

The Korean War in European Social Studies Textbooks¹

Jeong Jae Yun

This paper examines how European social studies textbooks deal with the Korean War. The Korean War is not only a major Korean topic covered in foreign textbooks, but it is also an important historical event for European countries as tensions rose in the face of the entrenchment of the Cold War. This paper divides Europe into three regions: Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and other European countries. The analysis shows that instead of three different views on the Korean War based upon region, each country has a different emphasis and way of narrating. Textbooks are an important medium in which official ideology and politics are reflected. Even if various perspectives on the Korean War exist, the mainstream view of each country, which is expressed in the textbooks, reflects the knowledge approved by the state.

Keywords: Korean War, European countries, foreign textbooks

Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to analyze how European social studies textbooks deal with the Korean War. The Korean War has been studied by scholars with various perspectives. Some deal with the origin and background of the war using historical documents and materials from the U.S., the USSR, and China while others examine the role of major UN member states and the international aspects of the war and its impact in world history. Nevertheless, the origin and

1. A part of this article is based on the analysis done by the Center for Information on Korean Culture. See Center for Information on Korean Culture 2005, 2006a, 2006b, and 2007. A much shorter, preliminary version of this article was presented at the 4th World Congress of Korean Studies (Jeong 2008).

background of the Korean War has been the dominate topic in research. There are two dominant perspectives, orthodox and revisionist, found in research on the Korean War.

The orthodox perspective sees the Korean War as an international aggression by the USSR to spread communism using the puppet regime of Kim Il-sung. The revisionist perspective argues that the Korean War was started by the South, not the North, and must be understood as a civil war caused by internal tensions, not international politics.² With the release of classified documents by the former USSR, these two perspectives diverged further into various interpretations such as post-revisionism.³ Despite the conflicting views on the origin of the war, the consensus is that North Korea started the war. Recently, new research on the Korean War is under way that focuses on minorities, the economy, a biochemical war, and civilian massacres.

This paper focuses on how the Korean War is represented in European social studies textbooks. Although Europe is far from Korea, the start of the war had a direct impact upon it. After World War II, Europe was under intense pressure because the USSR was engaging in a policy of communist expansion and planned to invade Yugoslavia (Stueck 1995:352). In addition, the Korean War was something European countries did not expect to happen; thus it took Europe by surprise.

Textbooks are an important medium of national ideology that reflects a country's social consensus and national identity. Therefore, it is possible to find a country's views on the Korean War in its textbooks. Textbooks are also revised and supplemented regularly whenever the existing dominant assumptions are challenged. For example, history textbooks are written in a tension between social consensus and state politics, and, in fact, are the result of a negotiation, or a balancing of the tension, between these opposing forces. Some historical events remain as sensitive issues because it is too difficult to find a point of equilibrium in the tension.⁴

2. Kim 2001:34. Some revisionists include I. F. Stone, Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, Robert Simmons, and Bruce Cumings.

3. See Lee 1999 and Lee 2000 for further discussion and a review of research in South Korea.

4. One example would be the coverage of the Algerian War in French textbooks. The Algerian War began as a rebellion by the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) and developed into a guerilla war of the Algerian independence army. It was only after the 1990s that the atrocities committed by the French army and the terrible reality of the war were written about in history textbooks. Nevertheless, contrary to the claims repeated by French educational authorities that the

The narratives on the Korean War found in European textbooks reflect the official position of the consensus of each country. There are slight variations among the different textbooks, but they do not fall outside the official position. Even in a country with a free publication system, there are guidelines that directly or indirectly influence the contents and structure of the textbooks. In Britain, for example, history textbooks are written, published, and distributed in a free market economy with the decision to use in the hands of individual schools. Nevertheless, all textbooks follow the objectives and contents of the National Curriculum (Kim 2003:240-3).

The textbooks covered in this paper are European social studies textbooks for secondary school students that introduce the Korean War.⁵ The paper seeks to identify the different views on the Korean War found in the textbooks with the premise that they are the official narratives of the country.

