

The Korean War: The “Unknown War”. The Coverup of US War Crimes

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The Korean War, a.k.a. the “Unknown War,” was, in fact, headline news at the time it was being fought (1950-53). Given the Cold War hatreds of the combatants, though, a great deal of the reportage was propaganda, and much of what should have been told was never told. News of the worst atrocities perpetrated against civilians was routinely suppressed and the full story of the horrific suffering of the Korean people—who lost 3-million souls of a total population of 23-million—has yet to be told in full. Filling in many of the blank spaces is Bruce Cumings, chair of the Department of History at the University of Chicago, whose book “The Korean War” (Modern Library Chronicles) takes an objective look at the conflict. In one review, Publishers Weekly says, “In this devastating work he shows how little the U.S. knew about who it was fighting, why it was fighting, and even how it was fighting.”

Though the North Koreans had a reputation for viciousness, according to Cumings, U.S. soldiers actually engaged in more civilian massacres. This included dropping over half a million tons of bombs and thousands of tons of napalm, more than was loosed on the entire Pacific theater in World War II, almost indiscriminately. The review goes on to say, “Cumings deftly reveals how Korea was a clear precursor to Vietnam: a divided country, fighting a long anti-colonial war with a committed and underestimated enemy; enter the U.S., efforts go poorly, disillusionment spreads among soldiers, and lies are told at top levels in an attempt to ignore or obfuscate a relentless stream of bad news. For those who like their truth unvarnished, Cumings’s history will be a fresh, welcome take on events that seemed to have long been settled.”

Interviewed in two one-hour installments by Lawrence Velvel, Dean of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, producers of Comcast’s “Books of Our Time” with the first installment being shown on Sunday, March 20th, Cumings said U.S. coverage of the war was badly slanted. Hanson Baldwin, the military correspondent for The New York Times, described “North Koreans as locusts, like Nazis, like vermin, who come shrieking on. I mean, this is really hard stuff to read in an era when you don’t get away with that kind of thinking anymore.” Cumings adds, “Rapes were extremely common. Koreans in the South will still say that that was one of the worst things of the war (was how) many American soldiers were raping Korean women.”

Cumings said he was able to draw upon a lot of South Korean research that has come out since the nation democratized in the 1990s about the massacres of Korean civilians. This has been the subject of painstaking research by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Seoul and Cumings describes the results as “horrific.” Atrocities by “our side, the South Koreans (ran) six to one ahead of the North Koreans in terms of killing civilians, whereas most Americans would think North Koreans would just as soon kill a civilian to look at him.”

The numbers of civilians killed in South Korea by the government, Cumings said, even dwarfed Spaniards murdered by dictator Francisco Franco, the general who overthrew the Madrid government in the 1936-1939 civil war. Cumings said about 100,000 South Koreans were killed in political violence between 1945 and 1950 and perhaps as many as 200,000 more were killed during the early months of the war. This compares to about 200,000 civilians put to death in Spain in Franco's political massacres. In all, Korea suffered 3 million civilian dead during the 1950-53 war, more killed than the 2.7 million Japan suffered during all of World War II.

One of the worst atrocities was perpetrated by the South Korean police at the small city of Tae Jun. They executed 7,000 political prisoners while Central Intelligence Agency and U.S. military officials looked on, Cumings said. To compound the crime, the Pentagon blamed the atrocity on the Communists, Cumings said. "The Joint Chiefs of Staff classified the photographs of it because they make it clear who's doing it, and they don't let the photographs out until 1999 when a Korean finally got them declassified." To top that off, the historian says, "the Pentagon did a video movie called 'Crime of Korea' where you see shots of pits that go on for like a football field, pit after pit of dead people, and (actor) Humphrey Bogart in a voice-over says, 'someday the Communists will pay for this, someday we'll get the full totals and believe me we'll get the exact, accurate totals of the people murdered here and we will make these war criminals pay.' Now this is a complete reversal of black and white, done as a matter of policy." Cumings adds that these events represent "a very deep American responsibility for the regime that we promoted, really more than any other in East Asia (and that) was our creation in the late Forties." Other atrocities, such as the one at No Gun village, Cumings terms "an American massacre of women and children," which he lays at the feet of the U.S. military.

Initially, reporters from U.S. magazines' "Look," "Saturday Evening Post," "Collier's," and "Life," could report on anything they saw, the historian said. They reported that "the troops are shooting civilians, the South Korean police are awful, they're opening up pits and putting hundreds of people in them. This is all true." Within six months, though, U.S. reporters were muzzled by censors, meaning, "you can't say anything bad about our South Korean ally. Even if you see them blowing an old lady's head apart, you can't say that." Even though his writings on Korea years after the war ended were not censored, New York Times reporter David Halberstam wrote a book on the Korean War (*The Coldest Winter*) in which "he doesn't mention the bombing of the North (and) mentions the three-year U.S. occupation of South Korea in one sentence, without giving it any significance," Cumings said. Besides rape, the Pentagon was firebombing North Korean cities more intensively than any of those it firebombed during World War II. Where it was typical for U.S. bombing to destroy between 40 and 50 percent of a city in that war, the destruction rate in North Korea was much higher: Shin Eui Ju, on the Chinese border, 95 percent destroyed; Pyongyang, 85 percent; and Hamhung, an industrial city, 80 percent."By the end of 1951, there weren't many bombing targets left in North Korea."

