

The Korean War

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With 'The Korean War' Peter Lowe returns to the subject of the 1950-53 south-east Asian conflict which he argues could have flared up into the third world war of the twentieth century (see also Peter Lowe 1986). In the preface he outlines the objective of the book as follows, 'to provide a concise survey of the origins, nature and aftermath of the Korean war'. What he in fact achieves, especially in the first two thirds of the volume, is a concise survey of the origins and nature of American interventions in the Korean war

The book is most convincing when looking at the context of and reasoning behind for American policy and plenty of detail is supplied. In tracing American policy Lowe takes the reader back to 1943 and the Cairo conference and concludes that Roosevelt included Korea with such colonies as Indo-China in envisaging trusteeship as the best way of proceeding once Japan had been expelled from south-east Asia. He asserts that Truman had no particular vision for south-east Asia upon taking office and that American policy in Korea in the immediate post-war period was determined by two men. On the ground there was MacArthur's representative, General John Reed Hodge. He actively promoted Syngman Rhee in order to create a credible right-wing alternative to the communism that he loathed. Back in Washington, Dean Acheson formulated policy, being partly responsible for the identification of the 38th parallel as the line across Korea and informing the senate Foreign Relations Committee that America should commit to a rolling programme of aid in the country.

From tracing these early American approaches Lowe goes on to identify much of the detail of American decision making and the rationales underpinning behind it. He outlines changing perceptions of Taiwan and National Security Council paper 68 of 1950 as the broad context of the decision to act in Korea in the face of the DPRK attack. The latter demonstrated a general fear of communism in American foreign policy, the former determined tough stances in the face of the threat in Asia. He shows how MacArthur acted ahead of orders in despatching military aid to south Korea and that the Americans initially relied on his assessments of the ROK's army in deciding to send in ground troops. He shows how early decisions were driven by military considerations and that Truman gave MacArthur the lead while he was successfully pursuing the 'rollback' of the north's forces despite his unease over the general.

Lowe similarly argues that it was the subsequent military achievements of General Matthew B. Ridgway that drove American thinking in the later stages of the war. His ability to arrest the advance of communist forces reduced the likelihood that the Atomic bomb would be used in a full conflict with China and instead moved the focus onto armistice negotiations aimed at recognising that the war could not be won by any of the antagonists. He mentions Truman's experience of repatriating reluctant Russian prisoners to the USSR after WWII by way of explaining the American concern over POWs which drew out the armistice negotiations and he points to the demise of Truman's presidency and Eisenhower's electoral triumph as the events which precipitated the conclusion of these negotiations. He outlines Eisenhower's use of the National Security Council to adopt bellicose stances designed to intimidate the negotiators into a settlement and also shows that the Americans had plans to oust Rhee had he not acquiesced in the signing of the armistice.

In short, the most information provided in this book is on the motives for and on the details of American policy. The first problem with this is that the account of American decisions is patchy and uneven. For example, the reader is given the name of the American ambassador at the time of the ROK's initial attack despite his apparent insignificance (he appears to have had no impact on policy and appears neither before or after his name is mentioned). But the reader is denied far more significant information. For example, General John Reed Hodge is identified as a key decision maker in Korea in the aftermath of the Japanese defeat and the reader is given a thumbnail sketch of the man's personality, his political convictions and his approach to Korea. Having introduced the reader to the General ('Hodge hailed from rural Illinois') and having identified him as the man who promoted Syngman Rhee, Hodge is then forgotten by the author and never mentioned again. Having been identified as an early key player in formulating American policy and as a MacArthur place man it might have been useful to provide a broader consideration of Hodge's reign. This would certainly seem to be the case when it is considered that he remained in charge of the American military government of Korea until 1948, a period which included such colourful episodes as his threatening to kill Rhee's main rival Kim Ku.

The problem with achieving a balance in the consideration of American motives and policies goes further than the problem of the relevance and irrelevance of the information that is included and excluded. At key moments in the decision making process Lowe fails to provide an explanation for the outcomes of American reasoning. In looking at the prelude to Chinese intervention, he repeatedly emphasises that 'American and British intelligence reported the growing mobilisation in Manchuria and the Chinese involvement' (p. 44) and that 'American intelligence believed that around 35000 Chinese troops were in Korea' (p. 45). In short, Lowe ably demonstrates that the Americans were aware that China was amassing a significant presence, and that it had already demonstrated on the 18 October that it was willing to engage in direct confrontation. Yet MacArthur ploughed on with his advance and ran straight into what Lowe call the 'jaws of the trap' (p. 46) of the Chinese army.