Western European Countries: UK, France, and Germany

1) UK

Parliament decided to send British soldiers to the Korean War on July 5, 1950. Announcing that the Korean War is a prime example of the threat of communism to the world, the British government actively sought to involve the U.S. and other European countries in the war. Britain's participation in the Korean War was not only to demonstrate that it is a strong and special ally of the U.S. but also that it is still a major power in the world. Moreover, it feared that the U.S.'s involvement in the Korean War and emphasis on the security of Asia

truth about the Algerian War was taught in school, very little was covered in French history textbooks. In 2005, a controversy arose when legislation recognizing and supporting the French people who were expelled from Algeria after the war was created since it contained statements that valorized French colonial rule and a unilateral guideline for education of colonial history (Lee 2006:426, 437-8).

5. The Korean War is usually covered in geography and history textbooks. In geography textbooks, Korea at the time of the Korean War is described as having poor economic conditions, similar to that of African countries. Immediately after the war, the GDP per capita was as low as that of African countries south of the Sahara Desert with no prospect of improvement. However, South Korea succeeded in achieving a miraculous economic growth over the next forty years. The Korean War is briefly introduced as a way to explain the rapid economic growth of South Korea.

might result in moving its attention away from Europe (Choi 2002:204-5). Britain wanted to keep an eye on the U.S. and contain the Korean War so that U.S. interest would remain focused on Western Europe (Ra 1994:113-4).

In this light, the main viewpoints on the Korean War found in British textbooks are that the Cold War was not limited to Europe and Cold War tensions led to an unexpected war on the Korean Peninsula. Mason et al. (2001:62) set the lesson objective of the Korean War as learning “how the Cold War contributed to the outbreak and conduct of the Korean War” and “the impact of the war on international affairs.” The content focused on the U.S. policy during the Korean War and the UN’s response instead of the cause and intervention of China and the USSR. It also stated that the U.S. had full command of the armed forces and military operations while the USSR, the competing superpower, provided support to North Korea. It also added that the U.S. did not directly confront the USSR in fear that it would lead to a full blown war between the two superpowers. In addition, most of the British textbooks examined (Aylett et al. 2005; Mason et al. 2001; Scadding et al. 2005) took an orthodox perspective about the origin of the war whereas Edwards (2002:69) introduced a revisionist position by indicating that recent scholarly works suggest that the war was caused by internal conflicts between North and South Korea.

The visual materials used in the British textbooks mainly consist of maps of the Korean Peninsula showing the process of the war. One exception is Aylett et al. (2005:20-2), which features a picture of Kim Il-sung to emphasize clearly who started the war. The textbooks also contains cartoons from Britain depicting Truman and the UN rushing to help South Korea, and from the USSR criticizing UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie for approving the use of biological weapons in the war.

2) Germany

After World War II, the Allies were determined that Germany would never become a superpower, thus tipping the balance of power in Europe. This policy was expressed in the Potsdam Declaration which demanded complete disarmament and demilitarization of Germany and the prohibition of any industry that could be used for war or in making war materials. However, tensions between the East and West increased and a threat of communism overshadowed the western world as the USSR implemented its expansion policy and succeeded in carrying out a nuclear test in 1949 and China was taken over by a Communist

regime. In response, the need to strengthen the military power of the western world was underscored, but there was no public discussion about West Germany's military role. Amid such a mood, the outbreak of the Korean War increased the threat of the USSR to the western world to a point where not only economic and political participation but also military participation of West Germany was demanded and the decision to re-arm West Germany was made. Seizing the opportunity of West Germany's re-armament, politicians like Adenauer attempted to restore the complete sovereignty of West Germany (Choi 2002:15-9).

German textbooks describe the Korean War as one of the major events of the Cold War and the factor that led to the re-armament of West Germany. The Korean War was one of the threats of Stalin's aggressive expansion policy that loomed over the free world and the very event that led to the increase of the U.S.'s military budget and the re-armament of West Germany. German textbooks also consistently narrate the orthodox perspective that it was North Korea who directly attacked the South upon the decision by the USSR.

German textbooks also highlight the civilian massacres with pictures and numerous citations on the number of civilian and military casualties and the loss of combatants during the war. Interestingly, Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* is featured alongside the introduction of the Korean War (Golecki 2000:103; Pfändtner et al. 2002:371). Often called the second Guernica, *Massacre in Korea* was criticized by both the U.S. and USSR. Picasso, a Communist Party member, was criticized by a French Communist for not making clear the real perpetrator of the massacre while the free world led by the U.S. criticized him for depicting the U.S. as the perpetrator of the Korean War (Jeong 1996:246-7). The most well-known civilian massacre during the Korean War took place in No Geun Ri from July 26-29, 1950.⁶ It is highly unlikely that Picasso knew of this event at the time he painted *The Massacre in Korea*. Nevertheless, the painting is an important symbol highlighting the atrocities of the war and the fact that the Korean War had more civilian casualties than any other war. In addition, some textbooks point out that one of the major impacts of the Korean War was to stimulate the export of German products (Berg 2003; Pfändtner et al. 2002; Weber et al. 2002). Thus, the descriptions tend to lean toward the impact the war had on Germany rather than on historical facts.

