese and Koreans “gooks”, considered them inferior beings<sup>6</sup>. The Americans did not feel solidarity with the allied South Korean forces. Even General Ridgway recognizes that: “One more question disturbed the troops and it was crucial. That question was simply this: Why do we fight at all? What the hell are we doing here in this country forgotten by God?”<sup>7</sup> Both Tunstall and Ridgway (albeit from different ideological positions) write mostly about the battles with the Chinese. Ridgway once mentions

<sup>3</sup> Ким Ир Сен. Великая освободительная война корейского народа за свободу и независимость. Пхеньян: Департамент культурной связи с заграницей министерства культуры и пропаганды КНДР, 1951. С.12

<sup>4</sup> Там же. С.89

<sup>5</sup> Там же. С.148

<sup>6</sup> Дж. Танстолл. Я воевал в Корее. Пер. с англ. М.: Военное изд-во министерства обороны Союза ССР, 1960.

<sup>7</sup> М. Риджуэй. Солдат. Пер. с англ. М.: Военное изд-во министерства обороны Союза ССР, 1958. С.227

that South Koreans were engaged for the construction of fortifications, once laments that the troops of Syngman Rhee on the front line acted ineffectively. Tunstall says that local people all over the country suffer from the actions of the UN forces.

The situation with the participation of the Chinese People's Volunteers in the Korean War was quite different. The North Koreans considered them brothers. Stories by Chinese soldiers about the war not only were published separately in large number but also were included in the collections along with the stories by North Koreans. (See, for example, the book "Stories of heroes of Korea" («조선 영웅들의 단편집»). As a result, we can say about the North Korean war literature the following:

- 1) The enemy is clearly identified. And the main enemy is the American imperialists. In the documentary story by Ahn Chan-guk "On the battlefield" from the book "Stories of heroes of Korea" we read: "The assistant commander of the reconnaissance platoon ordered in English to the enemy soldiers to lay down their arms and raise the hands up. The soldiers turned to the voice but did not understand the order. Then the scouts attacked and captured them both"<sup>8</sup>. It is unlikely that the problem was in bad pronunciation, why ever the scouts were sure that they were dealing with the Americans?  
Not only the word "enemy" («적»), but also such word combinations as "the imperialist (US) gangsters" («미제날강도들»), "imperialist invading army" («미제침략군»), "imperialist jackals" («미제승냥이들»), "imperialist mercenaries" («미제고용병들») are widely used in the texts. There are compatriots in the South which should be liberated, and there are foreign enemies. Nobody from the North Korean side does not want to see, that some of the enemies have the same Korean faces. The War is not presented as a civil one. Thus friendly Chinese volunteers do not spoil the overall picture.
- 2) The war is presented as something well-organized, as a chain of planned and thought-out military operations. In this context the figure of a man giving orders is often put forward: it can be the head of a particular military unit, or the Supreme Leader (Kim Il-Sung, as we know, even though he is not called by the name nowhere). The life of people not involved in hostilities is reduced to meeting and seeing off the soldiers. The storytellers (soldiers from different branches of the army) mostly talk about military operations providing a large number of technical details.
- 3) Here we often meet with abnormal grotesque, not typical in any way for the literature of the Soviet Union. In the "hot battles" North Korean soldiers "heroically" "pierce the enemies with bayonets" and leave their disgusting corpses "to rot in the field". Not only the life of the enemy has no any value, but also the life of the comrade or your own. It is interesting that Tunstall looking at the enemy from the outside says: "It was as if the Chinese wanted to prove that the death of one or another of them does not matter, for it is impossible to kill all the multi-million population of China"<sup>9</sup>.
- 4) Just in the context of this study as a particular feature of North Korean war literature can be called its invariability during the whole period of existence, a kind of rigidity.

The works have been placed in chronological order not accidentally. It is said that collective memory of certain historical events starts to form about 15 years after them (M. Halbwachs), because during 15 years individual non-system memory of the direct witnesses remains productive. On the whole, the works of Korean writers confirm this opinion.

In the works written by South Korean authors in the early post-war years, we find the confusion came from the fact that former friends suddenly became enemies («학»), and in unnecessary war with these friends-enemies people have to risk the most valuable thing they possess – life («유예»). There is a distinct sense of chaos, hopelessness («비 오는 날»), the invasion into the people's life of the force, similar to a natural disaster, unpredictable, uncontrollable and unjust («홍남 철수» or «수난 이대», where the husband of the heroine got killed during the bombing of Seoul by formally friendly to South Korea UN forces).

In 1960 there was published a landmark novel by Choi In-hun «광장», in which the author by the mouth of his character very frankly explains why and what happened to the Korean peninsula. He says that after the liberation of the peninsula from Japanese rule certain persons who understood the global

---

<sup>8</sup> Ан Чан Кук. На поле боя // Рассказы героев Кореи. Ред.-сост. полковник Н. Денисов. М.: Военное изд-во министерства обороны Союза ССР, 1956. С.23

<sup>9</sup> Дж. Танстолл. Я воевал в Корее. Пер. с англ. М.: Военное изд-во министерства обороны Союза ССР, 1960. С.113.

balance of power, trying to get influence and/or money, involved in their games compatriots, who mostly were not good at politics and did not have any clear opinion on political issues at all. Under the extreme circumstances people, out of fear, anger, weakness or impunity began to behave not in the most rational and noble way in this or that situations loosely connected to each other. That was the truth, but how could people live knowing it? It is noteworthy that the protagonist of the novel Lee Myong-jun cannot make a choice between the North and the South and, having an opportunity to go to a neutral country and imagining what kind of life is waiting for him abroad, commits suicide. We remember that the peak of the civil consciousness and activity of the educated people of the RK occurred in 1960. But soon this activity was pushed into the narrow confines of militaristic regime of Park Chung-hee.