The obvious question that the reader will ask with all of this information supplied by the author is why MacArthur drove onwards. Yet here the author's analytical courage fails him. He provides no clue as to the reasoning of MacArthur and his fellow commanders, Walker and Almond, despite the importance of their decisions for understanding American positions in the subsequent months. In a book which is dominated by a consideration of the motives for American decisions it seems a curious source of imbalance to fail to explain for the reader what lay behind one of the most important and unsuccessful of the policies pursued.

A range of other decisions are contemplated in detail despite their dubious relevance to the progress of the Korean war. It becomes a book about American foreign policy to point out that Truman's failure to seek a congressional declaration of war foreshadowed the actions of subsequent presidents in Vietnam but the place of this fact in a study of the Korean conflict needed to be explained. Similarly the spat between the British and the Americans about trade with China is relevant in a book about American foreign policy but a failure to demonstrate whether these arguments or the subsequent sanctions had any impact on the course of the conflict suggests that the author was insufficiently focused on the task of writing about the Korean war.

That the greatest amount of detail and analysis is devoted to American objectives and motives is of course a

serious and fundamental flaw in a book about an Asian war. While the differing strategies of various Americans and their individual allies are considered at each stage of the war, it seems that there was only one moment when there was any debate within the Chinese leadership. Thus Lowe points to the conviction in October 1950 of Mao Tse-tung and P'eng Teh-huai that China had to intervene and to the reluctance of Chou En-lai and Lin Piao to agree. Ten pages later though he depicts Chou En-lai, little more than two months later, as a hardliner unwilling to make any concessions to the UN. He fails to explain why Chou En-lai had now adopted this position. Quite simply, while he lavishes plenty of attention on the minutiae of American policy he devotes little time to explaining the changing approaches of the various Chinese decision makers and to exploring the ways in which they picked their way among the options that faced them.

The most serious failure on this score is his consideration of Koreans. As the book is about the Korean war it might be expected that Korean actors would feature heavily but this simply is not the case. For example, he continually refers to the idea that the 1950-1953 conflict 'was a continuation of a civil war that began in 1945' (p. 32) and that 'a civil war was in progress before June 1950 when it was submerged in an international war' (p. 98). This of course is correct and especially important for understanding why the Americans and the UN got it wrong when they decided that they were taking on an expansionist global communism in Korea. However, at no point in the book does Lowe provide details of this civil war or discuss such issues as the ferocity with which it was fought, what its major battles were and their outcomes, which sections of Korean society fought on each side and so on. His account of the pre-1950 period, which he christens 'the gathering storm', includes sections on Japanese occupation, on American and Soviet policies, on the relationship of the Soviet Union and China and on American attitudes towards Taiwan and how their position on Korea changed as a result of this. Korean society merits a page and a half with such sociological observations as 'the peasants were, as always, exploited' (p. 7) and Korean politics after 1945 is given half a dozen sentences under the heading 'American and Soviet policies' with such unsubstantiated speculation as 'had the foreign powers not intervened it is probable that Korea would have developed into a radical state in 1945-6 and one which would have gravitated towards communism' (p. 10).

As his account develops, opportunities are consistently passed up to explore and explain the agendas of the Koreans who after all started this conflict, did most of the fighting and suffered the majority of the casualties. 'Unrest existed in various parts of Korea and there was a danger of armed rebellion of the kind desired and encouraged by Kim Il Sung' (p. 13) is his account of the impact of the 1948 elections. Here are the origins of the Korean war, the Korean people's dissatisfaction with the UN conducted elections, the failure of Syngman Rhee to allow democracy to run its course and the development of armed opposition in south Korea to the government of Rhee. Yet this is all dismissed in a sentence, there is no detail given and worst of all the author attempts to implicate the north's government in unrest in the south in the most unsatisfactory and speculative of manners (he might have proved his point and demonstrated an interest in or knowledge of what was actually happening in Korea prior to the Korean war by mentioning the Communist organised insurrections at Yosu and Sunch'on in 1948). This sentence is sandwiched in between a section on who were members of the UN election organisation and who was in charge of the American military presence. In short, Koreans are deemed less important in understanding the Korean war than a group of UN officials and a not particularly effective American Brigadier-General.

