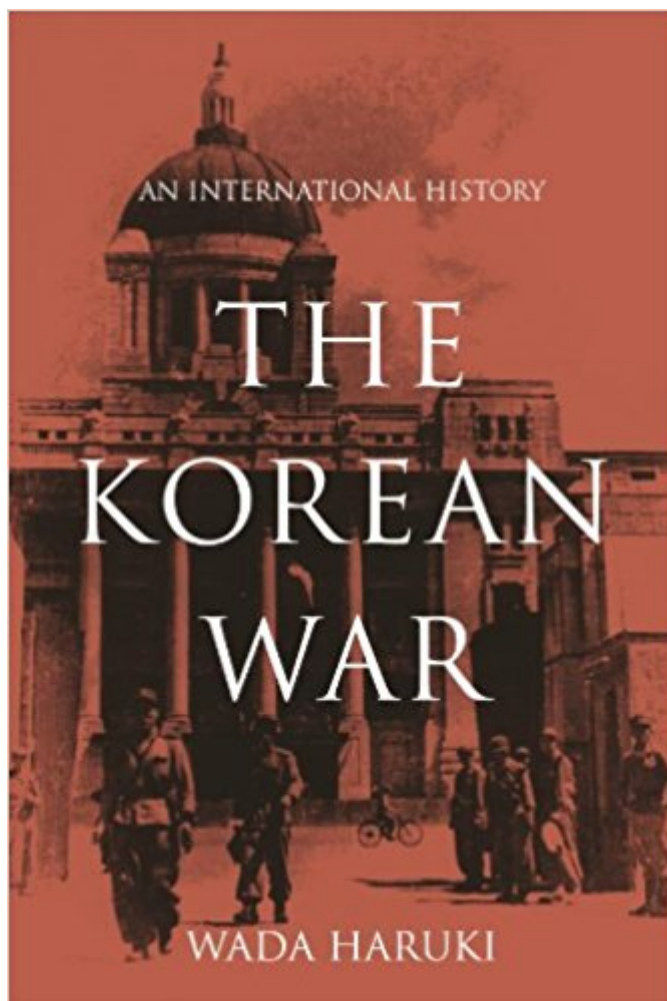


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The Korean War: An International History (Asia/Pacific/Perspectives)



Synopsis

This classic history of the Korean War "from its origins through the armistice" is now available in English for the first time. Wada Haruki, one of the world's leading scholars of the war, has thoroughly revised his definitive study to incorporate new sources and debates. Drawing on archival and other primary sources in Russia, China, the United States, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, the author moves beyond national histories to provide the first comprehensive understanding of the Korean War as an international conflict from the perspective of all of the major actors. Tracing the North Korean invasion of South Korea in riveting detail, Wada provides new insights into the behavior of Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Harry Truman, Kim Il Sung, and Syngman Rhee. He also provides new insights into the behavior of leaders and diplomats in Korea, China, Russia, and Eastern Europe and their rivals in other nations. He traces the course of the war from its origins in the failed attempts of both North and South Korean leaders to unify their country by force, ultimately escalating into a Sino-American war on the Korean Peninsula. Although sixty years have passed since the armistice, the Korean conflict has never really ended. Tensions remain high on the peninsula as Washington, Beijing, and Pyongyang, as well as Seoul and Pyongyang, face off. With rising international conflicts in East Asia, it is even more timely now to address the origins of the Korean War, the nature of the confrontation, and the ways in which it continues to shape the geopolitical landscape of Northeast Asia and the Western Pacific. With his unmatched ability to draw on sources from every country involved, Wada paints a rich and full portrait of a conflict that continues to generate controversy.

