



# Massacre or Genocide? Redefining the Sook Ching

## Lauralei Singsank\*, Political Science and Music

### ABSTRACT

Sook Ching is a Chinese term meaning “purge through cleansing.” Operation Sook Ching took place in Singapore from February 21 to March 4, 1942. It was a military operation carried out by the Japanese with the intent of executing anti-Japanese Chinese men between the ages of 18 and 50. Ultimately, it is impossible to know exactly how many people were killed; the official Japanese figure is 5,000, while unofficial estimates reach as high as 50,000. Men were called into screening centers where disorganized screening procedures determined if they were anti-Japanese. The Sook Ching’s legacy lives on as one of the greatest tragedies in Singapore’s history.

The intent of this paper is to argue for a redefinition of the Sook Ching as a genocide rather than a massacre. The cornerstones of this research are the United Nations’ Genocide Convention and contemporary sources discussing the crime. This research is important because it sets a precedent of accountability, as well as acknowledging the crimes the Japanese committed during the Second World War. This thesis will discuss the Sook Ching, its legacy, and the steps required to address the incident and right the wrongs that occurred. It will also examine the racial and political environment that set the stage for the tragedy, as well as the scars it left behind.

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On February 3, 1942, artillery shells reached Singapore from Johore, part of modern day Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> It was the beginning of the end. Singapore was Britain’s southernmost post on the Malay peninsula and was considered almost impenetrably secure. This hubris would ultimately hurt residents; many shores were defenseless, as Arthur Percival, Lieutenant-General in charge of the island, believed reinforcing them would only harm morale.<sup>2</sup> When members of the British army realized they would likely lose the city, panic broke out. Many abandoned their uniforms and disguised themselves as civilians to avoid capture, while members of the Chinese Mobilisation Council, a local volunteer force, haphazardly sewed new ones to take up the flag and fight to their deaths in the northeastern suburb of Kranji.<sup>3</sup> On February 14, Japanese forces reached Alexandra Hospital in southern Singapore. Claiming that they had seen British sniper fire, they entered the operating theatre and killed everyone inside. Over 200 staff and patients died.<sup>4</sup> After this, chaos reigned. When families tried to escape the oncoming Japanese, they were met with unfought fires,

\*Lauralei Singsank is a senior double majoring in political science and music with a minor in peace studies. Originally from Maui, Hawaii, she will be pursuing a law degree after graduation. In her free time, Lauralei likes playing the flute and struggling with computers.

bomb craters, debris, and human bodies.<sup>5</sup> February 15<sup>th</sup> marked British surrender of the island—a feat that took two weeks rather than the expected six months.<sup>6</sup> It was also the first day of the Chinese New Year.

Six days later Operation Sook Ching began.

## INTRODUCTION

Operation Sook Ching was a twelve-day long cleansing of ethnic Chinese Singaporeans during World War II. The Japanese forces occupying the island rounded up Chinese men and killed those they determined to be untrustworthy. Before it was called off, the Sook Ching left somewhere between 5,000 and 50,000 people dead, and it is remembered as the largest recent tragedy of the country.<sup>7</sup> Despite the integral role race played in the crime, the Sook Ching has been memorialized as a massacre rather than a genocide. To gain a better understanding of the events that transpired, we must ask: what drove this decision, and what has the significance of the Sook Ching been in the years and decades after?

I will begin with an overview of the invasion and Sook Ching itself, with a focus on the targeting of ethnic Chinese. The tragedy that occurred in Singapore was not isolated; it followed the Rape of Nanking and other war crimes committed against ethnic Chinese throughout east and southeast Asia. Viewing the Sook Ching as part of a lineage of racially driven crimes expands our understanding of it. The second section will overview of the history of genocide studies. This covers contemporary times, from World War II forward. Included are a variety of sources that provide a context of genocides and genocide studies that the Sook Ching fits into. I will then define genocide as it is used in this paper and lay out how I conceive the Sook Ching should fit in this framework. I use the United Nations Genocide Treaty as the basis for my argument by stating that the Sook Ching fits three out of their five determinants of genocide. This is followed by addressing potential reasons for why Singapore as a country does not view the crime as a genocide. Reasons include economic ties to Japan and the ethnic tensions that led to Singapore's independence. This is followed by a series of counterpoints from both first- and second-hand sources arguing against a genocide classification. These arguments question the significance of the number of people killed, point out the gendered targeting of victims, and discuss the baselessness of the Japanese idea of Chinese guilt due to race.

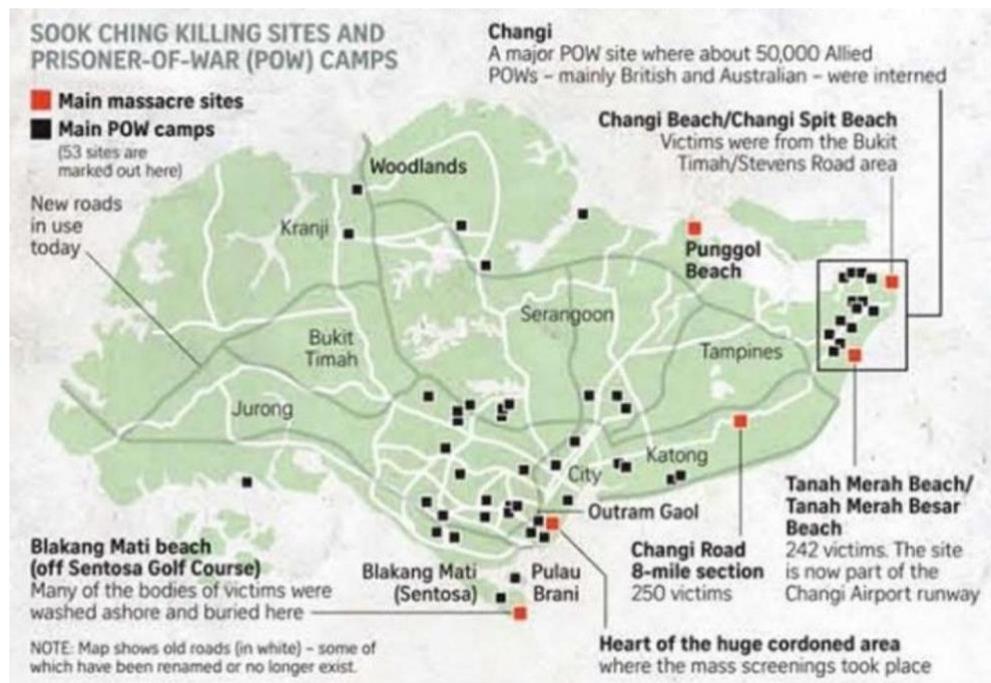
In section three, I also discuss the politics of memory and how it can help us better understand the legacy of the Sook Ching. I address both Singaporean and Japanese perceptions here. For Singaporeans, a series of impactful war shrines and monuments reflected changing perspectives. From demands for justice to cries for racial harmony, Singapore's relationship to the Sook Ching has varied over the years. Japan has had an even more conflicted view of its wartime activities. Many people still visit the Yasukuni shrine each year, a site where several class A war criminals (those who committed crimes against peace) are interned.<sup>8</sup> There has been a move towards acknowledgement of war crimes, but a sense of Japanese victimhood still often surrounds such discussions. This is caused in part by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, tragedies so enormous they may be seen to eclipse any suffering inflicted during the war. The differing

memories here are of particular importance because they give us insight into how war crimes and genocides can be understood and misunderstood with time. I will close with a comparison of the Sook Ching to the Cambodian Genocide, which had a more successful conviction of war criminals. This acts as a case study for future genocide prevention and war crime trials. I will also discuss what genocide prevention success stories look like and why they're so difficult to identify. Ultimately, I argue that the Sook Ching should be redefined from a massacre to a genocide because of its compliance with the United Nations Genocide Treaty standards for defining genocide.

