Review Essay

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The "Civil War Thesis" and the Myth of Revisionism in the Historiography of the Korean War: *A Critical Review of Recent (Post-Cumings) Scholarly Literature*

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It has been nearly seven decades since the Korean War ended without an armistice, but debates on the war's nature have continued to inform much of the scholarly literature on the subject since the publication of Bruce Cuming's *The Origins of the Korean War* (1981; 1990). All scholarly debates are destined to go on without any promised conclusion, and those surrounding the Korean War are no different. Cumings' work reminded traditional scholarship, with its emphasis on the international aspect of the war (the Korean War as a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union), that the very essence behind naming the Korean War as a *Korean war* is the undeniable fact that it was Koreans who first shed blood in a civil war whose main theme was a struggle between South Korean communism and anticommunism. If the liberty that ensued from the Korean War was South Korea's liberty from communism, the origins of the blood that was that liberty's price must be found in post-liberation South Korea.

In doing so, Cumings was not *revising* anything, for attempts to show Korea's role—especially that of South Korea—predated 1981. Much of the literature published after Cumings' work, such as by historians Clay Blair ([1987] 2003) or Max Hastings (1987), or journalists like Callum MacDonald (1986), assumed that a history of the Korean War could only begin from

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June 25, 1950. While they successfully told readers how the war unfolded, it was inconceivable that a *beginning* to a war that so unexpectedly and importantly inaugurated the Cold War could have such negligible and mundane origins as a civil war. It was the shock of making this *new* discovery, rather than the crucial message about how wars begin, that led Kathryn Weathersby (1993) to decry and criticize Cumings for harboring a "revisionist" tendency, which she believed, denied the orthodox and *true* wisdom that the Korean War could not have begun on a date other than June 25, 1950.

If one examines some major historical works on the Korean War published since 2000, it is noticeable that not only have scholars such as Allan Millett and journalists such as David Halberstam failed to understand Cumings' message and intention in *The Origins of the Korean War*, but it is also too early to label Cumings as a "revisionist." Despite being published nearly three decades before Millett and Halberstam published *Their War for Korea* (2002) and *The Coldest Winter* (2007), respectively, Cuming' work still corrects and supplements the post-Cumings scholarship by reminding them that the Korean War began as a civil war between Koreans before the gruesome implosion of violence set off on June 25, 1950, which would be so appalling as to cause one to forget the civil war phase, whose intensity paled compared to North Korea's invasion of South Korea. Post-2000 scholarship on the Korean War exhibits this phenomenon of forgetfulness about the Korean War's civil origins such that Cumings' argument must not be termed revisionist for it presented facts about the civil war phase that had not been known before.

Even forty years after the debut of Cumings' civil war thesis—that the Korean War was like any other war, for it had its roots as a civil war (in this case, between the South Korean Left and Right)—it continues to be grossly misunderstood. The idea that the Korean War began on June 25, 1950 dismisses the notion that all international wars have origins in national civil wars. International wars do not occur in a vacuum; they emerge from national grievances and hatreds. While the sustained interest in the Korean War is one laudable outcome of Cumings' *The Origins of the Korean War*, it

is too early to describe Cumings' work as *revisionist*. Even the most recent works focusing on the human and psychological aspects of the war, of which Su-kyoung Hwang's *Korea's Grievous War* (2016) and Monica Kim's *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War* (2019) are the most representative, have not fully understood or absorbed Cumings' crucial message that the Korean War was fundamentally a Korean conflict with Korean roots, causes, and developments.

The five works reviewed here prove that the label of *revisionism* is a mythical one that conceals an inability to understand Cumings' emphasis on the post-colonial, civil war origins of the Korean War. No original scholarship, such as that of Cumings, can be labeled as revisionist. Revisionism is but a veil of ignorance for those who cannot or refuse to understand that all wars, however great, have small but painful origins as civil wars, which ultimately expand into international wars because grievances from the former remain to haunt and nurture the monstrosities of the latter.

Millett's *Their War for Korea* attempts to understand the war as a historical memory. The book is a meticulous account of how South Koreans remembered the Korean War. The author relies largely on interviews of Korean, American, and other international veterans of the war from all walks of life. Each interview shows the pain of the Korean War, from the gruesome experiences of fighting communists, to enduring poverty, or being suspected of being a communist or communist sympathizer.

