



South Korea's April Revolution through the Lens of West Germany

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Abstract

This article investigates how the 1960 April Revolution in South Korea was reflected in the contemporary West German press and the diplomatic cables to Bonn. While in general the topic of the April Revolution is well documented and well researched, how events regarding the student movement were evaluated and depicted in Germany's media and politics has not yet been subject to academic scrutiny despite the intriguing parallels between the two countries' geopolitical dilemma that existed during the Cold War. By analyzing historical sources such as media reports, government-issued publications, and diplomatic cables retrieved from the Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office, the present article explores the following three research questions to illuminate yet another facet of the historic student movement. First, how did the German press and diplomatic corps evaluate President Rhee Syngman's rule of South Korea? Second, how did they assess the significance of the student movement? Third, how did they explain the reasons for the uprising and project its effects?

Keywords: Cold War, student movement, revolution, democracy, East Asia, foreign press, diplomatic wire

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Introduction

The April Revolution¹ of 60 years ago was the cornerstone of South Korea's democracy and democratization movements. The Republic of Korea (henceforth, South Korea or Korea) became a modern liberal democratic state after the end of World War II and as a result of the ensuing foundation of the republic under the influence of the USA in 1948. Subsequently, its people—having just been liberated from four decades of Japanese oppression—suffered under the harsh autocracy of President Rhee Syngman, fueled by stern anticommunism. In Rhee's twelfth year in office, after attempting to illegally prolong his reign for the third time, the people finally stood up against the autocratic regime and demanded the liberal democracy guaranteed by the Constitution and preached by the government as if it were a vaccination against communism. Ultimately, strongman Rhee was toppled. After he resigned and went into exile, a new government was elected democratically. In other words, the Korean people demanded and obtained democratization by their own volition and hands. Thus, for the first time, they exercised their sovereignty as demos. In addition, this movement occurred at the time and at the forefront of the Cold War, when in many other places of the so-called Third World the authoritarian reverse wave (Huntington 1991) was under way. The April Revolution was so significant to the Korean nation's democratization movement that its spirit was even adopted by the first lines of the preamble of the Constitution, where the most fundamental principles are laid down.²

Following this tradition, in early 2017, at the dawn of the presidential

1. There are several Korean terms used for the historical events that the English literature most often dubs the April Revolution, such as *4.19 hyeongmyeong* (April 19 Revolution), *4.19 undong* (April 19 Movement), *4.19 minju hyeongmyeong* (April 19 Democratic Revolution), and *4.19 uigeo* (April 19 Uprising).

2. In 1963, the April Revolution was mentioned for the first time when part of the Constitution's preamble read: "...building a new democratic republic based on the ideas of the April 19 Uprising (*4.19 uigeo*) and the May 16 Revolution (*5.16 hyeongmyeong*).” The April Movement is missing only from the Constitution of 1980, after military officer Chun Doo-hwan staged yet another military coup.

election run-up, candidate Moon Jae-in pledged to add candlelight demonstrations—he calls them the candlelight revolution—that ultimately led to toppling corrupt President Park Geun-hye to the new Constitution’s preamble (Bak and Bak 2017).³ While the constitutional reform eventually failed, the candlelight movement’s important contribution to democracy was appreciated by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which awarded the demonstrators its Human Rights Prize in late 2017. The whole world was stunned by the Korean people’s peaceful and relentless demonstrations in the name of justice and democracy, but it is not surprising that it was a German entity that valued the Korean people’s resistance to authoritarianism when “authoritarianism was on the rise everywhere in the world” (Ock 2017). German-Korean relations reach far back to the late 19th century and have been amicable throughout. Germany’s interest in the peninsula became significantly stronger after World War II when as US protégés both countries were divided and became states at the frontlines of the new bipolar world order. This is why the war in Korea was a horrifying scenario for Germany, for it feared something similar due to the growing threats from the Eastern bloc.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores how the April Revolution was reflected in the German press and diplomatic correspondence. The April Revolution is a well-researched topic (see for example, Kim and Kim [1964]; Stone [1974]; S. Han [1980]; Q. Kim [1996]; Im [2014]; W. Yang [2005]; S. Yang [2015]; Jung [2015]; Katsiaficas [2016]; Bak [2016]; and C. Kim [2017]), and even includes studies addressing the positions and perspectives of domestic and overseas media reports on the subject (Yun 1993). How the events around the April Revolution have been reflected in the German press and politics, however, has not yet been subject to academic investigation despite the intriguing parallels between the two countries’ geopolitical dilemma that existed at that time. To alleviate this desideratum, the present article explores answers to the following three research questions: How did the German press and diplomatic corps evaluate President Rhee Syngman’s rule of South Korea? How did they assess the significance of the student movement? How did they explain the reasons for the uprising, and how

3. This idea was earlier floated by the Democratic Party (Jo 2017).

did they project its effects? By answering these questions, the investigation intends to widen our perspective on how the April Revolution was perceived internationally in the context of the country's history of having been denied international recognition at crucial junctures in its development as a result of foreign countries' press and politicians' disinterest. One of the most notable instances in this respect occurred in 1919, when after the First March Independence Movement representatives of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea tried in vain to garner public support and political help from the international community, but were rebuffed and not allowed to join the Paris Peace Conference (Savage 1996, 191–199).⁴

Consequently, this article resorts to an analysis of historical sources such as media reports, government-issued publications, minutes of plenary proceedings of the Bundestag, and diplomatic cables retrieved from the Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office. The time span of the investigation ranges from the mid-1950s to late 1960. Besides examining evaluations and interpretations in such press organs as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Die Zeit* (ZEIT), and *Der Spiegel* (SPIEGEL) and the diplomatic corps regarding the activities, actors, and occurrences of the immediate context of the April Revolution, the analysis also includes the wider context of the Rhee government in the First Republic before—and, briefly, developments in the aftermath of—the uprising.

