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Reappraisal of the Korean Military’s Core Competences in the Age of the Phono Sapiens

Dong-ha Seo and Jung-yoon Chang

Authors’ Note: This study was supported by the ROK Army Soldiers’ Value and Culture Research Center in 2021.

Abstract: This study explores the characteristics of three core competences that can lead the Phono sapiens generation, which uses smartphones as an extension of their bodies, to become ideal “democratic citizens in uniform” in Korea where the military maintains the conscription system. The democratic citizen concept poses two challenges: first, how the military explains the concept in the conscription system in a way that summons Phono sapiens as soldiers without choice, and second, how the military trains these recruits to be democratic citizens in uniforms. Based on the characteristics of Phono sapiens and the conscription system, we reappraised the three core competences of democratic citizens in uniform: reflection, sympathy, and tolerance (RST). In reflection, soldiers who feel confused when experiencing unfamiliar circumstances can view their situation as a temporary suspension of some of their rights as citizens. In terms of sympathy, which is the reproduction of the experience of another, soldiers realize that they are not accessories to be sacrificed for the army or the nation and thus develop a natural sense of comradeship. Finally, in requiring an other-oriented attitude, tolerance can lead soldiers to respect others’ existence. RST competences are not developed separately but are intricately intertwined, and develop Phono sapiens’ understanding of the personal liberty of service members while maintain a high degree of combat readiness. The RST competences can help KMA cadets and soldiers representative of Phono sapiens learn how to cultivate leadership skills and democratic values.

Keywords: Reflection; Sympathy; Tolerance; Competence; Democratic Citizens in Uniform; Conscription; Phono Sapiens.

Introduction

The military exists as the guardian of the state and as a legitimate institution for managing violence and using lethal force when necessary. It remains true—and is becoming more apparent—that “the (modern) military profession,” as Samuel Huntington argues, “exists to serve the state. To render the highest possible service, the entire profession and the military force which it leads must be constituted as an effective instrument of the state policy.”1 In this regard, it does perceive waging war and increasing expertise or professional knowledge of war as its core function.

To perform its core function, the military endeavors to ensure a high level of discipline, morale, and unity, and to continuously train soldiers to win wars, and to maintain a hierarchical pyramid structure of command and control. In other words, to achieve the highest combat efficiency and ensure invincibility in war, the military emphasizes a sense
of unity and camaraderie within its hierarchical control system and has a distinct culture. Under these circumstances, soldiers are expected to both obey legal orders and execute seemingly impossible orders during potentially fatal combat missions.

Notwithstanding, it is not beneficial for the military to overemphasize the extraordinary state of war at the national level, particularly in the Korean situation, when it does not produce needless casualties on a massive scale. Moreover, it should avoid regarding itself as “another state within the state”: the military does not exist as a specialized and independent society. Only when it exercises its power over personnel and property in accordance with democratic principles (i.e., when it is subject to civilian control) can its almost exclusive control within the chain of command be seen as legitimate.

The present situation in the Republic of Korea (ROK) due to the radical changes brought about by the democratization process has provoked a discussion about a new, or redefined, civil-military relationship in the context of its unique historical, political, and social experience. The current government’s Defense Reform 2.0, is an improved version of the Roh Moo-hyun administration’s Defense Reform 2020 implemented in 2004. Defense Reform 2.0 aims to create a smaller but smarter military by restructuring and modernizing its armed forces and addressing human rights issues and the service conditions of conscripts. Notably, these changes, which involve reshaping cultural life in the barracks, are not limited to the improvement of soldiers’ lifestyle. Furthermore, the Korean Army’s modernization project Tigor 4.0 System, which envisions the creation of a smaller but smarter army based on a hyper-connected and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven ground network, should be considered in light of the development and maintenance of interoperability between the U.S. and ROK forces. Within the present demographic and political contexts of Korean society, the changes cannot be reversed. In fact, the building of democratic armed forces was introduced very quickly after a series of reform initiatives, and the culture of the ROK military has been transformed dramatically over the past two decades.