Each chapter tells the story of one individual's experiences in the war. Millett examines famous generals such as Peng Dehuai, as well as ordinary soldiers, journalists, and photographers. Millett presents humane portraits of people who risked their lives to defend a country, about which many knew almost nothing, from communist aggression. Whether a frontline solider or wartime refugee, Millett gives balanced attention to every interviewee, providing detailed and moving accounts of the individual's experiences in and impressions of the war. He tries to address all dimensions of the war by portraying an international array of figures—Korean, American, British, and even Belgian and French soldiers—to highlight the

war's global resonance.

Unfortunately, the book's structure and argument are flawed. The former is unclear and even nonexistent, while the latter only briefly appears in the book's introduction and is not directly connected to the book's central content. Millett may have interviewed people he deemed appropriately representative of those who directly witnessed or participated in the war, but there is no guiding rationale or logic for the organization of the book's chapters. Millett discusses the Chung family, who built Hyundai into one of the largest conglomerates in South Korea, but it is abruptly disjointed by the following chapter discussing a soldier's recollection of the war without any prior explanation of the thought behind the order of the chapters. This incomprehensible pattern persists throughout the book, such that by the time the reader finishes it, all one is left with is a collection of random vignettes of people whose experiences are only vaguely thematically united by the Korean War. There is also little theoretical analysis and no footnotes, making it difficult for a reader to understand why reading the chapters genuinely matters aside from providing a panoramic view of what experiencing war meant. While the purpose of showing the variety of experiences Millett's interviewees faced in the Korean War can be appreciated, the lack of a general framework makes it hard to understand the work's main argument.

Millett curiously claims that the Korean War was mostly about protecting "Christian values" from communism (p. 100), but then claims a few pages later that he had gathered the portraits of common people who would have never imagined their experiences to be exceptional. The two claims do not square neatly with each other. The Korean War was not simply an anticommunist war, even from South Korea's perspective, but an extension of a post-colonial war between the South Korean Left and Right. Moreover, because Christians accounted for less than 5 percent of the entire Korean population at the time of the war's outbreak, there is no reason to consider Christian values as the beginning point of any analysis of the war.

When North Korea invaded South Korea, Christianity was irrelevant, for the actual motive behind the invasion was to extend the South Korean

Workers' Party's (SKWP) bid to launch a more perfect communist revolution and to realize a communist hegemony on the Korean Peninsula. The war was not anti-Christian or pro-Christian, but was a pan-Korean tragedy because it arose first amongst Koreans and ended with Koreans scarring each other's lives, often by leaving irreparable wounds such as permanently divided families. The war was ruthless and vicious because it left no lives untouched and being a Christian was no indulgence for escaping the horrors of violence and bloodshed. Considering this book was written 21 years after Cumings' *The Origins of the Korean War,* a more precise coverage of the southern connection to the war's origins by discussing the SKWP or tragedies such as the April Third Uprising in more detail would have helped readers understand the post-colonial roots of the Korean War, which is a more important link for understanding why the Korean War happened.

David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter* realistically analyzes the Battle of Jipyeong-ri, perhaps the most ferocious and hectic battle in the war. He draws on the most recent contemporary scholarship to not only bring his wide range of characters—from Douglas MacArthur to ordinary soldiers—to life. The book's greatest strengths are its scope and meticulous detail and Halberstam's consistent ability to maintain an objective tone. By illuminating how intense, tragic, frantic, and horrible the butchery committed during the war actually was, and by equally dividing his attention between generals and soldiers from diverse backgrounds, Halberstam is able to cast the war as a truly human story.

Moreover, by painstakingly recording what soldiers said on the battlefield, he adds veracity and vivacity to highlight that history is the true story of people who find themselves in unexpected places at unexpected times. Although Halberstam exclusively relies on published books by noted historians, he successfully portrays the Korean War as a human drama. Although Halberstam only focuses on one battle, he chose the most bitter and ferocious one, sustaining his central purpose of relating just how brutal and arduous the road to securing a stalemate was. Halberstam describes the war as it happened and captures the brutality more accurately than Millett

because he has a clearer focus and purpose, and each chapter builds on the narrative of a major battle, which serves as a microcosm of the war.