## SECTION ONE: THE SOOK CHING

Operation Sook Ching lasted from February 21 to March 4, 1942. It was a military operation carried out by the Japanese with the intent of executing anti-Japanese Chinese men between the ages of 18 and 50.<sup>9</sup> The fact that the Sook Ching began only a week after Japan initially invaded Singapore means that it is likely they had plans for the cleansing beforehand.<sup>10</sup> General Yamashita Tomoyuki was in charge of the occupation of Singapore. Although he clearly had a role in the Sook Ching, he argued that his men exceeded his expectations in executing a “severe disposal” of hostile Chinese, as he left his troops and marched on to Sumatra during the operation.<sup>11</sup> He was eventually hanged in the Tokyo Trials after the war without ever being tried for his crimes in Malaya.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to understand the demographics and layout of Singapore in order to understand the Sook Ching. In 1957, the date closest to the Sook Ching for which data is available, Singapore was 75.4% ethnic Chinese, 13.6% Malay, and 8.6% Indian.<sup>13</sup> These percentages were likely similar to those during the Sook Ching. In addition, I have included below a map of killing and burial sites to help orient the reader (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Sites of killings and burials<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, it is impossible to know exactly how many people were killed; the Japanese official figure is 5,000, while unofficial estimates reach as high as 50,000.<sup>15</sup> Japanese Lieutenant Colonel Hishakari Takafumi, who was at that time a newspaper correspondent, stated that the troops had been instructed to kill 50,000 Chinese and had reached half that number by the time the operation was called off.<sup>16</sup> One cause of uncertainty was the method used to dispose of bodies. They were typically taken to shorelines around the island and shot so that their bodies could be washed out to sea by the waves.<sup>17</sup> Despite the inability to specify the number of deaths, the Sook Ching was certainly the largest single atrocity in the Southeast Asian portion of World War II, and served to strengthen, rather than weaken, the Chinese identity of Singapore.<sup>18</sup> It serves as a good example of how national identities can be built around collective suffering, which I discuss in-depth in my later section titled “Politics of Memory”.

During the Sook Ching, Chinese Singaporean men were called into screening centers, where the *Kempeitai*, the Japanese military police, determined whether they were anti-Japanese.<sup>19</sup> Five groups were targeted in these procedures:

- (1) members of the volunteer force;
- (2) Communists;
- (3) looters;
- (4) those possessing arms; and
- (5) those whose names appeared in lists of anti-Japanese suspects maintained by Japanese intelligence.<sup>20</sup>

There are several accounts, however, that state these qualifiers were not strictly upheld, and that the decision of whether someone was innocent or guilty was often arbitrary. For instance, all men who spoke the Hainanese dialect were targeted, as they were all considered communists.<sup>21</sup> At Jalan Besar, one of the screening centers, men who wore glasses were selected because they were assumed to be educated and therefore guilty, something with no ties to the five official categories.<sup>22</sup> Once a man was determined to be guilty, he was loaded onto a lorry alongside other Singaporeans and transported to a remote portion of the island to be gunned to death.<sup>23</sup> Known execution locations are Punggol, Changi, Katong, Tanah Merah and Blakang Mati, and several other sites are acknowledged by local people, although no concrete proof has been yet discovered.<sup>24</sup> The operation was initially meant to last three days, but the Chinese population of Singapore was 600,000 in 1941, far too many to be processed in that time.<sup>25</sup> For this reason the Sook Ching was extended.

Surprisingly, the Japanese required little force to get these men to screening centers. In interviews sourced from the Singapore National Archives, Charlie Fook Ying Cheah, an eyewitness to the invasion, stated, “The people were very calm. You can say they just simply took it lightly. Because the British put up the propaganda: ‘Oh, these Japanese, they got these match-box aeroplanes. They can’t do much harm.’ So the people were, more or less, quite confident.”<sup>26</sup>

Singaporeans, for the most part, believed that as bad as the invasion might seem, the British would come back and take care of things. This did not occur, and Japanese forces took Singapore and began to round up Chinese men. Cheah confirms that people were compliant with the summons: “Of course not knowing what [the summons] were all about, the people and myself were in fear that if the response was not there, they would use their soldiers to come out and physically check each individual flat. And that would make it worse for those of us caught remaining behind in the flats. So the bluff worked.”<sup>27</sup> The fact that civilians voluntarily presented themselves to Japanese soldiers makes it clear that most were not expecting to be killed, making their unjust deaths all the more tragic.

There is one notable case of Japanese resistance to the Sook Ching. Mamoru Shinozaki, a civilian administrator during Japanese occupation, actively helped to save tens of thousands of straits Chinese (the portion of the Chinese diaspora living in Singapore) and Eurasians during the proceedings.<sup>28</sup> In his words, the Sook Ching was “a crime that sullied the honour of the Japanese army.”<sup>29</sup> There were many other Japanese that also helped the locals in a more limited fashion. One helped a man because he spoke some Shanghainese, a language the soldier spoke; another saved a family by telling them to stay inside during the summoning after seeing their mother praying to a Buddhist shrine for the Goddess of Mercy.<sup>30</sup> It is thus clear that the Japanese forces were not a unified whole, but rather were a diverse ensemble of individuals capable of making their own choices. In this light, those who aided the Chinese are all the more heroic, and those who followed orders to kill much harder to defend.

Chinese men were not the only victims of Japanese occupation. Although this thesis focuses on their suffering, it is important to note that many Singaporean women were victims of rape during Japanese occupation. Chinese women tended to be primary targets, as their ethnic group was already viewed with more disdain than their Malay peers.<sup>31</sup> During the beginning of the Sook Ching, many families hid their female children in fear of a repeat of the Rape of Nanking, a crime fresh in the region’s collective memory.<sup>32</sup> It was also common for girls and women to darken their faces, leave their hair untended, and wear conservative clothing to make themselves less attractive to Japanese men.<sup>33</sup> There are no concrete statistics on these rapes, and we are left with only sparse eyewitness accounts. Women were mistreated in other ways as well. I’ll include here a brief mention of the comfort women system; it was instituted by the Japanese military to decrease rapes, a goal that ultimately failed.<sup>34</sup> Somewhere around 139,000 women were taken from Japanese occupied territories to serve the army full time, often getting shipped straight to battle fronts under the listing of “military supplies.”<sup>35</sup> According to Lee, “80 per cent of these ‘women’ were aged between 14 and 18.”<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, Singaporeans at the time were aware that the Japanese occupation was driven by race. In her seminal book *The Syonan Years*, Lee Geok Boi quotes Thambiraju Paramasivan, an Indian man who lived through the period: “Serangoon Road residents would go to Race Course Road open field and put up Indian flag so that Japanese bombers would not drop their bombs there.”<sup>37</sup> She also quotes a European who feared for his daughter’s safety: “There was a trend of feeling also that [the Japanese] will not harm the Malay families.”<sup>38</sup> Contemporary residents’ awareness of the Sook Ching’s racial dimensions is a very persuasive argument for the event’s

revision from massacre to genocide. Had the killings been more indiscriminate, they could be viewed as part of a wartime massacre.

The legacy of the Sook Ching took several forms. An important one to note is that of ethnic identities in Malaysia as a whole. Many influential British residents had hoped to form a multiracial identity in Malaysia, but the Sook Ching drove home the idea that racial splits within the country were still of great importance.<sup>39</sup> Schools were formed in an attempt to unite the colony, but few Malays attended, and the Chinese majority was distrustful of the Western-centered education they received.<sup>40</sup> This distrust led to a widespread independence movement that ultimately failed due to a lack of Malay support, and independence only came once the nation formed coalitions of ethnically unified groups.<sup>41</sup> This early emphasis on ethnic divides set a precedent for Singapore's eventual independence.

## SECTION TWO: A CASE FOR GENOCIDE

This section contains an overview of the history of genocide studies, definitions of genocide, an explanation of the United Nations Genocide Treaty, an analysis of the Sook Ching through this lens, and counterpoints to my argument

### THE HISTORY OF GENOCIDE STUDIES

Any discussion of genocide must begin with Raphael Lemkin. Lemkin was a Polish Jew famous for the coinage of the term genocide as well as for his subsequent study of the subject.<sup>42</sup> His work began prior to World War II but did not become truly popular until after the war ended. His ultimate goal was to outlaw genocide not only as a war crime, but as a crime in and of itself.<sup>43</sup> As he states in his work titled "Genocide," "Genocide is not only a crime against the rules of war, but also a crime against humanity."<sup>44</sup> Lemkin recognized the importance of delegating the responsibility of trial to an international body to ensure true justice.<sup>45</sup> Essentially, he set the standard for genocide studies in following years. Lemkin's desire for international courts was fulfilled by the post-World War II trials, of which the Tokyo Trial is of greatest significance in relation to the Sook Ching. Unfortunately, perpetrators of the Sook Ching were not brought to justice at these trials, setting the stage for my research in modern times.

