



2010.09.05

Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*. New York: Modern Library, 2010. Pp. xix, 288. ISBN 978-0-679-64357-9.

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The title of Bruce Cumings' new book may mislead unwary buyers into expecting an extended, detailed narrative of American combat actions. But to learn how the 5th Marines or the 8th Calvary fought on 27 November 1950, one must look elsewhere.¹ Cumings (University of Chicago) focuses instead on the war among the Koreans—Korea's war, if you will. A set of numbers reveals his priorities: U.S. wartime casualties were 130,000; Korean losses totaled 3.3 million (35). Cumings argues that the Korean War was a tragic chapter in a much longer struggle that began with resistance to Japanese colonization early in the twentieth century and evolved into a civil war following the division of the peninsula in 1945. He reminds us that the central event in 1950 was an "invasion" of Korea by Koreans. He sharply criticizes many aspects of the American role in the conflict, which he sees as often misguided and occasionally brutal. Sadly, in his view, virtually the whole war long ago slid from the American consciousness—at some continuing cost to the nation. The book reflects not only the author's intellectual odyssey through a wide range of primary sources, but also his philosophical reflections on them.²

Cumings opens with a streamlined narrative of the war years (1950–53) as an introduction to his principal themes. He tells the story this way: North Korea invaded the South in June 1950 after a lengthy period of border skirmishes initiated by both North and South. The decision to attack reflected a desire to reunify the nation and "rectify... ancient inequities" dating to the Japanese colonial era (4); the Soviets and the Chinese supported these goals, but did not provoke hostilities. The American decision to counter the northern offensive with force marked the ascendancy of Dean Acheson and Washington's strategy of military containment. The decision for a counter invasion of the North in the fall of 1950 represented "logical follow-on to the earlier move" (22). The Chinese chose to intervene to protect their frontiers and honor the "sacrifices" Koreans made on China's behalf during World War II and the Civil War (24–25). Combined Chinese and North Korean forces enjoyed several dramatic successes, but not overall victory.

During the last and longest phase of the war, fighting raged over the entire peninsula: along a stationary front approximating the 38th parallel, against guerrilla bands in rural areas, in POW camps, and in the air. Nearly every day American bombers advanced the policy goal of making North Korea a vast "wasteland" (29). Despite the willingness of Koreans to fight on when the United States, China, and the Soviet Union had tired of the struggle, hostilities ended with the armistice of July 1953. Cumings maintains the war entrenched the notion of militarized containment in Washington; in Korea "the tragedy was that the war solved nothing": Korea remained (and remains) divided, and a technical state of war continues (35).

In Cumings' view, "Korea surely suffered one of the worst 20th-century histories" (235). How did Koreans get into such a tragic mess? Before 1950, they had suffered almost half a century of humiliation, bitter internal divisions, and intense physical hardship. Early in the twentieth century, Korea, an ancient nation, fell victim to its more powerful neighbor, Japan. Theodore Roosevelt gave his tacit blessing to Japan's treatment of Korea as a prize after its victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905. Though the Japanese occupation was brutal, some Koreans, especially among the land-owning elite, allied with the colonizers. National sentiment and a sense of economic injustice fueled resistance movements, especially in the South. Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 further complicated the situation, as men like the future North Ko-

1. E.g., to Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987) or David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (NY: Hyperion, 2007). To know what 27 November felt like on the ground, see Donald Knox, *The Korean War: An Oral History*, 2 vols. (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985/1988).

2. One does not often encounter Friedrich Nietzsche, Ambrose Bierce, or the word "mnemonic" in histories of the war in Korea.

rean leader Kim Il Sung joined the Chinese struggle against Japan. This “pitiless and unforgiving struggle” (237) shaped a cadre of intensely anti-Japanese and nationalist Korean leaders. Marxism was their language, and the Chinese their grateful allies and patrons. The outbreak of World War II exacerbated matters as the Japanese stepped up their exploitation. Tens of thousands of Koreans were forced to work for Japan or serve in its armed forces.³ Thousands of Korean women were forced into prostitution as “comfort women” for Japanese soldiers. Korean antagonism toward all things Japanese was profound. The defeat of Japan revived dreams of national independence and a longing to settle scores with Japan’s collaborators inside Korea.