However, Halberstam fails to understand Cumings' central message by misrepresenting the North Korean regime as monolithic and Soviet-inspired without accounting for anti-imperialism or Korean nationalism. As unforgivable as North Korea's dictatorship and its abuse of human rights may be, historical accuracy is a required virtue. Halberstam omits that it was the civil war between the Southern Left and Right that inspired North Korea to plan an invasion to expand the SKWP's "more perfect communist revolution" as its own and to consolidate a communist hegemony under the Northern communists by absorbing the South Korean Left. Since Halberstam omitted the civil war phase, there is no chapter devoted to understanding the linkage between the civil war and the horrendously expanded Korean War. Although Halberstam notes that Koreans had post-colonial problems rooted in Japanese colonial rule, he does not link these problems to North Korea's mixture of Korean nationalism and communism. Had he done so, he would have realized the erroneousness of his assertion that North Korea was a Soviet satellite because the Soviets had withdrawn from North Korea in 1947, realizing that Kim Il-sung, appealing to Korean ethnic nationalism and a fervent anti-Japanese sentiment, would not abandon the *suryong* system. What resulted from this appeal and its combination with a one-party state was a haphazard attempt to present North Korea as a pseudo-communist state; ironically, it was also this attempt that became the ultimate source of the regime's survival after the Cold War. A major factor in Halberstam's failure to appreciate the message of Cumings' civil war thesis is that he did not conduct research at the National Archives. Doing so would have helped him understand how the war began as a civil war, as well as the roots of North Korea's antagonism towards the United States, which was mostly due to American aerial bombings of North Korean cities, especially Wonsan.

What is commonly observed across Millett's and Halberstam's books is an evolutionary, albeit imperfect, trajectory of methods used to understand the meaning of the Korean War to those who fought in it. An attempt to

fathom the war's significance through a series of interviews can transition to telling what the war actually looked like on the battlefield through the voices of American generals and soldiers who fought in the most ferocious battle of the entire war. Yet, both books fail to understand why the Korean War began as a civil war, and what such a beginning implies about the war's central conflict between communism and anticommunism.

Steven Casey's *Selling the Korean War* offers a respite from an exclusive concentration on what happened on Korea's battlefields by concentrating on how American media reported and sought to influence American public opinion about the Korean War, and the American military and the White House's attempt to censor such influence. Casey examines various primary sources from the National Archives to show that the American government struggled to not only control how the war was portrayed in newspapers, but also to "sell" to the American public the notion that engaging in a "limited war" against communism in Korea was worthwhile. The attempt to sell the war was compounded by a tug-of-war in Congress, with conservative hawks demanding a more aggressive posture against North Korean and Chinese armies and isolationists demanding a quick withdrawal from a costly affair.

Nevertheless, the effort to sell the war was worthwhile. As the war dragged on to an armistice, it diluted the Republicans' vehement opposition to the Democratic Truman Administration and allowed the Eisenhower Administration to concentrate on ending the war without any further major divisions in political or public opinion. However, because all eventually *positive* changes in American public opinion came at the cost of failing to shift the American public's perception of the Truman Administration, selling a limited war is a costly political business, which ought to be an enduring political lesson.

Casey's book is thoroughly researched. It is remarkable for its vast scope and usage of newspaper articles, military reports, memoranda and other governmental documents. It also utilizes major scholarship on the Korean War, securing the book's status as a consensus history. The book notably addresses the history of the conflict through the novel analytical prism of public relations. Casey traces the complex and convoluted relationship

between the military and media, the latter protesting the former's attempt to influence and control the amount and nature of information released to the public in the war's initial stages, and slowly converging to a consensus as fighting ended, which gave journalists more freedom to report events exactly as they unfolded. The book's forte is its accurate account of rapprochement between the American military and the press without sacrificing important details. It also extends the Korean War to the negotiation phase to show how tensions between reporters and military personnel rose and then died down. The inclusion of the negotiation phase and how it influenced reporting is noteworthy, for while scholars such as Rosemary Foot (1990) had analyzed the negotiation process proper, its coverage by the press and its impact on American public opinion had remained neglected.

