

NIHILIST MANIFESTO

by WOO-YEOL YOON

Translated from the Korean by RIN JUNG

Facing the revolution, Joseon is groaning in fear and anxiety. In this fall, the Nihilist Party rises, demanding the direct action of bombing, arson, and assassination. Currently it is impossible for Joseon to advance even one step further under the cruel oppression of the vicious enemy surrounding us double and triple. Twenty million of our people stand at the final precipice of catastrophe, wandering and facing death in fear of this critical moment; the curse of our current situation grows bigger and bigger.

There is no hope, no ideal, no future, nothing for us today. Only the ruthless exploitation, abuse, slaughter, ridicule, and insult of the vicious enemy exist. There is only the savage dance of our enemy, crazed with ambition in the violent pandemonium of darkness, and if we fail to overcome this shuddering situation, Joseon will perish forever and our ideal of the greatest happiness of the greatest majority would be a sheer fantasy.¹

1. This is the same expression as used by Jeremy Bentham: "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" in *Fragment on Government* (1776). However, Yoon seems to use this expression meaning the anarchist ideal of an equal and liberated society for the people rather than Bentham's Utilitarianism.

The vicious enemy is destroying the slender existence of ruined Joseon through the means of politics, law, military, prison, and police every minute. How could you remain silent in this terrifying sight? We are all being slaughtered in such ways. We cannot continue to be slaughtered in this way. Light the beacon of revolution and draw the righteous sword of destruction. The time has come for the ones with the blood of indignation to rage and rise against.

2. In the original text the word is *순사 · 殉死*, which specifically means death by “junshi,” the medieval East Asian act of committing suicide or being killed for the death of their lord so they can be buried together. Here, Yoon uses it to mean practicing revolutionary acts involving violence by risking one’s life, for the sake of Korean people, which has a resonance with Huey P. Newton’s *Revolutionary Suicide*.

3. The phrase “snakes and scorpions” (*사갈 · 蛇蝎*) is a Korean idiom referring to the cruelty and viciousness of these venomous creatures.

In this miserable life with no significance or value, would it not be truly exhilarating to commit the suicide of rebellion² for the sake of our people? Declare war against the vicious enemy that oppresses us. Fundamentally destroy this current vicious and dreadful terror that denies our existence—any systems of power, including those of politics and law that are like snakes and scorpions.³ The only way to annihilate this terrifying sight is direct action. Revolution can never be brought about by language or text alone.

You must not be unprepared for bloodshed and martyrdom. If anyone believes in the possibility of legitimate revolution within the current system of order, he is a fool. We organized the Nihilist Party by pledging to the death, by promising to complete the Joseon

Revolution⁴ with violence; based on the actions of the Russian Nihilist Party during the Revolution,⁵ we explode with the curse, resentment, and anger we have accumulated for years.

Let us begin a battle of revenge against the vicious enemy that exploits, abuses, and slaughters us. Anyone who deeply feels and understands the abuse and sorrow that the Korean people have suffered will agree with the claims of us, the Nihilist Party. Those who oppose the proposition of the Nihilist Party are the enemies of the people. Our people only turn to methods like bombing, arson, and assassination as a last resort against the enemies. Those groaning under the vicious enemy's cruelty gather under the flag of the Nihilist Party. Destroy the devastating and ferocious enemy of ours at once. The final victory lies with us.

Long live the Nihilist Party, long live the Joseon Revolution!

January 1, 1926
Nihilist Party

Gyeongsangbuk-do Provincial Police Department,
Gyeongsangbuk-do Higher Police History, 1934

4. The phrase "Joseon Revolution" seems to refer to another anarchist manuscript "The Declaration of Joseon Revolution" 조선혁명선언 · 朝鮮革命宣言, 1923.

5. Sergey Nechaev's Nihilist Revolution

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: On January 4, 1926 in Korea, then under Japanese colonial occupation, copies of "Nihilist Manifesto" appeared at 177 different locations, including major newspaper offices and government offices nationwide. The text was written by a young anarchist and anti-colonialist named Woo-Yeol Yoon. Motivated by the April 1925 mass arrest and imprisonment of several Korean anarchists from a group called "Black Flag Federation" (흑기연맹 · 黑旗聯盟), Yoon authored the manifesto to rally Korean anarchists and advocate for violent resistance against the colonialism and fascism of Imperial Japan. The copies bore the postmarks of the Kyung-sung Post Office and were dated January 3rd, 1926 according to the historical record, but the identities of the individuals distributing the materials remain unknown. Yoon was the only one to be arrested and indicted for this incident, however several other anarchists, leftists, and intelligen-

tsia were also involved in the Nihilist Party and in the distribution of "Nihilist Manifesto."