Background of the April Revolution

Course of Events

The April Revolution was a movement mainly initiated by high school and university students against the authoritarian rule of President Rhee

4. Twelve years earlier, in 1907, secret emissaries sent by Korea's Emperor Gojong to the Hague Peace Conference to support the cause of independence were repudiated as a result of powerful states as well as the press that was "generally favorable to Japan" (Schlichtmann 2003, 388–389). In 1943, at the Cairo Conference, Korea was in principle recognized as a nation to be granted independence, however, (in)famously "in due course" only.

Syngman and for democratic freedom during the First Republic (1948–1960). The movement began when, on February 28, 1960, authorities tried to inhibit students of Gyeongbuk High School from participating in the election campaign of the oppositional Democratic Party (Minjudang) in the city of Daegu. The students staged a protest against the state control of students and the Rhee administration's dictatorial politics and corruption in general. The authorities put down the demonstration violently, only sparking more resistance and protest by students all over the country. The extreme manipulation of the vice presidential election on March 15⁵ led to protests by the people, most strongly in the city of Masan. Again, the police violently suppressed the demonstrations, and again, the people were outraged, finally leading to the resignation of the Minister of the Interior Choe In-kyu. However, on April 11, the dead body of 16-year-old middle-school student Kim Ju-yeol was found floating in the sea near Masan with a tear gas cartridge in his eye. Again, a strong nation-wide protest arose. With mass demonstrations by high-school students in Seoul, on April 18, the spark spilled over to college and university students in the capital. A day later, on April 19, around 1,000 demonstrators were shot dead by the police. The government proclaimed martial law, and demonstrations receded, only to spring up again, finally prompting Vice President Chang Myon to resign from his post on April 23 in protest of the election rigging, the atrocities against demonstrators, and the authoritarian methods of the Rhee administration at large. Two days later, on April 25, about 400 professors from almost 30 universities nationwide stepped in and showed their sympathy with the students and their antipathy, protesting the regime by staging demonstrations. This triggered participation in the protests by people from all walks of life, and on April 26, about 30,000 citizens protested in front of the presidential palace. President Rhee resigned the same day, which brought the First Republic to an end and, thus, provided the opportunity for democratization.

5. Manipulations included forcing groups of three or five persons to reveal their vote choices, having thugs hired by the ruling party eject observers from the opposition from the polling stations, replacing ballot boxes, and injecting votes in favor of the ruling party.

Causes

Besides the interaction between repressive state apparatuses and popular protests that ultimately culminated in the demise of the Rhee regime, there are more profound causes of the course of action that belong to the wider domestic and international context of the time. The main driver of the protest in the first place was the increasingly autocratic ruling style of the Rhee administration. After the initially wide support of Rhee Syngman by large portions of the public, the political elites, and especially, his parliamentary backing, began to disintegrate rapidly only two years into Rhee's first term. This prompted Rhee in 1952 to change the Constitution to hold popular presidential elections from then on (instead of indirect elections by the National Assembly) to make his re-election possible. When this amendment attempt was met with strong opposition in the National Assembly, the government proclaimed martial law, used force to remove opposing deputies, and pushed through the reform. Another two years later, in 1954, the government enforced an additional constitutional amendment in parliament, which removed the restriction on the president to two terms and, thus, provided the conditions for incumbency for life. However, the ruling party garnered only 135 votes, one vote short of the necessary majority in parliament. This prompted them to make the obviously false claim that, arithmetically, two-thirds of the total 203 deputies amounted to 135.33, which, rounded off, tallied with the 135 affirmative votes the amendment proposal received. This had the effect that, in 1955, the opposition parties closed ranks and established a unified opposition party, the Democratic Party, which succeeded in the regional elections of 1956 as well as at the general elections two years later in 1958 to obtain a much larger proportion of offices. In other words, the pressure against the autocratic regime within the arena of institutionalized politics was growing significantly stronger. The regime constantly struggled to retain its power and, as a countermeasure, resorted to prohibiting the Progressive Party (Jinbodang) in 1958, sentencing presidential candidate Jo Bongam to death, toughening the National Security Law (Gukga boanbeop), deforming the Self-Government Act (Jibang jachibeop) in 1959, and closing down the

oppositional news outlet *Kyunghyang sinmun* in 1960.

A crucial reason for the people no longer unconditionally supporting their president was that the ruling bloc—the president, the ruling Liberal Party (Jayudang), the police, the military, and the USA—increasingly contradicted themselves by officially propagating liberal democracy and practicing aggressive anticommunism (see Im [2014, 419]). In other words, under the name of liberal democracy, critical forces were suppressed by sacrificing freedom, equality, freedom of the press, and the rule of law to anticommunism. This ever-wider discrepancy between official claims and actual activities developed into a legitimacy crisis for the ruling bloc and, thus, provided a powerful vantage point on the side of the opposition—students, intellectuals, media, oppositional political parties, and the people—for challenging its hegemony. The initial protest by Gyeongbuk High School students was prompted by the fact that, since 1949, students had been organized into the National Student Defense Corps (Hakdo hogukdan), and after the end of the Korean War, the authorities frequently mobilized students for public marches or other mass events. Toward the end of the 1950s, students became weary of being instrumentalized by the government and started to act. High school and university students enjoyed a high-standard modern education largely influenced by the US and, thus, strongly focused on the principles of liberal democracy (see, for example, C. Kim [2017, 137–174]). Therefore, to them, the gap between the regime's official claims and its actual deeds looked particularly wide. The powerful basis for their challenge of the regime was the country's Constitution, which—at least on paper—remained strongly liberal democratic despite the changes by the regime.

In the immediate course of action regarding the developing movement, the US government and Korean military broke ranks from the ruling bloc, crucially weakening its hegemony (see Im [2014, 419–420]). The US threatened the Rhee regime with withdrawing its support if Rhee did not resign. For the US, South Korea was strategically highly important as a bulwark against communism at the forefront of the Cold War in East Asia, comparable to West Germany in Europe. Hence, up to this point, the US government had been supporting Rhee's regime, despite its autocratic tendencies. Simultaneously, the US had always been worried by Rhee's

extreme character and his constantly propagated plan of unifying the peninsula using military force. Now that most of the intellectual elite and vast portions of general society had finally showed their discontent with the strongman, the US saw the necessity of Rhee's resignation to prevent the dangerous destabilization of their bulwark. The Korean military declared its neutrality. Put differently, the strong institutional opposition, the oppositional bloc, and the crumbling of the central pillars of the ruling bloc provided the general populace with sufficient conditions to join the struggle against the authoritarian regime without too much danger of harm. Another favorable development for weakening the regime's hegemony was the faltering world economy at the end of the 1950s, which led the US to decrease its crucial aid to Korea. For the Rhee regime was largely based on patrimonialism, and financial injections from the United States represented the most fundamental source of power for the leadership. In addition, because of a growing working class and/or urban poor that suffered from economic decline most directly, there was a sufficient basis in the populace for political mobilization. The many overeducated students who suffered increasingly from unemployment added their opposition to the Janus-faced regime's propaganda.