This point needs emphasising. In the whole account of the war and the armistice it seems that there are six Koreans worth mentioning by name, Kim Il Sung, Syngman Rhee, Pak Hon-yong, Kim Ku, Kim Dae-jung and Nam Il. Only the first two are mentioned consistently, Pak Hon-yong and Kim Ku disappearing early in the story and Nam Il appearing once as the sole Korean general to be mentioned in the entire book, and that at the signing of the armistice. Kim Dae-jung appears early on in an aside and then, of course, in the final chapter as the victor in the 1997 presidential election. This final chapter, on the development of the Koreas after 1953, is a clear and useful summary of the key events in both the north and the south since the armistice and to the present day. This chapter proves that when he does hold his focus on Korean politics the author can be authoritative. This makes the absence of any real detail on Koreans in the rest of the book all the more perplexing.

This absence gives the impression that the Korean war had little to do with contemporary Korean society or its modern history. The steady impoverishment of the peasantry under Japanese rule and the decline of the Korean land-owning small-holder (the number of 'fire-field' subsistence farmers grew six times between 1916 and 1936) together with the rise of an industrial proletariat (the number of factory workers and miners grew almost seven times between 1931 and 1944) are important developments in understanding the attraction of communism and the dynamics of Korean politics after WWII. The history of armed resistance is also important and can be traced in the modern period from such early battles against the Japanese as those at Feng-wu-tung and Ch'ing-shan-li (1920) up to such war-time organisations as the Kwangbokkun (Restoration Army). The history of political idealism and organisation is also surely important in understanding why the Korean people fought so hard and so long. Again this has a modern history, finding focus on such occasions as the founding of the March First Movement (1919) and of the formation of the Sin'ganhoe (1927) and also partly explaining the rejection of the organised parties available to them by south Korean voters in 1950 (128 of the 210 seats in the National Assembly went to Independents and only 56 went to the government). By 1950 the Korean people had specific political expectations, experience of making subsequent political commitments and a history of making these commitments and fighting for them in the face of oppressive and threatening circumstances. These were chief among the reasons why the Korean war was fought, and the odd sentence such as 'the peasants were . exploited' (p. 7) and 'Japan also stimulated by reaction a burning patriotic zeal' (p. 9) hardly demonstrate this in enough detail in a book on the Korean war that can find the space to devote 500 words to building up to the 'question of how much damage was done to American politics' (p. 91) by Eisenhower's handling of McCarthy.

This failure to really examine Korean agendas and interests means that the book will remain of interest less as a solid source of reference for understanding the conflict and more as a reminder to twenty-first century historians of the interests that lay behind much history writing in the twentieth century. The west-centred nature of the book is obvious and damaging. In its weak form it gives the impression that to understand conflicts in Asia one needs to focus on New York and Washington and possibly on London and Moscow. With its claim to superpower status it might also be necessary to include Beijing in this analysis, but only in so far as the Chinese featured in plans devised in New York and Washington. The idea that the Korean war had complex historical, sociological and political origins in south-east Asia and that local agendas flared into war is overlooked.

In its stronger forms in the book, the west-centred outlook of the author verges on the offensive and results in unbalanced writing. Who but a westerner, in writing about the Korean war, would describe that part of south-east Asia as 'this remote peninsula' (p. 5) and as 'an obscure Asian peninsula' (p. 30)? The region may appear remote and obscure from the author's Manchester office and the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington but it is fairly certain that not so many Koreans would have died throughout the twentieth century in the area's various conflicts had they agreed that their homeland was so unimportant. And who but a westerner would choose the word 'petulant' as his most critical adjective for an American who planned to annihilate Chinese cities through atomic bombing (Lowe's toughest description of MacArthur on p. 65) while painting the picture of Oriental despotism that was the 'unscrupulous, ruthless, intolerant of criticism and . extremely repressive' (p. 40) Syngman Rhee. Of course Rhee was all of these things but so was MacArthur and his having been born in the West ought not to shield him from such

criticism. On this point it is significant indeed that while the author dwells on the point that 'atrocities were committed by the NKPA, just as they were by ROK forces and Rhee's agents' (p. 40) there is no mention of the alleged massacres by western troops such as the No Gun Ri incident during the war or indeed of alleged crimes such as the killings at Kwangju which have occurred since.

