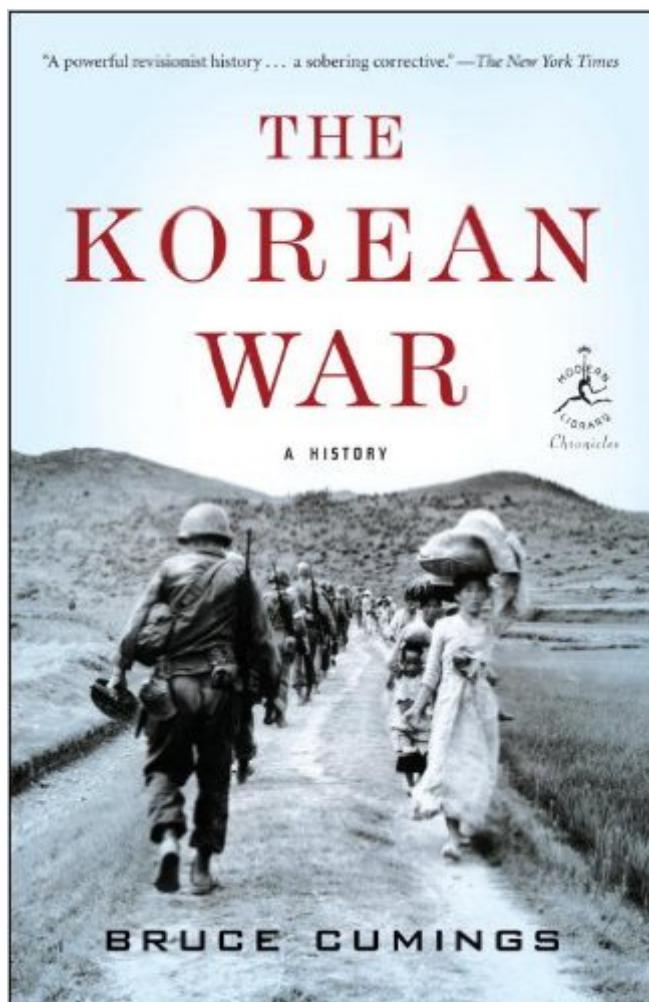


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# The Korean War: A History (Modern Library Chronicles Series Book 33)



## **Synopsis**

A BRACING ACCOUNT OF A WAR THAT IS EITHER MISUNDERSTOOD, FORGOTTEN, OR WILLFULLY IGNORED. For Americans, it was a discrete conflict lasting from 1950 to 1953. But for the Asian world the Korean War was a generations-long struggle that still haunts contemporary events. With access to new evidence and secret materials from both here and abroad, including an archive of captured North Korean documents, Bruce Cumings reveals the war as it was actually fought. He describes its origin as a civil war, preordained long before the first shots were fired in June 1950 by lingering fury over Japan's occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. Cumings then shares the neglected history of America's post-World War II occupation of Korea, reveals untold stories of bloody insurgencies and rebellions, and tells of the United States officially entering the action on the side of the South, exposing as never before the appalling massacres and atrocities committed on all sides. Elegantly written and blisteringly honest, The Korean War is, like the war it illuminates, brief, devastating, and essential.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

It is only fair to start by saying that this book was not as bad as I expected, despite its serious

shortcomings. On the positive side, it seems that Professor Cumings has largely, though belatedly and grudgingly, come to terms with the appalling nature of the North Korean regime. Also, there are certainly things that I agree with that may surprise many Americans for whom the Korean War came out of the blue on June 25, 1950. I made many of the same points in a lecture on the Korean War's role in US foreign policy at the Citadel in Charleston in 2008. They include:

- o The war had its distant origins in the 1930's in the political struggle among Koreans, mostly in exile in Manchuria, China and the US, to determine the shape of a future independent Korea. (But it is inaccurate to say that the Korean War started then.)
- o The US occupation (1945-48) was headed by John Hodge, an honest and brave general who was completely unprepared for the political complexities of southern Korea. Hodge gravitated toward the most conservative Koreans and seemed to believe that all the rest were communists, when the actual situation was far more complicated. (After I gave my lecture, I learned from the Russian scholar Andrei Lankov that the Soviet occupation of the North was every bit as unplanned and ad hoc as ours was.)
- o The conflict began in earnest from 1948 with the formation of the ROK in the South and the DPRK in the North. There followed many North-South military clashes along the 38th Parallel, then just a line on the map, totally unlike the present Demilitarized Zone. Some were battalion-sized battles.

If this book were a college course, it would NOT be Korean War 101. It would be an advanced course, perhaps even a graduate level course. That is not because the book is particularly difficult to read, but rather because it requires basic familiarity with the Korean War - or at least the conventional (American) understanding of the Korean War. Then this book proceeds to dismantle that conventional understanding. Bruce Cumings is a professor at the University of Chicago. He worked in Korea in the Peace Corps, and he now is one of the country's preeminent scholars of modern Korean history. He brings to *THE KOREAN WAR: A HISTORY* a lifetime of scholarship on Korea. He also brings to it a critical, sometimes acerbic, view of U.S. policies in and towards Korea since 1945 (which accounts, I think, for the fact that one-third of the reviewers give it only one star). I found that occasionally he does go needlessly out of his way to cast snide aspersions, but overall I was persuaded by the majority of his criticisms and his "revisionism". But we Americans tend to suppress Korea from our historical consciousness, and where that is not possible we favor as warm and fuzzy a narrative as possible, so honest efforts to arrive at the truth, even if perhaps a little flawed and less than tactful, are not well received. The back cover of the book bills it as "a bracing account of a war that is either misunderstood, forgotten, or willfully ignored." An apt summary, in my opinion. The most important point of Cumings's account is that the roots of the Korean War lay not

so much in the global Cold War as in Korean history, especially the occupation of the peninsula by the Japanese, beginning in 1910 when Japan annexed Korea as a colony.

While reading through the reviews of Bruce Cummings "The Korean War" I noticed more than one reviewer complain that Cummings book isn't a history of the war. Up to a point they are right, it is not a conventional history of that war beyond the first thirty-seven pages of two hundred and forty-three that narrate the actions of leaders and armies from beginning to end of the "war". But it only takes a moment of reflection to realise that the remainder of the book is as valid a part of the history of that war. Cummings places the war of 1950-53 firmly in its historical context, making it clear that there had in essence been conflict going back decades in Korea, exacerbated by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and between those who collaborated with the Japanese and those who didn't. To an extent this division was also class based. He also dispels the reader of any notion that South Korea was a land of peace and tranquillity prior to the war, insurrections were endemic and the South Korean regimes response were extremely brutal. The background detail on the two regimes that formed when the U.S. artificially split Korea in 1945 is useful in so far as it diminishes assumptions based on the current state of North & South Korea. Other issues dealt with include a fresh look at how the war started, the role of foreign powers (of whom the U.S. followed by the Chinese were the most important), the question of U.S.'s possible use of nuclear weapons, the role the war played in the origin of the Military-Industrial complex, atrocities (Cummings claims the U.S.

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