Significance

In many other countries of the so-called Third World around 1960, it was a time of democratic backlash in the form of military coups, but through its early occurrence (Jung 2015, 275–276), the April Revolution postponed in Korea the Second Reverse Wave (Huntington 1991, 18) that was rampant elsewhere during this period. Put differently, the April Revolution preempted the quasi-ordained military coup—at least for the moment. This was important because, in the short interlude of 12 months, the seeds of the sovereign people were still sown in the form of ideational concepts and firsthand empirical experience (Im 2014, 408). This had the effect of a democratic vaccination of Korea's people that became important for the subsequent democratization movements. It could not be ignored by succeeding dictatorships either, thus providing yet another vantage point of the Constitution on which the people could base their demands. This

opened a space for various societal forces to politically mobilize and initiate their potential as political forces, such as students, workers, and civil society (Y. Kim 2015; Jung 2015, 276–278). It is particularly remarkable that, in Korea's first democratic revolution, its people at this point in time (i.e., the Cold War) and at this place (i.e., the forefront of ideological polarization in the East) stood up against their stern anticommunist leader who was the protégé of the world power, the USA—and that they in fact succeeded (Im 2014, 407). A crucial factor was that this was a “revolution from the side” (Choe 1960a; 1960b). Neither of the two major political camps nor the masses but a third force—the students—initiated the movement. In so doing, they mitigated potential friction, which could have had explosive effects for the delicate situation of the country.

Korea and Germany

The history of German-Korean relations reaches back to the late 19th century, if not earlier (Lee and Mosler 2018). One of the most intense interlinkages in the relationship between the two countries, however, began after World War II and the liberation of Korea. Nazi Germany had been a strong ally of the Japanese Empire, which occupied the Korean Peninsula for 35 years, and thus was a partner in crime. However, West Germany swiftly became a likeable partner again once liberated from the Nazis and pressed by the Western Allied forces, foremost the United States, to reinstate liberal democracy. In 1951, Korea approached its old friend to formally reestablish relations (J. Han 1991, 109). The two countries now shared a fundamental commonality—being divided and standing at the forefront of the new bipolar order. Of course, there were still plenty of differences, such as their distinct historical backgrounds, immediate geopolitical contexts, and relationship to their common protégé, the USA. Nonetheless, the major structural parallels were undeniable, which in the ensuing developments led to peculiar reciprocities between the two strange bedfellows—one who was the perpetrator, divided because of her crimes (against humanity), and the other, an historical victim and divided because it had once more been

made a victim. Shortly after the end of the war, the Cold War found its way into the new post-war world. While the Western allies disarmed Western Germany, the Soviet Union propped up Eastern Germany with special police troops. The first major crisis manifested itself in the Berlin Blockade (1948–1949), when the Soviet Union cut off West Berlin from West Germany to press the Western allies to drop their currency policy. Not only the people in West Berlin, but also those in Western Germany were stunned by the aggressive posture of their new neighbors and were quickly reminded of the brutal war that had just recently ended and which might be reignited by the frictions over Berlin or Germany, considering it stood at the forefront of a Cold War that was growing hotter by the day.

Against this backdrop, it is not difficult to understand the shock and awe among the West German people as well as the Western allies when, in 1950, war broke out on the Korean Peninsula—Germany's Cold War twin in the East. This prompted discussions in West Germany on rearmament, a taboo topic after the war, but now back on the table out of fears Germany could suffer the same aggression (Foerster 2013; Kleßmann and Stöver 2008; Mai 1977; Schubert 1972, 22). Up until then, what concerned the West German people most was the economy (i.e., prosperity), not so much security, and the High Commission for Occupied Germany (HICOG) was actively pursuing material as well as legal disarmament and the demilitarization of the country. However, the Korean War provided a decisive impetus for considering Germany a key building block in the Truman Doctrine of containment. The United States and parts of the German press were most vividly advocating the rearmament of West Germany and proposed building a West German army to be integrated into the European armed forces, while France and Great Britain were strongly skeptical. Meanwhile, the West German political elites took a moderate position and, instead of rearmament, pledged to build a German police force as a compromise. “May I remind you,” three years later security adviser to the German government Theodor Blank wrote as a guest contributor to the British newspaper *The Star*, “that the idea of Germany's rearmament did not come from the Germans ... [i]t came from the Western allies after the outbreak of the Korean War” (BULLETIN 1954, 421).

Stalin's sudden proposal in his "March Note" of 1952 to reunify Germany under the condition of its neutrality instead of integrating West Germany with the Western military alliance rather accelerated the rearmament initiative, beginning with the Treaty of Paris for establishing the European Defense Community (EDC), which took effect in July 1952 (Schubert 1972, 37). Three years later, based on a new round of Paris treaties, the occupation of West Germany was terminated. It was granted full sovereignty, an independent armed forces (Bundeswehr) was built, and West Germany became a member of NATO. Not only Germany's sovereignty and rearmament, but also West Germany's economy benefited from the Korean War. The literature speaks of a downright Korean boom that crucially boosted the post-war West German economy (Abelshauser 1979, 240–245; Berger 2012; Giersch et al. 1995, 62; Kleinert 2019, 90). The Korean War triggered a worldwide surge in demand for industrial goods, raw material, and capital. West Germany's industrial sector had maintained its production capacities, because it had been prevented by the Western allies from producing armaments and related goods. Consequently, it was ready to answer this call and seized the opportunity, which also positively stimulated the domestic economy.⁶ Leaving aside to what extent the Korean War was responsible for Germany's economic *miracle on the Rhine*, Germany experienced strong economic growth shortly after the Korean War. Accordingly, Germany could support Korea with a hospital and other donations during the 1950s. In the 1960s, Germany provided larger loans to Korea that were important for Korea's economic *miracle on the Han*. These loans were backed by the salaries of hundreds of Korean nurses and mineworkers who had gone to Germany to work in hospitals and mines (Lee and Mosler 2018, 37).

