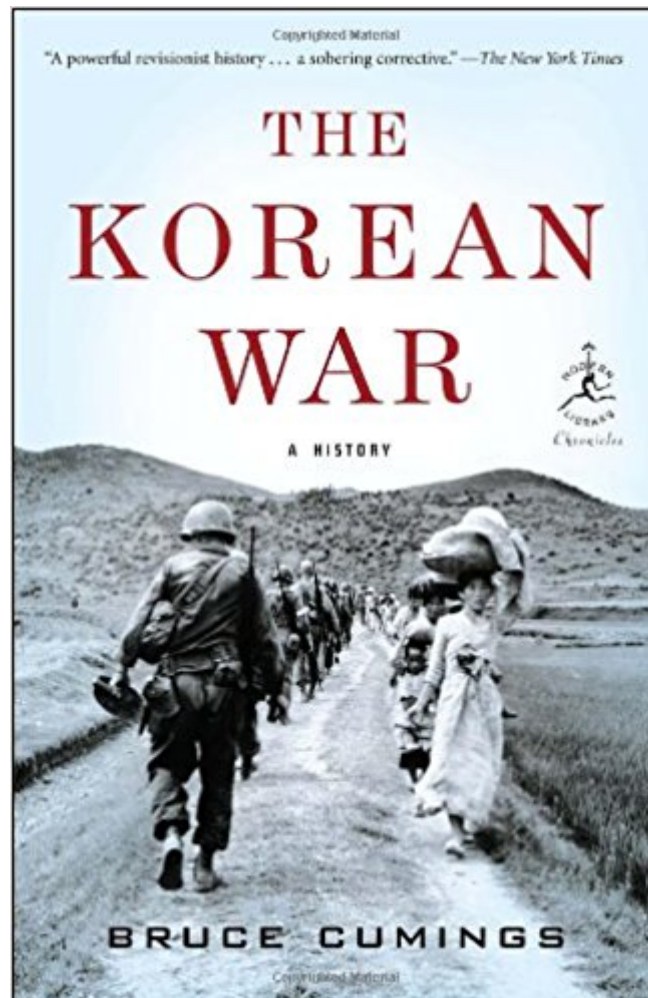




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# The Korean War: A History (Modern Library Chronicles)



## Synopsis

A BRACING ACCOUNT OF A WAR THAT IS EITHER MISUNDERSTOOD, FORGOTTEN, OR WILLFULLY IGNORED— For Americans, it was a discrete conflict lasting from 1950 to 1953. But for the Asian world the Korean War was a generations-long struggle that still haunts contemporary events. With access to new evidence and secret materials from both here and abroad, including an archive of captured North Korean documents, Bruce Cumings reveals the war as it was actually fought. He describes its origin as a civil war, preordained long before the first shots were fired in June 1950 by lingering fury over Japan's occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. Cumings then shares the neglected history of America's post-World War II occupation of Korea, reveals untold stories of bloody insurgencies and rebellions, and tells of the United States officially entering the action on the side of the South, exposing as never before the appalling massacres and atrocities committed on all sides. Elegantly written and blisteringly honest, *The Korean War* is, like the war it illuminates, brief, devastating, and essential.

## Book Information

Series: Modern Library Chronicles

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Modern Library; Reprint edition (July 12, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 081297896X

ISBN-13: 978-0812978964

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 80 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #84,896 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #24 in Books > History > Military > Korean War #163 in Books > History > Military > Strategy #884 in Books > History > Military > United States

## Customer Reviews

For many, the Korean War is remembered more for Hawkeye and Klinger than General MacArthur and Syngman Rhee. But for Cumings (*Korea's Place in the Sun*), professor at the University of Chicago, the critical issue is not one of memory, but of understanding. 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 (including dropping over half a million tons of bombs and thousands of tons of napalm, more than was dropped on the entire Pacific theatre in World War II, almost indiscriminately). 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. (Aug.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

