

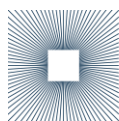
**Escaping the Nationalistic Shell in South Korea:
Transcending Cultural Exclusivity in a Multicultural World**

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of nationalism, its historical roots, and its consequences in various contexts, including Nazi Germany and modern South Korea. Nationalism, characterized by the prioritization of one's nation over others and a focus on ethnic homogeneity, can precipitate severe societal fragmentation, as demonstrated by the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. In modern South Korea, nationalism played a central role during Park Chung Hee's regime, which used national identity and anticommunism to legitimize military rule and promote economic development. However, nationalism also fostered social exclusion, particularly toward foreign immigrants and multicultural communities. South Korean society, shaped by both historical narratives and education, has developed a form of cultural exclusivity, leading to discrimination against those perceived as outsiders, particularly individuals from Southeast Asia and Muslims. This paper argues that nationalism functions as a form of modern feudalism, dividing people based on ethnic or national superiority. To overcome these divisions, a shift toward transnationalism and regionalism is proposed, emphasizing shared human experiences and fostering a regional cooperative framework. Such an approach would help dilute the exclusivity of nationalism and enable South Korea to embrace multiculturalism and social harmony in the 21st century.

Keywords: nationalism, transnationalism, totalitarianism, multiculturalism, pure blood

1. Introduction: A Contemplation of Nationalism

Before the modern concept of the nation-state, which emerged from the French Revolution in 1789, territories and their inhabitants were primarily regarded as the properties of feudal lords. Moreover, the common people, from the perspective of the petite bourgeoisie, were largely preoccupied with their economic survival. The French Revolution, however, catalyzed a transformative shift by elevating these individuals to status of "citizens," equal to the nobles, thereby establishing the foundational principles of popular sovereignty and planting the seeds for the concept of the "nation-state." While the aspiration to safeguard freedom is noble, the rise of the nation-state has also led to numerous challenges, particularly in relation to nationalism.

Nationalism is defined as *“a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promoting its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups.”*¹ This raises critical concerns regarding its implications. The primary issue with nationalism lies in its inherent assumption that individuals within a nation are intrinsically tied to that state. This perspective effectively reduces individuals to mere components within a larger national entity, often overshadowing their identities as autonomous human beings striving for self-determination. Furthermore, ethnicity is often used as a tool to reinforce notions of national identity, fostering an ideology that posits members of a particular group as homogeneous and sharing “pure blood.” Such a conception can lead to profound societal divisions and fragmentation.

This commentary seeks to elucidate the dangers associated with the rise of nationalism by illustrating its connections to racial discrimination. Additionally, it proposes

¹ Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Freedom. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism>

ways to promote social integration by fostering transnationalism in South Korean society, advocating for a more inclusive approach that transcends narrow nationalistic boundaries.

2. Nazism: The Limitations of Nationalism

During World War II, the Nazi regime, officially known as National Socialism and led by Adolf Hitler, supported eugenics and pseudo-scientific theories that promoted a racial hierarchy, asserting a belief in genetic supremacy. The Nazis gained support from the German population, largely due to the aftermath of Germany's defeat in World War I, compounded by punitive conditions of the Treaty of Versailles and economic turmoil. This context weakened Germany's national power compared to other great powers such as Britain, China, Japan, France, and the USA. Consequently, Hitler's rise was perceived as a messianic emergence, advocating for the unity of the Germanic peoples and claiming the superiority of "Aryan blood." Many Germans identifying as "pure-blooded," aligned themselves with his totalitarian ideology, which systematically excluded other ethnic groups within Germany.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler articulated the concept of *Lebensraum* (living space), positing that the German people needed additional space for their growth. To achieve this, he argued that so-called inferior peoples, including Poles, Russians, and other Slavic groups, needed to be exterminated, expelled, or enslaved to facilitate German resettlement in these regions (as cited in Park, H.K., 2008). This territorial ambition underpinned the Nazi regime's policies of ethnic cleansing, which culminated in the Holocaust, the systematic extermination of Jews, Slavs, and other groups deemed inferior. The Nazis' campaign to preserve "pure Aryan blood" led to widespread persecution and mass murder. The Holocaust resulted in the deaths of approximately 17 million individuals between 1941 and 1945, including around 6 million Jews

