

Roof Koreans: How Civilians Defended Koreatown from Racist Violence During the 1992 LA Riots

The riots of the spring of 2020 are far from without precedent in the United States. Indeed, they seem to happen once a generation at least. The 1992 Los Angeles Riots are such an example of these “generational riots.” And while most people know about the riots, less known – though *quite* well known at the time – were the phenomenon of the so-called “Roof Koreans.”

The Roof Koreans were spontaneous self-defense forces organized by the Korean community of Los Angeles, primarily centered in Koreatown, in response to violent and frequently racist attacks on their communities and businesses by primarily black looters and rioters during the Los Angeles Riots of 1992. Despite their best efforts, over 2,200 Korean-owned businesses were looted or burned to the ground during the riots. It is chilling to imagine how many would have suffered the same fate had the Koreans not been armed.

Standing on the rooftops of Koreatown shops they and their families owned, clad not in body armor or tactical gear, but instead dressed like someone’s nerdy dad, often smoking cigarettes, but always on alert, the Roof Koreans provide a stirring example of how free Americans of all races can defend their own communities without relying upon outside help.

The Koreans of Los Angeles were the ultimate marginalized minority group. They were subject to discrimination and often victimized by the black community of the city. Due to language barriers and other factors, they lacked the political clout of other minority groups, such as the large Mexican community of Los Angeles County. This in spite of their clear economic success in the city beginning in the 1970s and 80s.

The reasons for the tensions between the Korean and black communities of Los Angeles pre-dates the riots, which were largely just the match that ignited the powder keg that had been this region of Los Angeles for years. To understand what happened in Koreatown in 1992, it is necessary to understand much more than simply the Rodney King trial and the resulting riots.

The Roots of Korean Business Ownership in Black Communities

How is it that the Korean-American community of Los Angeles ended up owning so much property in what were largely black neighborhoods? The answer, ironically, lies in a previous riot, the Watts Riot of 1965. This riot, which included six full days of arson and looting, was kicked off when a black man was arrested for drunk driving.

The riots occurred roughly at the same time that the Koreans started showing up in America. This meant that, among other things, businesses and real estate were very cheap to purchase. The newly arrived Korean immigrants began buying up the businesses that no one else wanted. By the 1980s, it wasn't limited to Los Angeles – Koreans were dominating the mom-and-pop shops from coast to coast. But the resentment in the City of Angels was growing.

Prologue: The Death of Latasha Harlins

While it was not the start of tensions in the city between these two communities, the killing of Latasha Harlins in 1991 certainly ratcheted the situation up to a new level.

Harlins, whose personal life is a hard-luck story that does not bear repeating here, was 15 at the time when she was shot and killed by Korean shopkeeper Soon Ja Du, a 51-year-old woman born in Korea. Du generally didn't even work in the store, a task that typically fell on her husband and her son. However, that day she was covering for her husband who was outside in the family's van.

Du claimed that Harlins was trying to steal a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice, but witnesses said they heard Du call Harlins a slur and heard Harlins say she planned to pay for the juice, with money in hand. After reviewing video tape footage, the police agreed with the witnesses. Video footage further showed Du grabbing Harlins by her sweatshirt and backpack.

Harlins responded by striking Du twice, which knocked the latter to the ground. Harlins started to back away, prompting Du to throw a stool at her. The two struggled over the juice before Harlins went to leave. Du went behind the counter and grabbed a revolver, firing at a retreating Harlins from behind from three feet away. Harlins was killed instantly by a bullet to the back of the head.

Billy Heung Ki Du, Ja's husband, rushed into the store after hearing the gunshot. His wife asked where Harlins was before she fainted. Mr. Du then called 911 to report an attempted holdup.

Mrs. Du was charged with voluntary manslaughter, a charge that can carry up to 16 years in prison. At trial, she testified on her own behalf. The jury recommended the maximum sentence, which the judge rejected, instead giving Mrs. Du time served, five years probation, 500 hours of community service and a \$500 fine. The California Court of Appeals upheld the sentence about a week before the riots began in a unanimous decision. Harlins' family received a settlement of \$300,000.

The case wasn't the first example of tensions between the two communities, but it was a microcosm for them and perhaps the worst from an optics perspective. In 1991, the *Los*

Angeles Times reported that there were four shootings in the span of just over four months involving a Korean shooter and a black target. The store was eventually burned down during the riots, never to reopen.

That same year, there was an over 100-day boycott of a Korean-American-owned liquor store that ended when the owner was effectively bullied into selling his store to a black owner. Then-Mayor Tom Bradley, who many blamed for the riots, was instrumental in coming to this “settlement” which chased a Korean owner out of the area.

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