Thus, this close and amicable relationship between the two countries goes back through a long, mostly positive joint history, but was also attributable to a common denominator, that is, their main ally the USA and the ideology of anticommunism. For West Germany, the Berlin Crisis

6. While most of the scholarship follows this line of argumentation, some doubt the explanation and argue against it (Temin 1995).

(1958–1961), when the Soviet Union demanded the withdrawal of all armed forces from Berlin, a demand strongly rejected by the Western Allies, was yet another precarious situation that reminded all involved parties in the West of the potential threat from the Eastern Bloc. The turn from the 1950s to the 1960s in general was a delicate time in the development of the Cold War and included various upheavals in the bipolar world order. It is at this very decade's turn that, in South Korea, the people whose ideals were based on liberal democratic principles through the April Revolution toppled their autocratic but anticommunist regime.

The Rhee Syngman Government: Torn Between Guaranteeing an Anticommunist bulwark and Undermining Liberal Democracy

Against the backdrop of the time and its circumstances, this first section addresses the question of how President Rhee Syngman's South Korea looked like from West Germany's perspective. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's foreign policy during the 1950s and early 1960s was characterized by the pursuit of German unification, integration with the West (USA), and strong anticommunism, which naturally manifests itself in the position of the Federal Foreign Office (hereafter FFO; Creuzberger and Hoffmann 2014, 6; Lüdicke 2014, 107). In one of the FFO's cables to its embassy in Seoul, for example, it emphasizes, "Korea deserves our particular attention because it is similar to Germany, a target of the expansionism of the Soviet-Chinese bloc located at the front line" and instructs the ambassador to specially focus on observing possible "subversive communist activities" in general "in relation to the issue of unification of Korea" and on "developments in communist North Korea as a seismograph for the Soviet-Chinese relationship" (FFO 050960).⁷ Among the West German diplomatic corps in Seoul there seemed to be no doubt, however, that South Korea displayed one of the most "determined anticommunist postures" in Asia (FFO 260657),

7. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the German are my own. Here and following, the numerical sequence is such that 050960 designates September 5, 1960.

if not an “unrivalled resistance against communism” (FFO 180360), which was seen as a “gratifying avowal to the free world” (FFO 260657). In a following memo, the FFO repeated the emphasis on unification policy issues and explicitly stated, “[T]he elimination of the division of Germany is one of the main aims of the government’s foreign policy” (FFO 060960). Accordingly, the FFO instructed the ambassador to “do everything in your powers to promote in Korea sympathy for the fate of the German nation and the interest in its desire for unification in freedom,” while emphasizing not to overdo it, because “it would not be in our interest, if the German question was to be lumped together with other divided countries into one pot so to speak” (FFO 060960). In other words, the German position was to defend its interests, including the major task of unification in particular, in countries such as South Korea, which were in a similar situation. Simultaneously, it would reject being likened too much to Korea because conditions were different between the two countries. One of the differences the FFO was implicitly cautioning against was Korea’s varying state of development regarding democracy, the economy, and society.

Regarding accounts of President Rhee’s unification policy, the diplomatic corps straightforwardly depicts its skepticism. Richard Hertz, German ambassador to South Korea, describes Rhee as a “political romanticist” who is “unrealistic” and “not objective” because he is a “prisoner of a mentality that, say, parallels the Mazzinian nationalism of the mid-19th century” and often resorts to the “temperamental opinion expression” of a “militant tone” (FFO 030158). He sees a problem in his “impatience” and in him “propagating violent solutions” for the questions of unification (FFO 230158). Similarly, members of Rhee’s government are reported to be propagating a hot war. Emphasizing parallels between the two countries, they are reported to believe that Germany would be receptive to the forceful unification of the Korean Peninsula, which was strongly rejected by the ambassador as rooted in a “pre-nuclear mentality” (FFO 230158). In this regard, Rhee is attested to be “rigidly pursuing an uncreative policy,” which has also led to, among younger generations “who search for realistic future visions,” a “loss of confidence in the government due to the [policies] radicalism” (FFO 230158).

Interestingly, a similar critical assessment was echoed in Germany by the opposition towards Chancellor Adenauer's unification policy. In heated debates in the Bundestag, Rhee Syngman was often used as a bad example for how to deal with the somewhat similar challenges in Germany, particularly concerning the issue of unification. Just two weeks before the Korean War broke out, during a parliamentary debate about the reform of the penal code, KPD⁸ Deputy Müller accused Chancellor Adenauer and his government of preparing a war to forcefully integrate East Germany into the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and, therefore, was attempting to strengthen the penal code into a "terror law" (BT-Prot. 1/269, 13268 B). Müller claims that, in "Germany, Adenauer has taken the same role that was taken by a certain Syngman Rhee in Korea, a henchman of the American war party" (BT-Prot. 1/269, 13268 C).⁹ Likewise, a year later, another KPD Deputy, Max Reimann, accused Adenauer of deliberately frustrating international efforts in the form of the Four Power Conference to find a peaceful and consensual solution to the unification issue and warned that these attempts would fail, just as the "thwarting attempts by Syngman Rhee against the establishment of a cease fire agreement in Korea failed" (BT-Prot. 1/278, 13903 D). However, not only the KPD, but also SPD¹⁰ Deputy Fritz Erler used this comparison to attack the government's unification policy in the international context, because Adenauer's foreign policy allegedly focused too much on a provocative rearmament and the introduction of military conscription. "We should," Erler stated, "remind ourselves as a warning that in the last decade there have already been more of these kind of developments in the world beginning with Chiang Kai-shek to Bảo Đại to Syngman Rhee" (BT-Prot. 2/159, 8775 C). SPD Deputy Heinemann repeated this argument years later, when he criticized Chancellor Adenauer's policies by mentioning the ban on the Progressive Party (Jinbodang) in South Korea in 1958 "because it pursued a p e a c e f u l unification policy,

8. Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany).