Nevertheless, one of the important issues during this transformation has been the fear—felt not only in the military mind but also in the public realm—that democracy in the military will undermine its combat efficiency. Although the ROK military has recognized that the liberty and individual rights of its service members are important, it has long wished to distance itself from individual rights and democratic value on the grounds that the North Korean military threat remains unchanged but is becoming more serious. This threat calls for special consideration when promoting a democratic culture in the ROK.

With due consideration of various security issues, this paper discusses the future of the ROK military and explores the characteristics of a “democratic citizen in uniform.” The idea of a democratic citizen in uniform encompasses two aspects: what it means to be a democratic citizen in the twenty-first century and how the military can support the production of democratic citizens. Before tackling this issue, it is important to understand
the conscription system that has operated in the ROK military since the 1960s, as well as the characteristics of the new generation, which has been dubbed “Phono sapiens,” referring to the generation of young people who “use smart phones as an extension of their bodies.”

We then reappraise the core competences of democratic citizens in uniform and propose reflection, sympathy, and tolerance (RST) as key competences for Korea Military Academy (KMA) cadets and soldiers representative of Phono sapiens to cultivate. The paper advocates that these three key competences are important factors in determining the future of the democratic Korean Military.

**The Conscription System and Phono Sapiens**

The term “democratic citizenship education” was introduced in formal educational contexts in the 1960s as a means of earning the Korean government popular support, as well as the support of the U.S., for its anti-communist policy. Subsequently, the democratic movement in the 1970s and 1980s was an expression of the political resistance against the military dictatorship. Park Chung-hee, who took power in a military coup in 1961, declared a constitutional revision in 1973 to grant himself greater political power. Following Park’s assassination in 1979, General Chun Doo-hwan seized power and was elected president in 1980. During these periods of military rule the military elites controlled the government bureaucracy and strengthened their rules with compulsory military training and service. As democratic citizenship education became equivalent to radical political education, military leaders were highly critical of the democratic rhetoric, believing that the democratization of the military would weaken its power and threaten national security.

Nowadays, however, the military is looking for ways to maintain a balance between national security and individual rights. For example, the Directive on Human Rights (amended by Act No. 2199 of September 27, 2018) of the Ministry of National Defense (MND) states, “The aim of military human rights education is to make soldiers aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens in uniform and to spread a barracks culture that respects human rights.” This is significant not only in terms of the human rights policy, but also the recognition of human rights as a fundamental principle of the military. In view of MND acts, regulations, and administrative rules and legislative efforts that are underway in the area of soldier education, it is necessary to determine ways to strengthen democratic values in the military going forward and to propose diversity in recruit education.

What is noteworthy in the aforementioned legislative enactments is the scope of “democracy.” For example, Administrative Rules Article 188 under the Framework Act on Military Status and Service (amended by Act No. 14609 of March 21, 2017), which governs citizenship education, reads, “The heads of the National Defense Agency, the joint chiefs of staff, and the chief of staff of each service establish a culture of respect for the human rights of the soldiers and eliminate undemocratic abuses while continuing to provide mental education and personalized guidance.” The 2019-2023 Comprehensive Plan for Defense Human Rights Policy further highlights that “improving human rights conditions in the
military will contribute to the promotion of invisible combat power.”

As a result, the military has begun to reconsider the effectiveness of a coercive control and disconnection from society on conscripted young people. Having been maintained since the establishment of the ROK military, the conscription system is generally seen by young people as a requirement of sacrificing their time and “learning the framework of hierarchy.”

In the past, complete isolation from society was considered the most effective way to turn young civilians into homogeneous soldiers, so recruits were prohibited from carrying personal belongings with them.

According to the Defense Human Rights Policy however, Korean soldiers are now allowed to use their mobile phones every evening. As The Economist observes, this easing of restrictions is “one of the more visible changes in South Korea’s armed forces.” It also implies that the military has understood the characteristics of Millennials and Generation Z (the MZ generation) and thus allows conscripted soldiers to use their mobile phones in a way that facilitates their adaptation to life in the military. Although the MZ generation, the mobile generation, is a global phenomenon due to the development of digital technology, the Korean MZ generation is “the generation who has experienced the development of the Internet and the use of various app services armed with smartphones with the level of communication network up to 5G.”