(United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed September 5, 2024), 4.5 million Soviet civilians (Niewyk, 2000), and 3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war (Barenbaum, 2005), and 1.8 million Polish people, among others. Nazism, a form of totalitarian nationalism, highlights inherent dangers associated with nationalism driven by self-centered orchestration of government and people. The public's engagement with Nazism can be analyzed through the lens of the "politics of enthusiasm", a phenomenon where masses yearning for strong charismatic leadership amid political, economic, and social turmoil are incited by charismatic leaders who manipulate nationalistic sentiments. This manipulation often leads to extreme societal choices (Park, H.K.). Citizens anticipate a messianic dictatorship that promises improvements in living conditions and social fulfillment, while tacitly supporting oppressive nationalist governance. In this environment, social agitation often results in the oppression of the minorities as the public seeks to enhance their relative social status, while reinforcing notions of racial purity.

Even segments of the German working class – expected to resist Nazism – demonstrated varying degrees of support for Hitler's regime. (Ludtke, 2002, as cited in Park, H.K.). Their backing was significantly influenced by Nazi initiatives aimed at reducing unemployment through national projects such as highway construction and military expansion. These national projects and the policy of full employment through military expansion diminished workers' motivations to pursue their individual and economic interests (Kim, Seung-Ryul, 2004, as cite in Park H.K., 2008).

Additionally, the political sacralization of Nazism portrayed Germans as protagonists engaged in a sacred struggle against perceived threats from Jews. This ideological framework effectively captivated public sentiment (Na, Inho, 2004). Through propaganda and strict control over information dissemination, the Nazi regime effectively manipulated the masses,

turning them into unwitting participants in its totalitarian agenda. George Orwell's concept of "Big Brother" in "*1984*" resonates here; people became cogs in a national machinery without awareness of their roles as victims manipulated by those in power.

Nationalism can be likened to a mirage within totalitarianism – instilling a false sense of allegiance to an abstract entity, while promoting the illusion that shared ethnicity constitutes a tangible reality. The tragic lessons from Nazism reveal that extreme nationalism can obstruct societal integration and dehumanize individuals based on perceived racial superiority. Such exclusionary ideologies undermine human solidarity and foster division within society.

3. Nationalism in Contemporary Korea

Starting in the 1960s, following the tumultuous period of Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 and the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, Park Chung Hee, the third president of South Korea, prioritized economic development as a means of bolstering his legitimacy after seizing power through a military coup on May 16, 1961. To address public discontent with his regime, Park's military dictatorship strategically mobilized nationalism, fostering a sense of homogeneity among the populace. His administration emphasized the preservation of cultural heritage and the cultivation of patriotic sentiment, promoting national figures such as Admiral Yi Sun-sin, who defended against Japanese naval forces during the Imjin War (the Japanese invasions of Korea from 1592 to 1598), as symbols of national resilience. Additionally, Park celebrated Sejong the Great, the fourth monarch of the Joseon Dynasty, as a Renaissance figure for Korea, asserting that his government's economic initiatives would lead to a "New Korean Golden Age", thereby obscuring the authoritarian nature of his regime (Jeon, J. H., 1998).

Park also framed North Korea as a significant threat to national security, effectively intertwining nationalism with anti-communism to reinforce his control (Ha, S., 2005). The government propagated conservative values emphasizing loyalty, filial piety, self-reliance, cooperation, and an independent national spirit rooted in overcoming crises. This approach reflected a nationalistic, militaristic solemnity and a repressive attitude toward sexual content (Oh, M., 1998). After Park Chung Hee's assassination in 1979, Chun Doo Hwan seized power through the December 12 coup d'état. In response to his dictatorship, South Koreans initiated the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement in 1980. The regime imposed martial law and deployed military troops to Gwangju, resulting in brutal suppression and an estimated death toll of between 1,000 to 2,000 people (Plunk, 1985), with civilian injuries ranging from

approximately 1,800 to 3,500 people (Oh, S.M., 2020).

