

The Korean War: A History. By Bruce Cumings. (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2010). Pp. 288. Cloth, \$90.00.

Despite being one of the bloodiest and most intense tragedies that shaped the beginning of the Cold War in East Asia, the Korean War is still hotly contested. For most Americans and South Koreans, almost everything about the war is mysterious and inconclusive, from its origins to its continued repercussions through the division of the Korean peninsula. Bruce Cumings clears some of the fog engulfing the war in 288 pages, blending historical analysis with an eclectic collection of allusions from philosophy, theatre, and literature. Invoking Nietzsche, Brecht, and Bierce, he painstakingly shows why the Korean War, despite only lasting three years, had such a devastating impact on the Korean and American psyche that forgetting about the war seemed to be the best way to prevent succumbing to the anti-Nietzschean disease of excessively remembering history.

Cumings does not merely provide a historical narrative but also cogently explains why the war is worthy of the historian's attention in three sections. The first three chapters deal with perception and interpretation and compare how the war produced a "party of memory" and a "party of forgetting," suggesting that the war did not just create two states but also two polarized conceptions of Korea's liberation from Japan. North Koreans continue to bitterly remember the wounds of Japanese imperialism. They preserve the bitterness through the Kim Il-sung personality cult and a fervent anti-Japanese nationalism. Such bitterness is the root cause behind molding Kim Il-sung into a national hero, fighting against the Japanese with his northern guerrillas and continually remembering the unresolved issue of Japan's compensation to Korean women who had to endure immense suffering as "comfort women." In contrast, most Americans and South Koreans constitute the "party of forgetting," only desiring to answer the question of who started the war. Cumings argues that South Koreans and Americans were forced to focus overwhelmingly on this question because South Koreans faced terrifying torture under the Korean National Police, which received immense support from the American military government. In the United States, a wave of anti-Communism swept across the country through the rise of McCarthyism and Orientalist bigotry, preventing Americans from understanding Koreans beyond the stereotype of the Asian as a representative image of the enemy and unknown "other." Anti-Communism partnered with military repression and racist bigotry to prevent mutual and comprehensive understanding between the two countries.

The next two chapters explain what was forgotten about pre-war Korea in the United States, which prevented Americans from understanding why they had to participate in a war happening in a country unfamiliar to most of them. Cumings surveys South Korean politics, highlighting charismatic figures such as Lyuh Woon-hyoung and tragedies such as the April Third Massacre and the Yuh-soo and Soon-chuhn Rebellions, which saw thousands of civilians, mostly wrongly suspected of aiding southern Communists, brutally massacred by the South Korean military. The American military government was responsible for deciding to employ the South Korean military without knowing that the institution was and still is a living historical memory of Korea's national division, with most Korean generals having served in the Japanese Imperial Army. Cumings also emphasizes "small wars" across the 38th Parallel in 1949 between North and South Koreans, demonstrating that these skirmishes served as a prelude to the

Korean War. The United States' lack of information about South Korea's post-liberation politics and encouragement of violent anti-Communism stemming from that ignorance, he argues, are responsible for blotting out America's brief yet turbulent occupation of Korea from American memory.

The final four chapters discuss historical memory as a ghost. Memories are presumably invisible to the naked human eye. Yet Cumings argues that those relating to the Korean War are still psychologically present, playing a requiem within Koreans to remind them of a war which saw family members kill each other due to ideological differences. In the case of Americans, memories are searching for a tune to reflect a sincere gesture of reconciliation. The war continues to exist in this limbo because of the forgotten South Korean massacre of Communists and, in comparison with American counter-insurgency operations in South Korea, a heavily disproportionate American carpet-bombing of North Korea. The latter resulted in the American occupation of North Korea and killed thousands of civilians and displaced many orphans, creating the ultimate source of North Korean bitterness toward Americans and a prime cause for the former to label the latter as "imperialists." In contrast to the previous two sections, which describe historical forgetfulness as a phenomenon inviting North and South Korean and American passions, the final section provides an overarching diagnosis of these various interpretations by pinpointing the American air war in North Korea as a crucial and primary cause for the forgetfulness. The final section's exposition smoothly blends with scientific analysis, elegantly illuminating the philosophy and structure of history as a social science while balancing phenomenological clarification with painstaking causal analysis.

Despite the seemingly perfect balance between historical explanation and theoretical profundity, however, the second section is slightly rushed. A lack of Southern Leftist voices leaves Cumings' analysis of South Korea's political and social milieu prior to the war incomplete. While he introduces an assortment of interesting personalities such as the charismatic yet unfortunate non-ideological centrist Lyuh Woon-hyoung (1886-1947), more should be said about South Korea's political circumstances which originally initiated the Korean War as a civil war between the southern Right and the southern Left. The considerable involvement of the South Korean Workers' Party (SKWP), which is the second largest Communist party in Korea after 1945, and the southern Left in establishing the Korean War's paradigm as a quest for "a more perfect Communist revolution" is one major piece of the puzzle. Cumings could have also discussed the existence of archives at the National Central Library and the Kyu-jahng-gahk Archives of Seoul National University. He would have complemented his book by transcending a phenomenological discussion of 1950-1953 and including a more precise portrait of the Left-Right skirmish in South Korea. It would also have been worthwhile to explain why South Koreans have experienced historical forgetfulness. By examining possible causes of historical forgetfulness among Koreans such as the lack of scholarly publications inquiring about pre-war South Korea, Cumings could have facilitated a more direct qualitative comparison with Americans' forgetfulness. Had he done these things, Cumings would have provided sufficient context and complexity about specifying the war's "Koreanness."

Overall, however, the book is a profound example of methodological excellence in writing history. Diverse allusions and philosophical observations spread evenly across the book. They provide a good rhythmic balance between an emphasis on war as a stern teacher and a careful attention to history as a collective psychological drama filled with the blood, sweat, and tears of Koreans and Americans who fought alongside and against each other. The book is a concise, sharp, and excellent critique of American and South Korean conduct during the war, enough to remind readers that we still have many mysteries about the war and its origins to unravel. While it may still be unclear for many Americans what sort of requiem to play for Koreans, the book will definitively remind readers that playing one is necessary to remember and overcome the horrors that shaped the Korean War. Cumings has written an essential and rewarding book that deserves critical attention from historians and anyone interested in the causes of the hot conflict that ushered in the Cold War.

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