In Korea, the MZ generation purchases what they want and performs their financial activities and learning through mobile devices. In this study, we regarded mobile technology as the most important factor in determining the tastes and trends of the MZ generation and thus defined them as “Phono sapiens” because they treat smartphones as an extension of their bodies and minds, not just as a means of communication. Given that soldiers in their early 20s account for 70 percent of Korean military organizations, it is essential that the military understand the characteristics of this generation: it is no exaggeration to say that they are all Phono sapiens. It is therefore only natural to have these mobile natives use mobile phones in the context of military human rights issues. As a result, the military’s decision to allow soldiers to use their mobile phones in the barracks has had a positive effect on their adaptation to military life.

The ideal goal of democratic civic education in the military is to make Phono sapiens believe that “every citizen has an obligation to serve his country and thereby (gain) an understanding of the role of the military in society and (strengthen) civil-military relations.” It should not be a system that deprives individuals of their freedom; rather, it should help people understand the value of democracy and the meaning of individual freedom and responsibility.

Like conscripts, KMA cadets undergo a socialization process through basic training. During the initial five-week training, they learn the values, attitudes, and skills associated
with the army and demonstrate their willingness to commit to public service. The Korean Army has long believed that KMA cadets stand on a different footing to university students, and the KMA thus tends to focus on a disciplinary culture that demands instant and unquestioned obedience to orders. Now, however, it should not be taken for granted that the transition from civilian to military life is the primary goal of the socialization process. In this complicated socialization process, a new approach is needed for young cadets who, as Phono sapiens, are seen as a somewhat different species from previous generations.

This study focuses on the fact that almost 300 cadets who share the characteristics of Phono sapiens serve as second lieutenants across the country each year. This means that they can become empowering leaders and have an important impact on soldiers' daily lives in the barracks: cadets are not only important receivers, but also skillful providers of democratic education. We therefore set different types of democratic civic education for cadets who are required to learn key competences and disseminated them to soldiers, presenting the competences that are important for Phono sapiens in the next section.

**Characteristics of the Three Core Competences**

Competences are "correlated with performance on the job," and therefore usually indicate how proficient an individual is in performing that job. The competences discussed in this paper are not the abilities that an individual already possesses but potential abilities that can be acquired through education. For example, if a soldier's ability is "leadership, personal discipline, and physical fitness," then competences can be defined as the motivation or inspiration that makes them develop these abilities and "continue" to do so.

According to most Korean scholars in the field of citizenship education, there are three key factors of democratic citizenship education and competence in each relevant area (i.e., key competence at an individual level, citizenship competence at civic and social levels, and democratic competence at a democratic level). The necessary competences for a democratic citizen can only be developed from the level of an individual's everyday life, through their community, to a national level. However, as Cho noted, the problem with the implementation of this education program is "the inconsistency in the contents of democratic citizenship education which leads to a lack of coherence and unity in the education program, causing confusion and creating difficulties amongst teachers and program practitioners." This is reflected in the education offered from elementary to high school, where Korean students only participate in student councils, mock voting, mock court trials, parliament tours, and municipal court tours.

Comprehending the difficulties of democratic citizenship education, the KMA designed the SITE Leadership Program, which instills democratic citizenship values in cadets. The program is based on the idea that "every cadet is a leader" and that it is necessary for all cadets to develop and strengthen their leadership skills and competences each year. The SITE program influences how cadets describe themselves as citizens and as soldiers, how they should relate to others, and how they can protect democracy. Simply put, cadets
systematically improve their individual, team, and organizational leadership skills as they go through the program’s four leadership training stages. Upon successful completion, cadets advance to the next stage, as shown in Figure 1.

In the SITE program, the evaluation system of leadership competences was improved through the inclusion of an annual assessment. The main tool chosen for this program over a four-year period was a competence evaluation for all cadets (encompassing their horizontal and vertical relationships) and coaching feedback sessions. Group counseling provided by the Office of Leadership and Character Education three or four times a year provides useful opportunities for cadets to develop their core competences.

