Contested History: Re-Examining The Korean War

Reviewed by John Swenson-Wright

SIXTY YEARS ON from the official onset of the Korean War in June 1950, it comes as no surprise that historians are once again re-examining the conflict that for many marked the onset of the Cold War in Asia and established the ideological, political and strategic divisions that continue to dominate the international relations of East Asia to this day. Bruce Cumings, one of America’s most well-known scholars of the war, has written a new account that both revisits familiar, historiographical themes and introduces new findings that encourage readers to re-examine their assumptions not only about the past, but also the present.

The book is short — 288 pages in all — but full of information. Beautifully written and wide-ranging, this is interpretative history of the highest order that eschews a narrow chronological narrative to illuminate the war from multiple perspectives, including the traumatic events on the ground as they affected ordinary Koreans, both in the North and South, as well as the more familiar case of high politics through the diplomatic relations of the early Cold War. Cumings has distilled his years of detailed, empirical scholarship and familiarity with Western and Korean sources to provide a hard-hitting polemical account that is sharply critical of the United States for its support for the right-wing administration of Syngman Rhee, its complicity in the massacre of civilians in the South and for its ignorance of conditions on either side of the 38th parallel that not only weakened US policy at the time, but that also continues to exacerbate tensions with Seoul and Pyongyang today.

The book addresses a number of different themes, exploring competing interpretations of the origins of the war, the salience of internal Korean tensions and the legacy of the anti-colonial resistance against Japan, the impact of the rise of McCarthyism in the US in shaping American perspectives on the war, the brutality of the war both on the ground and in the air and the increasingly important scholarly and popular debate in South Korea today about historical responsibility and agency.

Readers of Cumings’ past work, most notably his magisterial two-volume study, The Origins of the Korean War, will not be surprised to find him reprising his original interpretation of the conflict as fundamentally a civil war. While the intervention of the major powers after June 1950 provides the international dimension — one which other writers such as William Stueck and Rosemary Foot have written about extensively — Cumings concentrates more on a conflict that in its internecine brutality and persistent regional, fratricidal and inter-generational divisiveness has much in common with the American Civil War. By documenting the bitter contest for power between progressive and conservative forces following liberation after World War II, including the bloody competition between right-wing, proto-fascist forces and the left-wing peoples’ committees, Cumings shows convincingly that the seeds of division long predated the formal onset of war in 1950. Some 100,000 Koreans living in the southern half of the peninsula lost their lives before June 1950. Similarly, analyzing the war from the vantage point of Kim Il-sung’s guerilla resistance in Manchuria requires a historical perspective that dates the onset of the conflict as 1932 and the opposition to Japan’s expansionist campaign on the Asian mainland.

The notion of a Korean War meant, therefore, different things to different audiences at different times. To US President Harry Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, the war was both a story of success and also of failure: success in rallying the international community to resist the initial North Korean attack; failure after November 1950 when the push north beyond the 38th parallel prompted the intervention of China, transforming the conflict from resistance and the roll-back of Communism to one of US military humiliation, mass casualties, strategic stalemate and
eventual political defeat for Truman in his decision not to contest the presidency in 1952.

Cumings is particularly effective in forcing his audiences to confront their preconceptions and prejudices. In his early work, he generated controversy by suggesting that the South bore primary responsibility for the war by provoking the North. Here, he is less provocative, accepting unambiguously that the decision to mount a full-scale invasion came clearly from the North, but noting also the importance of early skirmishes between North and South that were characteristic of a conflict that defied neat geographical or temporal boundaries. Recognizing such ambiguities is helpful in exposing the simplistic assumptions of right and wrong, guilt and innocence, which often distort our understanding of the past. Such a nuanced perspective allows Cumings (in considering Truman’s decision in late September 1950 to authorize the US push northwards above the 38th parallel) to highlight the inconsistency in US interpretations of the actions of North Korea. As Cumings notes, “Why is it aggression when Koreans cross the 38th parallel, but imaginary when Americans do the same thing?”

This focus on perspective, as well as empathetic blind spots, is surely relevant today in the midst of the latest standoff on the Korean peninsula, following the North’s shelling of Yeonpyong island. The North’s leaders claim today that the persistence of US-South Korea naval maneuvers in the West Sea was a provocation that justified the shelling, while to the government of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, joint military action is merely a defensive means of enhancing deterrence. To Cumings, this lack of psychological flexibility, the inability to view things from the other side’s perspective, is key to understanding the limitations of US policy both in the past and in the present. Where Korea observes tellingly: “... We did not know the enemy, we lacked ‘empathy’ (we should have ‘put ourselves inside their skin and looked at us through their eyes’ but we did not); we were blind prisoners of our own assumptions. In Korea, we still are.”

US ignorance is, according to Cumings, not merely confined to historical actors. It also continues to infect and limit the views of contemporary observers — both government officials and, in some cases, historians and journalists. While Cumings is quick to highlight the perceptiveness of some commentators (for example, he singles out for praise two early writers on Korea — the American Gregory Henderson and the British war correspondent Reginald Thompson), he is understandably critical of those who appear to have very

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limited knowledge of local conditions in Korea. David Halberstam, the former Pulitzer prize-winning journalist who wrote persuasively about Vietnam, is one striking example of the variation in the ability of Americans to grasp the political and social circumstances of Korea. Halberstam’s 2007 book, The Coldest Winter, is, in Cumings’ view, “one of the best in a peculiar but common American genre: accounts of the war that evince almost no knowledge of Korea or its history, barely get past two or three Korean names, focus on the American experience in a war where Koreans and Chinese were much more numerous, and fail to question the accumulated baggage of 1950s stereotypes about the good guys and bad guys.”

