

Mózes Csoma, *From Budapest to the Korean War: Hungarian Physicians in North Korea, 1950-1957*. Seoul: Jipmoondang, 2021. 192 pp.

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### **The Specifics of North Korea and Medical Support for the Nation during the Korean War as Witnessed by Hungarian Medical Personnel**

The Korean War (1950-1953) was a civil war and an international war at once. Countless nations dispatched troops to the Korean Peninsula. There also were countries that, even though they did not send combat units, participated in the war by sending medical support teams. Nations that medically supported South Korea amounted to six: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, India, Italy, and West Germany. These medical support teams treated millions of patients in a remote country for years. They also led South Korea's medical development by transmitting advanced medical technology and fostering medical personnel in the nation.

North Korea likewise received medical support from countries in the socialist bloc. Nations that officially dispatched medical personnel to North Korea during the war were the Soviet Union, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Though it did not send medical personnel, East Germany provided four mobile hospitals. As did countries providing medical support to South Korea, medical support teams dispatched to North Korea established hospitals and treated countless North Korean soldiers and civilians. Even materials and medical supplies necessary for operating these hospitals were shouldered by nations dispatching medical support teams.

Out of Eastern European countries, the very first one to decide on medical support to North Korea was Hungary. Consisting of physicians, nurses, radiologic technologists, and medical assistants, the Hungarian medical support team entered North Korea on eight occasions from 1950 to 1957, and the members exceeded 200 in number. Working at the Mátyás Rákosi Hospital named after the then General Secretary (later First Secretary) of the Hungarian Working People's Party (MDP; Hungarian communist party), the medical personnel had opportunities to observe the nation and to come in contact with its people during the Korean War.

The activities of the Hungarian medical support team were made known in South Korea comparatively early through the reminiscences of János Bonta, who worked

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as a radiologist on the third medical support team of 1952.<sup>1</sup> However, medical support provided to North Korea during and after the Korean War by medical support teams from not only Hungary but also Eastern Europe failed to win researchers' interest for a long time. Though related studies gradually began to be published in the 2010s,<sup>2</sup> it is still difficult to say not only the overall contour of medical support from Eastern Europe has been drawn up but also that full-fledged investigations or studies on individual countries have been conducted amply. The problem presumably stems, first, from a situation where the number of researchers who are capable of accessing materials is extremely limited due to linguistic and geographical barriers. In addition to this, the limitation in research history that Korean War studies on North Korea have focused mostly on metadiscourses such as international relations surrounding the outbreak of the war and changes in the power structure of the North Korean leadership, too, must be pointed out. Under such circumstances, *From Budapest to the Korean War: Hungarian Physicians in North Korea, 1950-1957* (Seoul: Jipmoondang, 2021; henceforth "this book" or "this volume"), which fully addresses the activities of the Hungarian medical support team—which provided support to North Korea from 1950, the year in which the war broke out, to 1957—is a welcome and meaningful volume even just for its publication apart from its specific contents or significance in terms of research history.

Before introducing the contents of this volume, it is necessary to add a word about Mózes Csoma, its author. This is because his career and passion for Korean studies are the decisive backgrounds of the publication of the book. Also the current Hungarian ambassador to South Korea, Csoma is a scholar who established Korean studies as an official academic discipline in his country. After majoring in history and political science, he established the Department of Korean Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in 2008, for the first time in Hungary, thus paving the way for research in Korean studies in the nation. Csoma has published numerous books on Korean studies, which all make active use of interviews with relevant figures and materials housed in the National Archives of Hungary.

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<sup>1</sup> János Bonta 야노스 본타, "The Activities of the Hungarian Military Hospital in North Korea (1950-1956) 북한에서의 헝가리 군(軍) 병원의 활동(1950~1956)," ed. Ra Jong-yil 라종일, *The Korean War as Viewed through Testimonies 증언으로 본 한국 전쟁* (Seoul: Yejin Gihoeok, 1991), 239-250.