The significance of the SITE program is that it incorporates the unique and complex characteristics of South Korea’s social and political conditions. Although South Korea is considered one of the most democratic countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Koreans are currently experiencing polarization in terms of income and ideology and face complicated defense and diplomatic issues with respect to security on the Korean Peninsula as well as with the U.S., China, and Japan. Cadets should understand the concept of balanced and rational democracy in these extreme circumstances.

Accordingly, along with necessary traditional virtues, such as loyalty, courage, honor, responsibility, critical thinking, leadership skills, a law-abiding attitude, and a professional ethos, we propose three core competences that will help cadets learn the values that are required of an officer and how they are acquired at each stage of the SITE program. In the

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**Figure 1: KMA SITE Leadership Program**

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rest of this paper, we explain how these RST competences can help cadets internalize the concept of democratic citizens in uniform and understand why they have to follow the process of the SITE program.

RST competences are not developed separately but are intricately intertwined. Sympathy and tolerance are based on self-understanding through reflection, and tolerance can be described as a state of expanding sympathy to a community level. Reflection, in turn, is based on sympathy and tolerance since self-understanding is achieved through comparisons with others. As such, all three competences are important for cultivating a “democratic citizen in the community.” That said, we propose gender awareness education at the KMA as a case model to deal with gender equality issues in the military on a practical level while cultivating democratic citizenship.

By exploring “me” as a citizen and as a soldier, the first core competence, reflection, is one of the most important core competences. Because of the soldiers’ special status and the closed environment of the military, it cannot be claimed that the relationship between soldiers and military organizations is the same as that between citizens and states. Soldiers cannot demand freedom and equality. Most of the education in the military therefore centers on the specificity of military organization.

We, however, think it would be ineffective to order Phono sapiens, who value individual activity and freedom, to follow the characteristics of the military unconditionally. Reflection aims to help cadets and soldiers understand their specific situation, so those who feel confused in unfamiliar circumstances can view their situation as a temporary suspension of some of their rights as citizens and not as a state of exclusion and disconnection. Moreover, reflection makes cadets and soldiers recognize what it means to be a leader in their lives and the military. Because reflection can help cadets bring order to a chaotic mind, cadets can develop the self-leadership skills required in the first stage of the SITE program. Above all, cadets and soldiers will be able to understand why they have to fight and become “combat-effective soldiers” through “a military socialization process characterized by strict disciplines and arduous training.” They will also learn to control themselves effectively and make more ethical and rational decisions when facing dilemmas.

Based on reflection, gender awareness education should be reappraised as part of human rights education. The current education program for soldiers mainly aims to prevent sexual violence occurring in the military and instructs soldiers what to do and what not to do as a soldier. As a result, on the one hand, cadets and soldiers become bored because they are not convinced of the importance of taking the class on gender awareness. On the other hand, those who have developed the competence to reflect cannot help but think fundamentally about why gender-related issues are relevant in military life. We believe that they understand that gender-related problems like sexual harassment can be caused by a lack of democratic civic consciousness, not by instinctive problems such as sexual desire.
The second core competence, sympathy, can be important in building ethical relationships between soldiers who undertake reflection. We suggest sympathy as the basis for instilling a democratic culture in Phono sapiens as they have to live with others and obey others’ orders in military life. Stack Jr. notes that sympathy is “the reproduction of the experience of another, and it is through sympathy that we come to understand others taking us beyond mere self-interest.” Simply put, sympathy is a way of understanding others and helps soldiers realize that they are not accessories to be sacrificed for the Army or the nation. If soldiers perceive themselves as independent individuals rather than inferior beings, they will also see other soldiers as deserving of respect and develop a natural sense of comradeship.

Moreover, through sympathy, each soldier can recognize their appropriate role in the military system: superiors establish their leadership, colleagues encourage fellowship, and subordinates practice followship. With camaraderie based on sympathy, the soldier will recognize that all soldiers are connected to one another for a common goal: to safeguard the nation. For cadets, sympathy also is an important factor in establishing interpersonal relationships, so it can help them approach soldiers with different levels of education and of different origins and ages. Tian noted that “they need not only to train the soldiers in battle skills but also to develop subordinates in every aspect of their lives: they become both supervisors and friends of the soldiers.” In other words, cadets should be both a commander with authority and a collaborator who helps their subordinates adapt well to the military.

