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William Stueck: Rethinking the Korean War

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INTRODUCTION



POLITICAL SCIENTIST JOHN MUELLER HAS CHARACTERIZED THE Korean War as “quite possibly the most important event since World War II.”¹ I have labeled it “a substitute for World War III.”² What we mean is that in its timing, its course, and its outcome, it had a stabilizing effect on the Cold War. It did not end that conflict; indeed, it intensified and militarized it as never before. For Koreans it was a total war, with some 10 percent of the population either killed, wounded, or missing. In property, South Korea lost the equivalent of its gross national product for the year 1949. North Korea lost eighty-seven hundred industrial plants, its counterpart twice that number. North and South each saw six hundred thousand of its homes destroyed.³ Yet the fighting did not expand beyond Korea. The costs and risks of the war, combined with the success of the United States and the Soviet Union in preventing the other from enabling its proxy government in Korea to unify the peninsula, discouraged future efforts on each side to venture beyond its zone of influence by military means. The rearmament in the United States and Western Europe provoked by the war created a rough and sustainable balance of military power

2 Introduction

in the key theater of superpower competition. If the United States and the Soviet Union, and their allies, were better armed than before, there was less chance that either of the principals would employ their forces in a manner leading to direct confrontation.

This book is an interpretive account of the major diplomatic, political, and strategic issues of the Korean War. Rather than providing a lengthy narrative of the international dimensions of the conflict as I did in my 1995 volume, my approach here is issue-oriented and synthetic.⁴ My aim is to provide an overview, of interest to specialists and general readers alike, that takes into account the vast body of new documentation that has surfaced in recent decades.

When I began studying this event in 1968, the standard synthetic treatment of the event was David Rees's *Korea: The Limited War*, which was based almost entirely on published sources.⁵ Then, during the 1970s a wide array of official records and private papers became available in the United States. From the Soviet side, there emerged the memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, although their legitimacy and/or accuracy was questioned in some circles.⁶ During the next decade, this wealth of new material began to be exploited in scholarly monographs and new narrative syntheses.⁷

There also appeared a major new revisionist account, the first volume in Bruce Cumings's magisterial *Origins of the Korean War*. Cumings exploited Korean-language sources as never before and challenged other treatments for their downplaying of internal Korean factors in the coming of the war and their emphasis on Soviet and North Korean aggressiveness.⁸ Since the appearance during the war of journalist I. F. Stone's *Hidden History of the Korean War*, a revisionist literature had existed in the United States; but the firm grounding of *Origins* in archival and Korean sources gave the genre a new legitimacy.⁹ Cumings's follow-ups, a brief coauthored volume designed for a popular audience in 1988 and then his massive second volume of *Origins* two years later, ensured that the revisionist perspective on the conflict as essentially a "civil war" would continue to receive a wide hearing.¹⁰

Nonetheless, by the time Cumings's second volume appeared, revisionism was on the verge of facing major new challenges. As early as

1989, Dutch scholar Erik van Ree questioned Cumings's view of the Soviet role in North Korea from 1945 to 1947. Drawing upon heretofore untapped memoirs of Soviet officials in Korea, van Ree concluded that the Soviet Union had played a far more dominant role in its occupation zone above the thirty-eighth parallel than Cumings portrayed.¹¹ Yet van Ree's work received little attention in the United States, and, in any event, it covered a period well before North Korea's attack on South Korea of June 25, 1950. It was not until 1993 that a study appeared that analyzed the periods both leading up to and following that seminal event *and* drew on new archival sources and memoirs from the former Soviet Union and China. Written by a Russian, an American, and a Chinese national, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* argued, contrary to the revisionists, that the Soviet Union and China were intimately involved in the process by which North Korea decided to launch and execute its military offensive.¹² This volume was merely the first in a series of studies based on new documentation from the Communist side that challenged aspects of the revisionist account of the war's origins.¹³

Still, the day had long since passed when the civil aspect of the Korean War's origins could be largely ignored.¹⁴ A major task before scholars today is to weigh the internal and external factors in the coming of the war. This is the primary focus of part I of the account that follows.

Why was Korea divided in 1945 into Soviet and American occupation zones? Why did the two powers fail to reach agreement on unification and, in 1948, decide to establish independent governments in the areas under their control? What was the impact of the irascible Syngman Rhee and the declaration of the Truman Doctrine on U.S. policy toward Korea? Why did the United States withdraw the last of its combat troops from Korea in 1949 and then fail to secure its creation, the Republic of Korea (ROK), from outside attack? Why did the United States rush army units back to the peninsula in response to the North Korean invasion in June 1950? Why did the North Koreans decide to launch that invasion, what roles did the Soviet Union and China play in the process, and why did they play the roles they did?