6. No 2004:61-2. The incident was first publicized in an Associated Press article dated September 29, 1999, and quickly became a worldwide controversy.

3) France

French textbooks deal with the Korean War not in a direct way but indirectly through pictures and figures. For example, one textbook quotes Raymond Aron's article featured in *Le Figaro* on July 22, 1950 (Le Quintec et al. 2004:97), while others present Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* (Klein et al. 1999:171; Le Quintec et al. 2004:104). The fact that *Le Figaro* featured Aron's article immediately after the outbreak of the Korean War shows that even though Korea was a distant country, the war had a significant influence on European politics (Jeong et al. 2005:194). Like British and German textbooks, French textbooks show a world history perspective on the Korean War, one in which the Cold War confrontations and tensions between the U.S. and the USSR were reflected in various conflicts around the world including the Korean War. In other words, the Korean War was a result of the USSR's expansion policy of communism since it spread not only in Europe but also in Asia. Like the German textbooks, French textbooks also deal heavily with the fear of the expansion of communism and civilian casualties (Klein et al. 1999:171). Presenting Picasso's painting, it underscores the atrocities of the war as many civilian lives were lost. The fact that both German and French textbooks highlighted the civilian casualties may be related to the historical background and social mood of both countries which sought to reconcile their own historical tensions.⁷

Ivernel et al. (2003:130) asserts that North Korea decided on its own to invade South Korea and Stalin did not intervene in the Korean War. In contrast, Le Quintec et al. (2004:96) declares that North Korea invaded South Korea with the support of Stalin and Mao Zedong. As such, there is disagreement about the intervention of the USSR and China, but all agree that it was North Korea who invaded causing the war. Baylac et al. (2004:63), however, indirectly suggests that South Korea intended to invade North Korea by quoting an interview conducted by the American journalist Arthur Sulzberger, foreign correspondent to *The New York Times*, in March 1955 that stated Syngman Rhee's desire to invade North

7. In the process of integrating itself after two world wars, Europe began to criticize its history education which emphasized ethnocentrism. Instead of national identity, European countries began to experiment with various identities based on human rights, democracy, and pluralism (Kim 2003:139-40). For example, since 1935 Germany and France have promoted a partnership in history textbook publication which has resulted in the publication of joint history textbooks based on critical views of past history textbooks (Bernlochner et al. 2006a; Bernlochner et al. 2006b; Duménil et al. 2008; Braun et al. 2008).

Korea. It is interesting to see an explanation of the internal situation when in general the descriptions of the Korean War deal only with the international situation.

Eastern European Countries: Russia, Poland, and the Czech Republic

1) Russia

Having been directly involved in the Korean War, Russian textbooks deal with the war in its own way. Although it does not disagree that it was North Korea that started the war, there is little consistency in dealing with the USSR's involvement in the war.

The textbooks of the former USSR state that it was South Korea who started the war. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia revised the textbooks to identify North Korea as the one who started the war. Zagladin et al. (2005:276-7) writes, "Even though the history of the Soviet Union denied it for a long time, it was revised to say that North Korea began the full scale war." Nevertheless, the textbooks tend to downplay the USSR's intervention and responsibility. In some cases, they directly or indirectly recognize the USSR's responsibility in the war but explain that the USSR tried to prevent it from escalating into a bigger war between the U.S. and the USSR. In other words, they minimize the role of the USSR in the Korean War and glorify its role in preventing the war from developing into a world war. More inconsistencies are found in the explanations of the war and the USSR's support to North Korea during the war (see Table 1).

Aleksashikina (2005:223) introduces the Korean War as a war between North and South Korea with participation of foreign forces between 1950 and 1953 but does not specify what kind of foreign forces were there. There is no mention of who started the war and how much the USSR supported or intervened in the war. Danilov et al. (2005:273) acknowledges that the USSR came to the aid of North Korea during the war but adds that China and other socialist countries did the same. Although the author does not specify who those other socialist countries were, it is noteworthy to find a narrative mentioning the participation of socialist countries other than the USSR. This could be understood as an attempt to dilute the USSR's responsibility by saying it was the communist bloc that came to the aid of North Korea.

