*Book Review*

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# A History of Resistance

*Immovable Object: North Korea's 70 Years at War with American Power*. By A. B. Abrams. Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2020. 676 pages. ISBN: 9781949762310.

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Among monographs on North Korean history and politics, this book stands out in three respects. First, as indicated by its title, it focuses almost entirely on the history of the ongoing *war* between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (henceforth DPRK) and the United States. The reader will find only minimal discussions of events that are not directly relevant to the conflict between the two countries. Second, it is a rare book-length contribution in English that presents a resolutely anti-imperialist narrative of Korean history with academic rigor. Contrary to other works critical of American conduct towards the DPRK (e.g., Hong 2020, Smith 2014), the book's focus is less on the suffering of the DPRK and more on its tenacity and "culture of resistance" that ultimately allowed it to defend its independence and dignity. As such, the historiography has a literary form that is closer to a romance than a tragedy (White 1973). Third, the book is very thoroughly referenced, with a strength in primary sources such as diplomatic cables, parliamentary hearings, declassified state documents, contemporaneous newspaper reports, and observer accounts. The breadth of the supporting material—spanning at least six languages—makes this contrarian book a serious contender in the highly divisive debate on how to understand the DPRK.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part is devoted to the

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Korean War. The narrative broadly follows the "civil war thesis" (Jo 2022), which traces the beginning of the Korean War not to the outbreak of full-scale hostilities in June 1950 but to the widespread insurgencies and civil unrest in southern Korea that preceded it. One difference with the civil war thesis proposed by its most prominent advocate, Bruce Cumings, is that the book represents the conflict less as an essentially domestic war between two antagonizing groups of Koreans that escalated into an international conflict, and more as an anti-imperialist struggle of the Korean people which only initially took the form of a civil war. In this regard, the narrative shares an important trait with North Korean accounts of the war, which tend to downplay the political agency of South Korea (Ryu 1990). It is also similar to Chinese accounts, which traditionally, and largely still, depict the war as a war against US imperialism (Jin 2018). The author also devotes many pages to describing the crimes committed by US forces, most notably the indiscriminate air raids on Korean population centers and agricultural infrastructure as well as repeated threats of a nuclear attack.

The second part of the book covers the history of the US-DPRK conflict during the Cold War. A relatively unique addition to the otherwise familiar list of major events such as the USS Pueblo incident (1968), the EC-121 shootdown incident (1969), and the Panmunjom incident (1976) is the chapter on "proxy wars" between the DPRK and the United States.[1] The author argues that the DPRK has actively supported numerous Third World countries during the Cold war to curb American influence. Countries including Vietnam, Egypt, Syria, Iran, Libya, Angola, and Zimbabwe, as well as Hezbollah are shown to have received some sort of military or technical assistance from the DPRK. Although some descriptions, such as the participation of Korean special forces in Syria, rely on less-credible sources, the overall content of this chapter is clear enough to refute the notion that

1. See also Jay Solomon (2019), who describes the history of the "North Korean-Israeli shadow war" in the Middle East. Taylor (2023) presents a detailed history of North Korean involvement in Latin American revolutions, a topic that is almost completly overlooked in Abram's book.

the DPRK has always been a "hermit kingdom" reluctant to engage with the outside world for ideological reasons (Hwang 2009). This part of the book also continues the previous part's focus on American crimes by offering a detailed account of the sexual exploitation of South Korean women by American forces (pp. 313–330).

The third part of the book examines the period starting from the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s to the present (circa 2020). The DPRK's nuclear program naturally forms the main subject. A key argument is that throughout the repeated negotiations for denuclearization and normalization of relations, it was often the United States, not the DPRK, that refused to make meaningful concessions. This is an argument that is also, at least in part, found in the writings of *dovish* experts in the United States (Hecker 2023; Gregg 2003; Pritchard 2007). However, unlike most American *soft-liners* who tend to blame the *hawks*, or *neocons*, Abrams argues that the United States—even under the Clinton administration—was never genuinely interested in diplomacy but only bent on conquest largely due to its deep-rooted imperialist ideology. The author's overt anti-Americanism prevents an accurate appraisal of the existence of reasonable voices within the US state for engagement and coexistence. However, the author's argument may find some justification considering the *structural* causes of the failure of American doves to realize meaningful engagement for three decades, such as the widespread distaste and antipathy for the DPRK among the American foreign policy elite and the public (Feffer 2018; Hecker 2023).

