

The Gwangju Uprising: Triumphs from Tragedy

Junior Individual Website

Word Count: 499

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When looking for a 2019 NHD topic, I had compiled and researched 60+ historical topics, however, none had interested me as much as the Gwangju Uprising. I discovered this topic after watching *The Taxi Driver*, a film that follows a taxi driver transporting foreign correspondents into Gwangju. I decided to choose this historical topic because it addresses a pivotal part of Korean democracy and society that I am passionate about and was unbeknownst to me.

My most valued secondary sources were books that I had checked out from the Iowa State University Parks Library and “Asia’s Unknown Uprisings: South Korean Social Movements in the 20th Century” given to me by George Katsiaficas. In regards to primary sources, originally I struggled to find any. The Korean government heavily censored Korean media from releasing news stories regarding the Gwangju Uprising. Only recently has Moon Jae-in, the president of South Korea, called a reinvestigation into the Gwangju Uprising. The author of “The Gwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age”, Lee Jae-eui was arrested for publishing his book. His book, was a useful primary source I used to understand the uprising day by day.

Early on, I realized I would need to make connections in order to further my research. I contacted the May 18 Memorial Foundation for primary sources and they graciously sent me documentaries containing footage of the Citizens Army and the military crackdown on May 27. I wrote email communications to Matt VanVolkenburg, a researcher and commentator on the Gwangju Uprising who directed me toward many booklets, pamphlets, and journal articles. I interviewed George Katsiaficas over Skype, the author of *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings*. I was also given the opportunity to interview Don Kirk, a foreign reporter in Seoul during the uprising and

Kim Newton, a photographer during South Korea's Democratic Movement, who gave me photos from his "South Korean Democracy: 1987" and "South Korean Impeachment: 2017" gallery.

I chose a website because of its ability to display the extraordinary images and footage I was collecting. I was also accustomed to using Weebly after creating an NHD website last year. I enjoyed the flexibility the website provided; I could easily send the link to fellow classmates, teachers, or the people I interviewed in order to receive feedback and authenticate my project.

The Gwangju Uprising truly fits this year's theme of triumph and tragedy, because, despite the tragic deaths and neglect of human rights, the uprising prompted direct elections in 1987 and encourage political accountability in South Korea. The Gwangju Uprising was triumphant in capturing the perseverance and fostering the community of South Korea. Beyond that, the morale of the protestors is essential to maintaining a healthy democracy in the U.S. and South Korea, today.

On a personal note, watching the footage with my mother was a powerful experience. We saw mothers cry over their dead sons and gunshots coming seemingly from nowhere, and yet the protestors continued to fight for democracy until it was granted to them.