The overriding theme of this part is that the origins of the war must

4 Introduction

be understood in the context of events both inside and outside of Korea. Korea became a war of broad international dimensions after June 1950 because, since the defeat of Japan in 1945, the peninsula had been a setting for intense great power competition. That competition grew out of the transformation of the structure of power in north-east Asia with the defeat of Japan and the sharp divergence in ideology between the two nations, the Soviet Union and the United States, that took its place. Although these two powers occupied Korea and divided it at the thirty-eighth parallel without direct input from native peoples, perceptions in Washington of conditions on the peninsula were critical in that decision. Under the tight control of Japan for nearly two generations, Korea lacked indigenous political institutions or a population experienced in self-government; and independence forces in exile were deeply divided. Surely, planners in Washington believed, the country needed a period of tutelage before resuming its status as a sovereign nation. Division occurred because neither of the potential occupiers believed it possessed the capacity, given other priorities, to seize the entire country before the other arrived.

The occupiers went to Korea with the objectives, first, to remove the Japanese and, second, at minimum, to contain the influence of the other. The first objective proved relatively easy to achieve for both the Soviet Union and the United States, but over time the latter encountered greater difficulty than the former in exercising containment. A neighbor of Korea, the Soviet Union possessed a direct security stake on the peninsula, whereas the United States, located thousands of miles away, did not. The Americans lacked a tradition of direct military involvement on the Asian mainland. As commitments in other more crucial areas continued in the aftermath of World War II, Washington looked to reduce its presence on the peninsula. That reduction speeded creation of an independent government below the thirty-eighth parallel, the ROK, but it also led to the withdrawal of American troops. This withdrawal, in turn, combined with the victory of the Communists in the civil war in China, left the area vulnerable to attack by the Soviet creation above the dividing line, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Koreans were hardly passive bystanders in the process by which

their nation became the first major military conflict of the Cold War. Deep divisions existed among Koreans prior to the actions of the United States and the Soviet Union in 1945, both among exiles and among those who remained at home. These cleavages contributed significantly to the course of events in the years immediately following, even helping to produce some one hundred thousand casualties on the peninsula prior to North Korea's momentous action of June 25, 1950. Furthermore, no Korean accepted the idea of the country's division over the long term, and the leaders of the independent governments that emerged in 1948 were far more determined than their great power sponsors to restore unity at an early date. Together, the internal divisions and the intense desire for reunification played key roles in the course of events between 1945 and 1950. It is the interaction of these internal forces with external ones that explains the coming of the war.

Part II deals with the strategies and diplomacy of the major parties in the war from June 25, 1950, to the signing of an armistice on July 27, 1953. Although the fighting contained an important civil dimension, although Koreans themselves suffered far more than any of the other participants, and although the Korean governments lobbied persistently for their points of view—and not without effect—the great powers ultimately made the key decisions on the parameters of the war. Initially, for example, the United States defined the objective of its intervention as restoration of the situation prior to the North Korean attack, and it did so without consulting the ROK government and against the fervent desire of ROK leaders. Upon reversing the military situation on the peninsula in September 1950, the United States took military action in pursuit of unification of the peninsula under the ROK, but *not* primarily because of ROK pressure. Why did Washington choose this course? Why, in response to the move across the thirty-eighth parallel of troops fighting under the banner of the United Nations, did China decide to intervene? The Korean party, this time the DPRK, played an active, even influential, role, but the final decision came only after intensive exchanges between Chinese and Soviet leaders. Finally, in the face of the initial Chinese intervention, why did Washington refuse to order a halt to the UN military offen-

sive? Here again, this decision accorded with ROK wishes, but these remained secondary in U.S. calculations. Chapter 4 addresses these questions.

By late November 1950, China was fully engaged in Korea against UN forces. For a time it appeared that China might even drive the enemy into the sea, thus enabling the DPRK to achieve its original objective of uniting the peninsula under its rule. Why, in the face of the Chinese onslaught, did the United States refuse to expand the war beyond Korea? Why, eventually, did Beijing decide to negotiate for an end to the fighting short of total victory? These questions provide the focus for chapter 5.

Despite the decision by July 1951 of leaders of the great powers on both sides to accept a military-political stalemate in Korea, the war took over two more years to end. Why, then, did it take so long for them to agree on an armistice? Chapter 6 grapples with this question.

