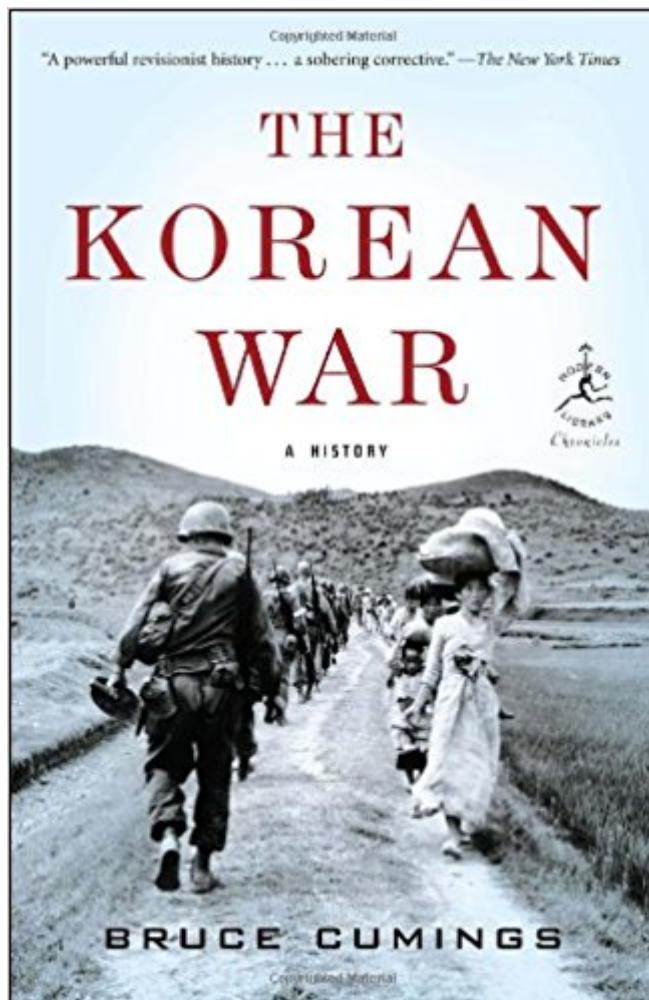


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# The Korean War: A History (Modern Library Chronicles)



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

This is a useful introduction to the Korean War. This is not a conventional military history and anyone looking for a conventional military history will be disappointed. Cumings, a leading expert on modern Korean history, is primarily interested in debunking common American myths about the Korean war. The book is organized as a series of essays on aspects of the Korean war. Topics covered include the ultimate genesis of the war as a civil conflict between Korean clients of the

Japanese imperium and anti-colonial insurgents, the essentially arbitrary post-WWII division of Korea, the nature of the American occupation and direct rule of Korea, the efforts of the US to rollback Communism in the Korean peninsula, the remarkably brutal nature of the conflict - including our use of saturation bombing, and the last consequences of the war for both Korea and the USA. Cumings's analysis is that the War was an essentially unavoidable civil conflict between Koreans who had been Japanese clients, and who became our clients, and anti-Japanese Korean insurgents allied with the Chinese Communists. Like many local-regional conflicts of the Cold War, the local issues became entangled in the East-West rivalry, greatly exacerbating the conflict. As Cumings points out, the war was started by the North Koreans led by Kim Il Sung but against the background of constant conflict between the Northern and Southern regimes, and given the resources (approval of the US), the Rhee regime in the South would have happily struck first.

Cumings devotes quite a few pages to the many, many crimes of the Korean war. As is typical of civil wars, there were enormous atrocities committed by both sides. Partly because of the debunking intent of this book, and partly, I suspect, because documentation is better, there is more discussion of the crimes committed by the South Korean regime. Cumings also discusses US atrocities, and probably more important, the remarkably intense bombing campaign conducted by the US.

Cumings emphasizes the centrality of Korea to this phase of Cold War diplomacy. This includes the American tendency to see Korea as an economic adjunct of Japan, a point appreciated quite well by many nationalist Koreans, and the way in which the Korean conflict contributed to the formation of the national security state we still live with. The consequences for Korea were just as great, including the establishment of the authoritarian South Korean state and what Cumings describes nicely as the nationalist monarchy of the North, a garrison state with few peers in recent history. While there is a lot of useful information and analysis in this book, the format and manner of presentation are less than optimal. The individual chapters are somewhat overlapping essays.