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Customer Reviews

This is an expanded version of a book originally published in 2002 in Japanese by Wada Haruki, a University of Tokyo professor emeritus who studies modern Russian history and contemporary Korea. It draws on a large number of both older and more contemporary books and periodicals in Korean, English, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese, as well as interviews and unpublished sources. All are well-referenced and footnoted in the back of the book. The book has lots of good background that I did not find in most of the other books on the subject I had read in the past. Korea has a long history of foreign influences/domination and of having destruction visited on it by external players. Knowing this helps the modern reader to better understand and place in context certain Korean sentiments. After WWII, when Korea was finally presented with its opportunity to control its own destiny and become completely self-governing, the oft-repeated factional dispute began about who should control the new nation. This ultimately became the scene for not only a Korean civil conflict, but a proxy war between newly-emerging Communist China and the United States. Although the offensive that is considered the beginning of the war itself appears to have been launched by the North, there was lots of "back and forth" in the form of raids by both sides for a long time before the war started. Both Kim and Rhee wanted to reunify Korea by force, and both the Soviet Union and the US tried to restrain them from being the first to act. Stalin in particular was anxious that Kim only act if he was first attacked by the South, and even after Kim ended up starting the offensive, the official line was that it was his response to an attack by the South. The author briefly discusses why "who started the war" may not even be the right question to ask. This book describes and explains the interactions between the various players on both sides; the detail is particularly good with respect to the Communists. Numerous communications and notes now declassified help throw light on behaviors and motivations. The interactions between Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung, and Joseph Stalin are covered in sometimes intimate detail. The reader witnesses Kim's obvious inexperience, and those few times he became discouraged and is bucked up by his more senior partners Mao and Stalin. Stalin, the so-called master puppeteer behind the scenes, is supplying most of the war material, some advisors, and much of the planning, and is calling many of the shots; we can see his obvious sympathy for Kim and the battering of the North

Koreans that is causing Kim such anguish. Mao Zedong ends up supplying vast Chinese manpower to the war, including several army divisions comprised of Korean expatriates that he basically "gave away" by repatriating them to North Korea. I felt, perhaps strangely, that Mao came off as a less sympathetic figure than Stalin. We learn how both Japan and Taiwan benefited indirectly from this war without taking a single risk or losing a single life, and how Japan tried to stick to its new post-war constitution forswearing re-militarization. We hear the US Joint Chiefs initially defining the new US defense perimeter in the Pacific as the Aleutians, Japan including the Ryukyus (Okinawa), and the Philippines. Leaving Korea and Taiwan outside, the chiefs took the initial position that Korea was of little strategic value to the US, and that any commitment to US use of military force in Korea would be ill-advised and impracticable in view of the potentialities of the overall world situation and of our heavy international obligations as compared with our current military strength. The US was very fearful about a flare-up that could turn into WW III. Yet we witness the US engage the sometimes erratic Syngman Rhee, the South's president, and see that this relationship was very contentious throughout the war, to the point that the US ultimately made contingency plans to remove him from power if it appeared that he would block the pending armistice. The US was frustrated because Rhee did not have the democratic credentials the US sought to support. At one point, in an effort to bring him around to reason, US Ambassador to South Korea John Muccio told Rhee: "It is fundamental that in the long run no country is militarily defensible unless it is in good health socially, economically, and politically." In a brutal war that killed over two million people, we read briefly about what is known as the Kochoang Massacre, in which hundreds of innocent civilians were executed as Communist collaborators by the South. Although the text does not dwell on this, and offers no discussion after simply leaving it as unsubstantiated, it is never asserted that it did not happen. Similarly, there is a brief mention of a Communist allegation that the US had engaged in biological warfare on a number of occasions. This appears to now have been debunked by declassified Russian papers, but what is proven is that Kim sought help from the Soviet Union to create a "contaminated zone" that it could show UN inspectors, since he apparently lacked any other proof. Late in the war, even as it appeared that combatants were on the brink of an armistice agreement, the US was still discussing the introduction of atomic weapons into the conflict. Official records show that President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles were in complete agreement that "somehow or other the taboo which surrounds the use of atomic weapons would have to be destroyed." At the time, this may have been viewed as desirable in principle, but based on the story, it surely seems unjustified tactically if not morally, as Pyongyang was completely leveled by