Gregory Stanton published his Ten Stages of Genocide framework in 1986, helping to further refine the study of genocide. These stages are Classification, Symbolization, Discrimination, Dehumanization, Organization, Polarization, Preparation, Persecution, Extermination, and Denial.<sup>46</sup> Stanton's suggested prevention methods for each stage are significant in the context of my argument, as they reflect events and processes that occurred during the Sook Ching. At the Classification stage, he recommends the building of institutions that transcend racial or ethnic boundaries to encourage cross cultural communication. At the Denial stage, he suggests that the perpetrators be tried by an international body to bring some semblance of justice for the victims.<sup>47</sup> These suggestions are fairly in line with the trajectories of genocides that have occurred before and after Stanton structured his framework, and portions of it can be effectively applied to the Sook Ching.

Adopted in 1998, The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court established the International Criminal Court and four main crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.<sup>48</sup> This was a step in the right direction for genocide prevention, as it created a framework with which to prosecute these varieties of war crimes. Since this court is fairly new, we will have to wait and see what real effects it has in the long term. However, it does bode well for the future of genocide prevention. Although it was created long after the Sook Ching, I would argue that some acts committed in its duration would qualify as genocide under this statute.

In 2002, Samantha Power published *A Problem from Hell*, an analysis of the United States' understanding of and responses to genocides around the world. It is a comprehensive book that covers the history of genocide beginning with the Armenian genocide in 1915 to present day issues. One important point Power makes is her suggested cause for increased US interest in anti-genocide laws. She attributes this to the newfound awareness that the United States' refusal to engage in discussions about anti-genocide law has damaged its international reputation.<sup>49</sup> I point this out as a counter to Japan's response, which has been a widespread disinterest in pursuing anti-genocide legislation. I will expand upon their reasoning in my section addressing politics of memory, but I include this here as an introduction to the idea.

In 2006, The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle was formally endorsed by the United Nations Security Council.<sup>50</sup> Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon released a report titled *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect* that same year, which endorsed the R2P. Under R2P, individual governments agreed to do as much as possible to prevent mass atrocities from occurring. It is also stated that a UN mandate is required to give legitimacy to any movement to follow R2P, a safeguard against states using it to justify intervention into other countries.<sup>51</sup> According to Ban Ki-Moon, cases of R2P being invoked without force outnumber those with force: "If you actually look at the last several years, we've invoked the responsibility to protect, at least on the [UN] Secretariat side eight or nine times. Only in one of those cases, with Libya, was it tied to the use of sanctions or military force."<sup>52</sup> The Responsibility to Protect is a strong resource to help prevent and address war crimes. Although R2P has no impact on the Sook Ching, I include it here to suggest that any push towards preventing genocide should be examined critically from all angles. For this reason, I have been meticulous with my research and have run my ideas past multiple critics.

In 2014, the United Nations published their Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes. This document provides guidelines for detecting early signs of an impending genocide, establishing risk factors and matching indicators.<sup>53</sup> Genocide is one of the crimes targeted under this framework. They state, "Genocide, according to international law, is a crime committed against members of a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. Even though the victims of the crimes are individuals, they are targeted because of their membership, real or perceived, in one of these groups."<sup>54</sup> This framework will hopefully be used with success to decrease genocides in future years.

I would like to note here that the sources I have addressed so far have a regional bias. We have just overviewed what genocide studies tend to look like in the West, as most efforts for defining it have taken place in that hemisphere; these studies are altered a bit in an Eastern Asian context. David Frank argues that international anti-genocide norms and their institutional incorporation have led to a quick decrease in genocide risks in East Asia.<sup>55</sup> He points out that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) nations have entered a relatively peaceful period, particularly when compared to just 50 years ago. The one clear exception is the current genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar, in which a minority Muslim group is facing violent persecution by a Buddhist majority; this stands out even more starkly when compared to the relative peace of its surrounding countries.<sup>56</sup> Frank also cites Alexander Bellamy, who lists four reasons that genocidal activities have slowed in Asia:

The dramatic and sustained decline of genocide and mass atrocities in East Asia was not produced by any single factor, but by the combined effects of at least four important ones: a reduction in the deliberate targeting of civilians in war, growing incomes across the region, creeping democratization, and changing ideas about the nature of sovereignty and the responsibilities for protection.<sup>57</sup>

All these points are important, but for my purposes I will refer to the fourth. Essentially, this point demonstrates that norms can and do change. ASEAN's incorporation of the R2P doctrine caused a shift in norms, leading to a decrease in genocidal action. These changes do not come about organically, but are rather pushed forwards by initiatives such as translated versions of the R2P and incorporation of the ideas into educational curriculums.<sup>58</sup> I bring this article up to show how the study and prevention of genocide has formed in Asia, and what initiatives have succeeded in preventing further atrocities.

## ARGUMENT FOR SOOK CHING AS GENOCIDE

There are many definitions of genocide, such as that by Mark Levene, a professor and author specializing in genocide. He writes, "Genocide occurs when a state, perceiving the integrity of its agenda to be threatened by an aggregate population—defined by the state in collective or communal terms—seeks to remedy the situation by the systematic, *en masse* physical elimination of that aggregate, *in toto*, or until it is no longer perceived to represent a threat."<sup>59</sup> This definition makes the distinction that the event needs not have fully destroyed a population, but only needs to have decreased it to the point of no longer being perceived as a threat. This definition has the advantage of being concise and easy to read; however, for the purpose of my paper, I will use the United Nations' definitions and qualifications of genocide. I do so to ensure that I utilize the most widely known and embraced delineation of the term, so that if one contests my points it results from faulty premises, rather than faulty definitions.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted its genocide convention on December 9, 1948 as a result of World War II atrocities.<sup>60</sup> This treaty defines genocide as

“... any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”<sup>61</sup>

I claim that the Sook Ching qualifies as a genocide due to its fulfillment of three points on this list. Point A, killing members of the group, occurred when Japanese soldiers executed thousands of Chinese men *en masse*. Point B, causing serious bodily or mental harm, occurred in line with point A and also encompasses those citizens who faced attempted murder but survived (such as Cheng Kwong Yu, whose words will later be used as reference to prove the lack of distinction used when selecting victims). Point C is particularly important to my argument as it specifies that an act committed to destroy a group “in part” may be designated a genocide; it is clear that the Sook Ching was indeed intended to destroy a significant portion of the Singaporean Chinese population. As far as my research shows, no substantive evidence of points D or E exists in relation to the Sook Ching. However, as the Sook Ching fulfills three of the above criteria when only one is necessary to qualify an event as a genocide, I state that the Sook Ching should indeed be labeled as such.

One important point in determining if the Sook Ching was a genocide is that Japanese forces had a premeditated number of killings they were to commit, at least according to Lieutenant Colonel Hishakari Takafumi.<sup>62</sup> The government had established plans for the Sook Ching in their “Implementation Guideline for Manipulating Overseas Chinese,” drawn up in late December 1941.<sup>63</sup> As a reminder, the operation had five categories of targeted Chinese: members of the volunteer force, Communists, looters, those possessing arms, and those whose names appeared in lists of anti-Japanese suspects maintained by Japanese intelligence.<sup>64</sup> There are several accounts, however, that state these were not strictly upheld, and the decision of whether someone was innocent or guilty was often arbitrary. In a *Straits Times* interview, Cheng Kwong Yu, a survivor of the massacre, described the selection process: “There was a crowd that came and picked us out. They had a liking for those who were big.”<sup>65</sup> He also stated that there were neither trials nor additional questions asked. All of the people around him were Chinese.<sup>66</sup> These accounts demonstrate that there were ulterior motives beyond simply weeding out opposition. In postwar trials, Hishakari also stated that he had been instructed to kill 50,000 Chinese in Singapore; he was later told it was impossible to kill this number, and the massacre was called off.<sup>67</sup> This is a

condemning statement: if the killings were executed not to target threats to the state, but rather to fill a quota, it negates any claim of justified killing.