An academic specialist on Korean history, Cumings believes Americans have amnesia about the Korean War of 1950-53. Or is it the Korean War of 1931 to the present? Cumings goes back that far for an origin to hostilities, seating them in the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and characterizing what happened in June 1950 as an intensification of a Korean civil war, though one definitely escalated by North Korea. These contexts, including the American occupation of South Korea from 1945-48, are more important in Cumings' treatment than the specifically military history of the war, which is dominant in popular American memory of the war. The picture Cumings presents does not flatter American policies, which take hits for supporting a ruthless South Korean government and for destroying North Korean cities. Chronicling atrocities perpetrated by the South, Cummings does not exonerate those committed by the North; the comparison serves his proposition that America intervened in a civil war, to its detriment. Cumings' historical expertise will be highly informative background material for those watching the current explosive potential of the North Korean situation. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a great book. Although the title is a little misleading. If you've come to get, like other reviewers have said, a Korean War 101 lesson, this definitely isn't it. There is lots in here, especially about, US politics that the general reader would have zero prior knowledge on. However, that shouldn't deter you from diving in because even a laymen on the topic (myself) still learnt a whole lot.

Unlike most histories devoted to wars, and in particular to this conflict, the viewpoint is more concerned with geopolitical and economic considerations. The author pays scant attention to the

day in and day out military conflicts that are the scope of all too many writings dealing with the subject of warfare. There is little space wasted in recounting "The Battle for Hill 519": unless it had a direct impact on the political/economic aspect of the conflict. Most Americans will be surprised to learn that US involvement in Korea's civil war dated back to 1932: with direct "boots on the ground" meddling that occurred after 1945. It goes without saying that like most of American wars for the past 80-years Korea was another harbinger to the disaster that occurred in Vietnam and linger on in the Middle East up to the present day. Strongly recommended for those who can stomach the truth. Some Americans may resent the concept that Korea was a wasted exercise of time, money, and lives. But how else could you consider it?

If you are looking for a history and chronology of the Korean War and its battles, you will be greatly disappointed. While there is an opening, very concise history of the war itself and bits of other information scattered throughout the book, it is more a history of Korea, old and new. It is slanted to the view that the North was the injured party and would be the unifier of an artificially separated nation, rather than the aggressor invading the South. While much of the research results in interesting, if not heretofore widely known facts, the conclusions are often tainted by viewing historical actions in the light of the moral and ethical views of today. It also confers the sins of the fathers (and grandfathers) upon their sons. In many instances it neglects the fact that none of the participants in this war had clean hands. If I were looking for a history of Korea, particularly the North, I might recommend the book as one view, but as "The Korean War, A History" I give it 2 thumbs down.

The author provides excellent, informative history that puts the Korean War into a far better perspective than is usual. The discernment is needed when he fails to discuss the impact of Christianity on present day South Korea...and the influence it has had since 1953. My point of view comes from being a Korean War Vet who went back there as a field engineer in 1973. I saw a country that moved from 1500-year old subsistence conditions to the rapidly modernizing economy. This book is well worth reading and considering.

Was doing research on the Korean War. Not many books out there on the subject. Was truly a forgotten war. Was good and informative. I believe it needs to read with other available books on the War to get a better picture of the overall situation.

If this book were a college course, it would NOT be Korean War 101. It would be an advanced course, perhaps even a graduate level course. That is not because the book is particularly difficult to read, but rather because it requires basic familiarity with the Korean War - or at least the conventional (American) understanding of the Korean War. Then this book proceeds to dismantle that conventional understanding. Bruce Cumings is a professor at the University of Chicago. He worked in Korea in the Peace Corps, and he now is one of the country's preeminent scholars of modern Korean history. He brings to THE KOREAN WAR: A HISTORY a lifetime of scholarship on Korea. He also brings to it a critical, sometimes acerbic, view of U.S. policies in and towards Korea since 1945 (which accounts, I think, for the fact that one-third of the reviewers give it only one star). I found that occasionally he does go needlessly out of his way to cast snide aspersions, but overall I was persuaded by the majority of his criticisms and his "revisionism". But we Americans tend to suppress Korea from our historical consciousness, and where that is not possible we favor as warm and fuzzy a narrative as possible, so honest efforts to arrive at the truth, even if perhaps a little flawed and less than tactful, are not well received. The back cover of the book bills it as "a bracing account of a war that is either misunderstood, forgotten, or willfully ignored." An apt summary, in my opinion. The most important point of Cumings's account is that the roots of the Korean War lay not so much in the global Cold War as in Korean history, especially the occupation of the peninsula by the Japanese, beginning in 1910 when Japan annexed Korea as a colony. Kim Il Sung, the long-time leader of North Korea, was demonized here in the U.S. as a wooden Communist puppet, but going back to the early 1930's he had been a fierce and heroic guerilla-leader in the anti-Japanese "Resistance." After the dust of WWII settled, what Kim Il Sung most wanted was an independent Korean nation, and what he feared and detested most about what was going on in South Korea, with the sponsorship of the U.S., was the accession to power of former Japanese collaborators and the continuation of policies of expropriation and oppression vis-à-vis the peasants. For Kim Il Sung and North Korea, "after every other characteristic attached to [the] regime--Communist, nationalist, rogue state, evil enemy--it was first of all, and above all else, an anti-Japanese entity." And the Korean War was at bottom a Civil War, rather than a far-flung hot-spot in a global "Cold War". Indeed, as the book brings home, the 38th parallel was rankly arbitrary and artificial. The day after Nagasaki, John J. McCloy asked Dean Rusk to find a way to divide Korea for the purposes of accepting the surrender of Japanese armed forces, as between the Russians, who were invading the peninsula from the north, and the Americans, which were not yet on the ground. Without consulting anyone, least of all any Koreans, Rusk settled on the 38th parallel -- in large part because that would put in the southern (American) zone the highly centralized capital

