

On This Topic



From Forgotten War to Unforgettable War: *The Korean War at Seventy*

Sang-ho LEE

The Korean War has been widely referred to in the United States as the forgotten war. For Americans, the Korean War may be perceived as a forgotten or forgettable war, but for Koreans, the war remains *unforgettable*.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. The war's impact has continued to this day. It has for instance solidified the division of the two Koreas and in turn provided different standards for the war's perception and interpretation due to internal pressures to strengthen the regimes in the North and South.

Reflecting these tendencies, previous studies on the Korean War have largely focused on the conflict's background and causes. Official histories of the war have been published in various countries, including the two Koreas, the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. These official histories each project their own interests onto the war, and as a result, each contains quite different perspectives and contents.

As governmental sources began to be declassified in the 1970s, the general academic community began using these primary sources to study

Sang-ho LEE is a senior researcher at the Institute for Military History in Korea. E-mail: Kennan2@naver.com.

the war. Based on such sources, studies on individual battles, diplomatic activities, and domestic politics in relation to the war began to be conducted. Moreover, the collapse of the global communist system in the early 1990s accelerated the opening of archives, making fresh approaches to the war possible.

Meanwhile, attempts have emerged at universities and research institutes to analyze the war from more diverse perspectives. Scholars attempted to reflect the voices of those who experienced, or were otherwise affected by, the actual war by making use of the methodologies of oral history. These contributed a micro-historic approach to the Korean War, with significant results in autobiographical or first-hand narratives and the oral testimonies of veterans, government officials, businessmen, educators, housewives, and students.

However, despite the scholarly achievements made by these diverse research methodologies, they also have many shortcomings, such as overlapping coverage, the exaggeration of facts, and the excessive generalization of personal histories. Also, the excessive emphasis on micro-history in search of novelty has led to the loss of the larger picture of the Korean War.

In Korea, 70 years is the span of a man's life. When the interested party of an event passes from the scene, it is possible to gain an objective understanding of the substance of that event. Thus, the 70th anniversary also offers the possibility of more objective and comprehensive analyses and interpretations of the Korean War based on previous academic achievements.

Therefore, this special issue was designed to provide a fresh view of the meaning of the Korean War through an exploration of new topics, such as a look at historical compilations of the Korean War, the treatment of Korean War dead and the media, psychological operations against Chinese communist prisoners of war, and UN Forces' management of war expenditures and conflicts surrounding them. We hope the examination of these topics will provide an opportunity to look back on past historiographical trends surrounding the Korean War and to explore new ones. Let us now look at the four papers published in this issue.

Chung Yong Wook's study, "From Occupation to War: Cold War Legacies of US Army Historical Studies of the Occupation and Korean War," takes a unique-themed approach to the Korean War. First, his study examines how contemporary Korean history was situated at the center of the Cold War by analyzing the compilation of the US Army's official history of the Korean occupation and subsequent Korean War during the immediate post-World War II period.

To this end, Chung focuses on the *History of the United States Army Forces in Korea (HUSAFIK)*, an unpublished manuscript written and compiled by the Historical Section of US Army Headquarters in South Korea, and official histories of the Korean War compiled by the US Army Center of Military History, including, *Policy and Direction: The First Year* (1972). As Chung puts it, these are books that anyone interested in the US occupation of South Korea and the Korean War, from amateur historians to professional researchers, would likely have examined at least once, but of which no historical analysis has yet been made.

Therefore, Chung examines the objectives behind the compilation of these histories, as well as their planning, progress, and completion. In other words, Chung endeavors to trace the background and process of the writing of these books, and in so doing to reveal the atmosphere of American society in the early years of the Cold War, while also tracking the impact of these works on the formation of Cold War-based American research on the occupation and Korean War.

HUSAFIK's compilation guidelines and working procedures had a dual nature. On the one hand, *HUSAFIK* was written after careful source verification and self-review. On the other hand, because free interpretation and criticism of the facts were not allowed to its historians, they were forced to write a *sanitized* history, consciously and unconsciously, from the early stages of compilation, to include the data-collection and draft-writing stages. Therefore, Chung evaluates *HUSAFIK* as the product of an American interpretation of contemporary Korean history and a unique historical depiction the US military as a central factor in Korea's nation-building following liberation in 1945.

HUSAFIK's compilation method was also applied to writings on the

Korean War. The US Army wanted to interpret its role in the Korean War from the perspective of a global Cold War, and this intention was reflected in its plan to compile an official history of the Korean War. The Korean War project of the OCMH (Office of the Chief of Military History) was incorporated as part of the Cold War history compilation plan following the end of the Korean War.