Of additional importance is the question of genocide versus politicide and democide. Rudolph Rummel, a professor at the University of Hawaii, differentiates genocide from other forms of state violence.<sup>68</sup> He believes that genocide is a killing of people due to group memberships such as religion and race, while politicide is a killing due to political ideology or for political purposes.<sup>69</sup> Democide encompasses these two, along with mass murders, as long as they are committed by a government. The Sook Ching would fall somewhere between genocide and politicide on this scale, depending on how significant one believes race to have been in the proceedings. Although the United Nations genocide qualifications is the main framework used in this paper, definitions such as Rummel's serve to complement it.

Gregory Stanton's "Ten Stages of Genocide" is another useful tool to use alongside the UN's Genocide Convention. The seventh stage, Preparation, rings particularly true. As Stanton states, "Leaders often claim that 'if we don't kill them, they will kill us', disguising genocide as self-defense. Acts of genocide are disguised as counter-insurgency if there is an ongoing armed conflict or civil war."<sup>70</sup> This is reflected in the Kempeitai's targeting of Singaporean Chinese, particularly with their portrayal of the men as a threat to Japanese occupation due to their race. Stanton's system proves useful for identifying the stages of genocides and can potentially help us to prevent further crimes.

## REASONS FOR SINGAPORE'S ACCEPTANCE OF MASSACRE DESIGNATION

Singapore's history is important to consider when analyzing reasons for the Sook Ching not being labeled a genocide. After the Japanese occupation period, the British took back Singapore in 1945; it remained under British control until September 16, 1963, when it merged with Malaysia.<sup>71</sup> Singapore remained part of Malaysia until August 9, 1965, when it became independent.<sup>72</sup> This independence came about as a result of clashes between the majority ethnic Chinese population in Singapore and the Malay population in Malaya and in Sabah and Sarawak states in Borneo.<sup>73</sup> This will be discussed in more depth in the section titled "Singapore's Memory." Singapore's trajectory of nation-building subsequently broke off from the route taken by most other Southeast Asian countries. Their emphasis was not on creating a mythological history for themselves or shunning foreigners but rather on modernizing as quickly as possible and making themselves an indispensable part of the region.<sup>74</sup> This, when compared to the trajectories of neighboring countries such as Cambodia and Thailand, differentiated Singapore and helps to explain the importance of a cohesive Singaporean identity. Singapore's small size also became a blessing; infrastructure overhauls for the entire country were possible, and centering itself as a commercial center was feasible.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, it is likely that an initial lack of independence and subsequent turmoil made it hard for Singapore, either as a colony or young nation, to focus its energy on re-qualifying the Japanese war crimes.

Singapore's precarious geopolitical standing also contributed to forward-looking policies. I've already discussed some issues stemming from clashes with Malaysia, but Singapore had another

neighbor who began making bold international moves in the 1960s. Indonesia announced their *Konfrontasi*, or Confrontation, on January 20th, 1963.<sup>76</sup> It lasted from 1963 to 1966 and was a response to the perceived “neo-colonialist project” of creating the Federation of Malaysia.<sup>77</sup> The *Konfrontasi* included bombings, armed incursions, and propaganda in conflicted regions such as Singapore.<sup>78</sup> Indonesia’s government had no initial issues with the Malaysian government’s plan, but the Brunei Revolt of December 1962 changed its position. The revolt was instigated by insurgents who did not want Brunei to join Malaysia and was quickly silenced by British forces.<sup>79</sup> This signaled to Indonesia that the Malaysian government was still a pawn of the British, and an armed insurgency was superior to a diplomatic solution. Singapore was one of several targeted areas, with the first bomb attack occurring eight days after it joined Malaysia.<sup>80</sup> International threats to Singapore’s security likely dissuaded the government from pushing for retribution against Japan, one of its few allies (as I will discuss momentarily).

A lack of international pressure may have also played a role in Singapore’s reluctance to push for more comprehensive recognition of the Sook Ching. The International Military Tribunal was active during the late 1940s, and tried war crimes.<sup>81</sup> Since Singapore was not independent until the 1960s, the majority of public awareness of the crimes had vanished. It is also likely that Singapore as a young nation had little interest in further destabilizing its relationship with other countries. It had broken with Malaysia and desperately needed allies; Japan became one of its very first.

Japan also has a history of crimes against the Chinese, setting a precedent for the Sook Ching Massacre. This may also contribute to why it has not drawn international attention; the crimes in mainland China were so violent and numerous that they may dwarf it in comparison. The 1937 “Rape of Nanking” sticks in collective memory as one of the greatest crimes of the Second World War, in which Japanese soldiers massacred hundreds of thousands of Chinese and raped 300,000 in three months.<sup>82</sup> The fact that Nanking was the capital of China when it was sacked makes the tragedy all the more poignant. Events in mainland China such as the Nanking Massacre typically outweigh the comparatively smaller atrocities enacted in Southeast Asia, both in the criminal courts and in collective history. This makes it harder for countries such as Singapore to push for recognition of Japanese war crimes.

Another reason that Singapore has not pursued charges against Japan may be the economic relationship between the two countries. Because Singapore was not independent until 1965, it could not establish an individual relationship prior to that point. It is also important to note that soon after independence, Singapore and Japan agreed on a reparations payment of \$50 million Singapore dollars.<sup>83</sup> This 1967 agreement set a strong precedent for diplomatic relations between both parties. In the same year, the Civilian War Memorial, the primary location for remembrance of the Sook Ching, was unveiled. At its unveiling, Lee Kuan Yew, the first prime minister of an independent Singapore, stated: “We meet not to rekindle old fires of hatred nor to seek settlements for blood debts. We meet to remember the men and women who are the hapless victims of one of the fires of history. We suffered together. It told us that we shared one destiny.”<sup>84</sup> Clearly, there had been a move towards forgiving the crimes of history.

The choice to establish diplomatic relations with Japan aided Singapore greatly in the decades that followed. In the 1970s, Japan became Singapore's largest trading partner and foreign investor.<sup>85</sup> Singapore also began to incorporate many aspects of Japanese society and culture, such as neighborhood police posts and Japanese food.<sup>86</sup> These ties made it both impractical and undesirable to focus on the country's violent past. This is still true in the modern day; currently, Japan is Singapore's fifth largest foreign investor (making up 6.9% of investment), and Singapore is Japan's fourth largest (13.2%).<sup>87</sup> The two countries have also engaged in multiple trade agreements. By increasing economic involvement, Singapore is increasingly unlikely to push for a revitalization of post-World War II anger. As two regional superpowers, Japan and Singapore have a responsibility to maintain diplomatic relations, something that could become destabilized if Singapore publicly called for a revision of the Sook Ching Massacre.

It is very difficult to categorize and prosecute genocide. This is particularly true when examining a regime like that of wartime Japan, in which a verdict on Hirohito's guilt is itself difficult to reach. He was never tried for his involvement in World War II.<sup>88</sup> In an environment as contentious as this, it becomes all the more difficult to address the question of genocide guilt. Who would be held accountable? Perhaps the leaders of the Kenpeitai, or military police, in Singapore; however, these were simply the people acting out orders given by their superiors. The people issuing the orders would likely be next in line. These would be either Chief of Planning and Operations Tsuji Masanobu, or Chief of Staff Hayashi Tadahiko.<sup>89</sup> However, what about Hideki Tojo, the prime minister during the Sook Ching Massacre? He was found guilty of waging war illegally and violating international law, as well as inhumane treatment of prisoners.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps he would be the best choice, as he has already been found guilty of comparable crimes. This discussion highlights the difficulty of genocide trials, in that the appropriate object of trial is often not a single entity but the entire system. This is complicated further when the perpetrating system has dissolved, as the Japanese military government guilty for the Sook Ching Massacre has. Addressing these difficulties is a long and arduous task that garners little international attention. Although not impossible, the idea of reviving a crime as old as the Sook Ching seems unrealistic. The Cambodian Genocide is still being legally hashed out over 40 years after it began; how can we expect this same diligence for a 77-year-old crime of a comparatively tiny scale?

## COUNTERPOINTS

One argument against the qualification of the Sook Ching as a genocide was its focus on quantifying the people killed. Because the death count, which ranges from 5,000 to 50,000, pales in comparison to events such as the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge Genocide, some argue that the Sook Ching does not fit the definition. However, the UN genocide convention does not mention any number of deaths needed to qualify an event as a genocide. Indeed, some qualifiers do not even require deaths to occur. For this reason, I argue that the number of deaths does not disqualify the Sook Ching from being defined as a genocide.

