

## **Should anyone be ashamed of their nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it?**

“Can the past help the present? Can the dead save the living?” (The Nobel Prize)  
- Han Kang

### **Introduction**

In a lecture, novelist Han Kang explains how these two sentences inspired her to continue a journey of exploring the past's connection to modern life, an impetus that led to *Human Acts*, a poetic exposition set in Gwangju 1980 during the climax of South Korea's democratic uprising (The Nobel Prize). Her work examines history through the lens of previous sacrifices that shape modern humanity—a factor at the root of the two-question essay prompt.

This essay argues that individuals should perceive their nations' history, including atrocities and painful memories, as part of a broader narrative that inspires pride, not shame. This narrative behind the country's past fuels current movements and provides a resilient front against threats to democracy. To provide a global perspective, the essay will feature democratization case studies in South Korea and Poland to explain how each country's previous experiences with democratization in the 1980s shaped responses to threats to democracy in the 21st century. Democratization was a global development that especially flourished from the late 20th century into the 21st century (National Museum of American Diplomacy), and this essay is written in a pro-democracy lens in an attempt to justify that a nation's history warrants pride despite the obstacles, tolls, and sacrifices the country faces.

### **Global Tensions in the 1980s**

During the latter half of the 20th century, tensions between Communist and anti-Communist groups escalated with the persisting conflict over democratic values including ideas behind fair elections, freedoms, and commerce (National Museum of American Diplomacy). This struggle was not only seen through the interaction between countries but also internally within nations as demonstrations against Communist authoritarianism flourished across countries like Poland, where anti-Communist sentiments sparked the nationwide Solidarity movement (Bartkowski). Meanwhile, countries such as South Korea also experienced global pressure from anti-Communist sentiments. These sentiments became an excuse for the press—widely regulated by General Chun Doo-Hwan's dictatorship—to refer to the uprising as a “bloody riot” (Yoon). Stemming from a time period with conflicting ideologies, Poland's and South Korea's democratization movements exemplify the past's impact on modern society.

## Case Study 1: Poland's Anti-Communist and Pro-Democracy Movements Across the Decades

Poland's history of democracy traces back to the country's decades-long Communist governance, which began in 1947 ("That May") and persisted into the 1980s as Solidarity, a coalition of opposition groups, came together to call for improved working conditions (Bartkowski), freedom of speech, and free trade unions (Richards). The Solidarity group's united stance against Communism provided momentum for the movement despite a four-year period of martial law (Bartkowski); with this resistance, the coalition made significant progress, including an opportunity for non-Communists to participate in the 1989 elections—a development that led to the election of the country's Prime Minister who, for the first time, was not Communist (Smith).

This stride was possible through decades of demonstrations, merciless government retaliation, and hundreds of casualties that contributed to a foundation for previous generations while inspiring future civic responsibility. Thus, the most effective way to determine whether one should have shame or pride for their nation's history requires examining long-term consequences—namely, efforts to decentralize regions to bring representation and voice to the lower levels of government, including local administrations (Bartkowski).

To discover whether one should feel pride or shame towards their nation's history, examining current events is also helpful. Poland's 2023 election exemplifies how experiences of political instability in a country's past can fuel the public's desire for civic engagement in democratic initiatives and, in turn, help them interpret the past with appreciation.

Two years after the landmark election of the non-Communist Prime Minister, Poland held its first democratic election in 1991, marking its transition from a Communist state to a democracy following decades of authoritarian rule (Smith). Despite this shift towards democracy, the rising Law and Justice (PiS) party and their governmental control from 2015 to 2023 regressed progress through initiatives that manipulated the courts system (e.g. lowering opposition judges' retirement age to force earlier resignations) (Duncan and Macy). Although PiS attempted to justify these initiatives through the claim that the reforms are imperative for courts' efficiency (Ayres), these steps were widely perceived as direct threats to democracy, with the EU warning Poland that such attempts to undermine judicial independence would potentially necessitate membership revocation (Duncan and Macy).

With Poland's extensive experience with pro-democracy demonstrations, the public unsurprisingly responded with strength in an effort that eventually culminated with nearly a decade of protests (Gera). The exacerbating polarization and decline in PiS's popularity not only mobilized these demonstrations but also contributed to a 74% voter turnout rate for the 2023

parliamentary election (Raderstorf)—a record since 1919—through civic responsibility, a development primarily sourced from a sense of pride and concern in one’s country (Rolski).

A 2024 *East European Politics and Societies* study examining 82 interviews with the Polish public found that individuals who have prior experience with anti-Communist demonstrations have a higher probability of upholding liberal, pro-democracy values in modern society (Blackington). These internalized values are lasting motives behind demonstrations; thus, this study justifies the personal, extensive weight that previous pro-democracy efforts can have on modern-day efforts to uphold democracy. This development is only possible through a sense of pride in the nation’s history and coincides with the primary drive—fueled by the large sacrifices of the Solidarity movement members—behind Poland’s Civic Platform (PO) party to win the 2023 parliamentary election. The victory provided the opportunity to restore democratic reform (Grzymała-Busse).

Some may claim that this essay’s support for individual pride in their nation’s history is, in Poland’s case, undermined by cultural ties that evoke nostalgia about the country’s Communism (“Lost and Found”). However, although having nostalgia for Poland’s Communist past may seem mutually exclusive with appreciating the pro-democracy Solidarity movement, part of the desire to return to the pre-democracy state of the 1980s actually stems from the longing to seek “values that were pure” (“Lost and Found”), including the demonstrators’.