In the memoirs written in 1992, many years after the war ended, Park Wan-suh tells about her brother who originally had leftist views but renounced them in order to get work and when the war started could not decide to which side to join. Finally he moved to the North not quite voluntarily. Their mother was not good at politics but she felt that leftist views could bring the son into trouble and asked to renounce them. Park Wan-suh writes: “She meddled in Brother’s ideological beliefs only because they were against the law, not because she had any real understanding of the Communist Party”<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, she cannot stand seeing the beloved son depressed.

The country needed a discourse which could contribute to the consolidation of society and would help people to cope with the trauma, redirect anger into constructive, not destructive channels (from the viewpoint of the Authorities). Z. Freud has described defense mechanisms, i.e. means of self-deception, which at the individual level are used unconsciously. While forming the historical and political discourse, that does not have the unconsciousness, such mechanisms as suppression of certain thoughts, dissociation, rationalization, projection of unacceptable feelings, etc. are used intentionally.

So the results are as follows:

- 1) The idea that from both sides the concrete not very good people should be blamed for the tragedy is gradually being suppressed. It is changed by very humane, but a little bit schizophrenic idea that everybody is guilty and no one in particular. For example, in the story of Park Wan-suh «부처님 근처» the heroine’s brother is killed by abstract rightists and the father – by abstract leftists. The word “enemy” is almost never used. The armies are called as they are: “Korean People’s Army” (조선 인민군) and “The National Army of the Republic of Korea” / “Republic of Korea Army” (대한민국 국군). Sometimes it even obstructs reading of the translated texts, requiring a modicum of historical knowledge, especially considering that in the European languages the words «조선» and «대한민국» are translated both as “Korea”.

The Americans are not mentioned very often due to the above-mentioned reasons, mostly as the owners of the warehouses where the food and other things necessary for the poor Koreans are stored. The attitude towards them is not definite.

The Chinese People’s Volunteers are almost not mentioned, although their number according to various estimates reached 2 million and their participation in the war determined its outcome (it is obvious for the head of the American military command General Ridgeway). There is the notable story by South Korean writer Kim Yeon-su «뿌녕취» written from the first person perspective of a former Chinese soldier, although in the spirit of usual views of South Koreans on the war. The Chinese soldier is shown as a man with natural human feelings who, as well as the Koreans, being a victim of the circumstances tries to survive.

- 2) War is associated with chaos, interruption of the natural course of events. It is not a coincidence that the theme of sexual violence is repeated here and there. Choi In-Hun’s hero commits it out of anger at himself and the situation, perhaps out of a desire to regain control over something or someone (as it usually happens, according to the psychopathologists). Later the violence is depicted almost as having some good aspects: it gives to a paralyzed woman an opportunity to give birth to a child («사과와 다섯 병정») and to old women – a chance to recollect about their physiological nature («그 살벌했던 날의 활미꽃») and to perform an act of bravery.

The theme of paralysis as a metaphor for lack of will, impossibility to change anything («비 오는 날», «사과와 다섯 병정») is quite sustainable, as well as the theme of injury («수난 이대»). We should take into consideration that a harmonious human body, with all the limbs, of course, in the traditional literature, particularly in *향가*, was associated with a harmonious society. In «과편» a

<sup>10</sup> Park Wan-suh. Who Ate Up All the Singa: An Autobiographical Novel / Tr. by Yu Young-nam, S.J. Epstein. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. P.365.

- shell splinter that cannot be removed becomes a symbol of unhealable trauma.
- 3) The theme of lust for life sometimes overshadowing moral considerations is the most actual. This lust for life as a personal experience is described in such works as «유예», «너와 나만의 시간» and through the rationalization it is being transformed into a universal excuse for everybody basing on the fact that at the front line and in the rear people were trying to survive. (In «공항에서 만난 사람» the author stresses many times that Koreans stealing this and that from American bases, cannot be regarded as thieves, in «소금 가마니» the heroine feeds with her soy cheese soldiers of both armies). It is noteworthy that there was a discussion on this topic between A.I. Solzhenitsyn and V.T. Shalamov: whether in reality, not in literature, an individual can be guided by moral considerations under the threat to life.

In conclusion we can say that South Korean writers in distinction from North Korean colleagues are not very enthusiastic about blaming the adversary or praising their army. They pay more attention to the evil nature of war as well as to physical and moral traumas caused by it. (An interesting exception is Lee Ho-cheol, extremely engaged and, like many defectors, emphasizing his loyalty to the new homeland.) Scrutinizing of the language of South and North Korean literature on the War gives us a reason to consider that South Korean discourse is quite viable in spite of some lack of the logic, which, in terms of psychology, can be explained by suppression of the most unwanted information. But North Korean discourse would not be bad if cleared from abovementioned grotesque.

Although in the North the literature of the divided nation is defined as «통일 문학» (unification literature), while in the South – as «분단 문학» (division literature), it seems that the mind of people in both parts of the country was oriented toward the reunification with the once lost brothers. It is a separate question: with what success? The consciousness of society is formed not only by the authorities and literature, but also by the life itself. According to statistics, nowadays only one-fifth of the population of the Republic of Korea thinks that the reunification is necessary, whatever it may cost. Nearly two-thirds of the population says that they should move along this way very cautiously.