Another possible point of contention is the fact that the Sook Ching Massacre did not focus on killing all Chinese Singaporeans, but targeted only men aged 18-50. This, however, does not disqualify it, as there is a precedent set by the Srebrenica Genocide of 1995. In this small Bosnian

town, 8,372 Muslim males were massacred by the Serbian military government.<sup>91</sup> Although this tragedy was limited to men, and thus was clearly not meant to destroy Muslim Serbs in their entirety, the act was ruled a genocide in the 2007 International Criminal Tribunal.<sup>92</sup> After all, the United Nations uses the language “in whole or in part,” and men are certainly a part of the population. Because of the ruling on the Srebrenica Genocide, I argue that the Sook Ching should qualify as a genocide as well.

I will also mention here a more fundamental criticism of my argument. Robert Cribb, Professor of Asian History at the Australian National University, pointed out potential issues with this thesis’s usage of the statement “in whole or in part” pulled from the UN treaty. He writes:

The specification 'in whole or in part' in the Genocide Convention is problematic. Clearly it can't be just 'in whole' or genocidaires would escape by sparing (or not reaching) a single potential victim. On the other hand, it feels to me that it seriously stretches the definition if any killing of some members of another ethnic group is identified as genocide. The extended definition would make it difficult to exclude the killing of enemy soldiers in battle from being regarded as genocide. In choosing a definition of genocide, I think it's important to consider what other cases would become genocide and whether the overall effect is morally or analytically acceptable.

It feels to me that genocide should refer to an attempt to destroy a community, even if that community is only part of its overall ethnic/religious/national group. Thus, the murder of all the members of an ethnic community in a town, district or province could be considered genocidal, as in Bosnia, whereas the assassination of political leaders of that community or the execution of militia members would not.

In the case of Sook Ching, it seems to me that although the victims were all Chinese, they were not targeted because of their ethnicity but because they were identified (by a flawed and ramshackle method) as individuals likely to resist Japanese rule. Many Chinese were 'screened' and released because they were judged to be harmless. Release in that way is not usually a characteristic of genocide.<sup>93</sup>

Cribb’s words allow us to have a thoughtful discussion, and he raises many valid points, which I will take a moment to counter here. Firstly, I argue that the very fact that Chinese men were targeted specifically is due to their race. It is true that there was significant Chinese resistance to Japanese rule; however, this is because there was a significant Japanese presence in China. Chinese people were not inherently more prone to dissent. The fact that Japan was occupying areas with large Chinese populations simply made it more likely that those pushing back against it would be Chinese. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the man in charge of the Singaporean occupation, believed that Singaporean Chinese were more combatant due to a small group’s strong resistance to Japanese occupation of the island.<sup>94</sup> I argue that this misrepresents the population, as due to a demographic majority of Chinese in Singapore, it is most likely that any resistance group there would be primarily ethnic Chinese.

Despite this, one could say that Japanese forces had an inclination that ethnic Chinese abroad might side with their countrymen and cause disruptions. This was, according to Cribb, mostly due to their significant population in Singapore and a history of involvement in mainland Chinese politics.<sup>95</sup> However, there was no direct evidence of potential insurgency, as Japanese forces had not previously occupied Singapore. The idea that racial ties might cause problems is one that may at first seem compelling but upon further examination becomes more problematic. Indeed, this approach appears to me to be similar to that used in Japanese American internment, where ethnic ties were seen as an inherent sign of guilt.

As for the fact that these Chinese Singaporeans were killed for political reasons, I will again reference my point about the obscurity of politicide in my “Definition of Genocide” section. Although I do agree that there are many elements of the Sook Ching that tie in with political violence, and that ideally it would fall somewhere on the scale between politicide and genocide, this differentiation strikes me as divisive. When race plays as strong of a role as it did in the Sook Ching killings, I believe it irresponsible to dismiss its importance under the aegis of political killings. This detracts from the fact that these men would simply not have died had they been a race other than Chinese. By saying that they died for political reasons, one implies that it was acceptable that Japanese forces determined political leanings by ethnic ties. If this mentality is accepted for the Sook Ching, how is it different from saying that Japanese American internment was in fact a legitimate, non-racist decision on the part of the United States’ government?

### SECTION THREE: POLITICS OF MEMORY

In this section I will lay out the Singaporean and Japanese politics of memory relating to the Sook Ching, focusing on their significance as represented by physical monuments as well as presenting possible reasons for the differences we see.

#### SINGAPORE’S MEMORY

In modern day, each February 15 is a day of remembrance during which Singaporean school children are instructed to think about the suffering that their people underwent during the period of Japanese occupation. This remembrance is not limited to those of Chinese ancestry and instead is meant as an experience of collective suffering amongst all ethnicities.<sup>96</sup> This was an intentional strategy that Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew enacted prior to Singapore’s expulsion from Malaysia. This unification around a tragic event serves to create a sense of national identity, regardless of accuracy. After all, it was primarily Chinese Singaporeans who suffered, but the focus on collective suffering serves to soothe these racial divisions.

War memorials were important for both Singapore and Japan. On Singapore’s side, the Civilian War Memorial, the centralized post for remembrance of the Sook Ching, is particularly notable. As seen in Figure 2, it is composed of four pillars known as “The Chopsticks,” each meant to represent an ethnic group of Singapore that suffered under Japanese rule: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian.<sup>97</sup> They represent racial unity by merging at their bases. Racial unity, however, was not the initial goal of the monument. It was constructed in response to widespread

demand by the Chinese Singaporean community as an acknowledgement of their suffering in particular.<sup>98</sup>



**Figure 2:** The Civilian War Memorial<sup>99</sup>

What explains this shift in commemoration? Kevin Blackburn's article "The Collective Memory of the Sook Ching Massacre and the Creation of the Civilian War Memorial of Singapore" gives a possible answer. An essential argument Blackburn makes is that the Sook Ching was harnessed by leaders of the young nation after its independence as a method of creating a national identity.<sup>100</sup> Singapore's independence was not voluntary. It had become a part of Malaysia in 1963, but within two years, racial and political tensions came to the forefront of politics. Chinese Singaporeans felt discriminated against due to affirmative action policies put in place to benefit Malaysians, and racial tensions reached a peak during the July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1964 riots between Malay and Chinese youths in Singapore.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, Singapore's strong economy was a perceived threat to the central power of Kuala Lumpur. In conflict with past agreements, Singapore continued to face internal trading restrictions.<sup>102</sup> For these reasons, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1965, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman expelled Singapore from the nation with a vote of 126-0, leaving Lee Kuan Yew, previously the leader of the People's Action Party--the primary party of Singapore--the unexpected head of a nation.<sup>103</sup> He had only been warned of the impending separation three days before and was unable to mend the rift despite his best efforts. A tearful quote from the press conference reads "For me, it is a moment of anguish. All my life, my whole adult life, I have believed in merger and unity of the two territories."<sup>104</sup> Lee Kuan Yew voiced the opinion of many Singaporeans in this quote, and the new country was left to create a sense of self.

The nature of this separation is significant because it drives home the importance of creating a national identity for the new leaders of Singapore. Typically, nations have a sense of national identity prior to being formed. Whether it be ethnic, political, or simply strong geographical ties, it is atypical to encounter a nation such as Singapore in which its very existence was, to some degree, nonconsensual. For this reason, leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew used the tragedy of the Sook Ching to foster a sense of national cohesion. His sponsorship of the Civilian War Memorial represented this goal of racial unity. Although it, to some degree, diluted the suffering of Chinese Singaporeans by claiming that all citizens suffered equally, it did present a more unifying message. Lee Kuan Yew was not necessarily acting selfishly. It may seem to our eyes that he determined the Sook Ching an insignificant enough crime that one could reinterpret it without much consequence; however, he was himself a survivor of the genocide. Lee had escaped off one of the lorries transporting men to be killed, barely escaping death.<sup>105</sup> Clearly, he was acting not from self-interest but from what he believed would be best for the nation.