<sup>2</sup> Representatively, see Avram Asenov Agov, "North Korea in the Socialist World: Integration and Divergence, 1945-1970. The Crossroads of Politics and Economics," (PhD thesis; University of British Columbia, 2010); Jongseok Kim, "Polish Aid for North Korea during the Korean War," *East European & Balkan Studies* 38:6 (2014), 161-180; and Jin-Hyouk Kim and Mira Moon, "The Socialist Camp's North Korean Medical Support and Exchange (1945-1958): Between Learning from the Soviet Union and Independent Course," *Korean Journal of Medical History* 28:1 (2019), 139-190.

For example, *Memoranda of Memories of Hungarians Who Have Visited the Korean Peninsula* 한반도를 방문한 헝가리인들의 기억 비망록 (Seoul: Jipmoondang, 2009; henceforth *Memoranda*), whose topic is the history of Korean-Hungarian relations from 1890 to the 2000s, was written on the basis of direct interviews with major Hungarian figures including diplomats and scholars studying Korean studies. Through materials in the National Archives of Hungary and interviews with former North Korean students who escaped from Hungary to the West, *To Budapest, Hungary! The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and North Korean Students* 헝가리 부다페스트로! 1956년 헝가리 혁명과 북한 유학생들 (Seoul: Jipmoondang, 2013; henceforth *To Budapest!*) demonstrates as a fact, not a rumor, a claim—that is, some of the North Korean students aided the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—transmitted through a handful of Hungarians’ reminiscences and Hungarian literary works.<sup>3</sup>

The principal materials used in this volume likewise are those in the National Archives of Hungary. The state archives house over 50,000 items of materials related to the Korean Peninsula during 1945–1993,<sup>4</sup> out of which those generated during the Korean War are numerous. Out of the materials in the national archives, the book mainly uses reports drawn up by Hungary’s diplomatic mission in Pyongyang. Because of these reports, it has been possible to reconstruct in detail important facts including the Hungarian medical support team’s scale and duration of stay in North Korea, the approximate routes and periods of their evacuation, the location and management of the Hungarian hospital in North Korea at which they worked, and information on famous North Korean figures who were hospitalized at or visited the hospital.

In addition, the author has unearthed in the archives of the Semmelweis Medical History Museum in Hungary diaries and reminiscences by physicians, nurses, and ambulance corps members who visited North Korea in the 1950s as members of the nation’s medical support team. These records include accounts of more specific and personal experiences and observations that are not recorded in official diplomatic documents. In addition, this volume guides readers to North Korea during the war through a variety of materials such as articles sent to Hungary by a reporter who entered North Korea in August 1951 and covered diverse aspects of the country including the Hungarian hospital as a correspondent for the *Szabad Nép*, the official bulletin

<sup>3</sup> In order to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Hungary, the Hungarian (*Hungarians in Korea; Magyarok Koreában*) and Korean versions of *Memoranda* were published in 2009 in Budapest and Seoul, respectively. As for *To Budapest!* it is a Korean translation and publication (2013) of a work published in Hungary in 2012 under the title of *Koreans in Hungary in the 1950s (Koreaiak Magyarországon az 1950-es években)*. Mózes Csoma, “Development of Korean History Research and Education in Hungary,” *Korean History Education Review* 136 (2015), 99–100.

<sup>4</sup> Jong Chol Park, Seong Yong Park, and Eunlee Joung, “The Declassified Documents Related to North Korea in the National Archives of Hungary,” *Social Science Research* 37:1 (2013), 67.

of the Hungarian Working People's Party, and a propaganda book reflecting his observations of the nation published in 1953. This wealth of contemporary materials and personal records can be said to be the sources of the specificity and vividness of this volume, its strongest points.

This is not a book that either criticizes existing studies and provides a new opinion or presents a special point. Consisting of a total of 15 chapters, it is written in such a way that it basically follows the activities of the Hungarian medical support team per period, describing what the members experienced and observed in North Korea. As a reviewer, I therefore would like to conclude this book review by introducing some aspects of the contents that were intriguing and pointing out a few aspects that were insufficient.

First, what definitely take up the greatest share of the experiences of the Hungarian medical support team are memories of bombings. From the first team, which arrived in North Korea on July 28, 1950, approximately a month after the outbreak of the war, to the fifth team, which entered the country on June 19, 1953, approximately a month before the armistice, all of the Hungarian medical support teams underwent air raids by the US air force. In the case of the first medical support team, it continuously relocated in order to avoid bombardments, only to cross the border and to move to Manchuria on October 27, 1950. Unable to return to North Korea, this team had no choice but to go back to Hungary in March of the following year after performing its duties in Changchun, China.