Historical and contemporary ignorance and the absence of empathy are, however, only one feature of American failure in its interaction with Korea. The much more serious charge that Cumings makes against past US administrations is their complicity in the killing of civilians in the South and the associated attempt to cover up and evade responsibility for such crimes over the post-war period. The civil war in Korea was not merely divisive and extensive, it was also “appallingly dirty,” involving a “sordid history of civilian slaughters amid which our ostensibly democratic ally was the worst offender.” Whether in the massacre by US forces of Korean civilians at Nogun-ri in July 1950, or in US willingness to turn a blind eye to the slaughter of some 60,000 to 80,000 civilians in Cheju in 1948, or in active US military support for the suppression of the Yosu Rebellion of October 1948, US forces were guilty of sins of both omission and commission. In some cases, US troops and officials were perpetrators; in others, they were observers of crimes against opponents of the Rhee regime, photographing, for example, the slaughter of men, women and children at Taegu in 1950 and then either seeking intentionally to pin the blame for such actions on the North or choosing to conceal evidence of the original crime by suppressing the photos for nearly five decades.

These are serious and disturbing charges and make for difficult reading. The revelations reflect a new frankness and openness in debates among Korean scholars — one that has had little impact in the US, where much of this debate is limited to a relatively specialized, academic audience. In South Korea, the driving force behind this discussion has been the work of young Korean scholars, as well as the Korean Truth Commission on Civilian Massacres, established in 2000, and the Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 2005. To Cumings, the discrepancy between US and Korean awareness of such issues is the key to understanding the “growing estrangement between Seoul and Washington.” At one level, this is of course persuasive. The combination of past US involvement in and contemporary ignorance of such atrocities is bound to contribute to bilateral tensions. However, one wonders if this represents the full story. Anti-American sentiment in South Korea is complicated, multi-dimensional and often contradictory. Young Koreans today are seemingly comfortable with the cognitive dissonance of criticizing Washington politically while choosing the US as their top destination for graduate study abroad. The gap between the US and South Korea is not merely the result of the difficult events between 1945 and 1953. It has, one imagines, as much to do with the ambiguous record of past US support for authoritarian leadership that extended beyond the Korea War itself and continued throughout the Cold War.

Widening our focus to include the post-1953 situation also helps to throw into relief a more complicated set of choices than those presented in Cumings’ account. US official support for authoritarian regimes was of course motivated by strategic self-interest, and frequently the cost of this was a heavy price for ordinary Koreans. Yet it also involved an awareness by some US officials of the policy dilemma that this choice presented — most notably the desire to foster democratic reform within Korea, albeit in a gradual fashion that minimized the risk of political upheaval or any setback to the economic modernization agenda of the regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan.

If there is one key shortcoming in Cumings’ account, it is the tendency to skirt over these choices or to avoid considering how more thoughtful American officials at the time, whether in Seoul or in Washington, confronted such dilemmas. Young US scholars, most notably Gregg Brazinsky, have begun to explore these questions in looking at the post-war period as a whole, but one wonders if there is scope for further work in this vein that will reveal a wider diversity of opinion on the US side than that suggested in Cumings’ account. This is surely also true in the South Korean academic context. One can only welcome the greater freedom that South Koreans now have to explore the contested history of the period between 1945 and
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1953. Beyond the war itself, however, it is striking how relatively under-researched the period after 1953 remains even today, despite the efforts at greater political openness associated with the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Part of this reflects the restrictions of a limited and only partially accessible archival record. Part, too, no doubt, is a function of historical taboos and mythologies, involving sensitive questions of opposition and collaboration within the wider framework of identity politics. In that respect, Cumings may be too optimistic to claim that “South Korea is finally one unified nation, all orthodox and heterodox ‘points of view’ are aired, and enormous progress [has been] made in reconciling with Pyongyang.”

Equally problematic is the discrepancy between the US experience in Korea and other Asian countries. In Japan, for example, arguably the US record of post-1945 engagement and the promotion of political and economic modernization are less fractured and divisive — and involve far fewer ostensible casualties, figuratively or literally, among Japan’s progressive political forces. Why was this the case, both in Japan and elsewhere in Asia? What explains why a writer of Halberstam’s stature can, for example, understand Vietnam so well, but fail to grasp what was happening in Korea?

Cumings points to an underlying political-economic strategy that shaped the approach of Truman, and especially Acheson, towards Korea. Shaping this was an attempt to create a “Great Crescent” of economic prosperity linking Japan with South Korea, along with a “general offensive against communism” that became entrenched in Asia following the emergence of National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC-68) in August 1950, which effectively outlined America’s Cold War policy. However, it is debatable how coherent and focused the US approach to Asia was at this time. Identifying a strategic vision underpinning the decisions by US leaders at this time is difficult. Indeed, many of their decisions were reactive and conditioned by events of the recent past, rather than any clear conception of how the future would unfold. Truman and Acheson were, as has often been told, desperate to avoid repeating the errors of wartime appeasement, and in this sense were looking backwards rather shaping a long-term policy for the future. Moreover, even in the context of the larger ideological struggle against Communism that domestic politics in the US presented as a deceptively simple choice between the Free World and Slavery, a door was still privately held open, in the minds of some in the White House and within the State Department, to the idea of rapprochement and accommodation with Beijing and possibly even North Korea. The point is a simple one: without minimizing the seriousness of the US crimes and transgressions in Korea that Cumings rightfully documents, we should keep in mind that the set of choices that US policy makers believed they faced in 1950, or for that matter in 1953, provided them in the short-term with few attractive options.

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