

**BUY THE BOOK****A Revisionist's Korean War**

By Doug Bandow on 11.1.10 @ 6:04AM

***The Korean War: A History***  
**By Bruce Cumings,**  
**(Modern Library, 288 pages, \$24)**

Six decades ago the Korean peninsula was ablaze. North Korea had invaded the South. U.S. and allied forces counterattacked and retook Seoul. But expectations that the war would end by Christmas were dashed when the People's Republic of China intervened. The conflict continued for another two and a half bloody years.

Much has been written about the "forgotten war." There wouldn't seem to be much to add, but Bruce Cumings, whose revisionist perspective has engendered much controversy over the years, manages to do so.

The ROK is now a major player on the world stage with a population of 50 million and a large, innovative, export-oriented economy. South Korea also has made the difficult political transition from military dictatorship to stable democracy. The legacy of the war lives on, however.

The Korean peninsula has a long history, but, notes Cumings, "Korea was at its modern nadir during the war... where most of the millions of Americans who served in Korea got their impression." The view was unfortunately negative.

Cumings' perspective is sui generis: "here was the Vietnam War we came to know before Vietnam -- gooks, napalm, rapes, whores, an unreliable ally, a cunning enemy, fundamentally untrained GIs fighting a war their top generals barely understood, fragging of officers, contempt for the know-nothing civilians back home, devilish battles indescribable even to loved ones, press handouts from Gen. Douglas MacArthur's headquarters apparently scripted by comedians or lunatics, an ostensible vision of bringing freedom and liberty to a sordid dictatorship run by servants of Japanese imperialism."

The war began with a North Korea invasion on June 24, 1950, but this is not the complete story. Cumings long has detailed how Syngman Rhee, America's obstreperous ally, staged

border provocations and threatened war.

As a result, Washington refused to fully arm South Korea beforehand lest the latter start a war. Cumings nicely sets the context of the Korean War. This was not another German invasion of Poland. Rather, he argues, the Korean War "was a civil war, a war fought primarily by Koreans from conflicting social systems, for Korean goals. It did not last three years, but had a beginning in 1932, and has never ended."

This helps explain why the North has been so resistant to Seoul's entreaties and subsidies. There are two systems, but only one people.

Interesting but less convincing is Cumings' attempt to tie DPRK policy today to Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese guerrilla days. The North Koreans, he writes, "essentially saw the war in 1950 as a way to settle the hash of the top command of the South Korean army, nearly all of whom had served the Japanese."

That may be true, but Rhee also was a rabid nationalist who had no affection for Korea's former colonial overlord. ROK President Park Chung-hee served in the military under Japan, but he was no toady to Tokyo and built a far stronger nation state than that developed by Kim. Popular antagonism towards Japan remains pervasive in South Korea even today. A ruthless will to power and an ideological commitment to communism are better explanations than anti-Japanese sentiments for Kim Il-sung's continuing brutal policies.

Cumings also posits that many aging North Korean officials believe that their anti-Japanese service decades ago "bequeathed their right to rule." Even if true in 1945 or 1950, that time is over. Not only has Japan lost its influence over the peninsula, but the North's government is now controlled by the antithesis of the austere guerrilla: a licentious, sybaritic child (Kim Jong-il), given every luxury possible before being handed power, who is attempting to similarly pass power on to his child (Kim Jong-un).

Cumings does, however, provide an important service by reminding us of Rhee's bloody rule. During the war ROK forces massacred political prisoners and communist sympathizers.

Indeed, after noting that "The North and South of today are vastly different than they were sixty years ago," Cumings argues that "We do not have evidence that the North Koreans ever killed their enemies in such large numbers." Pyongyang's forces murdered, he says, but not as promiscuously as did those of the ROK. "We are left with the conundrum that the DPRK, widely thought to be the worst of Communist states, conducted itself better than did the American ally in Seoul."

Perhaps, though Cumings unnecessarily downplays the North's uniquely bizarre and horrific government, calling it "an unusual but predictable combination of monarchy, nationalism, and Korean political culture." He writes: "there is no evidence in the North Korean experience of the mass violence against whole classes of people or the wholesale 'purge' that so clearly characterized Stalinism, and that was particularly noteworthy in the

scale of deaths in the land reform campaigns in China and North Vietnam and the purges of the Cultural Revolution."

While neither Kim Il-sung nor Kim Jong-il might equal Stalin or Mao, measured over time the first two probably killed a larger proportion of their own people. Kim Il-sung is responsible for starting a full-scale war which resulted in millions of casualties. His son presided over hundreds of thousands or even millions of preventable deaths from famine, which Cumings acknowledges (he is no fan of the Kim dynasty). And today abundant "labor" camps are full of the politically unreliable and execution is a common penalty for individual disobedience.

Cumings' search for the hidden story even causes him to posit that Joseph Stalin may have maintained the Soviet boycott of the United Nations Security Council because he "hoped to facilitate the entry of U.S. forces into a peripheral area, thus to waste blood and treasure." Yet Stalin only reluctantly backed Kim Il-sung's invasion plans and resisted Kim's and Mao Zedong's entreaties for aid after Washington intervened. Such a plan seems too clever by half even for Stalin, who, though a moral monster, feared a direct confrontation with America.

The consequences of the Korean War remain with us today. Bruce Cumings ably challenges us to rethink our assumptions. An easy and worthwhile read, *The Korean War* nevertheless should be consumed with the same air of skepticism which Cumings demands that we apply to conventional accounts of the Korean conflict.

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