Having set out from Budapest in February 1951, the second medical support team likewise worked at a hospital located in Changchun for four months before it was finally able to relocate to North Korea in June. Though the hospital at which the first and second teams worked was located in China, the patients were all North Koreans, and the medical assistants who assisted the Hungarian physicians in administering injections and managing the administration likewise were North Koreans. When the second team arrived in Changchun on February 28, those who welcomed it at the train station with flowers were none other than North Korean girls. In other words, the Hungarian hospital in Changchun clearly was a hospital managed by the North Korean government.

North Korea's "rear hospitals" were found not only in Changchun but also throughout Manchuria. For example, the Korean People's Army Naval Force (KPANF; North Korean navy) Central Hospital, located in the city of Wonsan at the outbreak of the war, relocated to the city of Dandong in Liaoning Province, China during the general retreat of the Korean People's Army (KPA; North Korean army) and moved, once more, to Longjing, staying in this Chinese city for two months. As of November 1950, Korean People's Army Hospital No. 65 likewise was in the Chinese city of Dehui near Changchun, and KPA hospitals could be found also in Heilongjiang Province in China, very distant from North Korea. Wounded members of the KPA who received treatment in the Yanbian, a region in China with a sizable

population of ethnic Koreans, amounted to over 50,000 during the latter half of 1950 alone.<sup>5</sup>

Such facts demonstrate well that the entire region of Manchuria was used as North Korea's de facto rear base during the Korean War. In general, only the fact that China "saved" a North Korea faced with the demise of its system by dispatching troops on a large scale during this war is widely known. However, without Manchuria's role as a rear base, North Korea would have had no choice but to give up on the war by the first half of 1951. In addition, the fact that China was the venue of the activities of the Hungarian medical support team, which flew to the Far East in order to provide support to North Korea, albeit briefly, can also be viewed as a case symbolizing the socialist bloc's proletarian internationalism during the Cold War.

As has been mentioned above, the second medical support team entered North Korea in June 1951. At this time, the Hungarian hospital was established in the Pyongyang neighborhood of Mangyongdae, Kim Il Sung's birthplace. The main building of the Hungarian hospital in Mangyongdae was liable to become a target of air raids because it was located on the top of a hill. However, the Hungarian medical personnel had no choice but to relocate to this area because the North Korean authorities were unable to find a better location for the hospital. Nevertheless, the operating room (OR), intensive care unit (ICU), radiology room, and laboratory were established underground. The medical personnel designated a separate space, dubbed the "Tiger's Cave" because the room had been created by digging rocks, as a safe operating room. These all were measures against bombardments.

There is another anecdote showing how bombings occurred daily in North Korea during the war. According to the reminiscences of a Hungarian physician who entered the country in June 1953 as a member of the fifth medical support team, while performing a surgery, he heard an immense explosion after an aircraft circled over the hospital. Windowpanes soon shattered and scattered, and he sought to stop the surgery immediately. However, his assistant, a 17-year-old North Korean nurse, only asked, "What happened? Was it an air raid?" in a calm voice. Hearing her serene voice, the physician was able to regain composure and finished the surgery, remaining in the operating room. That is, by the end of the war, North Koreans were so benumbed to the dangers of bombings that they were able to continue working even during air raids. In other words, this is also a case demonstrating the degree to which North Koreans suffered from severe bombardments for a period of nearly three years.

Meanwhile, some of the Hungarian hospital's medical activities were delegated to villages surrounding it. It was a method where patients were divided according to the type of injury so that those wounded in the abdomen or the chest, the arms, and

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<sup>5</sup> Mira Moon, "Establishment and Operation of Wartime Health Care System in North Korea during the Korean War and Support from the Korean Society in Yanbian," *Korean Journal of Medical History* 29:2 (2020), 523-524.

the legs were treated in villages A, B, and C, respectively. Patients were accommodated in farm households, and villagers were responsible for preparing food for patients with provisions provided by the Hungarian hospital. Nor do other hospitals operated in North Korea during the war seem to have differed much.<sup>6</sup> Through this, we can confirm the deficient situation of the North Korean government, which had to rely on “brother nations” for not only medical personnel and supplies but also provisions for patients and wartime medical activities, which basically are responsibilities of the state, had to be shouldered by civilians to a considerable degree.

