



The Korean War and its Legacy

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

Online course, Week 2: Origins and interventions

Week 2 of the online programme put the spotlight on the origins of the war. There was a consideration of the motives of the key players and also how these players interacted. There was also a strong historiographical dimension in terms of how historians' views about these issues have changed and developed over time.

Several of the Fellows engaged with the contention of leading scholar Bruce Cumings that the Korean War was first and foremost a civil war, although the Fellows naturally brought their own take to the debate:

- *It seems inevitable that there would have been serious bloodshed with or without outside interference. Even before liberation, it seems as though there was little unity between the anti-Japanese forces except that they wanted the Japanese out. It seems inevitable that tensions over what the newly independent Korea should look like were likely to spill over into conflict as it did in China post-1945. The formation of the short-lived Korean People's Republic seems like an interesting missed opportunity – but I can't see anyway that this wouldn't have collapsed given the Communist threat posed by Kim Il-Sung and the equally hardline anti-Communist sentiment from conservative forces within the country. Centrists, such as the left-leaning Lyuh Woon-Hyung (assassinated in 1947) seem to me to have been in an extremely difficult position caught between strong extreme forces on both sides. Throw in the fact that Korea's economy was in a parlous state in 1945, with hyperinflation and unemployment a major problem, especially in the industrial centres of the country at that time, then you have a toxic mix.*
- *Obviously a key reason is the context of the Cold War and the fact that the major powers had much to gain from exerting their influence in Korea. I found it interesting to read William Stueck's defence of his arguments that Korea was essentially a war of international origins against revisionists such as Cummings and his defence of America's conduct in Korea ;' the Americans overall treated Koreans better than they had been treated by other foreigners, and often by each other.'*

True to the tradition of history being a contested space rather than an accepted canon, there was some robust debate concerning some of the readings which the Fellows were asked to tackle:

- *Bruce Cumings' argument, that the Korean War was strongly rooted in localized disagreement which the USA, with the 'larger quest of hegemony', then exploited, contrasts sharply with the views expressed by some at the Residential conference back*

in August. I agree that revisionism certainly appears to hit a nerve with Stueck, particularly when he addresses the blame for the length of the war (which Revisionists attribute in part to the 'inflexible, intolerant and self-righteous' approach of the UN negotiators).

- *Stueck brings very little to the table regarding an analysis of the Origins of the conflict. It is noteworthy as late as 2002 he is liberally using the terms 'Traditional' and 'Revisionist', when Cumings himself legitimately rejects the labelling of him as the latter. Stueck (an extraordinary name in the context!) still seems to view any version of Cold War historiography that doesn't focus on attacking the USSR, as an attack on the US nation/his patriotism. Or if any critique of the US is to be made this must be along the lines of being too 'soft' on Communism.*

Other Fellows highlighted more strongly the international dimension in the origins of the conflict but also the importance of culture and systems of thought which had been discussed in Week 1 of the online programme:

- *Last week we discussed the importance of order in Confucianism and in Korean society before the Japanese colonization. Did this allow Communism to take root with greater speed in Korean society? Communism was very popular across Korea even until the late 1940s, when ¼ of the adult population were members of the North Korean Communist Party. Hammel argues that one of the main concerns facing the US in 1940s Korea was that of a misunderstanding between local vs. Soviet-controlled Communism. The Soviet army had been in Korea for only one week when Japan surrendered in 1945, but Stalin went onto dominate the politics of North to the extent of giving the go ahead for its invasion of the South in 1950. The USA then became more suspicious of the Korean People's Republic in 1945 due to the potential intrusion of Communists, no doubt because they saw huge expansion of Communism under Stalin in Eastern Europe 1945-1949.*

Finally, several Fellows have started thinking ahead to the final stage of this programme, in which they have to write a classroom resource:

I think I would probably talk through a simplified narrative with Y9, using lots of maps and images, and then present them with cards, each of which would contain a snippet of information. I would then get them to pick out evidence that the following causes were at play (I'd probably get different groups or pairs of students to look for different factors):

- *US policy of occupation in Korea / suppression of democratic or left-wing factions (e.g. undermining of land reform, relationship with previous collaborators)*
- *The actions of Kim Ill Sung*
- *US fear of Communism*
- *Triggers / sparks (e.g. Acheson's Press Club speech/ assassination of Yo Unhgong/ suppression of the Autumn Harvest Uprising)*
- *Korea's suffering from internal conflict before 1910 (e.g. rising inequality and tension between landlords and peasants)*
- *The Japanese occupation 1910 ff exacerbating internal divisions*
- *The actions of Communist Soviet Union / China*
- *The actions of Syngman Rhee*

I'd probably end with giving them a summary of 3 differing interpretations and asking them which one they most agreed with and why (e.g. 'The Korean War would not have happened without the US fear of Communism.' or 'War was inevitable in Korea even before 1945' etc.)

Core resources

- Revisionism and the Korean War by William Stueck
<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/365/576>
- HA Podcast: Mike Shin, 'The Korean War'
<https://www.history.org.uk/podcasts/categories/442/podcast/129/the-korean-war>
- BBC Documentary, The Korean War, 2015
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68Qpscmh6Fw&feature=youtu.be>

Secondary sources

- Review article of Peter Lowe's The Korean War
<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/157>
- Allan R. Millett, "The Korean War: A 50-year critical historiography," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 24, 1 (2001)
- YouTube: search for "Korea the Unknown War 1988" ("North Korean Soldiers interviews," "Chinese Army," "Peace Talks, Truce, 38th Parallel," "The 38th Parallel," "War Cameraman Interview," "Chinese treatment of Prisoners of War," "Korean Refugees")
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3c_vwqKxPneoViQPywTV Cp8RkKXuuKsi