As for histories of the Korean War by individual authors, Chung examines *The Hidden History of the Korean War*, by I.F. Stone, an independent journalist who tracked the developments of the Korean War. In his history, Stone explains how he looked at contemporary media reports to understand the progress and meaning of the war, and that following these descriptions, he came to understand how the media saw the war and how the US government and military responded to public opinion. In other words, Stone's work shows how the US government and military responded to the Korean War, and how the press releases and reports they published were consumed by the public and came to form American public opinion.

Explaining the nature of the cultural Cold War, Chung compares the official US histories with Stone's book. In other words, if the former focused on explaining phenomenally how the United States responded to various events taking place in South Korea, the latter questioned why those incidents took place. Chung criticizes how the former's contents were revised or censored in order to avoid embarrassing the US Army or causing diplomatic difficulties among fellow combatant nations, while Stone's work disappeared from all US Army libraries.

Through Chung's study, the nature of the cultural Cold War is better reflected in the fact that each side excluded or tried to violently impose its worldview on the other. Finally, as this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, Chung proposes a critical re-reading of various Korean War histories compiled during the Cold War towards the development of new studies of the Korean War.

Next, in, "The Domestic Management and Media Coverage of Fallen Soldiers during the Korean War, 1950–1953," Lee Sang-ho investigates one inevitable result of war: fallen soldiers. In this paper Lee aims to analyze the military organization surrounding the remains of fallen soldiers during the

Korean War, as well as Korean media coverage of these deaths, based on primary sources that have received little scholarly scrutiny in the Korean War scholarship thus far.

Despite the substantial amount of research conducted on the Korean War in Korea, studies on media reports of war dead and the fallen are almost non-existent. This may be due in part to data limitations, but it is also attributable to the media setting of the time, where coverage was carried out in a uniform manner under government censorship.

Though Korean newspapers and magazines of the Korean War period are limited, a close examination of them reveals a constantly fluctuating public opinion surrounding news of the war dead. In particular, a rise in soldier deaths in the highland areas in the later phase of the war had a huge impact on Korean public opinion regarding the war.

First, this study outlines the occurrence of the Korean War dead, and the extent of the Korean public recognition of them, before examining the organization and operations of the South Korean military's handling of fallen soldiers' corpses during the Korean War. Finally, media reports on soldier deaths are analyzed to gauge the Korean public's general perceptions of the war at that time. In the process, this paper actively utilizes primary sources, such as general orders from the South Korean (ROK) Ministry of National Defense and ROK Army Headquarters.

Korean War scholarship has thus far failed to sufficiently consider the question of how the remains of fallen soldiers were dealt with during military operations in the Korean War. Lee claims that moving the bodies of dead soldiers directly to the National Cemetery without understanding the process of handling the fallen soldiers on the battlefield serves to distort the general public's collective consciousness of the horrors of war.

The three years of the Korean War, which resulted in more than three million military and civilian victims, created significant military casualties over a short period of time. Even narrowing the scope of wartime fatalities to the military, the Korean War resulted in the deaths of more than 137,000 South Korean and 37,000 UN soldiers. Yet despite such extensive fatalities, South Korean media of the time provided only scant coverage of fallen soldiers.

The South Korean military entered the war without any experience or official manuals on the military honors for the dead or procedures for dealing with soldiers' remains. It was only in September 1950, three months after the Korean War broke out, and that the Cemetery Registration Unit (Myoji deungnokdae) was established.

Lee asserts that a true understanding of war necessitates the examination of the aspect of death that accompanies every armed conflict. Regardless of whether a war is won or lost, the nation bears the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the remains of the fallen soldiers of that war are properly cared for. The interpretation of how the nation honors and remembers those who sacrificed themselves is fundamental to construing what comprises national responsibility.

Park Young-sil's paper, "Efforts by the Republic of China Government to Convert Chinese Communist Prisoners of War during the Korean War," analyzes the reason the armistice talks, which began in July 1951, only a year after the outbreak of the Korean War, dragged on for two years. Park asserts that this delay in the armistice talks was due to the issue of prisoners of war, especially Chinese communist prisoners of war. According to her, two-thirds of Chinese communist prisoners of war refused to repatriate to the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC), but instead chose to go to the Republic of China (ROC, or Taiwan), seriously damaging the external image of the young PRC, a fact that delayed armistice talks. Park argues that even though the home of the Chinese communist POWs was the PRC, the efforts of the Republic of China government were instrumental in the Chinese communist prisoners decision to repatriate to Taiwan.