Yet, the book is not without problems. By assuming that the Korean War lasted from 1950 to 1953, Casey takes his focus on American public opinion and media for granted. While his devotion and consistency are remarkable, Casey barely references Korea or Korean agency. Although he discusses Syngman Rhee's declaration of martial law, it is too brief to allow readers to develop a critical insight into how Korean politics reacted before and during the war. Since Casey uses Record Groups 59 and 554, which contain many Korean newspaper clippings translated into English, he could have analyzed the Korean media's reports on the war and compared these with American ones to highlight the uniqueness of the American viewpoints. To further highlight the significance of 1950–1953, Casey could also have comparatively analyzed the American Military Government's reports and Korean and American newspaper articles from 1948–1949 to show why 1950–1953 deserves special attention in terms of changes and differences in language, tone, the American domestic political scene, and American public opinion. Moreover, while Casey acknowledges *The Origins of the Korean War* by mentioning that the war did not begin on June 25, 1950, his attention to Korea's internal affairs is given too late. It would have been better if Casey had concentrated on American media; while his focus may be beneficial to non-specialists of Korean history, Korean historians and historians of Korea would learn little from the discussion of Korean

initiatives.

Su-kyoung Hwang's *Korea's Grievous War* correctly begins with a discussion of the April Third Uprising and massacre to show that the main reason behind the Korean War's nature as a grievous war lies in the fact that many innocent civilians were sacrificed in the mayhem of a brutal ideological witch-hunt for supposed communists. Hwang also highlights that the announcement and implementation of the National Security Act were responsible for justifying the rise of the South Korean security state. Through an extensive use of personal interviews with survivors of the April Third Uprising and the Korean War, Hwang emphasizes the systematic and brutal violence that terrorized civilians, most of whom had no opportunity to ask authorities under what charges they were being victimized. Hwang shows that South Korea's history of human rights violations originates in the late 1940s and that violence continued throughout the war. Hwang poignantly discusses the war's legacy by showing that an ideological war between anticommunism and left-wing activism is still a defining feature of contemporary Korean politics. She argues that the ghost of the Korean War and the security state originally responsible for unleashing violence before the gruesome conflict, have left their vestiges through a divided Korean Peninsula and an ideologically divided South Korean society.

While Hwang's main arguments are sound and she uses a wide array of primary and secondary sources to support them, there are three major problems. First, because Hwang is invested in *showing* the extent to which violence characterized South Korean society before the Korean War, aside from telling readers what forms of violence existed before and during the war, she does not offer much else. While Hwang rightly argues the Jeju April Third Uprising and massacre as the origins of the subsequent stream of violence, she does not discuss why it became a massacre by examining how the South Korean Workers' Party launched what it called "a more perfect communist revolution" in a bid to unite with the North Korean communists and bring Korean communists under the SKWP's hegemony. She does not make use of the SKWP's official documents and does not mention the key political impact of the massacre—the destruction of ideological centrism

championed by Lyuh Woon-hyung (Yeo Un-hyeong) and the Korean People's Party. Since Hwang focuses on telling readers how violence unfolded, causes behind each instance of violence are often only briefly summarized, giving readers insufficient historical context to adequately understand the political origins or consequences of that violence.

Second, because each chapter discusses a political moment when violence was at its height, aside from the chronological linkage between chapters, there is very little explanation of why readers should expect a discussion of South Korea's imposition of martial law and political violence during the Korean War to transition to a discussion of American aerial warfare during the war. Providing a theoretical justification for discussing American aerial warfare would have been ideal because Hwang's discussions of napalm bombing and Wonsan were already addressed in Bruce Cumings' *The Korean War: A History* (2010). There ought to be an explanation of why aerial bombings had to be revisited.