9. This trope is repeated by KPD Deputy Heinz Renner (BT-Prot. 1/275, 13652 B) and KPD Deputy Walter Fisch (BT-Prot. 1/275, 13659 B) a week later.

10. Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social-Democratic Party of Germany).

but the aim of Syngman Rhee is unification by force, through war” (BT-Prot. 3/9, 401 C; emphasis in original). During the same debate, Chancellor Adenauer was arguing for preparing against a possible threat from the Soviet Union by establishing a conscription army, and against the critique from the opposition that this might provoke other countries around Germany, when SPD Deputy Helmut Schmidt interrupted him and shouted he was the “Syngman Rhee from Bonn!” (BT-Prot. 2/159, 8783 C).

Returning to the real Rhee, neither German press accounts nor German diplomats’ reports missed noting South Korean democracy was weakly developed and President Rhee was a peculiar autocrat. Journalists depicted Rhee Syngman as “stubborn” (FAZ 020560), “a terrible leather-faced geriatric” (SPIEGEL 040560), and a “stern dictator” (ZEIT 290460), who with his “one-man government” (FAZ 290460) put his “personal ambitions above the cause of freedom” (ZEIT 220460). The press explained that, “when he couldn’t get ahead any further by democratic methods, he tried increasingly with dictatorial ones” (FAZ 020560; ZEIT 130560), which eventually led to a “police regime” that is “not much more than a façade democracy” (FAZ 290460). In other words, “a democratic legal order does not exist anymore,” because Rhee “killed it with his own hands while pretending to defending it against communism” (ZEIT 220460). Likewise, the diplomatic corps was critical in its assessment of Rhee’s rule when it reported how in 1958, the “President and his party in parliament railroaded the National Security Law [reform bill], which provides the government with strong police power” and pointed out that this law “allows measures to suppress the opposition” (FFO 170359). Shortly afterwards, an embassy cable reports that the authorities shut down the oppositional leaning newspaper *Kyunghyang sinmun* as a “crass application of undemocratic methods to suppress the political opponent” (FFO 210559). Eventually, in August 1959, the National Security Law was reported to have been “misused for press censorship” and that Rhee, “out of political reasons,” did not grant amnesty to his most fierce opponent Jo Bongam, whose death sentence as a consequence was carried out (FFO 040859). Military attaché Günther Poser explained in one of his reports that the “almost unlimited autocracy and party sway developed since 1958” and that this “regime increasingly used,

partly under the pretext of security against communist infiltration, all means to maintain its decreasing reputation among the citizenry” (FFO 270460).¹¹

Meanwhile, remarkably, embassy cables often tend to qualify these critical assessments by quoting inevitable circumstances and then speak of the “so-called ‘dictatorship’ of Syngman Rhee” (FFO 260657); claim that the press is exaggerating with the “cliché of ‘the evil dictator’” (FFO 040560); that it is “not a tyranny” (FFO 130460); and that “here press freedom is better than in Turkey” (FFO 180360). Other qualifying explanations even go so far as to argue that Rhee Syngman’s wife had too much and too negative an influence on personnel decisions, which led to the government’s degeneration (FFO 040560) and that the Rhee Syngman system builds on “the traditional Confucian notions of a hereditary authority as in Prussia a hundred years ago where the same, almost blind respect of its inhabitants vis-à-vis the monarchy existed, which is *mutatis mutandis* alive in Korea” (FFO 130460). The ambassador seemed to share Korea’s leadership assessment that the “importance and meaning of Korea’s (very strong anticommunist posture) is more valuable than being socially acceptable [*salonfähig*]” (FFO 180360). He later writes that, “of course the government did a bad job, but to expect to have a working bulwark against communism and a perfect democracy at the same time is as if one wants to eat the cake, and keeping it at the same time. If one wants to prevent communism from spreading in Asia, the taboos of the armchair-democracy must suffer” (FFO 210460).

Local and Global Significance of Student Protesters

Against the backdrop of the German press and diplomatic corps’ ambivalent views on Rhee Syngman’s regime, this section examines how they assessed the significance of the student movement that turned against the autocrat. Frequent front-page reportage by German newspapers on developments in Korea begin to surface after the rigged presidential election on March 15, 1960. The newspaper reportage in its initial stage is largely based on reports

11. Military attaché Günter Poser, stationed in Tokyo, had visited Seoul in late April 1960.

of news agencies such as the Associated Press (AP), Deutsche Presseagentur (dpa), or United Press International (UPI), which are mostly brief and limit themselves to objectively describing the course of events and thus lacking more explicit evaluations or opinions. They often contain phrases such as “it is claimed that,” “allegedly,” and “it is suggested that” something happened. Hence, readers at this juncture might have been unclear why students took to the streets, other than their “claims” that the election was heavily manipulated. It is difficult, then, for the reader to grasp whether the students rightly took to the streets or whether the government was falsely alleged to have rigged the elections. As time passes, however, media reports become more explicit and dramatic. In the beginning, media reports speak simply of “demonstrations in Masan” (FAZ 130460), later this changes to “popular movement” (FAZ 190460), and finally develops into a situation “on the brink of civil war” (FAZ 200460). After the climax of April 19, newspaper reportage becomes more detailed and more analytical, and it begins to put the uprising into perspective, because now in-house journalists or foreign correspondents start to dominate coverage. Interest in the events at the far end of the Eurasian continent by the German media was growing because “less forgetful contemporaries will remember the days when the name of this so far away country evoked concern and fear whether one would become witness to the prelude of a terrifying Third World War” (FAZ 200460). Similarly, military attaché Günther Poser pointed out that the April Revolution had a “very great general meaning at the present time of the conflict between East and West” (FFO 270460) and stressed that its “meaning and its consequences are of importance for us, too” (FFO 210660). The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* explained to its readers that students initiated the uprising, which drew in large parts of society (FAZ 020560) and succinctly summarized the achievements of the student movement as follows:

The communist conspirers who constantly attempted to shake South Korea’s stability were not able to bring him [Rhee] down. [...] The parliament, too, was unable to control Syngman Rhee; [...] Most of all the students took to the streets. [...] His American allies pushed the falling [Rhee] to his bitter end. (FAZ 290460)

The weekly *Die Zeit* depicts the same events as a “rebellion by the students, by the pupils, by the whole people that swept away the government and all of their prohibitions” (ZEIT 290460). Other outlets contend that the students in Korea took to the streets because “they deemed favorable the climate of world politics” and that the South Koreans “availed themselves of their right to national self-determination” (BLAETTER 1960).