Then, in Cumings’ view, the United States made matters worse. Eager to block Soviet advances and revive Japan’s economy as the engine of the region, American policy makers imposed an arbitrary division on Koreans and then installed a southern government staffed largely by collaborators with Japan. The United States became a surrogate—and advocate—for Japan; the collaborators (especially strong in the police and the army) remained the same. To head the new government, the United States brought in Syngman Rhee, an authoritarian nationalist with a vision of reuniting his country and, to that end, blithely willing to do business with Japan’s Korean collaborators. Americans tried to rein in his aspirations. Kim Il Sung, aided by those who had fought the Japanese and later for a Communist victory in China, was established in North Korea; he and his supporters saw themselves as the authentic voice of Korean nationalism. Widespread uprisings against elite domination and foreign collaboration after 1945 were brutally suppressed by South Korean regular and irregular forces, using tactics devised by the Japanese. Americans sometimes looked on or even participated in the mayhem, their attitudes colored by anti-communism, respect for the Japanese (and hopes for their economic revival), and an “ingrained prejudice” against Koreans as a race of “barbarians” (14, 16). To Northerners who had fought Japan on their own soil and in China, it was déjà vu: new faces, same old colonialism. As Korean troops were released from the Chinese revolutionary armies, Kim envisioned a military solution to the “new” occupation. During the ensuing war, these antagonisms led to massacres, as both sides wreaked vengeance on the other; Rhee’s men were often especially brutal. All of this was visible at the time and reported by the press outside the United States. Three decades of American-supported military dictators and civilian tyrants followed in the South (211) and, of course, the heirs of Kim Il Sung remained in power in the North.

The consequences, acknowledged and unacknowledged, of these events in Korea are one of Cumings’ major concerns. The division of Korea continues and the threat of a horrific renewal of fighting remains substantial. While South Korea has recently emerged as a democratic state, North Korea remains in the grip of a xenophobic leadership cadre. This is part of a larger problem: the unfinished process of national unification. Many Americans see the current situation as something of a victory. As British historian Max Hastings has aptly put it, the war “saved the southerners from a tragic fate, and indeed opened the way to a future for them infinitely better than anything attainable under Kim Il Sung.... [I]t still seems a struggle that the West was right to fight” (427). For Cumings, on the other hand, the events of 1950–53 aborted “what might have been an ending for Koreans” (146)—freed from outside interference and with ancient quarrels put to rest, Korea might at last find its “place in the sun,” to quote the title of Cumings’ earlier history of Korea.⁴

That prospect, however, seems distant. Instead, Cumings supports efforts aimed at healing through remembering. He reports on South Korea’s attempts, based on the experience of nations such as South Africa, “to find ways to acknowledge past crimes, to grasp how they happened, and to reconcile with the victims” (235). The Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission (est. 2005) has begun to look into atrocities on all sides and hopes to lay ghosts to rest.⁵ Much of Cumings’ information on the internal war comes from this Commission and its supporters. He also hopes Americans will benefit from truth telling, that veterans like

3. In 1943, e.g., more than a thousand Korean laborers died in far off Tarawa during fighting between U.S. Marines and Japanese forces: see Audrey McAvoy (AP), “Search Is On for Remains of WWII Marines,” *Detroit Free Press* (28 Aug 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1025.htm>.

4. *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, rev. ed. (NY: Norton, 2005).

5. The Commission maintains a website <www.miwsr.com/rd/1026.htm>.

Art Hunter, who participated in the massacre at Nogun-ri (1950), might gain peace by honestly looking at events (166–67). He believes, too, that reawakened memories of lost opportunities in Korea may further understanding of later tragedies in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan—and prevent future disasters. His book is meant to help reduce the “unfathomable cluelessness” (241) that has so often led the United States into trouble in The American Century.

The restorative truths told by the survivors and living victims of the Korean conflict are fruits of the popular struggle for democracy in Korea; this surge of civil society is also a surge of suppressed information, and would never have been possible during the long decades of [South Korean] dictatorship.... Thus, in the past twenty years Koreans have produced hundreds of histories, memories, oral accounts, documentaries, and novels that trace back to the years immediately after liberation [from Japan].... The personal truths of the victims and survivors should become a restorative truth, a requiem for the “forgotten war” that might finally achieve the peaceful reconciliation that the two Koreas have been denied since Dean Rusk first etched a line at the 38th parallel in August 1945 (203).

Cumings assumes a unified Korea would look more like present-day Vietnam or China than North Korea: nationalism and the desire for prosperity would trump ideology. Perhaps it would have played out that way without American and UN intervention. The book certainly sheds light on the ongoing diplomatic imbroglio in that region and the argument for the benefits of truth and reconciliation certainly resonates around the world. Cumings may be unrealistic in expecting Americans to become more sensitive to the histories and cultures of other peoples, but his book will richly reward those willing to be challenged by a novel perspective on the causes and consequences of the Korean War.