The biggest problem with sex-related education courses like sexual harassment is that people are not interested in the content unless it directly affects them. Sympathy allows them to understand that losing a right like sexual self-determination is linked to losing one’s citizenship. In education programs, it is as important to make soldiers sympathize with the risks and pain victims face as it is to convey the message that they should not commit sexual violence. Sympathy for the situations others find themselves in and the pain they experience is a shortcut to preventing sexual violence and can minimize secondary damage.

The third key competence, tolerance, emphasizes a friendly attitude toward society within certain limits. According to Forst, “individuals show respect for diversity by viewing disparate groups as morally and politically equal even though they may differ fundamentally in beliefs, practices, and lifestyles.” The most important characteristic of tolerance is accepting that others may be different from oneself in every aspect. Accordingly, while sympathy is the ability to care for others and maintain a sense of camaraderie, tolerance refers to the acknowledgment of the existence of others and the fact that people are different. Tolerance therefore requires an other-oriented attitude. As a result, tolerance is the most difficult competence for Phono sapiens as they tend to focus on “individual happiness, authenticity, self-actualization, and self-sufficiency.” Given these characteristics, we believe that tolerance is the most necessary competence to develop in the soldiers of the Phono sapiens generation.
In terms of gender issues, Korea’s policy of mandatory military service has become one of the most important sources of gender conflict in the country and its digital space. Park noted that “while Korean middle-aged people consider themselves to be the patriarchs overseeing women, young Korean men see themselves as victims of gender equality policies.” This phenomenon stems from the belief that everyone beyond the individual is perceived as a competitor in neoliberal capitalism. In addition, given that the suicide of Korea’s first transgender soldier following his discharge from the Army have become subjects of heated debate in the digital sphere in 2021, the transgender issue and military service should be discussed together. These two events appear to deal with completely different aspects, but they are essentially the same. They pose the fundamental question of justice, which is the most important term in modern Korean society, especially among the MZ generation (Phono sapiens). It is significant that digital media has become an important battleground for voicing current debates. When observing or engaging in public debates, the MZ generation, especially young cadets, fail to understand the various principles of justice, such as equity, equality, need, and procedure, so they only argue that competing and winning on the same basis is just. A lack of awareness of others drives people to insist on a twisted form of justice.

Tolerance in the military is not intended to eliminate unity; rather, the aim is to understand that the process through which soldiers feel and realize unity in the military can vary. In other words, in the past, soldiers were forced to become soldiers, but Phono sapiens need various programs to help them adjust to the military while improving their self-efficiency. If the leader is able to give the right orders to each soldier, then the soldiers will feel empowered and contribute to society as democratic citizens. Education that empowers cadets is therefore vitally important as cadets can then help their subordinates feel empowered. It is for this reason that the final stage of leadership training in the SITE program is empowering leadership.

As indicated previously, tolerance is useful in dealing with online and offline hate speech, which is an important issue in gender awareness programs. As the composition of the Cadet Corps becomes diverse and foreign exchanges between military academies increase, the fundamental source of hatred, namely, gender, should be addressed, as should new emerging challenges based on race, national origin, color, disability, and sexual orientation. For example, by exploring the media’s portrayal of, and language against, women in our gender awareness program, we can help male cadets accept female cadets as part of their team. Similarly, programs focused on social and cultural tolerance that accurately convey the causes and risks of hate speech to cadets will remind them of the importance of using the right language and help them develop new ways of experiencing camaraderie.
Conclusion

The Korean military has demonstrated its continued interest in fostering the development of soldiers who will defend democracy by introducing the concept of democratic citizens in uniform. To support this, in this paper, we provided recommendations for competence-based programs to develop Phono sapiens’ understanding of the personal liberty of service members while maintaining a high degree of combat readiness. The RST competences can help soldiers representative of Phono sapiens learn how to cultivate leadership skills and democratic values. By using reflection, Korean soldiers can establish their own identity as democratic citizens in uniform and develop self-leadership. Based on this, they will be able to feel sympathy and realize how they are connected to one other. They subsequently need to learn tolerance, which will help them recognize that, even if they are connected, they are totally independent beings. Tolerance may in turn lead them to respect the existence of others.