After the outbreak of the Korean War, the UN forces were organized, and the Republic of China was unable to join the UN forces because it had been defeated in the Chinese Civil War. This paper traces and explains how the ROC, which was unable to directly participate in the Korean War, influenced its Chinese communist prisoners to choose to go to Taiwan.

Previous research on Chinese prisoners of war of the Korean War has focused largely on the issue of repatriation of prisoners of war and conflicts in POW camps. However, this study demonstrates how the ROC government acted directly and unofficially to influence Chinese communist

prisoners decisions to move to Taiwan. Specifically, to approach the prisoners, the Taiwanese government seized opportunities created by the UN Command's request for Chinese interpreters, while also exploiting the atmosphere within the Chinese communist POW camps and dispatching unofficial special agents.

In particular, this paper mainly utilizes oral testimonies published during the war, describing the activities of Taiwanese agents who operated in Chinese communist POW camps. Park also reveals that the Chinese side was aware of the ROC activities among the POWs. Moreover, the paper proves that the Taiwanese government also carried out operations on prisoners who were moved to neutral areas after the armistice had been signed, and confirms the process of ROC activities among the POWs up until the freed prisoners arrived in Taiwan.

Park cannot of course confirm all the individual reasons each Chinese communist POW decided to go to Taiwan. However, she does establish that the ROC government played a key role in those decisions through its use of various incentives. The academic significance of Park's study lies in its delineating the actual process by which Chinese communist prisoners opted to repatriate to Taiwan based on an analysis of primary sources.

Next, Lee Dongwon's study, "United States-United Nations Relations in the Korean War: Focusing on the Conflict over Aid Operations and War Expenses," deals with the economic aspects of the Korean War, analyzing the conflict between the United States and the United Nations over wartime expenses and casting light on what it meant that the US not only took the initiative in Korea-US relations but also among the nations of the free world during the Korean War.

Lee describes conflicts between the UN-led UNKRA (United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency) and the US-led UNCACK (United Nations Civil Assistance Command in Korea) over the right to run aid operations in Korea, and how the US side expressed discontent over UNKRA's involvement and activities during the Korean War. In the end, the US Army, in charge of military operations, and with hostilities continuing following the Chinese armed intervention, took the substantial initiative in aid for Korea.

According to Lee's analysis, the issue of US logistical support for the UN participant nations was another source of conflict. Logistical support for the collective military action of the UN forces was originally a matter for each country to bear. But the relatively small size of other participant countries' military forces, along with wartime contingencies, made logistical support by the US military inevitable.

The problem was the repayment of these war expenses. UN countries' ability to reimburse and their perceptions of what was expected of them varied. By the time the Korean War armistice was signed in July 1953, only 15 percent of the war expenses had been repaid, and the majority of these repayments came from Canada, which had already begun to make payments for the logistical support of its forces while the war was in progress.

Lee concludes that the United States took charge of the UN countries' logistical demands due to its overwhelming industrial and military strength, coupled with the American leadership of the United Nations Command, and that this reaffirmed the arrival of the American era. Having experienced firsthand the American logistical support in military supplies, services, and equipment, the UN participant countries became potential customers of the American military-industrial complex, just like nations receiving US military aid.

Lee claims that United States, rather than just being satisfied with these potential benefits in Korean affairs, pursued solid practical benefits. In other words, the signing of a bilateral treaty between Seoul and Washington, and the establishment of a Korea-US military alliance based on this, led the US to explore the possibility of an anti-communist front in East Asia extending from the United States to Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, which would effectively supplant the future possibility of collective military action by the United Nations in Korean affairs.

Finally, Lee evaluates that the Korean War served as an opportunity to strengthen the Cold War peace, a peace that relied on the strong economic and military power of the United States rather than on the collective military action of United Nations forces on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia or peacekeeping activities by civil arms of the United Nations and its agencies.

Such are the papers in this issue's special look at the Korean War. To

date, it is estimated that tens of thousands of papers and books have been produced on the Korean War, both in Korea and abroad. And various themes, analytical methodologies, and data analyses over the years have widened the scope and scale of our understanding of that war. Building on past research, it is hoped the papers in this issue will contribute to a better understanding of the Korean War. In other words, the analysis of rarely examined official histories of the Korean War by the United States and their significance, the handling of fallen soldiers in the Korean War, Taiwan's psychological operations against Chinese communist prisoners of war during the Korean War, and the cost of American aid in the Korean War, offer new perspectives and groundbreaking scholarship for the Korean War historiography.