The fourth part deals with economic and information warfare. The author criticizes the United States for causing immense suffering among North Korean civilians through sanctions. Regarding information warfare, Abrams notes that efforts to infiltrate the DPRK for gathering sensitive intelligence or inciting anti-government movements have been largely unsuccessful (pp. 581–582). However, the campaign for public opinion, which began in earnest in the 1990s (pp. 356–357) and was elevated to a new level under the Obama administration (p. 571), succeeded in making the DPRK one of the most disliked countries in the minds of the American and international public (p. 587). Abram's approach to knowledge is

cynically sociological: The best explanation for the purported atrocities, human rights abuses, and morally repugnant behavior of the DPRK is to be found less in such a reality and more in the triumph of the United States in global politics.

The author has demonstrated professional, albeit opinioned, knowledge of the geopolitics of various world regions in other monographs (Abrams 2019, 2021). The frequent use of international comparisons is therefore an expected strength of the book. Comparisons are sometimes used to highlight the extraordinariness of a certain event. For example, the comparison of the scope of the damage caused by the air raids on North Korean population centers to American air campaigns in the Pacific War and the Vietnam War helps the reader gauge the severity of the damage. Comparisons are also used to present certain historical events as part of a larger pattern in global politics. For example, the author's argument that the United States was highly unreliable in keeping its agreements with North Korea is presented against the backdrop of repeated cases of the United States government scuttling a security agreement made by a previous administration from the opposing party.

*Immovable Object* is replete with criticisms of dominant perceptions of the DPRK in international and especially anglophone foreign policy spheres. Here, I briefly review three. First, the long list of American violence and threats against Koreans beginning from the Korean War and continuing to the present, coupled with the fate of other small independent Third-World countries invaded by the US, strongly rejects the widespread perception that the North is "paranoid" about its security (Bush 2003; Schulte 2011). Moreover, the immense suffering of the civilians in both Korea and other countries targeted by the US rejects the nearly ubiquitous understanding that only the North Korean *regime* has a reason to be concerned about its security from the US (c.f. T. Jeong and C. Jeong 2019).

Second, the author argues that the United States has consistently underestimated North Korean resolve, resilience, and capacity (pp. 554–555). The record starts in the Korean War when the Americans entered the war with racial prejudices toward Korean and Chinese troops, only to be

surprised by their ferocity (pp. 71–76). American experts unanimously predicted an imminent and nearly teleological collapse of the DPRK during the "Arduous March," which, as the author demonstrates, greatly discouraged diplomacy and engagement in a period when North Korea's nuclear program was still in an incubational stage. The rapid pace of the North's missile and nuclear program over the past decade also took the Western intelligence community by surprise (pp. 429–430). While admissions of individual instances of intelligence failures and wrong predictions are not hard to come by in the existing academic and journalistic literature (Choi 2015; Sanger and Broad 2018), Abrams' characterization of them as a historically recurring pattern suggests the existence of common underlying causes.

Third, and related to the second, Abrams argues that information warfare against the DPRK often had the unintended consequence of hampering accurate political assessment. For example, in the 1940s, the US intentionally propagated the idea that the DPRK was a puppet state of the Soviet Union or China to delegitimize the People's Committee and justify the imposition of American rule in southern Korea (p. 358). Such misperceptions later became part of the dominant *paradigm* for understanding the DPRK, a paradigm directly responsible for the proliferation of North Korean *collapsism* in a period when Soviet client governments elsewhere in the world were collapsing *en masse*. Abram's description of America's "fall[ing] victim to its own propaganda" (p. 358) calls attention to a possible long-term side effect of information warfare, which occurs as information that was initially deliberately distorted to fulfill a certain strategic goal solidifies into a collective epistemic bias.

Despite the focus on US-DPRK relations, the book also contains criticisms of South Korean perceptions of contemporary Korean history. Perhaps one of the most provocative, and timely,[2] is the comparison between

2. In October 2022, the Supreme Court of Korea (South Korea) ruled that the South Korean government must compensate for the mistreatment of sexual laborers in *gijichon* (American military camptowns). Case number: 2018다224408.