Life under colonialism in the Korean peninsula was excruciating. The occupation lasted for thirty-five years—from 1910 to 1945—and employed various colonial tactics including military rule as well as policies of cultural assimilation. The Japanese military regularly massacred Koreans, even civilians and villagers, as a means of colonial control. The Kantō Massacre is a relatively well known incident, but various lesser known massacres, such as Suchon-li, Jaeam-li, Shinhan-chon, and Jiandao can also be found in the Korean historical record. Countless Koreans were forcibly drafted into the Japanese military, sent to concentration or industrial labor camps, forced into sexual servitude as "comfort women," or even subjected to biochemical experimentation at the notorious Unit 731. Imprisonment and persecution were common punishments during this era

for anyone involved in any national liberation or political struggles aiming to recover Korean identity. The Japanese colonialist regime was undoubtedly fascist and imperialist.

Under such dire and hopeless conditions, Koreans embraced a variety of strategies in their struggle to defend Korean identity and land. This was also a time wherein Korean intellectuals had opportunities to discover various theoretical and historical inspirations coming out of Russia and Europe. Despite the provenance of these ideas—from the imperial center in Japan to its colony on the Korean peninsula—the influx of new ideas nonetheless made a great impact on those involved in the struggle. Revolutionary thought from Russia was spreading to East Asian intellectuals and freedom fighters, including those in Korea. Mikhail Bakunin's anarchism and the nihilist movement were among those ideas. In particular, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by Narodnaya Vo-

lya served as one of many inspirations to militant fighters who were seeking radical tactics. Through the influx of new theories and praxis, Korean anarchists started to adopt violent actions as means for national liberation struggle. "Nihilist Manifesto" is evidence of the increasing radicalization among many Koreans engaged in this struggle.

"Nihilist Manifesto" is one of the few written records of the anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-fascist anarchist resistance in Korea during Japanese colonial occupation. Many leftist and anarchist struggles remain relatively unacknowledged by prevailing Korean historical narratives due to their violent and destructive nature. Importantly, a lot of erasure was due to the ideological divide of the peninsula which produced anti-leftist narratives. Anti-communist propaganda and sentiments, promoted in the wake of the Korean War, intentionally overlooked or minimized leftists' and anarchists' liberation efforts,

which were seen as contributing to communist or anti-state ideology. Therefore, little is known about this group or its people beyond this manifesto. Yet, the fact that this manuscript is preserved serves a valuable purpose—to finally acknowledge that these peoples and their works have left their mark on history.

The January 1926 “Nihilist Manifesto” incident introduced nihilism as a form of anarchist and anti-colonialist practice to Koreans. Although there are other extant Korean anti-fascist and anarchist records, this specific document stands out as the only in Korean history to explicitly use the word “nihilist.” It is also the only one to identify Russian nihilism and anarchism as its fundamental inspiration and influence. It wasn’t until this manifesto that Russian nihilism and Mikhail Bakunin’s theorization of anarchism were acknowledged as one of the main inspirations for violent and militant actions as a part of Korean, and other East Asian,

anti-colonialist struggles. As such, this translation of the manifesto will demonstrate for the first time for an Anglophone audience the history of “nihilism” and “anarcho-nihilism” within the Korean peninsula. Until now, the influence of such theories and praxes on anti-colonialist and anti-fascist actions in Korea and beyond have been counted among the unrecognized narratives of the global history.

A more literal translation of the title would be “The Declaration of Nihilist Party,” but I decided the word “manifesto” fits better given the nature of this document. The title of this text mirrors the Korean translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, rendered as “The Declaration of Communist Party.” The word “party” as it is being used here does not refer to a specific political “party,” but rather was then a term used commonly for any formal or informal political group or organization. The word Joseon (조선) in this

manuscript refers to Korea before the Japanese occupation. Technically Joseon did not exist at the time the text was written, as following Japanese occupation, the land and the people became a provincial part of Imperial Japan. However, many national liberation movements and their participants of course opposed this idea and fought to reclaim everything, including the name itself. Similarly, the word "enemy" reappears throughout the text, and is used to refer to Imperial Japan.

WOO-YEOL YOON 윤우열 · 尹又烈 (1904-1927) was a Korean anarchist and anti-colonialist from Daegu. Yoon was involved in various leftist leaning organizations for youth, workers, and farmers in areas of both Daegu and Seoul from the time he was a student. According to the official record of Korean Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, he was "immersed in reading books and publications on anarchism and socialism with the aims of overthrow-

ing imperialism and building a new society." Yoon was 22 years old when he wrote the Nihilist Manifesto in 1926. Imperial Japan arrested him in May of the same year, sentencing him to two years. Yoon was released after a year and two months, having received reduced prison time, but he was afflicted with pneumonia from poor prison conditions and the abusive treatment of prisoners. His illness worsened and Yoon died four months after his release. Later, the Korean government recognized his efforts in the service of national liberation, presenting him posthumously with the "National Medal" from Order of Merit for National Foundation in 2007.

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