in Seoul. Five years later, when the North attacked across that imaginary line, why was it "aggression across an international boundary", as opposed to a movement in force in a civil war (no different than the Union Army crossing the Potomac into Virginia)? But if indeed North Korea's attack across the 38th parallel in June 1950 was an invasion across an international boundary, why then didn't that concept also apply to the broad-scale military incursion northward by South Korean and American forces in October 1950? The Korean War was an "appallingly dirty" war, "with a sordid history of civilian slaughters." Conventional American history now acknowledges that fact in its generality, but it does not recognize that its prot  g   in the South was far worse in this regard than were the North Koreans. By the end of the War, the North Koreans and Chinese reportedly had killed almost 30,000 civilians and POWs. The corresponding figure slaughtered by the South Korean regime - approximately 100,000. With the outbreak of the War and the influx of journalists from around the world, outrage over the magnitude of the South's atrocities became so great that, beginning in January 1951, the U.S. imposed censorship. "Criticism of allies and allied troops was prohibited--`any derogatory comments' met the censor's black brush." Philip Knightly, in his book, "The First Casualty" (the title alludes to the epigram that "the first casualty in war is truth"), thought that American reporters were the most cowed and, therefore, the most useless. Nor does conventional American history recognize that American forces were themselves perpetrators of some heinous atrocities, the worst apparently being at Nogun-Ri. Some instances of American barbarism, including the shooting of children, actually were reported in mainstream media such as "Life" (August 21, 1950 issue) before the censor's curtain dropped in January 1951. It was not until 1999 that "The New York Times" published stories about the massacre at Nogun-Ri - by which time the Korean War had become the forgotten war and there was very little chance of Nogun-Ri becoming another My Lai. Another aspect of the Korean War that we similarly have airbrushed from our historical consciousness is our prolonged and brutal campaign of carpet-bombing. General MacArthur had wanted to use nuclear bombs; his successor, General Ridgway, wanted bigger and better napalm bombs to, in his words, "wipe out all life in tactical locality". Napalm bombing, of course, became controversial in the Vietnam War, but "oceans of it were dropped on Korea \* \* \* with much more devastating effect." Cumings writes, "The Korean War is an unknown war because it transpired during the height of the McCarthy era (Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were indicted when the war began and executed just before it ended), making open inquiry and citizen dissent improbable." Six decades later, open inquiry into the War is way past due. And THE KOREAN WAR: A HISTORY is a major effort in that regard. P.S.: If you don't already have a basic familiarity with the Korean War, my recommendation is to read "The Korean War", by Max Hastings (which I

have separately reviewed on ). Cumings makes a few snide remarks about Hastings's book, but he is even more critical of Donald Halberstam's "The Coldest Winter", despite his admiration for the author.

The book contained many facts that I was not aware of and some statements I was uncomfortable with the author indicated that it was educated opinion and not fact.

Just an outstanding account of the Korean events leading up to the war, and the Realpolitik during and after the war, on both Korean and American sides.

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