### **Case Study 2: South Korea’s Path Towards Democratization in the Past and Present**

Four years prior to Poland’s first democratic election, the 1987 June Democratic Struggle marked South Korea’s transition from authoritarian rule to democracy following tumultuous decades involving imperialism, coups, and martial law (Keblinska). Alongside Poland’s Solidarity movement, the 1980 Gwangju Uprising remains one of the most prominent examples of a previous movement that directly influenced 21st century pro-democracy initiatives. After the military organization Hanahoe executed military Chun’s coup and the new leader declared martial law on May 18 for the Gwangju province in hopes of quelling anti-military sentiment, the citizens’ freedoms were severely restricted—a matter exacerbated by press censorship that made it extremely difficult to communicate the truth to regions outside Gwangju (Kwon). Despite being subject to indiscriminate beatings, a helicopter shooting (The May 18 History Compilation Committee of Gwangju), and the death toll that rose to hundreds in ten days (Hwang), the people held demonstrations that mobilized tens and thousands of citizens to march on the streets to resist Chun’s authoritative rule (Jang).

The current polarization between the progressive Democratic Party (DP) and the People Power Party (PPP) (Kang and Sohn) echoes the fraught political tensions between Chun’s conservative ideologies and Gwangju’s demands for progressive reform (Seong). Although Yoon Suk-Yeol

(PPP) did win the 2022 presidential election, his thin 0.8 percentage point lead and the opposition party's control of Parliament, along with scandals that marked his tenure, contributed to a "cauldron of discontent" to ultimate result in a martial law declaration. In addition to how Yoon's martial law declaration came nearly four decades after Chun's, the geographic breadth was drastically larger in the former, spanning the entirety of South Korea rather than a single province like Gwangju (Yuhas).

Given the disparity in scale, there is a temptation to believe that South Korean citizens' rapid response against Yoon's declaration stems from the change impacting a significantly larger group of people relative to the martial law declaration over Gwangju. However, Gwangju residents' responses to the 2024 martial law declaration show a correlation between previous pro-democracy experiences and responses to martial law in modern society, with city officials and academics immediately gathering to discuss the situation while demonstrations unfolded at the 5.18 Democracy Square ("May Met Again" 08:53-09:30). Media coverage of Yoon's martial law declaration commonly features comparisons to the Gwangju Uprising, reflecting parallels across the two events. The Gwangju spirit, encompassing the resilience of the people in the face of martial law, inspired people to continue advocating for Yoon's impeachment even in sub-zero temperatures ("South Koreans Protests Continue Demanding Yoon's Impeachment" 00:10-00:11).

In addition to the demonstrators' mobilization following Yoon's declaration, the contrast between the military's responses in 1980 and 2024 provides a concrete example of history's inevitable influence on current events, justifying the pride one should feel about their nation's past. Video clips from the scenes of the military response show troops retreating ("May Met Again" 19:55-20:04) after a 190-0 National Assembly vote for lifting martial law (Hong et al.) and hugging a citizen to calm him down (Malay Mail). South Korea's experience with atrocious violence under martial law is the source for this shift in troops' attitude and draws a stark contrast with their approach to suppression in the 1980s, when troops executed a mass shooting after the Gwangju residents played the national anthem ("May Met Again" 20:19-20:46).

The Gwangju Uprising is unique as a case study for this essay because, at first glance, the events defining the 1980s movement may seem startlingly similar to those defining the 2024 continuation of democratization following Yoon's declaration: both include martial law declarations and vocal resistance—factors that can make it difficult to envision how one event influences the other. Nevertheless, this claim disregards the philosophy behind transformative experiences, which include Poland's Solidarity democratization movement and South Korea's Gwangju Uprising in the 1980s. Both nations' movements involved tragedy, a type of transformative experience that brings emotional scarring and goes so far as to impact one's sense of identity. Following the nature of transformative experiences, events like these leave indelible marks on survivors and—facilitated by the spread of witness testimonies, histories, and

media—descendants, shaping modern history in a way that should bring pride, not shame to the history of one’s nation (Chan).

## Conclusion

This essay concludes that individuals should feel pride for their nation’s history. All events—most notably ones of tragedy and grief, such as the violence pervading Poland’s and South Korea’s 1980s democratization movements—contribute to a collective narrative of resilience and provide lasting hope for future generations. The past provides lessons for modern governance, and it is only fair to give back to previous generations by embracing inspiration from history’s movements.

While implementing a pro-democracy lens, it is also important to understand how external factors in historical context can inevitably affect the complexity of pride individuals have towards their nation’s history. A notable example is media accessibility in the 1980s. During the 1980s Gwangju Uprising, press censorship (Mal) and a lack of developed media technology limited recorded history of the military crackdown, inhibiting current attempts to form informed opinions about the nation’s past (Chon and Kang). The role of media is especially prominent when comparing its restricted presence in Gwangju with its extensive involvement on the night Yoon declared martial law as foreign press provided live news coverage (“president faces impeachment”) and quick communication methods such as opposition leader Lee Jae-Myung’s viral livestream mobilized pro-democracy efforts (He). Given how external factors are nearly impossible for individuals to control, it is not truly possible to declare a definite answer to the essay prompt.

Taking an approach analogous to Han Kang’s retrospective outlook, viewing the history of one’s nation underscores the past’s inevitable ties to current events and renews appreciation for previous generations whose actions allowed modern democracy.

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