There was one subversive addition that commemorated Chinese losses. 600 funeral urns were interred below the monument, signifying the ashes of Chinese victims quietly settling into their final resting place.<sup>106</sup> The bodies of those murdered in the Sook Ching form the foundation for the memorial we see today. When I visited the memorial in 2018, I was unable to find any English note of the urns' presence. Although I do not know if they were mentioned in any other languages, this silent acknowledgement of Chinese suffering fills a gap left by the race-blind acknowledgements of the memorial itself. The complex history of the Civilian War Memorial demonstrates how collective memory can both be used and subverted for national interests.

There is also an argument to be made that the Japanese occupation influenced Singapore's eventual independence. Under Japanese rule, residents of Singapore were forced to contemplate their own racial and political identities. During the occupation, Malays were typically treated well, and often became pro-Japanese.<sup>107</sup> Straits Chinese typically held opposing views because they were treated poorly. After Japanese forces were driven out, the divides within communities often became contentious. Ahmad Khan, a Singaporean who investigated wartime collaborators, stated, "If the Japanese Occupation may not have achieved anything else...it did create...political awakening."<sup>108</sup> It is quite possible that the racial rifts which formed during occupation played a role in Singapore's eventual expulsion from Malaysia.

Once Singapore was independent, it had to create its own identity. As I mentioned before, Lee Kuan Yew wanted to avoid a racial split for this determination, so he decided to emphasize collective suffering to unify the country. Wang Gungwu, a Singaporean scholar of China and the Chinese Diaspora, discusses another route and reason for creating a collective Singaporean identity. He references Singapore's national heritage and nation-building. Singaporean leaders made a conscious decision to de-emphasize any sense of history in their early years.<sup>109</sup> According to Minister S. Dhanabalan, this was because "we were all too preoccupied with surviving the present to worry about recording it for the future."<sup>110</sup> This sentiment was pushed even further by a fear that hunting for history would divide the nation. As a multiethnic country born of a colony, worries were that searching for history would either lead back to Europe or to each ethnicity's home country.<sup>111</sup> These concerns ran so deeply that history as a subject was dropped from primary

school curriculums in 1972.<sup>112</sup> All of this is to say that for a period, Singapore had little, if any, cohesive sense of history or identity.

It was only in the 1980s that people began to speak seriously about the detriments of lacking a national history. Essentially, people worried that without any binding history, Singapore would risk dissolution if ever threatened by a conquering force.<sup>113</sup> In other words, if their economic power and physical location were shaken, what cultural ties would remain? For this reason, the 1990s saw the beginning of a nation building initiative. This led to a standardized National Education in 1997, which also stemmed from the fact that “it was found that many Singaporeans...did not know how Singapore became an independent nation...[,] when Singapore gained independence, and that Singapore was once part of Malaysia.”<sup>114</sup> At the same time, the memoir of Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew—who had retired from his post as Prime Minister-- was published, driving home the point that history was now of value.<sup>115</sup> The 1964 and 1969 race riots were referenced in this memoir as an example of what can happen if a nation does not address its racial tensions and create a sense of shared history.<sup>116</sup> Lee Kuan Yew’s memoir became the definitive telling of Singaporean history. The problem with this was that it made this history distinctly political. Lee Kuan Yew was the leader of the People’s Action Party (PAP), the single party that has run the country since its inception.<sup>117</sup> Using his memoir made Singapore’s history a partisan tale, and indeed made it more vulnerable to criticism.

The Sook Ching did not play a large role in this nation-building, because it was primarily one ethnic group that suffered during it. It would have weakened the national identity to focus too much on the suffering of only Chinese Singaporeans. It would also have harmed Singapore’s image after its breakup with Malaysia, as it fought hard to portray itself as multicultural rather than as only Chinese. It was easier to focus on events that preceded and followed the break than World War II era events, which would have less widespread sympathy with a 1990s population. This concern over racial tensions helps to explain why the Sook Ching was not redefined as a genocide. The attention that would have been paid to a mostly Chinese-based war crime would have re-emphasized racial divisions in Singaporean society.

It is also important to note that the Sook Ching was not an isolated incident. It was part of the larger occupation of Singapore by Japan, which had wider cultural impacts. One example is the education system set in place during *Syonan-to*, or occupation, which lasted from 1942 to 1945. After a one-month closure for reorganization, Japan reopened schools in April of 1942, just over a month after the Sook Ching.<sup>118</sup> Primary schools began mandatory Japanese classes in July, with students learning the Japanese anthem and celebrating Japanese festivals.<sup>119</sup> School attendance declined during the Japanese occupation. Families who could homeschooled their children, a custom enhanced by the fact that no secondary schools were open during *Syonan-to*.<sup>120</sup> This was likely due to the lowered quality in education, as much attention was paid to assimilation into Japanese culture and little to academic success. These same traits were found in the few universities left open, where many students likewise ceased attendance. It is likely that this shortage of good education played into postwar resentment of the Japanese, enhanced by the fact that education under the occupation focused on immersing students in the culture of the conquerors.

The war crime trials in Singapore are also important for our understanding of memory and retribution. Tsuji Masanobu, the primary architect of the Sook Ching, was never convicted for crimes relating to the genocide; it is likely the Kuomintang, the governing party in China, were sheltering him back in mainland China during the trials.<sup>121</sup> The war crime trials lasted from 1946 to 1948, and tried 1,101 men.<sup>122</sup> One thing that prevented the Sook Ching from receiving adequate attention in these trials was its timing. These trials addressed crimes from many parts of Asia and Oceania, not just those that occurred in Singapore. The Sook Ching was addressed last in the trials, which meant that many of the prosecutors and witnesses were tired and ready for the process to end.<sup>123</sup> Only seven men were tried. Two of these, Kawamura Saburo and Oishi Masayuki, received the death sentence, and the other five received life sentences that ended after five years when Japan regained its sovereignty.<sup>124</sup> There were 133 recipients of the death penalty from other crimes addressed in the Singapore trials. Compared to these, those responsible for the Sook Ching seemed lightly punished.<sup>125</sup>

It is likely that this comparatively light sentencing prevented victims from feeling free of their wartime experiences. This is echoed in the memories of some survivors. The Overseas Chinese Appeal Committee was formed during these trials with the singular goal of securing a death sentence for all convicted Japanese. The committee, along with two war widows, were permitted to watch the two hangings that did occur.<sup>126</sup> They wanted to watch these hangings so that they could feel some sort of justice for the crimes committed against them. Indeed, after the hangings one of the widows is quoted to have said, "I'm not satisfied. I want to see their faces to make sure they are dead."<sup>127</sup> Even seeing two men put to death for their crimes did not satiate a need for justice. I believe that this lack of any collective sense of justice among Chinese Singaporeans is one of the main reasons the Sook Ching's collective memory is so complex, as many believe those who perpetrated the crime were not held accountable.

In the decade following World War II, Singapore struggled to figure out how to deal with the Japanese who remained on the island. Organizations such as the Singapore Japanese Association reopened, and many members of the Japanese community returned to the island as "advisers" who succeeded in reviving themselves socially and economically with the use of wartime connections.<sup>128</sup> Local Japanese were thus able to regain their stature in Singaporean society, something that would likewise happen for non-Singaporean Japanese a couple decades later. In this case, stature is regained through economic, not social, means. As Bayly and Harper remind us,

By 1972 Southeast Asian countries purchased nearly 12 per cent of total Japanese exports and supplied 16 per cent of total imports. By 1979, 35.4 per cent of Japan's total manufacturing investment...and 43 per cent of investment in mining was in Southeast Asia...'Even after the war,' one Japanese historian has observed, 'many Japanese businessmen and entrepreneurs still thought of Indonesia as a sort of second Manchuria.'<sup>129</sup>

Japan's economic superiority over newly independent Singapore made them a strong ally. This ties back into my earlier section discussing potential reasons for the Sook Ching not being acknowledged as a genocide. Economic ties can erase many historical injustices, and Singapore struggled with this dilemma after the war.