Table 1 Descriptions of the Korean War in Russian Textbooks

Textbook	Who Started the War	Foreign Support	Foreign Participation	
Danilov et al. (2005)	Does not mention	Does not mention	North South	USSR, China, other socialist countries U.S. approved by the UN
Shestakov et al. (2003)	North Korea	Does not mention	North South	Chinese army, Soviet planes as part of Chinese support (unofficial participation) 15 UN countries led by the U.S.
Chubaryan et al. (2004)	North Korea	Does not mention	North South	Chinese army, USSR intervenes diplomatically U.S.
Volobyeb et al. (2005)	North Korea armed with Soviet weapons	Supported by Stalin	North South	Soviet planes, Chinese army U.S. under the UN flag hurrying to the aid
Zagladin (2005)	North Korea	Approved by Stalin and Mao Zedong	North South	Soviet planes, Chinese army U.S. under the UN flag and its allies
Aleksashikina (2005)	Does not mention	Does not mention	Does not mention	
Rodriguee et al. (2005)	Does not mention	Does not mention	North South	Soviet military advisors and pilots, Chinese army U.S.
Ulunyan et al. (2005)	North Korea	Does not mention	North South	Chinese army and Soviet military advisors U.S. and Western European countries under the UN flag

One visual image that deserves attention is the photo of American soldiers taken hostage by the Chinese in the textbook written by Volobyeb et al. (2005:190). This is an example of how the USSR showed that the communist bloc was superior to the democratic bloc during the Korean War. Moreover, the fact that the USSR picked a picture of the Chinese and the U.S. tells something about the USSR's position on the Korean War.

Before the release of the former USSR classified documents, Russia purposely did not deal with the former Soviet Union's role in the Korean War. The political leaders at the time completely denied the USSR's involvement in the war and often emphasized its active moral and reconstruction to North Korea and its efforts to end the war peacefully. It was forbidden to mention the USSR's military support to North Korea. It was only after 1969 when Kapitsa, a Russian sinologist and diplomat, published his book *The People's Republic of China: 20 Years, 2 Policies* and part of Khrushchev's memoirs was published in the U.S.

that the USSR's military support was publicized (Gi 2001:248). The demise of the USSR and the Communist Party as a political system and the rejection of socialism by the ruling power set in motion a series of changes not only in society but also in its Korea policy (Vanin 2000:74-5). In spite of these changes, Russian textbooks inconsistently portray the role of the USSR in the Korean War and at best try to minimize it or conceal it. This goes to show the conservative character of textbooks as a medium which is never free from the state or society to which they belong.

2) Poland

Poland was the third largest socialist country to support North Korea during the Korean War after the USSR and China. Despite its unsuccessful economic recovery from the destruction of World War II, Poland campaigned to deliver relief to North Korean children and women and sent medical and social welfare delegations to help orphans and education. All of this was done at a high cost to Poland. Considering the fact that Poland had little or passive diplomatic relations with North Korea, such efforts to assist North Korea are highly irregular. The only possible explanation would be pressure from the USSR (Kim 1999:87-8).

Although it is a convention to refer to the foreign armies that supported South Korea as 'the American army' or 'UN Forces,' Polish textbooks use the terms 'American army' and 'British army.' From this, one can conclude that Poland considered both the U.S. and Britain as superpowers of the non-communist bloc. The textbooks also deal with the results of the Korean War in detail, especially the economic aspect. It is worth noticing that they state that the arms race between the communist and non-communist blocs was the critical factor in increasing the economic gap between capitalism and communism (Śniegocki 2004:246).

3) Czech Republic

The description of the Korea War in Czech textbooks is very brief. Comparing Korea with Germany, the textbooks state that the U.S. and the USSR did not have a direct confrontation during the Cold War but eventually their actions resulted in the Korean War. They also take on the orthodox view by stating that it was the will of Kim Il-sung for North Korea to invade South Korea but the idea was discussed and approved of by Stalin and Mao Zedong. According to

the textbooks, Stalin agreed to the invasion but refused to provide direct military support to Kim Il-sung (Luňák 2004:17). Even after the release of classified documents of the former USSR, Czech textbooks continued to insist that there was no military support from the USSR.