As public discontent grew under Chun's leadership, he sought to legitimize his regime by contrasting it with Park Chung Hee's rule. Chun asserted that his ascent was peaceful and thus lacked the same nationalist fervor. Consequently, the discourse on nationalism shifted to reflect the public sentiment and became known as the "Revolutionary Nationalism Discourse." During this period, fueled by a spirit of nationalism, South Koreans united against the military government. They advocated for the expulsion of foreign powers, such as the United States, through anti-Americanism and opposed Chun's dictatorship. Their nationalistic fervor catalyzed a democratization movement aimed at securing their democratic rights and overthrowing Chun Doo Hwan's military regime (Ha, S.).

During this time, Korean nationalism emerged as an ideology embraced by both the ruling regime and its opposition, but it was utilized for divergent purposes. For Park's government, nationalism served as a tool for maintaining and legitimizing power. In contrast, for the people, nationalism became a driving force for democratization and resistance against the dictatorship. Despite their opposing goals, both sides were deeply invested in the idea of Korean nationalism, which embodied their respective visions and became firmly entrenched within Korean society.

4. Racial Discrimination in South Korea

Over the past 50 years, South Korean society has developed a form of cultural exclusivity characterized by heightened nationalism, which has manifested as both patriotism and racial discrimination. This exclusivity has particularly fostered hostility toward foreigners, especially those from Southeast Asia and Muslims, while Western nations receive more hospitable treatment.

A notable example of this cultural exclusivity occurred in Daehyeon-dong, Daegu City, where Muslim students sought to build a mosque to accommodate the growing Muslim population. In response, around 40 residents organized a barbecue party, cooking pork dishes directly in front of the proposed mosque as part of an anti-Muslim demonstration. One resident articulated their stance by stating “Because those Muslims claim freedom of religion, we have the freedom to hold a pork barbecue party” (The *Hankook Ilbo*, 2022). Online reactions to this incident included a surge of comments directed at Muslim foreigners in Korea, with statements such as “This absolutely must not be allowed. We support the residents,” “It’s heartwarming news,” and “Everyone! We need to expel Muslims” (*SBS News*, 2022). Such remarks reflect an exclusive animosity toward Muslims, viewing them as “complete strangers” rather than “members of the local community,” neglecting the values of religious and social integration.

Additionally, societal perceptions regarding multicultural families contribute to discrimination. A parent named Jang, a 42-year-old living in Gwanak-gu, Seoul, remarked, “There seems to be a stereotype that immigrant parents have different emotions, which could lead to different views on their children's education. Additionally, there is a perception that some multicultural students face language barriers or are neglected by their parents, making it difficult for them to communicate. As a result, there is a tendency among some parents to

prevent their children from associating with multicultural students" (*The Seoul Economic Daily*, 2023). According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of South Korea (2021), the enrollment rate of multicultural students in higher education institutions stood at 40.5%, which is significantly lower than the national enrollment rate of 71.5%.

A survey conducted among 1,000 South Korean citizens regarding "socio-cultural expectations and concerns" related to the increase in foreign immigrants revealed that 63% of respondents believed that "an increase in foreign immigrants will lead to an increase in social 'greater respondents (46%) "believed that 'an increase in foreign immigrants will harm their unique culture and intensify conflicts due to differences in socio-cultural values' compared to those who thought that 'an increase in foreign immigrants will enrich culture through the expansion of races and religions' (31%)" (Hankook Research, 2024). Another study indicates that foreigners from developing countries experienced more discrimination than those from developed countries (Jeong & Park, 2017). This suggests that Korean society exhibits nationalistic discrimination, particularly against individuals from lower-income nations. Two primary factors contribute to this phenomenon: external and internal influences.

Externally, South Korea has developed an economic-based nationalism that fosters societal pressures leading to the exclusion of foreigners from developing countries. This exclusion is rooted in perceptions that create barriers for outsiders seeking integration. During South Korea's rapid economic development phase, emphasis was placed on growth and increasing incomes while viewing advanced nations as desirable models for emulation. Consequently, public attitudes toward accepting foreigners are often linked to anticipated social benefits and a sense of national pride—factors closely associated with admiration for Western countries.