Cumings has written each of these sections in a somewhat self-consciously literary style which sometimes impairs readability. In addition, Cumings presents some important arguments in pieces in different chapters, which degrades the quality of his analysis. The discussion of the American tendency to see Korea as a economic adjunct of Japan is an example. Some of the writing has an almost angry tone; Cumings is clearly frustrated by American ignorance of Korea and its history. I think Cumings would have done better to use a more conventional narrative structure and adopt a more neutral voice in this book. There are also, I think, a few errors of interpretation. Cumings, for example, contrasts the limited containment policy advocated by George Kennan with the rollback advocated by Dean Acheson. Kennan, however, was an advocate of rollback at one point in his

career. I have to comment on some of the more negative reviews of this book. This is not a "far-left" view of the war. The civil nature of the Korean conflict, the authoritarian nature and brutal behavior of our Korean clients, the excessive nature of the American bombing campaign, and our primary interest in securing Japanese security, are not arguable points. Nor is Cumings an apologist for North Korea. Cumings own ideological orientation is probably revealed best by the fact that this book is dedicated to the late Kim Dae Jung, the courageous pro-democracy politician who was nearly killed by the authoritarian South Korean regime we supported.

My only gripe with this book is that its title "The Korean War" is misleading. "Essays on the Korean War in Korean and American Memory" would have been a more apt, but maybe less marketable, title. Thus, interested readers looking for a quick, up-to-date narrative of the period of combat involving the United States (1950-1953) might feel disappointed. I hope they will still read this literally eye opening book. After all, there is David Halberstam's recent opus magnum "The Longest Winter" that covers the "conventional" Korean War. Professor Cumings--who has travelled in Korea and studied its history extensively over more than four decades--dispenses with the traditional story in chapter one and then moves on to uncover the dark sides of the conflict--covered up in Korea and repressed in America for decades. He explores the beginning of the conflict in the brutal Japanese occupation of Korea in the early 20th century, which created fierce guerilla resistance fighters (many of whom would fight for the North in 1950) but also collaboration among the economic and military elite (many of whom would become "our guys" in the South after World War II). He discusses the brutal violence used by corrupt southern leaders to suppress dissent BEFORE 1950, the merciless American air war, which employed napalm, against civilians, the massacres committed on POWs and civilians by both sides, and other topics most Americans never heard of back then and would prefer not to hear about now. After all, this was one of America's "good wars," even for most liberal commentators. Yet ignoring this history, as Cumings forcefully argues, prolongs the terrible traumas the war inflicted among all participants, and it makes it impossible to understand what is currently going on in Korea. The book is full of revelations. I know a good deal about U.S. cold war policies, but had no idea that at least 100,000 south Koreans had been killed in brutal counterinsurgency operations by southern leaders--with American assistance--before 1950. That president Truman had actually signed the order to use nuclear weapons in April 1951 (Chinese restraint might have saved the world from nuclear war). That some of the worst Korean war criminals (and their families) who had collaborated with the Japanese regime ended up holding elite positions in South Korea for decades. That the Pentagon actively suppressed evidence of American

war crimes and today refuses to pay compensation to the victims who are still alive...Lastly, Cumings gives the Korean War the central place in recent U.S. and world history it deserves. He argues that it was the Korean War that created containment as it would be practiced outside Western Europe for the rest of the cold war and beyond (picking sides in postcolonial wars, controlling development by forcefully incorporating areas into the western economic orbit, justifying policies with anti-communism whether applicable or not). He confirms the judgment of other historians that it was Korea that sparked the national security state of permanent preparedness and the creation of what Chalmers Johnson has called an empire of bases. The book reads less like a monograph than a series of essays. Cumings pulls no punches when criticizing American complacency and misjudgments, and he frequently inserts himself into the narrative. This is frankly a book for people who already know the basic conventional story and might be open to ponder its implications and neglected sides. Contrary to what some critics (who clearly have not read the book) have charged, Cumings not once excuses the violence, political persecutions, or cult of personality in North Korea. I kept track of how often he criticizes the North Korean regime and found him even-handed throughout the book. His acerbic criticism of U.S. attitudes toward Korea might be hard to swallow for some "patriotic" readers, but Professor Cumings knows his stuff. One can disagree with his interpretation of details, but his central argument--that American leaders intervened in a civil war they did not understand on behalf of people they did not care about--is hard to refute. Powerful, even moving, history.

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