South Korean attitudes toward the sexual slavery of Korean women by the Imperial Japanese Army in the Pacific War and the sexual exploitation of South Korean women by American forces after the Korean War. The author convincingly shows that the female body was an indispensable component in the US-ROK alliance at least until the 1970s. Contrary to the typical South Korean intuition, however, the author further argues that the severity of American crimes is commensurate and possibly worse than those of the Japanese. American *comfort stations* operated under abjectly horrible conditions, and while the women were paid, many of them had no alternative due to the economic devastation of the scorched earth policy used by the US military in the Korean War. The cumulative number of victims, which the author somewhat liberally puts at around 1 million, also exceeded the victims of Japanese sexual slavery.

When sociologists talk about the socially constructed nature of emotions and grievances, they often imagine counterfactual outcomes such as a world in which the Holocaust was never discovered because the Axis Powers had won World War II (Alexander 2012, 37). The irony of such an example is that it often includes a certain intellectual relief: history has fortunately been written by righteous victors, allowing us to assess historical atrocities in their true nature. Abram's presentation of a case where the victim nation has been effectively desensitized to the horrors and humiliation of an atrocious experience is a strong reminder of the deeply power-laden nature of historical trauma. Even if the reader decides to reject the moral equivalence between American and Japanese sexual crimes, he will be seriously challenged to admit that South Korean historical trauma is conspicuously underdeveloped concerning the American exploitation of Korean women.

The book's shortcomings mostly have to do with its limited focus but also with factual errors or badly substantiated arguments. Regarding the former, the book overly focuses on conflict and pays little attention to not only American but also South Korean efforts for rapprochement and reconciliation (except for the recent 2018–2019 talks, which are covered in detail). Moreover, many historically salient political events, including,

among others, the North-South Joint Conference of 1948 and the anti-factional purges of the 1950s, are completely omitted. Despite the apt acknowledgment that the North's independent pursuit of its interests sometimes led to clashes with its bigger neighbors, the book is mostly silent about the history of crises and problems in the North's relationship with China (c.f. Shen and Xia 2018).

As for factual errors and unsubstantiated arguments, the most conspicuous example is found in the author's account of Japanese sexual crimes. Despite the disclaimer that the comparison with the Japanese "is not to…lessen the rapaciousness or degrading nature of its crime against the Korean people" (p. 326), the author argues, uncharacteristically without reference, that the Japanese improved the living standards of Koreans.[3] The author goes further to claim that the Japanese might not have had to resort to forceful recruitment if they had ravaged Korea like the Americans did, implying that Korean women would have joined *voluntarily* to make a living. In another book published one year before this volume, Abrams preposterously suggests that egregious atrocities in war are inherently Western, and Japan only emulated it from the West (Abrams 2019, 23–25). At this point, one can only think that the author is unduly downplaying Japanese crimes to highlight the supposed evilness of the United States or the "West". The author also introduces the DPRK's nuclear doctrine as "the most defensive doctrine for nuclear use" (p. 436), apparently to stress its political legitimacy. This was true when the book came out, but only two years later, North Korea updated its nuclear doctrine to considerably lower the bar for using nuclear weapons.[4] While not a factual error, this change

3. Most of the support for the revisionist thesis that Korean living standards robustly improved under Japanese colonial rule come from South Korean new-right economic historians centered at the Naksungdae Institute. It is curious that A. B. Abrams chose to adopt this view considering the Naksungdae historians' anti-DPRK and pro-American stance. For a relatively recent defense of the traditional thesis that living standards declined under the colonial extractive economy, see Jeong (2017).

4. The entire text of the new law, passed in September 2022, has been reposted by several South Korean media outlets. See, http://www.minplusnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=13083.

prompts the reader to wonder whether the author might have overstated the defensiveness of the DPRK in the ongoing conflict.

This book is not for everyone. Some readers will be offended by the pro-North Korean and anti-American orientation that runs throughout the book (Cussen 2022). Ideological bias aside, the specialized scope of the book makes it ill-suited as a standalone introduction to North Korean history and politics. However, the book vividly demonstrates that a vastly different narrative can be constructed, arguably with an academic rigor no less than many popular *must-have* books on the subject. While seemingly contrarian, one must remember that the book's overall perspective, barring a few idiosyncrasies, has historically received much support from numerous audiences in the Third World, including the South Korean left as indicated by its recent translation into Korean.[5] All in all, *Immovable Object* offers open-minded students of contemporary Korean history plenty of material for critical reading and reflection.

5. This translation appeared under the title *Kkeunnaji aneun jeonjaeng: Bungmi daegyeol 70-nyeonsa*(Unending War: 70 Years of North Korea-US Confrontation), translated by Hyeonju Park (Seoul: Minpeulleoseu, 2022).

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