Other European Countries: Denmark, Italy, and Sweden⁸

Danish textbooks compare Korea and Germany when dealing with the Korean War. Pointing to the fact that U.S. troops continued to be stationed in Germany while they withdrew from South Korea, the textbooks explain that Korea was not important to the U.S. They also maintain the orthodox position by writing that North Korea carried out a full scale invasion to occupy South Korea after careful planning and that Stalin and Mao Zedong were involved in the decision making. Faced with the USSR's expansion policy, the U.S. had to respond in fear that if South Korea fell to communism the security of Japan would be jeopardized (Bryld et al. 2005:33-5). Harrison (2005:14-5) wrote that due to the unexpected Korean War, the Cold War led Asia to the extreme. Danish textbooks also declare that the Korean War was the first war which the U.S. did not win. Quoting an American veteran of the Korean War, the textbooks explain that the Korean War is also called the 'Forgotten War.'

Italian textbooks introduce the Korean War as a war that could have easily escalated into a third world war. They write that North Korea crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea with help from the USSR, implying that North Korea's invasion was caused by the support of the USSR and China (Zaninelli n. d.:249). On the other hand, Brancati (2002) writes that North Korea's invasion was carried out with the support of China, and with the involvement of the U.S. the war produced massive casualties. Interestingly, the author makes no mention of the USSR. Moreover, textbooks explain that Japan benefited economically when it became a special supply base for the U.S. and the UN during the Korean War. However, there is no mention of the impact of the Korean War on Italy or the world.

8. Multinational forces participating in the Korean War under the flag of the United Nations consisted of combatant and non-combatant forces. However, the UN Forces commonly refers to the sixteen countries that sent combatant forces. Thus, in this paper, European countries such as Denmark, Italy, and Sweden that sent non-combatant forces like medical units are considered to have been indirectly involved in the Korean War.

In Swedish textbooks, instead of a historical description of the Korean War, the aftermath of the war is highlighted by indicating that the war caused the division of Korea. Although they explain that the war was started by North Korea with support from China against South Korea, who was supported by the U.S., and lasted three years, there is no mention of the involvement of the USSR or the international impact of the war.

Conclusion

By dividing Europe into three regions, I have analyzed the different views with which the Korean War is narrated. However, the different views do not correspond to the three different regions; instead each country has its own view.

Most of the European textbooks agree that the Korean War was started because of North Korea's invasion of South Korea and was an unexpected event of the Cold War. However, they differ on the emphasis of the role and responsibility of the superpowers in the war. British textbooks underscore the historical facts of the war by narrating the process from the start and the result of the war. In the case of German textbooks, they pay attention to the impact of the war on Germany—how it led to the re-armament of West Germany—and civilian massacres by introducing Picasso's painting. French textbooks deal with the Korean War indirectly with pictures and photos instead of providing a direct introduction. As for Russia, which was directly involved in the war, textbooks partially acknowledge the USSR's intervention. However, inconsistencies were found as to how the USSR was involved and supported the war. Economic aspects of the result of the war are highlighted in Polish textbooks while Czech textbooks maintain the position that the former USSR took before the release of classified documents. Danish textbooks introduce the Korean War as the forgotten war and compare Korea with Germany. In the case of Italy and Sweden, the Korean War is briefly introduced with historical facts.

Textbooks are an important medium which reflects the official ideology and politics of a particular state. Nevertheless, numerous authors, editors, and publishers with various perspectives on and understanding of the world, knowledge, and power are bound to intervene intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, textbooks contain the knowledge of diverse collective cultures where these cultures in turn contain hidden meanings of the majority (Kang 2004:139). Knowledge learned through textbooks, in other words, knowledge and information

learned in school, leads people to accept the values of a particular group and support their activities. Such knowledge and information delimits people's understanding of the world and becomes the basis for social control and domination (Lee 1988:91). Hence, the contents of textbooks are knowledge approved by the state and this knowledge provides the basis of a collective memory on the "other," whether it is true or not.

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Jeong Jae Yun is a researcher at the Center for Information on Korean Culture, the Academy of Korean Studies. She received her M.A. from the Graduate School of Korean Studies. Her research interests are food culture and the identity of Koreans in Uzbekistan and Korea in foreign textbooks.