If the book will remain of interest as a demonstration of the perils of west-centred writing when analysing Asia it also flags up the failure of historical approaches that focus solely on the elite politics of the diplomats and the generals. Over thirty years of writing on Asian societies, from historians such as the Subaltern Studies collective (1988), from anthropologists such as James Scott (1985), and from analysts of revolution and war in Asia such as David Gillin (1964), has emphasised that the peasants that make up the majority of Asian societies have complex, localised and varying agendas. In the Korean war, in which it has been estimated that civilian casualties matched military ones, the villages and the farms were central to the fighting and the ability of these institutions to mobilise for defence, attack or concealment needs explaining. This is a complex issue as organised peasant resistance was not simply an age old phenomenon once again lumbering out of history for the same old reasons. Rather, it had a specific and modern history in such organisations as the Red Peasant Unions of the 1930s, in such events as the Autumn Harvest Uprisings in 1946 against the American occupiers and throughout the Korean war where such episodes as the battle at Taejon show that women and children fought alongside the men of the rural areas against American troops.

In other words historians need to explain why ordinary Koreans fought the Korean war and why so many died in prolonging the conflict. Indian historians (Ranjit Guha 1983) and historians of Vietnam (James Harrison 1989) and of China (David Gillin 1964) have shown that it is not enough in explaining peasant participation in wars of revolution to point to a broad 'potent sense of cultural cohesion' (p. 6) or to universalize 'peasant grievances' (p. 6) as in reality these are either elite constructions of rural societies or meaningless generalisations. A book such as Lowe's that fails to analyse peasant societies and agendas in seeking to explain a conflict such as the Korean war is a very dated volume indeed, especially when there are books available (Cumings 1981) of which the author was aware and which do attempt to begin considering these issues in the origins of the Korean war.

Peter Lowe's 'The Korean War' was presumably intended as a broad survey of historical understandings of the conflict. Its market was no doubt the general reader and the student population and it would have been hoped that academics would have bought it as a handy reference point. It cannot be recommended as being suitable for any of these groups. The general reader will come away with the impression that the Korean war was an American affair, fought in 'an obscure peninsula' with the Chinese army although most of the important engagements were in Washington and New York. This general reader will have little sense of why Korean leaders were engaged in the war above a generalised sense of the personal ambition and universalized attraction to/hatred of communism of Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee. The reader will have no sense of why non-elite Koreans fought in the war and indeed will have little idea that they did fight in the war as they rarely feature in this book as anything but POWs.

Students will find similar problems but will also pick up bad habits from the author. There is much unsubstantiated and unnecessary speculation 'under a weaker or more extreme American president it is quite likely that this option [atomic attack] would have been implemented' (p. 50). There is much unreferenced gossip 'some sources suggest that Mao suffered a temporary breakdown on receiving the news [of Stalin's duplicity]' (p. 42). Is it not too much to expect a discussion of how reliable such sources are or indeed to hope for a footnote to allow readers to go and decide for themselves? There is also evidence of a tendency to jumble points in together rather than to think clearly about where each might belong. For example on page 88 a paragraph on the bacteriological warfare controversy is suddenly introduced after a paragraph on POWs and before a further paragraph on POWs without any attempt to explain how the germ war issue relates to that of prisoners.

Academics will find the book frustrating as it shows that west-centred and elite-focused histories of wars are still being written. This despite almost thirty years of post-colonial history writing which has attempted to shift the focus on to the complexities of non-western and non-elite agendas and to the importance of these in

understanding conflicts such as the Korean war that involve whole societies and regions. It is to be hoped that Peter Lowe will be able to use his expertise and experience in studying the Korean war to write a fuller and more considered survey now that the pressure of getting an anniversary edition into print has passed.

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