Reportage by the diplomatic corps in Seoul, of course, partly could draw on richer sources including direct observation (the “embassy is located right above the plaza in front of the city hall, which served as a gathering point for the demonstrations” [FFO 210460]), and thus were more detailed and nuanced and could lend more space to analysis than media reports. Military attaché Poser reported to the FFO in a long memo that the April Revolution was started by the youth who in a “spontaneous expression of their will stood up and demanded the establishment of a free basic order” and that they succeeded in bringing down Rhee shortly afterwards “due to their relentless and sacrificing efforts” and their “desire for freedom and self-sacrifice opened up possibilities for a basic order suitable to a more stable system” (FFO 280460). This affirming and supporting evaluation of the students is echoed by Ambassador Hertz, who emphasized the “responsible behavior of the idealistic youth” by explaining that, “thanks to the courage, esprit de corps, and idealism shown by the youth [...], the overall impression of the crisis is positive” (FFO 270460).

When during the second wave of demonstrations participants consisted of mostly non-academic hooligans with partly dangerous appearance, it was the students who made every effort to restore order in the streets through counterdemonstrations. (FFO 270460)

In a later cable, Hertz referred to likewise positive evaluations by the general foreign society in South Korea of the students’ strong self-discipline and high ethics by praising how things had not come to chaos despite the eruptions. Hertz noted that, it was said that, during the demonstrations, “not a single apple or shoestring was stolen from street stalls” (FFO 080660). Reports approved of the “responsible behavior of the idealistic youth who

unarmed wiped out the parasite-like side-effects of the political fair” (FFO 270460).

Indeed, it seemed crucial to the reporting diplomats that there was “in no way a communist participation or pro-communist remarks” during the student demonstrations (FFO 270460; FFO 210460). Thus, the April Revolution had “nothing to do with communism” (FFO 130460). On a related note, the significance of the April Revolution to domestic developments was stressed in that the diplomatic corps evaluated it as having “prevented a civil war” (FFO 040560a) by “mitigat[ing] this anticipated extreme scenario because [the students] appeared as a third power that exposed not only the [Liberal Party] but also the opposition as problematic, which [in turn] helped to tone down the possible explosiveness of the situation” (FFO 040560a). This obviously referred to the concept of the “revolution from the side,” which was probably introduced to the diplomatic corps by Mehner’s analysis (FFO 210660), inspired by Choe Mun-hwan’s essay on the topic (Choe 1960a).

Another remarkable way of depicting the student demonstrations and their evaluation is the frequent reference to historic student movements in Germany and contemporary student uprisings worldwide. Newspaper articles and embassy cables alike resort to these comparisons, obviously to assist the understanding of their readers, but also for expressing a certain perspective on the actors and the meaning of their actions. Ambassador Hertz, for example, cables back to Bonn that he sees a “parallel” between the April Revolution in Korea and the Berlin March Days of 1848, “when taking into account the academic background of the insurrection.” Here, Hertz alludes to the March Revolution of 1848 that had gripped all of Europe and which in many countries including the German states had been significantly influenced by student activities, beginning with the Hambach Festival in 1832. Klaus Mehnert¹² in his report to the FFO went even further back in history to the Wartburg Festival in 1817, when German

12. Klaus Mehnert (1906–1984) was a political scientist and journalist who visited South Korea for intensive field studies, to include interviews; his field report was shared among and highly valued by the diplomatic corps.

fraternities (Burschenschaften) were founded as part of the first movement for liberalization, against the authoritarian conservatism of the Metternich System, which was characterized by the persecution and suppression of democratic ideas and freedom of press, speech, and assembly, when he wrote:

The spirit that pushed the students onto the streets of Seoul on April 19 was not the spirit of Marx or Mao, but the spirit of an international liberalism like the one that once led to the establishment of fraternities and to the Wartburg Festival. (FFO 210660)

Rudolf Leonhardt, then-chief *feuilleton* editor of *Die Zeit*, who also alludes to the Wartburg Festival, mentions the Langemarck myth, according to which German students sacrificed their lives in World War I; refers to the Scholl Sisters, who resisted the Nazis; and eventually refers to the courageous “students in Turkey, in Korea, in Hungary” (ZEIT 130560), who elsewhere were described as “real live agencies for historic change” (Mills 1963, quoted in Katsiaficas 1987, 40). Historian and activist Renate Riemeck, in her essay in the monthly *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, contends that the “upheaval in South Korea gave the impetus to the spontaneous uprising of Turkish students” (BLAETTER 1960). Riemeck not only directly related the April Revolution to the students uprising against the police state of Adnan Menderes, but also “alluded to (...) the possible need for students (in Germany) to follow the example of their counterparts in Korea and Turkey” (Fuhrig 1963, 64). While Leonhardt does see “at the moment little reason for students in the Federal Republic [of Germany] to mount the barricades to overthrow the government,” he critically points out German students’ “lethargic indifference” despite the “student’s duty to make oneself disliked” as a way of saying that it was the responsibility of students to disregard other people’s censure of them and to say and demand what was right and necessary (ZEIT 130560). Leonardt obviously relates to student movements in Turkey, Hungary, and South Korea, which he sees as active and effective in juxtaposing them with the “fatal tendency” among students in Germany to “look for reasons for protesting” only in regards to international issues or