As a result, the characteristics of the key competences of reflection, empathy, and tolerance can help soldiers adapt well to the military and grow into democratic citizens in military uniform. We believe that these competences (summarized in Table 1 in reference to gender awareness education) are appropriate for application in programs for young cadets and soldiers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Method &amp; Type of Leadership</th>
<th>Gender Awareness Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection (R)</td>
<td>Exploring oneself, self-leadership</td>
<td>Comprehend the cause of sexual harassment in military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathy (S)</td>
<td>Understanding others, interpersonal leadership</td>
<td>Escape the bystander’s position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance (T)</td>
<td>Accepting others, empowering leadership</td>
<td>Avoid the hate speech</td>
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Table 1: RST Competences and Their Application in Gender Awareness Education

In conclusion, as Korea is still a divided country, even after the end of the Cold War, it maintains a conscription system and has complicated defense and diplomatic relations based on the Korea-U.S. alliance. The pros and cons of the RST program, which was designed with due consideration of this unique situation in Korea, can be shared with people engaged in world military education and facilitate the exchange of views.
Dong-ha Seo is a professor of English at the Korea Military Academy, Republic of Korea. He currently serves as a head of the Cadet Leadership & Character Education Office. His main research interest is military culture in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporary writers. He is the author of “Re-reading of Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida through Bill Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’ ” (Shakespeare Review, 2019), “A Way of Thinking Human Bodies that are Detachable: The Burgeoning Concept of Cyborg in Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida” (Korean Journal of Military Arts and Science, 2020), and “Understanding Shakespeare and Fletcher’s The Two Noble Kinsmen through Johan Galtung’s Violence Triangle” (Shakespeare Review, 2020). The central focus of his current work has been on the Korean reception of Shakespeare in colonial times and the Korean War.

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Disclaimer: The ideas and viewpoints advanced in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Korea Military Academy and the Korean Army.

Endnotes


6. During its seventy-year history, the KMA has played a leading role in developing the Korean Army. During its first decade, its primary goal was to establish a professional officer corps for a modern army. In subsequent decades, it produced officers dedicated to defending democracy and economic development, and then to active participation in international security cooperation in the age of globalization.


15. Eunsuk Choi, “Military Spiritual Education.”


21. Chanrai Cho, “Democratic Civic Education,” The Journal of Democratic Civic Education 13, no. 2 (2012): 71-92. Both “citizenship competence” and “key competence” have been left undeveloped or undiscussed, partly because of disagreements about the general definition of terms such as “human rights,” “sexual diversity,” “justice,” “equality,” and “fairness,” and partly because attitudes toward “patriotism, national identity, law-abiding spirit, morality, and self-reliance,” which constitute citizenship and key competences, have long been considered synonymous with Korea’s ruling ideology and governing practice.


23. The Korean military and the KMA have created classes and teaching methods to generate these competences among Korean citizens, but their development is not yet complete. The problems are the exact format of the classes and teaching methods. We have therefore proposed a particular class format. Specifically, basic RST competence-based liberal education courses should be interdisciplinary in nature. The advantage of interdisciplinary classes is that competences can be reflected in existing subjects without requiring the excessive reorganization of the curriculum. The subjects’ educational purposes can be achieved by integrating educational methods, such as problem-based learning, simulation learning, and project-based classes, into existing courses. For example, “Understanding and Practicing Gender Sensitivity,” an interdisciplinary liberal arts course for first-year cadets, was the first of its kind introduced in the KMA and is now taught by professors from various departments. In this course, cadets learn about gender sensitivity and why they must study it. They are also required to seek reasonable solutions to gender bias problems through discussions with classmates. They further reflect on their own positions in society and the military while learning how to understand and accept others.


25. Moon, Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea.


29. Tian, et al. “Fourth Military Medical University, Xi’an, People’s Republic of China.”


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Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33


For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference. Feldman, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78. Roehrig, “Stability or Instability?,” 131.
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