Part II emphasizes the important yet secondary nature of Korea to the larger conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the influence of allied interaction on both sides of the conflict, and the depth of the situational, cultural, and ideological divides between the contestants. Korea became a battleground between the United States and China because of its symbolic value to the former and its symbolic and strategic value to the new government, the People's Republic of China (PRC), of the latter. In the end, Korea was important enough to generate a lengthy, bitter, and destructive war but not so important as to produce the ultimate tragedy of another global bloodletting.

While revisionism is not nearly so well developed on the course of the war as on origins, its thrust is to emphasize divisions among the allies on both sides, the excessive belligerence and ideological rigidity of the United States in contrast to the flexible and defensive postures of the Soviets and Chinese, and the proactive nature of the Korean actors.¹⁵ As in part I, my analysis integrates some of the insights of the revisionists. In drawing upon new documentation from the Soviet and Chinese sides, however, I adopt a framework closer to traditional than to revisionist accounts. Although divisions existed on both sides, the fundamental unity on key issues is often at least as important in explaining short-term events. Although the United States possessed an

ideological agenda and at times overreacted to stimuli, it just as often showed flexibility and responded prudently to difficult and complex conditions. The Communists, on the other hand, also possessed an ideological agenda and frequently adopted courses that both threatened the other side's fundamental interests and produced results contrary to their own. The ROK and DPRK generally played active roles in the development of policies within their respective alliances, but ultimately their great power sponsors defined the broad outlines of the conflict.

The final part addresses issues that, while relating to the origins and course of the war, transcend that event topically, chronologically, or both. Chapter 7 deals with the impact of the war on the American relationship with Korea. Historians, even those focusing on Korean-American relations, have failed to deal systematically with this issue, and my goal here is to fill that gap. Dividing the relationship into military, political, and economic affairs, I argue that, while the fighting greatly increased the U.S. presence on and commitment to the peninsula, it often reduced Washington's influence on the ROK. In moving toward the present, I suggest that the war left a mixed legacy—of material and emotional bonds on the one hand and of impatience and resentment on the other. This mixture has tilted increasingly toward the negative side over the last generation as the balance of power on the peninsula has shifted in favor of the ROK, thus calling into question the continued need for an American presence. The location of Korea has not changed, however, and this fact ensures the country's ongoing vulnerability and importance to regional stability. These realities, combined with the bonds produced by many years of intimate contact, leave hope that timely adjustments will continue to prove sufficient in maintaining a positive bilateral relationship.

Both the practice of democracy in the United States and the evolution of that system of governance in the ROK have influenced that relationship. Chapter 8 examines the Korean War as a test of *American* democracy, of its ability to compete with its authoritarian enemies abroad, as well as of its sustainability at home in the face of that competition. Many observers in the West, at the time and later on, doubted the competitiveness of the American political system over the long term in confronting a challenge abroad of indefinite duration and

led by systems of seemingly iron discipline. Indeed, David Rees concluded in his classic treatment of the war that, although in keeping the Western “coalition intact,” repulsing “the Communist aggression,” and bolstering North Atlantic Treaty Organization defenses the United States produced its greatest political victory since World War II, it also missed a possible opportunity “to unite Korea and to inflict a decisive defeat on China” while the relative military and industrial strength of the West was far superior to what it would be in the future. Whether or not history would judge as correct Truman’s decision to fight a limited war in Korea was far from clear to Rees.¹⁶ Rees wrote while the outcome of the struggle between socialist authoritarianism and capitalist democracy remained uncertain. With the uncertainty gone, we can now say with some confidence that Truman made the wise decision. The democratic system in the United States did not always produce advantageous results—either before, during, or after the Korean War, in relation to either the nation’s interests abroad or its ideals at home. Yet on balance that system performed better than its Soviet or Chinese counterparts. With new studies emerging on American political culture during the Cold War and with new and complex challenges confronting the United States both at home and abroad, the time is ripe for a fresh examination of democracy’s performance during the Korean War era.¹⁷

The Korean War was a multifaceted event, the mastery of which challenges the capacity of the most diligent of historians. I make no pretense herein to cover the major battlefield events of the contest or to provide details of the civil conflict that occurred on the peninsula from 1946 to 1953. Although the general outlines of the latter, especially prior to June 1950, are integrated into the analysis, my emphasis is on the broader strategic, diplomatic, and political issues that preoccupied the three great powers most concerned about Korea—the United States, the Soviet Union, and China—and on the ways in which Korean political leaders influenced their more powerful allies. If much remains to be learned about the war, and if much that is known is omitted from this account, my hope is that this limited effort at synthesis will further understanding and debate through a focused discussion of many of the key issues raised by a truly momentous event.