Cumings believed that Douglas MacArthur, the General who commanded U.S. forces in Korea was prejudiced against Asians and badly underestimated their fighting capabilities. On the day the North Koreans invaded the South in force on June 25, 1950, MacArthur boasted, according to Cumings, "'I can beat these guys with one hand tied behind my back' and within a week he wants a bunch of divisions, and within a month he's got almost all of the trained American combat forces in the world either in Korea or on their way to Korea." MacArthur's slight of the fighting trim of North Korean units was shared by other high

American officials. “(John Foster) Dulles, (then U.S. delegate to the United Nations) even says things like, ‘They must put dope into these guys (because) I don’t know how they can fight so fanatically.’” Cumings goes on to explain, the North Korean soldiers “had three or four years of fighting in the Chinese Civil War (for the Communists), so they were crack troops, and our intelligence knew about these people but completely underestimated them, and a lot of Americans got killed because they underestimated them.” Again, when the CIA had warned MacArthur that 200,000 Chinese troops were crossing the border into North Korea, MacArthur said, “I’ll take care of it, don’t worry about it, Chinamen can’t fight.” However, the Chinese routed U.S. forces, clearing them out of Korea in two weeks. “Sometimes I wonder why the world isn’t worse off than it is,” the historian reflected, “because people make such unbelievably stupid decisions that will affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of people (based) on stupid biases.”

The U.S. use of air power to inflict widespread devastation had a profound impact on future North Korean military practice. To escape the rain of death the North Korean military—starting at the time of the Korean War—built 15,000 underground facilities, putting whole factories, dormitories, and even airfields underground. “So you have jets flying into the side of mountains,” Cumings says, as well as 1 million men and women under arms in a nation of 24 million—so that one in every 24 people is in the military. The U.S. military believes the North Koreans have built their nuclear weapons facilities underground—plural, that is, as it is possible they have one or two backups if a facility is destroyed by an enemy attack. While the U.S. today is concerned that North Korea is developing the means to deliver a nuclear weapon, Cummings said the country “has been under nuclear threat since the Korean War. “Our war plans, for decades, called for using nuclear weapons very early in a new war. That’s one reason there hasn’t been a new war,” Cumings said. The armistice that terminated the peninsular war banned the introduction of new and different quality weapons into the region but the U.S. in violation of the pact inserted nuclear-tipped “Honest John” missiles into Korea in 1958. “They said, ‘Well, they’re (always) bringing in new MiGs and everything, so we can do this.’ But to go from conventional weapons to nuclear weapons essentially obliterated the article of the (armistice,)” Cumings said. The U.S. has relied so heavily on nuclear deterrent in Korea that one retired general said it has reached a point where “the South Korean army doesn’t think it has to fight in a new war because we’re going to wipe out the North Koreans,” Cumings continued.

The historian said the North Koreans detonated their first nuclear device in 2006—of about one-half kiloton equivalent (compared to the 20-kiloton bomb that leveled Hiroshima). Three years later, they detonated a 4- to 5-ton kiloton range bomb that could “certainly blast the hell out of a major city.” While Cumings doubts the North Koreans have yet to miniaturize a bomb so that it can ride on one of their medium-range missiles, there is nothing stopping them from, say, putting such a device aboard a freighter and detonating it upon reaching its port of destination. Cummings noted the North Koreans are “very good at manufacturing missiles” and have medium-range missiles “that are among the best in the world outside of the American bailiwick.” These are sold to Iran and Pakistan and, if fired from Korea, could reach all of Japan and the U.S. base on Okinawa, as well as all of South Korea. Any new war on the Korean peninsula, the historian says, “would be an absolute catastrophe” even though the general consensus is that the North Koreans have been unable yet to miniaturize a nuclear warhead.

Getting back to the Korean War, historian Cummings believes that all parties to the war bear some responsibility for its outbreak: “What they did was take an existing civil conflict that

had been going on five years and take it to the level of a conventional war, and for that, they bear a lot of responsibility.” Both sides initiated pitched border battles from 1947 onward and the general in charge of the U.S. advisory group said “the South Koreans started more than half of these pitched battles along the 38th parallel border with North Korea between May and December of 1949,” Cumings discovered. “Hundreds of soldiers were dying on both sides and in August there nearly was a Korean War, a year before the one we know...(as the North Koreans pushed) down to the Ongjin Peninsula in the Yellow Sea south of the 38th Parallel” (but which is not contiguous to the rest of South Korea.)

Both the North’s Kim Il-sung and the South’s Syngman Rhee wanted to fight all-out at the time but were restrained by their American and Soviet advisers, respectively. The following year, after his troops came back from China, Kim Il-sung stationed his crack Sixth Division just north of Seoul and when hostilities broke out captured the South Korean capital in just three days. “Our intelligence knew about these (troops) but...completely underestimated them,” Cumings said, “and a lot of Americans got killed because they underestimated them.” The South did not develop the kind of military that the North Koreans did, and this is one of the truly hidden aspects of the Korean War. ...The North Koreans had tens of thousands (50,000)of fighters in the Chinese Civil War they sent across the border as early as Spring of 1947,” Cumings said. This gave the North Koreans a cadre of battle-tested fighters that routed the Seoul government’s troops.

Because of the troops North Korea furnished the Chinese Communists, deep ties were forged between the two countries. “China was a kind of reliable rear area for training and for cementing a very close relationship,” Cumings said. “Our people in Washington (didn’t) begin to understand this....There (were) a lot of hard-liners in the Chinese military that really liked North Korea.” Nor did U.S. intelligence apparently take into account how repressive U.S. actions in South Korea might make its citizens unwilling to fight all-out for a U.S.-backed government run by strongman Rhee. American military officials in South Korea in the late Forties “were outlawing left-wing parties, knocking over left-wing people’s committees and things like this, for two years” on their own initiative, Cumings said. But the development of the containment doctrine and the start of the Cold War in 1947 put the official U.S. imprimatur on their ad hoc policies.

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