narrow personal concerns (ZEIT 130560), but not for a national, domestic cause. In other words, he uses these student movements, including the April Revolution in South Korea, as a kind of best practice to drive home his point of German students being “too lethargic.” Somewhat toned down but still referring to the case of Korea, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* notes regarding the events in Turkey that, at least before it came to the coup d'état, deputies fought each other in parliament with chair legs and that students in Korea demonstrated until Rhee Syngman left office (FAZ 030660). While all these were “no pleasant events and by no means a sign of functioning democracies,” the FAZ admits, they nevertheless were “explosions that eventually initiated the fall of a government with which the people were dissatisfied. [...] to that effect, the developments in Korea, Turkey, or elsewhere do not need to discourage us” from hoping for respective improvements for these countries (FAZ 130660). Seven years later, when the historic student movement finally arrived in Germany, the German press again refers to the April Revolution as an event of global significance. In 1967, for example, the weekly *Der Spiegel*, in its cover story on the ascent of charismatic student leader Rudi Dutschke, writes:

Student demonstrations were the beginning of the end of the Syngman Rhee regime in South Korea. Students played a leading role in the fall of governments in Bolivia, South Vietnam, and Sudan. Student demonstrators were bludgeoned in October this year in Prague [...] as well as in Tokyo. [...] Students protested last month in Paris against [...] the de Gaulle regime. (SPIEGEL 111267)¹³

While the article claims that the “model for the rebellion of German, namely Berlin students, was provided by the revolt at the American state university

13. Seven years earlier, in early June 1960, *Der Spiegel* reported on protests in Japan against the government of Prime Minister Kishi and students shouting “Down with Kishi! Away with Japan’s Syngman Rhee!” (SPIEGEL 010660). Military attaché Poser at that time wrote, “[U]nfortunately, students in Japan and Turkey unjustifiably have taken the events in Korea as a model” (FFO 020560) and thereby confirmed the assessment of the April Uprising’s international influence.

Berkeley,” the German student movement is seen as part of a “worldwide protest movement against conformist society, against authorities, against the powerful” (SPIEGEL 111267), thereby indirectly indicating “the global significance of the April 19 Revolution” (Katsiaficas 2016).

Gloomy Outlook after Successful Revolution

While the student movement has earned much praise by German observers, the last question this article address is how those observers explained the reasons for the uprising, and how they projected its effects. The press and the diplomatic corps agreed that Rhee's demise was self-inflicted. “Every people needs time to acquire the rules and public morals of democratic suffrage,” the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* argues, but the “Koreans hitherto had little, too little, time.” Rhee was “lacking a sense of democratic values. Thereto he failed” (FAZ 290460). A later article seconds this assessment, which posits that, despite increasingly authoritarian means, Rhee “kept the democratic coat on,” which led to “one of the most disgusting forms of democracy, namely a hypocritical one” (FAZ 020560).

Arguably nothing has infuriated large parts of South Korean society more than constantly being told that contrary to their brethren in the north they enjoyed the amenities of democracy, and that their country belonged to the free world, while in reality the South Koreans were terrorized and exploited. (FAZ 020560)

Clearly, the election fraud of March 15 was the breaking point. It provoked the revolt, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* argues, and “nobody doubts that the election results bear the brutal handwriting of Rhee Syngman's police” (FAZ 290460). Ambassador Hertz is likewise repelled by the events and even more by the way the political elite, with whom he frequently converses, tend to dismiss the election rigging as a necessary evil. He describes this as the “same brutal logic with which the violations of free elections in the course of the establishment of totalitarian regimes in Italy

and Germany were excused” (FFO 180360). The “national legend” Rhee, the FAZ notes, “started to fade away when his police fired into crowds of hundreds of thousands of demonstrating students from all Korean universities” (FAZ 270460). Ambassador Hertz shared this basic assessment and contended that the ensuing people’s protest against the police “showed that the people no longer tolerate the police as a neutral organ of the state but see it as an instrument of the one-sidedly reigning coalition” (FFO 130460). Despite these strong protests, Rhee “until the final moment stubbornly clutched the office he had occupied for twelve years. However, this time his people were stronger” (ZEIT 290460). Notably, more substantial interpretations of the meaning of the student uprising and legitimacy were often expressed indirectly by both the media and diplomats by quoting the position and remarks of the US government and its ambassador to South Korea, who argued the “protests purely reflected the dissatisfaction of the Korean people, and that the government is supposed to eliminate the underlying problems.” In other words, the United States government understood the protests as a “necessary sign from the people against the dictatorial Liberal Party government” (FFO 210460; similarly, FAZ 200460; FAZ 200460a; FAZ 210460; FAZ 220460; Zeit 220460; SPIEGEL 040560).

The opposition is also seen in a critical light. In fact, though German diplomats had sympathies for such oppositional figures as Jo Bongam, Yun Posun, and Chang Myon, they often point out their deficiencies, such as a lack of political capacity and courage, or their undiplomatic radicalism. Overall, their evaluation is clear: “The opposition failed miserably, but the students boldly demonstrated against the gagging of electoral freedom” (FFO 180360). When it comes to other background factors that played a role in students taking to the streets, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* explained that, in South Korea inflation, price hikes, and unemployment have prevailed for years and the city of Masan “used to be a peaceful nest. There have never been communists [there]. But one must know that in the past year only every tenth student found a job after exams” (FAZ 020560). Similarly, Ambassador Hertz refers to students’ individual living conditions when he points out that “no day passes in which a desperate student does not commit suicide out of the hopelessness of existence (only 30 percent

find an employment after graduation)” (FFO 300659).