Finally, due to the book's organization, the overall argument is thin. It is important to understand that there was much violence before and during the war and that its legacy continues to the present, but Hwang provides no unifying argument explaining why she chose these moments to discuss. Since she does not demonstrate how she advances Cumings' thesis, it is not clear why she begins with the April Third Uprising and massacre. That massacre was only one chapter in the civil war that bred the Korean War, and Cumings showed that the Autumn Harvest Uprisings and the rise of the People's Committees across South Korea had unleashed as much violence as the events around April 3rd. The Korean War's essence lies in the fact that the Left-Right divide and clashes between Leftists militants and the American military government were responsible for creating the war's leitmotif. Yet, because Hwang allows violence to become the central theme to understanding the Korean War's early history, discussions about the Moscow Conference, the rivalry between the Korean Democratic Party and the SKWP, and the failure of populist politics are barely mentioned. Readers might get the wrong impression that the former is the Korean War's essence such that it can blot out the latter.

Monica Kim's *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War* challenges the notion that war must exclusively mean whatever happens on the battlefield. She examines how interrogations during the Korean War adopted the ideological politics that became the war's framework and demonstrates through a meticulous analysis of documents from the National Archives at College Park, Maryland that interrogation was more than just *brainwashing*. It was a means for prisoners and interrogators to negotiate a limited "freedom of repatriation," with Korean, Japanese-American, and Indian-American prisoners allowed to choose their intended destinations, ranging from Korea, China, India, and Brazil. Kim argues that the Korean War's final stages were intertwined with a process of *decolonization*, for the prisoners' demands to repatriate was a means of enjoying a limited liberation from the globalizing reach of an informal American empire.

The forte of Kim's book is its impressive marshalling of diverse sources. Examining interrogation rooms as a venue for understanding the complex politics of war overturns the traditional assumption that analyses of war have to be restricted to battlegrounds, strategies, and generals. By incorporating *empire* and *decolonization* to interpret the milieu of the Cold War, Kim highlights the Korean War as the first hot war in the Cold War and shows that the post-colonial moment in global Cold War history meant the end of *empire* as an independent and traditional construct and as a geographical and tangible entity of one nation directly conquering and managing the territories of other nations. An invisible yet powerful ideological American empire, in which race and ideology became tools of compromise and negotiation, was in the making near the end of the Korean War. This demonstrates that the Korean War that went on in interrogation rooms was about finding that thin line between ideology and empire, and if that thin line could be found, the racial identity of the interrogated was the primary means of making such a discovery.

Despite the work's theoretical finesse, Kim does not transcend the framework of ideology and the Cold War. Her use of "empire," while highlighting the multi-cultural and multi-racial dimensions of a cultural melting pot, does not sync well with the Korean War. The American

military government was a policing institution aimed at maintaining an anticommunist order in favor of the Korean Right. Most Koreans did not like the idea of having Americans assume the role of the much-hated Japanese, and the United States had no interest in casting itself as an imperialist nation.

The practice of launching an informal empire arises from an *ennui* with the experienced limits of a formal empire, and America had a rich and controversial experience with formal empire through her colonization of the Philippines, which lasted nearly half a century. Paul Kramer's *The Blood of Government* (2006) discussed "colonial insularity" and its complex history, and Kim's book can be understood as its theoretical sequel. However, many Koreans did not welcome the idea of living under American domination, and there was much controversy over what the American military government represented, especially as the Moscow Conference on trusteeship over Korea was ongoing. Kim does not discuss the civil war phase, when discourses about American imperialism were at their height, to elaborate on how she is exactly using "American empire" in a Korean context, whether that be South or North Korea.

Moreover, despite her invocation of "global history," most of her subject matter is Asian, and the only global dimension is the diverse places where the prisoners wished to go. Despite her best efforts not to cast the interrogation rooms during the Korean War as "ideological venues," ideological conversion *was* a hotly debated topic and goal during the Korean War. The *freedom* with which Koreans chose to repatriate was not actually freedom because decisions to leave South Korea were often rooted in the harsh and dictatorial ideological Manicheanism which became the backbone of the South Korean police state launched by the Syngman Rhee Administration.

If there was genuine freedom in Koreans being able to choose where to be repatriated, it would have hardly been surprising if Korean prisoners chose South or North Korea. The fact that a large number of Koreans did not means that there was no real freedom. Considering that ideological antagonism between the two Koreas worsened right after the Korean War,

the freedom which Kim illustrates cannot be understood literally. The principal interaction she illustrates is that between interrogators and prisoners, with the former trying to convince the latter to convert to anticommunism. Where the internationalist perspective does reflect throughout is in the fact that some prisoners chose to emigrate to regions such as South Asia or South America, but the book cannot ignore the ideological ambience inside the interrogation rooms, for the contextual purpose behind having an interrogation room was convincing prisoners of war to convert to anticommunism before giving them a choice to repatriate or emigrate to a desired destination.