In the 1990s, Japan began to spread its influence socially, politically, and economically into the Southeast Asian region once again. This came as a result of their attempts to work as peacekeepers during the Gulf War.<sup>130</sup> Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki visited member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from April to May of 1991 in an attempt to strengthen relations with the region, and in Singapore issued an apology for Japan's actions during the Sook Ching. He stated his "strong feeling of remorse for our country's act that caused unbearable suffering and grief among many people in the Asia-Pacific region," an apology that was not fully accepted by Singaporeans.<sup>131</sup> Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated that Japanese peacekeeping forces were unpopular because it was "like giving chocolate filled with whisky to an alcoholic."<sup>132</sup> Japan had not properly apologized for their actions during World War II, so why should they be trusted to once again arm themselves and interfere with international conflicts? Singapore's dissatisfaction with Japanese intervention 50 years after the Sook Ching demonstrates that the wrongs committed by their army had not been properly apologized for.

I will also include reference to Paul Slovic's study on psychic numbing here in order to further explain how genocide is viewed on a global scale. He proposes that a psychophysical function, the connection between the physical world and one's reaction to it, may explain why people have a difficult job registering the magnitude of mass killings. This model suggests that psychophysical numbing may result from being exposed to numbers too large to easily conceptualize.<sup>133</sup> However, this model suggests that empathy caps out at a certain point, but is maintained at that level of magnitude. Slovic, therefore, proposes another idea for why genocides may be received with little to no empathy. An earlier study that Slovic helped facilitate found that people were twice as likely to donate winnings to an identified child in need than to a general cause.<sup>134</sup> Shockingly, however, when another group was exposed both to the child in need and the statistics about a larger issue, their contributions to the child declined. Additionally, a follow-up study showed that when participants were primed with calculative thoughts, "simple arithmetic calculations," rather than emotive ones, they donated less.<sup>135</sup> Even more concerning is the fact that when Slovic and others ran an experiment to see how large a group must be to demonstrate a decrease in empathy, they found that a group as small as two may determine a significant drop in empathy.<sup>136</sup> It is likely that the Sook Ching's treatment was influenced by psychic numbing. The sheer number of people killed is enough to overwhelm the brain's capacity for empathy, something not helped by the fact that we typically discuss the genocide in terms of numbers, rather than personal stories or specific people.

Ultimately, Slovic determines that an important move to increase genocide prevention is an emphasis on rational thought. He references the successful ratification of the United Nations' Genocide Treaty, a rational choice made in 1948 to draw up a document with which genocide

might be prevented and punished.<sup>137</sup> I agree with his approach, and hope to contribute to this rational field of thought by constructing this thesis in a logical, straightforward manner.

## JAPAN'S MEMORY

I will include here a short discussion of Japan's memory of World War II, as I believe it is important to examine both sides' memories of the Sook Ching in order to better understand the crime. Comparisons between Germany and Japan are popular in the postwar period, and it is of note that Japan is typically considered to have the "better" postwar period, despite Germany arguably fighting a better strategic war overall.<sup>138</sup> This was largely due to the lack of acknowledgement of war crimes on the Japanese side, paired with a lack of public awareness after the war. Japan was allowed to move forward from their war legacy without the same punishment that Germany faced. The Yasukuni Shrine is a good example of problems with Japan's war memory. As seen in Figure 3, it is a shrine to those killed during war in Japan with a contentious history; several Class A war criminals, those who committed crimes against peace, were secretly interned there in 1978.<sup>139</sup> Public officials also made several visits to the shrine in the far right period of the 1980s, when many Japanese became more nationalist.<sup>140</sup> Among them was Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro in 1985, whose visit sparked widespread controversy due to the perceived tacit approval of those war criminals interned at the shrine.<sup>141</sup> This created tensions between those who had lost people close to them in wars, and those who treated the shrine as a physical embodiment of Japanese nationalism.



Figure 3: Yasukuni Shrine<sup>142</sup>

American General Douglas MacArthur established the Tokyo Trials, Japan's postwar trials, which played a great role in the determinations about Japan's future. The main issue was that Allied Powers had significant issues among themselves. The late 1940s brought about the escalation of the Cold War, and MacArthur decided that democratization and demilitarization were less important for Japan than reconstructing and rearming.<sup>143</sup> This allowed the allies to use the country as a supporter, but this came with many consequences. Nineteen Class A war criminal suspects were released, and only microfilms of the trial records were made available in select places.<sup>144</sup> This meant that there was an immense decrease in external pressure to fix war legacies in Japan. Because of this, it was not until the 1990s that Japan began to investigate its World War II era war crimes in greater detail. According to historian Sheila Miyoshi Jager, this was because "the newly current concept of 'memory' provided a broad public with a lens through which to reexamine the entire postwar order and discover missed chances or unresolved issues that might explain the current social and political instability."<sup>145</sup> It was also hastened by the fact that most eyewitnesses and victims were aging or dying. This revival in interest about World War II crimes contrasted with previous periods when Japan was notorious for ignoring wrongs committed in the eastern hemisphere during the war.

Another explanation of Japan's reluctance to confront their crimes relates to the Tokyo Trials. After the war concluded, victorious countries ran these trials to hold Japanese forces accountable for both starting the Pacific theater of the war and for their various war crimes.<sup>146</sup> The idea of "war responsibility" here alienated many Japanese citizens. Essentially, Japan was held entirely responsible for the wars with Allied powers and China during 1931 to 1945.<sup>147</sup> Many contemporary Japanese citizens, as well as later historians, disagree with this verdict. The fact that victor countries prosecuted Japan made it all but impossible for them to take any form of responsibility for beginning the war, both out of fear that Japan would thus avoid responsibility and because it would undermine their presentation of a "good war" that vindicated their actions.<sup>148</sup> Anger over this perceived hypocrisy made many in Japan less regretful of their country's war crimes. It is understandable that they felt this way; when the country prosecuting your war trials bombed civilians with nuclear weapons not once, but twice, it would likely be difficult to be as compassionate as during an impersonal trial. This demonstrates the importance of assigning responsibility on all sides, whether or not one force is considered the victor. Perhaps if other countries such as the United States had taken more responsibility for their wartime crimes, Japan might have had less reluctance to face their own.

An important note for why Japan may have been reluctant to acknowledge many crimes was because of the way their veterans were treated in the postwar period. The military bore the brunt of the blame for postwar destitution, and most discharged veterans had difficulty reestablishing themselves in the civilian world.<sup>149</sup> Because they were so disdained, many veterans were reluctant to speak out about their experiences in the war, and 48.3 percent of veterans wanted to speak but "found it perhaps impossible to be understood."<sup>150</sup> An additional problem was that of the people who did choose to share their experiences in immediate postwar times, as many bragged shamelessly about their victories and crimes without guilt.<sup>151</sup> It was not until the 1970s that many

veterans who felt shame spoke out, and by that time, a precedent of bravery and victory had already been set.

This all shows that Japanese memory and approach to war reconciliation was complex. Their desire to forget war crimes in the immediate postwar period did not stem from a collective evil or a diminution of the value of human life, but rather came in large part from civilian horror and misplaced blame. Many Japanese citizens who did not fight abroad did not know the extent of their army's crimes, and those who did often felt too socially threatened to speak out. Being aware of these reasons helps explain why memories of the Sook Ching have not been fully explored in Japan and may give us a leg up in preventing any similar forgetfulness in the future.

## COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSION

In this section I will discuss a comparison of the Sook Ching to the Cambodian Genocide, a discussion of success stories in genocide prevention, and my conclusion. The Cambodian Genocide is a good comparison because of its wider impact and more successful war crime trials. I bring up the issues relating to successful genocide prevention because it is not easy to determine what impact intervention had on a crime that never occurred. It might have been prevented due to this intervention, or for any myriad of other reasons. This makes studying histories such as that of the Sook Ching all the more important by providing context to discussions about future prevention.

### COMPARISON TO CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE

The Cambodian Genocide is particularly strong as a comparative case due to its regional proximity. Its history has little overlap with that of the Sook Ching, but the repercussions and eventual conviction of the Khmer Rouge's leaders set a precedent for the sort of verdict the Sook Ching deserves.