conventional bombing by the end of the war—“not a single building remained in the city. In fact, the description makes it clear that US aerial bombardment took a terrible toll, particularly on the North, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that US air supremacy (savagery?) finally brought the Communists to the negotiating table. At one point, the US and allied forces bombed 13 hydroelectric projects in North Korea along with other power stations, and essentially blacked out the entire country for over two weeks. Even after some of the thermal generation stations were brought back on line, this only brought the nation back up to about 10% of its preexisting electrical capability. This reader is left with at least a surface impression that the Communists really only brought the conflict to a virtual draw by virtue of their willingness to sacrifice 10 times as many soldiers as the South Koreans and UN forces. The perceived effect of this massive bombing may have driven future US behavior in Vietnam along similar lines. (This is not touched on in this book.) Eisenhower did write Rhee late in the armistice negotiations in an attempt to persuade him to lay down arms, saying “the time had come to pursue Korean unification by political means, not warfare, and promised, in the interest of the ROK’s security that the United States would provide economic and military aid and negotiate a mutual defense treaty.” Around this time, the book documents a sudden change in thinking at the US, whereby it was proposed that the ROK (South Korea) be developed as a prime example of association with the free world. The descriptions of the attitudes regarding the armistice among the various combatants and other interested countries are revealing. Despite having lost 10 times as many men, the Communists viewed this as a victory, whereas the South was disappointed and did not celebrate. Repatriation was one of the big areas of disagreement during truce negotiations, and the book devotes quite a bit of space to this issue. The Communists wanted all prisoners repatriated, as the Geneva Convention specifies. The US was against any forced repatriation, figuring (rightly as it turned out) that not everyone would want to be returned to his country of origin. After a long delay, this issue was finally resolved in favor of the US position. As it transpired, 2/3 of the 20,000-odd Chinese captives asked to be sent to Taiwan rather than being repatriated. Taiwan welcomed these soldiers as heroes, whereas many of the 1/3 that returned to China reportedly met a grimmer fate. Taiwan and Japan were big beneficiaries of this war. In Japan’s case, production ordered up by the US and allies to support the war effort turned out to be the economic revitalization Japan needed after the devastation of WWII. Taiwan benefited because Truman ordered the 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Strait just after the war started, to protect Taiwan from the Communists. All in all, I thought this was well-written and objective, and I can suggest only a couple of minor improvements. First, a little background on how the two rival power centers (North and South) originated would have put things in better context, but the narrative

in this particular book begins just before the outbreak of war in 1950, with only a few brief remarks in the introduction about the post-war creation of two zones one administered by the US and the other by the Soviet Union. The reader is presented with two leaders (Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee), both with armies and both desiring reunification of Korea by force. Since the author has written a number of other works on similar subjects (none of which I have read), and may have already covered this ground in an earlier work, he may not have wanted to duplicate it here. Also, some kind of appendix listing the names and positions of some of the players might have been helpful, particularly in the case of the Koreans, since most of them have one of only four or five surnames.

excellent

I found the Preface to have the most revealing information. Wada Haruki traced the blame game for who started the war. As researchers perused available government documents, first right-wingers blamed the communists and then later left-wingers would blame the US. Back and forth for decades. As Russian and then Chinese archives opened, the communiques with North Korea were accessible. The fact is that North Korea started the war and it was not a US plot. It is also a fact that after Japanese occupation ended, both the North and South rival regimes (just like Vietnam) claimed the territory of the other. Without the backing of the Cold War antagonists (Russia, United States) the war would not have happened. It was a civil war based on Nationalism. The mistake the US made was to reward Russian support for the war with Japan with hegemony of North Korea. Where the archives provide stunning new information is relation to the ceasefire and negotiations. The communists were divided and the details are in the book.

My conclusion after reading this book is it must be the most up-to-date history of the Korean War. As the subtitle "International History" indicates, it is not a nationalistic Korean book or another American war story. It is based on decades of research on US, Korean Russian and Chinese sources. The author seems to be capable to use those sources and understand the various languages. The book is at its best when it quotes all the information that came out of Russian archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While many of these documents have been published elsewhere this is the first comprehensive presentation of all such documents. The weak point is the lack of access to Chinese Army archives. Such access is difficult for anyone but probably impossible for a Japanese national to achieve. The only mistake I can point out is on page 287 where he quotes Chinese human losses in Korea as reported by official Chinese sources as

116,000 persons. As far back as in 2010 the "China Daily" reported losses at 183,108 persons and the number is increasing year after year. It will take China years to come up with a realistic figure but they work on it, something that cannot be said about other nations involved in that conflict.

Views on the Korean War keep changing, as time passes and more archived documents become available. This book focuses on China, Taiwan, Japan, the USSR and the Koreans--and of course the US. This is not a military history. It is more a narrative of diplomacy and negotiation. As such it is important but not a particularly compelling read.

This is not a military book. Says little about the movement of forces during the Korean War, but says much about the thinking and maneuvers of the leaders on both sides as they struggle, somewhat tragically, to achieve their shared goal of reuniting a nation arbitrarily split in two by the victors of WWII.

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