While the press focused on depicting “hundreds of thousands of South Koreans [that] took to the streets of Seoul on Tuesday, after President Syngman Rhee announced he will resign” (FAZ 270460), diplomats stressed that, despite the people being in a “transport of joy,” Rhee still enjoyed strong support among the citizens as well as the political class, including his opponents. Hertz reported:

When Rhee left his residence, “loyal people” would cry to the loss of their leader. Also, when Rhee attended the funeral of Yi Ki-bong, politicians of all parties cheered Mansei. The house where Rhee and his wife will be residing from now on is located on the Seoul National University Campus, the university with some of the most active students. (FFO 040560a)

Looking forward, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* contended that it was “not completely clear whether the protest was for freedom and democracy, or whether they revolted mostly against Rhee and the hypocrisy of the system hitherto. The uprising was spontaneous and unorganized; it had neither leaders nor a program, save for: away with the existing system” (FAZ 020560). Similarly, Hertz expresses doubts about the potential of the student protest to better the country, when he writes the “demonstrating youth believe solely in holy-making freedom, and in the evilness of power, without realizing that in reality freedom and power are not mutually exclusive.” He also was worried because “student activists reject all existing political groups, including the oppositional Chang Myon” (FFO 270460). Mehnert, conversely, attested that the students understood clearly that they fought for “freedom, people’s self-determination, democracy, and for an end to tyranny; the word freedom came up most often” (FFO 210660). As part of an unavoidable cure, he prescribes for Korea the painful process of “de-Nazification”:

The crimes committed by the Germans during the twelve years of the Hitler regime were different in their kind and severity from those which the Rhee regime had put on its conscious during equally twelve years.

However, in both cases there exist[s] the necessity of making accountable the perpetrators as well as the beneficiaries of the fallen regime. (FFO 210660)

Ambassador Hertz, however, is concerned with what will come considering the “activities of the irascible Korean youth that showed the highly anarchic dimensions to which the collapse of a ruling regime can lead” (FFO 210460). Along the same lines, military attaché Poser concludes:

[F]or Korea it will be [...] important to stick to a government system with a strong central power. It could have fatal consequences if the country follows examples such as Greece or Japan. The reason being that the people’s character has the tendency to become very emotional and extremist. This is why Korea needs its own form of “democracy.” (FFO 280460)

Conclusion

This study investigated how the April Revolution was reflected in the German press and the reports of the diplomatic corps with the aim of widening our perspective on how this historic event was reflected in the international community. The first of three questions explored was how the German press and diplomatic corps evaluated President Rhee Syngman’s rule of South Korea. Germany’s foreign policy during the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by the themes of integration with the West, unification, and anticommunism. In line with this, the analysis revealed that the West German Federal Foreign Office (FFO) and its diplomats’ perspectives on South Korea were as if looking at its East Asian twin. Accordingly, an evaluation of developments in Seoul was fundamentally affected by this particular Cold War lens. Cables from West Germany’s Seoul embassy reported on the country’s underdeveloped democracy, President Rhee Syngman’s dangerously bellicose unification policy, and his general authoritarian leadership style. At the same time, however, the German diplomatic corps tend to either explicitly depict Rhee’s dictatorship as a

necessary evil for the sake of the stability of an anticommunist bulwark or palliate it as benevolent autocracy.

The events regarding the April Revolution were reported by the German press daily and in relative detail, reminding the German public of a faraway country that had felt so threateningly close when the newspapers covered the Korean War. Newspaper reports were naturally less diplomatic, more explicit, and sometimes doom-mongering. They would call the situation as they saw it, including Rhee's brutal dictatorship. Because the German readership was so relatively well informed about Korea's Rhee Syngman and his belligerent peculiarities regarding North Korea during the 1950s, Rhee even became a metaphor used by opposition politicians in parliament when criticizing Adenauer over his foreign policy toward East Germany and the Soviet Union. Thus, besides their obvious differences in reporting, the German press and the diplomatic corps eventually differed little, already viewing the Rhee regime critically before the dawn of its demise at the end of the 1950s.

The second question asked how the German press and diplomatic corps assessed the significance of the student movement. The examination found that newspaper reports and diplomatic cables apparently agreed on a generally positive and affirming evaluation of the students' initiative and attitude during the events of 1960. They are interpreted as a third force between the increasingly autocratic Rhee government and a similar, or even less capable, opposition. Against the canvas of the corrupt, egoistic, and over-ideologized political class, the students' courage, liberal idealism, and self-discipline are praised as exemplary. In this context, diplomatic cables even conclude that the student movement pre-empted a looming civil war and, thus, the incipient threat of a communist invasion from North Korea was prevented. The significance of the students' April Revolution was also explained by relating it to German student movements of the 18th and 19th centuries that became crucial elements in the development of liberal and democratic ideas and their eventual realization in the Weimar Republic and Federal Republic. In some reports, of course, this comparison also potentially implied that Korea's level of social and political development was still underdeveloped. Other reports even cite the Korean example to

contrast how inactive German students have been and to call upon them to stand up for important national issues as their counterparts in Korea did. Correspondingly, the April Revolution was evaluated as a beacon for student movements around the world when Germany's famous student movement of 1968 had yet to be born.

The final question referred to how the German press and diplomatic corps explained the reasons for the uprising and how they projected its effects. As for the reasons, diplomatic cables as well as newspaper reportage clearly reflected not only on the difficult political, but also on the socio-economic circumstances that made South Korea yet another powder keg in the developing world, and that the student uprising was a logical consequence and a legitimate intervention by the people with whom the sovereignty of the republic resided. Despite general praise for the students' initiative, the press and diplomatic corps anticipated dangerous waters in the aftermath of the April Revolution. At some point, this is related to some of the deficiencies observers perceived in the student movement, such as its naiveté, emotionality, and lack of sustainable alternative proposals. In addition, the overall political and socio-economic conditions in Korea combined with a continuously unstable Korean Peninsula were quoted as factors that did not forecast a bright immediate future for the country despite the opportunities that were opened by the student movement. Thus, for contemporary German observers, the April Revolution, despite its success as a revolution from the side, is seen as a drop in the bucket insofar as the challenges in the persistent power of the existing political elites, the national character of the Korean people, and, above all, the communist sword of Damocles.

In summary, contemporary observations of the April Revolution through the German lens were characterized by the circumstances in which Germany found itself. Looking at its *Cold War twin*, the German press and diplomatic corps showed great and sincere concern, sympathy, and commitment, while being strict, critical, and explicit in their assessment of the events taking place on the Korean Peninsula. This study revealed this precise and appreciative evaluation of the Korean student movement by the West German press and diplomatic corps, hopefully contributing another

facet to research on the April Revolution.

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