The Cambodian Genocide began in 1975, after the Khmer Rouge took power. They were a communist insurgent group that had been working for over a decade to gain power and named their regime Democratic Kampuchea (DK).<sup>152</sup> Their origin was built atop a legacy of US bombing in Cambodia. Lasting from 1969 to 1973, this violence gave the communist Pol Pot and his followers effective anti-US propaganda and a defense for their murder of enemies.<sup>153</sup> Killings were particularly violent and widely distributed; almost anyone could be perceived as an enemy of the state, for almost any reason.<sup>154</sup> There were three main groups targeted: religious groups, ethnic and racial minority groups, and the eastern Khmers, who lived near Vietnam.<sup>155</sup> Here, ethnic Chinese were again targeted. This time it was not because of their perceived dissidence but because of perceived laziness derived from their city dwelling.<sup>156</sup> Of their original population of 425,000 in 1975, only 200,000 had survived by 1979.<sup>157</sup>

Out of a population of 8 million, approximately 1.5 million Cambodians are estimated to have died during this time, many from executions and many from starvation.<sup>158</sup> Although we have learned much of this through oral histories, the prosecutors of the Cambodian Genocide also had

a bit of luck. Kang Khek Iev, often known as Deuch, oversaw the Khmer Rouge prison and extermination center Tuol Sleng. When the regime fell, he did not destroy the prison archives that documented the crimes which occurred there; instead, he made sure to murder almost all remaining prisoners.<sup>159</sup> These documents formed the foundation of many arguments by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia that investigated the genocide. This was a common thread throughout the Cambodian Genocide. Many top officials meticulously documented their actions, both out of ignorance of their coming fall and of the coming of the internet, which would allow their documents to be widely circulated.<sup>160</sup> This sort of written documentation is perhaps the most helpful tool genocide researchers can have. Unfortunately, the Sook Ching has significantly less written documentation, and so I must focus more on oral histories.

The Khmer Rouge was ousted by Vietnamese forces in 1979, but Pol Pot continued to lead an insurgent group from the Thai border until the group collapsed inward during 1996 to 1998.<sup>161</sup> Pol Pot died of illness in his sleep, never facing trial for his crimes.<sup>162</sup> Throughout this all, the United States and China continued to support the Khmer Rouge, and up until 1992, the United Nations supported Pol Pot's regime and considered the exiled Khmer Rouge government to be Cambodia's legitimate representatives.<sup>163</sup> This legacy of genocide acceptance, or even denial, shows us an alternative of how the Cambodian Genocide could have remained in collective memory had it not been for institutions such as the United Nations (which improved its handling of the situation after 1992) and their Genocide Convention. The establishment of international courts of law is of huge importance for the trial of crimes of this magnitude. Without the UN, Cambodia's legitimate government would have needed to face the power of both the United States and China to gain recognition for crimes committed. It is quite possible that these two countries could have used their economic and political influence to force Cambodia to do their will without ever using a military threat.

Despite these difficult circumstances, the situation is improving. Infrastructure is being rebuilt, land mines dug up, and new professionals are getting trained. Additionally, in November of 2018, the United Nations-backed Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia convicted two of Pol Pot's assistants of genocide.<sup>164</sup> This is the first ever verdict of its kind, as the organization had spent years collecting evidence (and faced widespread criticism for its slow movement). An important point here is how long it took the UN to establish an international tribunal to begin hearings. They did not begin this process until 1999, a full 20 years after the Khmer Rouge was removed from power.<sup>165</sup> Despite this long wait, the courts have successfully brought several criminals to justice. This long wait proves that the age of a crime does not make it ineligible for genocidal study. Although the Sook Ching is a significantly older crime, we have many firsthand records of what happened, along with documents from both sides of the genocide. The 20 years that passed before the Cambodian Genocide was officially examined by the UN proves that immediate action after a crime is not a prerequisite for bringing about justice.

The most important part of these proceedings for my argument are the methods through which the tribunal convicted these men of genocide. Prosecutors used the same language from the United Nations Convention on Genocide that I have used here in my own argument, namely that

the Khmer Rouge had the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.”<sup>166</sup> This was then corroborated by the Khmer Rouge’s mass killings and deportations of ethnic Vietnamese, along with the ethnic Cham minority<sup>167</sup> and ethnic Chinese populations. The fact that prosecutors successfully used this language to convict people of genocide is very valuable to my case, as it sets a precedent for historical crimes such as the Sook Ching Massacre.

## SUCCESS STORIES

The importance of my research is to strengthen the precedent of genocide identification to prevent further crimes. The fact that the Sook Ching is an old crime does not diminish the net gain that would come of using it as a precedent in future preventative measures. Unfortunately, the very nature of genocide studies makes it difficult to identify failed genocides. Even when they have indisputably occurred, there tend to be deniers. As Christina Cliff, professor of political science at Franklin Pierce University stated, “[When] a regime (or group) has plans to commit a genocide but were stopped by external forces...[it] is difficult to discern, although you could argue that the NATO intervention in Libya prevented Qaddafi from mass slaughter, although whether his plans would have been legally defined as genocide is questionable.”<sup>168</sup> Herein lies the problem. Although we know that NATO intervened to halt Qaddafi’s mistreatment, we cannot determine with any great level of certainty that his regime would have progressed to genocide. Due to this uncertainty, we can only say that it is possible that an intervention prevented a genocide, not that it did so definitively. Using historical evidence of crimes such as the Sook Ching helps us identify dangerous patterns, and ideally allows us to intervene early enough that no tragedy occurs. It is crucial to build a definition of genocide and a catalogue of examples which we can pull from to address future crimes.

One of the strongest forms of genocide awareness comes from the communities that have formed online to keep people informed about potential and current genocides. Genocide Watch is perhaps the best known of these. Its website features a tab titled “Current Genocide Watch Alerts” that informs readers about potential areas of genocide around the world.<sup>169</sup> Features such as these allow public citizens to learn about global conflicts, and demonstrate that there is some level of care taken by those determining whether or not to intervene in other countries. Genocide Watch, and other websites like it, can enhance confidence in governing bodies, along with giving people the information needed to make personal decisions about activism or intervention. This is a clear marker of improvement in public awareness about genocide. At the time of the Sook Ching, it would have been near impossible to spread the news of it to distant countries in any sort of timely manner. Since the entire crime took only twelve days, and itself only began a week after Japanese occupation began, it is unlikely prevention could have happened concurrently. Nowadays, with publicized watches going on, it will hopefully become easier to predict and prevent future genocides. Redefining the Sook Ching will add to the catalogue of past genocides and will provide evidence and information that can be used to prevent future crimes.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have discussed a variety of reasons that the Sook Ching should be considered a genocide rather than a massacre. My argument utilizes the United Nations Genocide Convention's five qualifications for genocide, and states that because the Sook Ching fulfilled three, it should thus qualify as a genocide. I also give readers a background on the history of genocide studies, along with an in-depth history of the Sook Ching itself. This is accompanied by a series of counterpoints that defend the view that the Sook Ching was not a genocide, which I respond to. I then discussed the politics of memory on both sides of the invasion. I specifically focused on the use of war shrines and memorials in Singapore and wrote about how they were used by both Japan and Singapore to back up a political agenda. I finish with a comparison to the Cambodian Genocide and its similarities and differences to the Sook Ching. I will add a disclaimer here that my research is somewhat incomplete. Some sources I used here are tertiary because I was unable to procure more direct sources. Hayashi's writing about the Sook Ching is an example, as I was unable to read the Japanese plans myself. Finally, my argument is not merely an academic one, as I think the alteration of the label is important to set a precedent for future genocides. By labeling something like the Sook Ching a genocide, it will leave a record which we can reference in the future to bring justice to other mass tragedies.

In November of 2018, the Khmer Rouge was convicted of genocide in Cambodia for their crimes of the 1970s.<sup>170</sup> This ruling sets a strong precedent for genocide trials. Rather than only finding individuals guilty (though this is necessary as well), the government and system within which the genocide occurs were found guilty. I hope that this reaps benefits in the form of continued genocide convictions around the world, including the Sook Ching.

History, of course, is subjective. I will end with a quote from Talaat Pasha, initiator of the Armenian Genocide: "I have the conviction that as long as a nation does the best for its own interests, and succeeds, the world admires it and thinks it moral."<sup>171</sup> Perhaps if Japan had succeeded in conquering Southeast Asia and winning the war, the conversation we have would be a very different one.

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<sup>169</sup> “Current Genocide Watch Alert,” *Genocide Watch*, <http://www.genocidewatch.com/countries-at-risk> (accessed 5 August 2019).

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Quoted in Mark Levene, “Why is the Twentieth Century the Century of Genocide?” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 336. Fall 2011.