Despite many difficulties, the fame of the Hungarian hospital spread to the front line. According to this book, surprisingly, even South Korean troops, too, crossed the line of battle constantly in order to have their wounds treated at the hospital. Also, at one time, the Hungarian hospital was subjected to inspections by the North Korean state security ministry, as a result of which 12 South Korean soldiers were discovered and expelled from wards. If this is true, the Hungarian medical support team’s activities can be evaluated as holding meaning even beyond solidarity based on ideological homogeneity and proletarian internationalism. However, it is necessary to verify closely whether medical activities directed at South Korean soldiers hid ulterior backgrounds and motives or were performed merely on a humanitarian level and the circumstances and routes through which South Korean soldiers were able to reach the hospital.

Though the volume is thus full of intriguing anecdotes, it leaves something to be desired as well. The most regrettable aspect is that, above all, the background of the dispatch of the Hungarian medical support team is completely unexplained. Of course, the motive can be understood as solidarity in the socialist bloc, but would this indeed have been the only reason? From the Hungarian perspective, what would the dispatch of medical support teams to North Korea meant? Considering that the author has examined numerous Hungary’s internal classified documents (diplomatic documents), it is all the more regrettable that answers to questions such as this cannot be found.

In the same context, the question of why Hungarian medical personnel had decided to leave for remote battlegrounds without any personal tie and where they would have to risk their own lives stayed with me throughout the reading process. As in the author’s words, the destination of the medical support team was “the most apocalyptic place on Earth at that time,” and the members had to work in an utterly unfamiliar cultural environment. If so, then, there clearly must have been a reason

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<sup>6</sup> Established in the city of Manpo in Kanggye County, North Pyongan Province, Korean People’s Army Hospital No. 34, too, operated in the same way as the Hungarian hospital. In other words, it was based on a system where patients were accommodated in surrounding civilian homes in groups of two to four and physicians provided treatment by visiting each household. Civilian homes used as wards stretched along 100 *ri* (approximately 393 km). There also were “middle school wards” where 70-80 patients were accommodated per classroom at a middle school and treated. Ibid., 507.

prompting them to go all the way there. Could not the author have discovered a hint regarding this, even if not clearly stated, in the records of individual members of the medical support team? Moreover, the contents of the volume would have been even richer if the author had shed light on whether that decision had been voluntary and figures from which backgrounds had been selected through which procedures.

Another point is the nearly absent analysis of changes within or impacts on North Korea caused by the activities of the Hungarian medical support team. In addition, though the author stresses the cultural exchange between Hungarians and North Koreans, he does not proceed to explaining what it meant to or how it changed North Korean society. A close analysis of this must be conducted first in order to produce a proper evaluation of the place of the Hungarian medical support team's activities in North Korean history or medical history.

Though I have pointed out several aspects out of a sense of responsibility as a reviewer, as has been mentioned above, this book is highly significant even just for surveying the specifics and facts of a particular nation's medical support for North Korea. What must be done now is to widen further the path that the author has opened up. Though the language barrier must be overcome, fortunately, countless relevant materials are said to await researchers' attention in Hungary, still not even opened.<sup>7</sup> This is the time for interested researchers' bold initiative.

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<sup>7</sup> According to investigations by Bogook Kim, who has collected and translated Hungarian materials related to the Korean Peninsula for a long time, the National Archives of Hungary houses a group of materials consisting solely of those directly and indirectly related to examination and treatment provided by the Hungarian hospital. Excluding administrative reports or contents on the current status, these materials cover public health duties themselves. Comprising a total of five boxes, they include medical records of North Korean patients treated at the Hungarian hospital in the 1950s and North Korean patients' letters addressed to Hungarian physicians (Bogook Kim, "The Materials in the National Archives of Hungary Regarding the Korean War: Data, Information, and Academic Activities," *East European & Balkan Studies* 41:1 (2017), 122-123). Such materials will be an invaluable clue to the reconstruction of North Korean medical history in the 1950s from a new perspective.