Internally, Korean nationalism is deeply ingrained within the educational system and

societal consciousness from an early age. The elementary school curriculum emphasizes political history through figures who established or defended the nation, while portraying Korean culture as inherently superior. For example, narratives surrounding the invasions during the Goryeo period (10th–14th centuries) and responses during the Joseon period (14th–19th centuries) highlight national resilience against foreign threats while glorifying cultural achievements such as celadon pottery and the Tripitaka Koreana (Kim Minsu, 2021). The language used in the textbooks often promotes cultural nationalism through phrases like "the oldest [...]," "the most outstanding [...]," and "registered as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site [...]," which can reinforce cultural nationalism (Kim Minsu).

This early exposure to nationalistic rhetoric fosters a mindset among young Koreans that prioritizes in-group superiority while marginalizing out-groups. This creates barriers among different groups and hinders progress toward a multicultural society. By emphasizing Korean cultural superiority and focusing solely on "preservation" and "purity" rather than on understanding or accepting other cultures, there is a risk of reinforcing attitudes that reject diversity.

5. Conclusion: Escaping the Nationalistic Shell

The discussion highlights that the origins and deepening of nationalism in both Korea and Nazi Germany arise from a complex interplay between the people and the government. Both contexts have "sacralized" ethnicity and nationality, creating a distinction between the sacred and the profane (Eliade, 1957). According to Eliade, humans distinguish between religious space and secular space, leading to the "manifestation of the sacred," which imbues certain spaces with specific symbolic significance. When individuals transition from secular to sacred spaces, they interact with the sacred unconsciously, approaching the essence of an absolute being. Within this framework, nationalism operates as a quasi-religious phenomenon. Consequently, through the religion of nationalism, people come to worship the state and become its survivalist slaves. This functions as an irrational caste system between the state's power holders and its people. Nazism during World War II and contemporary Korean nationalism share similarities: both involve "the initial introduction by the government," "religious worship by the people," and "exclusivity based on bloodline." During World War II, in the midst of the national crisis caused by the Treaty of Versailles, the distorted messianic ideology of Nazism rallied the people as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983), uniting them under the notion of the "pure Aryan bloodline." Similarly, after the devastation of liberation and war, modern Korean nationalism proceeded in a direction that promoted national heroes and fostered national pride through economic development. On the other hand, the German people sacralized Nazism as a nationalist ideology, reconstituting themselves racially as a "community of blood," while portraying themselves as the "forces of light" and "God's chosen people" (Na, I., 2004).

Furthermore, according to Kang Jung-in (2016), the Korean people, in their efforts to promote development or fight for democratization, justified their positions by embracing

nationalism, and this resulted in the further sacralization of nationalism. This was reinforced by beliefs in the 5,000-year history of the Korean bloodline and an infallible national spirit. The prevailing cultural climate in Korea emphasizes ethnic homogeneity and purity of bloodline, which fosters an exclusive sense of superiority and a mentality of being a chosen people toward other ethnicities. This exclusivity manifests in social favoritism toward certain groups, especially Westerners, while discriminating against people from developing countries.

To transcend this nationalistic shell, it is imperative to recognize that nationalism often sacrifices individuals for the sake of maintaining the abstract notion of nationhood. Such a consciousness fosters an environment where others are rendered entirely “other,” enforcing self-centered exclusivity. It embodies a neo-caste system that delineates superiority and inferiority among ethnicities and nations rather than acknowledging shared human existence. Nationalism can thus be viewed as a contemporary iteration of outmoded feudalism. Its hierarchical divisions perpetuate distinctions akin to those between nobles and commoners in historical contexts.

To counteract these divisive tendencies, it is essential to embrace transnationalism—acknowledging that every individual’s traits and ontological visions (i.e., their existential perspectives) are shaped by societal factors rather than predetermined by notions of purity at birth. A regional approach (Jinwoo Choi & Young Chul Cho, 2016) should be adopted instead of adhering to nationalism’s invisible ideologies resembling idol worship. While members of the same group inevitably share aspects of universal identity, culture, and lifestyle, nationalism often engenders exclusivity against others. Therefore, it is crucial to foster a cooperative regional framework that mitigates nationalism’s exclusivity in multicultural societies and enhances greater collaboration among diverse groups. Once the illusion of nationalism is broken, South Korea can navigate the multicultural landscape of the 21st century more

effectively by moving beyond discrimination and conflict toward genuine progress.

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