Kim does not grasp that the Korean War's ideological milieu continued to exert itself as long as it did because the war never outgrew the shadow of its civil origins. She does not probe into the war's origins to understand the nature of the American military government in South Korea. Aside from endorsing Right-wing activists, the American military government did not have a balanced enough grasp of post-colonial Korea to understand that many Koreans resented the military government's decision to hire former Japanese collaborators.

Nor did the American military government understand moderates such as Lyuh Woon-hyung, who wished to promote a non-ideological middle-of-the-road solution to unifying the Korean Peninsula by adopting "unitary socialism," or a proto-social democracy that emphasized ideological reconciliation while promoting an idealistically equitable redistribution of land and preserving the landed aristocracy under the expectation that they would promote economic growth that would seek to balance the growth of industry with that of agriculture. Had the American military government truly acted as a representative of Koreans despite being a symbol of an informal American empire, it would have at least earned some legitimacy by understanding the plight of the landless peasantry and the pro-Japanese proclivities of the landed aristocracy to account for the raw anti-Japanese Korean nationalism that ran deep and strong immediately following liberation.

Americans were in Korea to maintain order, not to understand Korea

or Koreans from a Korean perspective. The South Korean Left was most vocal in its determination to prevent Americans from even thinking about launching an imperial project in Korea. The ideological clash over the trusteeship issue, the initiation of a South Korean civil war between the SKWP and the Democratic Party of Korea, and the protraction of the April Third Uprising until 1954, prove that the South Korean Left had no desire to accept any sort of legitimacy in the American military government's attempt to put South Korea firmly under its control. Moreover, considering that the whole fiasco ended with Syngman Rhee's imposition of martial law, the idea that Korea was within America's imperial orbit with the arrival of the American military government does not seem plausible because it ignores the powerful agency of the South Korean Right to build a security state during the late 1940s and solidify the division of the Korean Peninsula according to their own volition.

All five books examined here illuminate previously unexamined aspects of the Korean War. By highlighting notable soldiers who fought for South Korea, a major battle during the Korean War, American efforts to shape and control American public opinion and media throughout the war, the tragedy and pain of ordinary Korean citizens who had to endure the horrors of war, and the extension of Cold War politics into interrogation rooms, they together show the complex dimensions of a brief war whose intensity was hot, controversial, and made a lasting imprint on the country where it originated. However, despite their common identity as post-Cumings scholarship, they all miss the mark in their theoretical attempt to inherit and transcend Bruce Cumings' poignant reminder that the Korean War began as a civil war. The five books omit the civil war phase entirely in their general assumption that June 25, 1950 is the true beginning of the Korean War, or even when they do recognize the civil war phase, they do not give much attention to South Korea's post-liberation domestic politics that make the civil war phase worthwhile and important. If there is one promising impact of *The Origins of the Korean War* it is that revisionism must not be registered as a proper vocabulary in the historian's lexicon, regardless of an historical study's topic; the horizon of discovered knowledge widens whenever a *new*

article or book makes the unknown known and renders it as an *old* fact. The purpose behind writing history is to enrich and enlighten the age in which the work is written so it might inspire meaningful scholarly conversation about what more needs to be studied and written about. There is nothing to revise about what has already been discovered because no fact can withstand the test of time insofar as a historian has the obvious yet important expectation that new facts will arise with the official release of new documents. That new scholarship may occasionally not fully understand the wisdom of old scholarship suggests the possibility that *revisionism* may be a veil of ignorance for people who lack the courage to face the reality that no matter how many historical accounts present new information, such new accounts are bound to grow old. It is the sacrosanct purity of the joy of making new discoveries through the guidance of the old that constantly ignites scholarly curiosity. To consider labeling old or new scholarship as revisionist as a sanctuary against what has not been discovered or fully understood is but acknowledgement of a lack of courage to face a permanent sea of history, with its high and unpredictable waves that historians must navigate or break through by searching for new sources guided by what has already been discovered.

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