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The Korean Conflict, Reevaluated



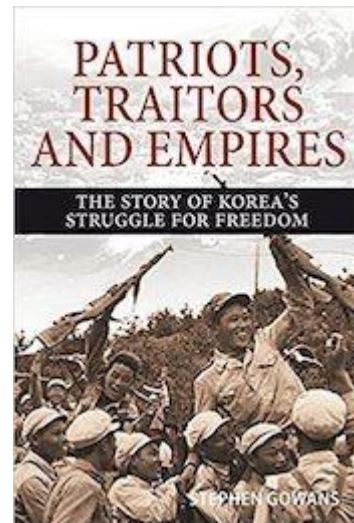
Patriots, Traitors & Empires: The Story of Korea's Struggle for Freedom, Stephen Gowans' latest book on the Korean conflict, could not be more timely given the recent tensions on the Korean peninsula as well as the recent overtures being made for peace and reconciliation. The book is also a very good antidote to the anti-DPRK propaganda we have been fed for so many decades.

The Korean conflict, usually thought of as beginning in 1950 and ending in 1953, is one of the least known and understood conflicts in which the US has been involved. Given the lack of knowledge about this conflict, it has been easy to paint the DPRK, usually referred to as North Korea, as a rogue state led by a succession of madmen. As Gowans' book explains, the real story is much more complex than this and indeed greatly favors the DPRK over the United States which has truly been the villain in this saga.

First of all, Gowans explains that the beginning of the Korean conflict can fairly be said to begin in 1945 when, as WWII was coming to an end, two US generals drew the arbitrary dividing line of Korea at the 38th parallel and when the US began to intervene quite deeply in what quickly became South Korea. The conflict could indeed be said to have begun even sooner as Gowans explains – that is, in 1932 when Kim Il-sung began the Korean armed resistance against the brutal Japanese occupation of Manchuria and Korea.

Kim and his fellow Koreans had much to rebel against. As Gowans reminds us, the Japanese occupation involved impressing Koreans, and Chinese as well, into forced labor as well as into sexual slavery. By 1938, Gowans explains, “30,000 to 40,000 women, mainly Koreans, [were] subjected to regular sexual violence by Japanese soldiers.”

Of course, after WWII was over and fascist Japan defeated, the Koreans reasonably



believed that all of this would end and that Korea would proceed as an independent and unified country as it had been for centuries before.

However, the US had other plans, as it had for Vietnam which had aspirations quite similar to that of Korea. Thus, as Gowans explains, the US, in the interest of blocking Soviet expansion and preventing countries like Japan and Korea from voluntarily turning to communism or socialism, decided that it was critical to help Japan maintain its economic dominance over parts of Asia, including Korea, or at least the Southern half.

As it would do in other countries such as Greece and throughout Latin America, the US turned to the most reactionary, and indeed fascist, elements of South Korea to keep it safe from socialism and open to economic exploitation. Specifically, the US turned to traitorous Koreans who collaborated with Japan during WWII to lead South Korea.

The South Korean military, which the US helped to construct and which it trained, armed and led, was in fact “dominated at its highest levels by Koreans who had served in the Japanese Army, some of whom had even served in units tasked with hunting down Kim Il-sung” who was unquestionably a principled Korean nationalist and patriot with much popular support. So thoroughly bankrupt and corrupt was the South Korean military that — with the acquiescence of the US which ultimately commanded the South Korean military and does so even to this day — it even resurrected the practice of sexual slavery which Japan practiced during the occupation.

The main mission that the South Korean military and police forces performed at the behest of the US, however, was the violent eradication of the left in South Korea. Thus, these forces jailed tens of thousands of leftists and nationalists in severely overcrowded prisons and killed between 100,000 to 200,000 “southern patriots,” as Gowans refers to them, by 1950. Gowans quotes Roger Baldwin, famed head of the ACLU, who visited South Korea in 1947 and reported that “[t]he country is literally in the grip of a police regime and private terror.” He further quotes Bruce Cumings, one of the best historians of the Korean conflict, who described South Korea during the late 1940’s and well after as “one of the worst police states in Asia.”

Thus, even before the 38th parallel was crossed in 1950 – the event which many argue was the beginning of the war and which North Korea is generally blamed for – the US was in a very real way helping to wage war against the Korean people. This is why, as Gowans argues, the crossing of the 38th parallel was not so much a beginning of the conflict as it was simply another phase of it. But it is the pre-1950 war conduct which gives critical conduct to that which followed. Given the fact that we are rarely ever given the true context for the wars waged in our name, it is not surprising that the pre-1950 events are rarely discussed if known at all. Gowans’ chief contribution is in highlighting these events.

To put a finer point on it, Gowans explains that this context “illuminates the nature of the fratricidal intra-Korean war that would be fought in 1950 between, on the one side, an army whose officer corps was almost exclusively drawn from the pool of Korean turncoats who had served in the Japanese army, and on the other, an army whose officer corps was

almost exclusively drawn from veterans of the guerilla resistance to the Japanese – an army of traitors vs. an army of patriots.”

And, as the US would almost invariably do throughout its long history of foreign intervention, it backed the wrong side of this war to advance what it viewed as its own self-interest. Thus, Gowans quotes William Langdon, a US State Department adviser, who put it succinctly: “[t]he old native regime [with which the US allied] internally was feudal and corrupt but the record shows that it was . . . disposed toward foreign interests . . .” That has always been good enough for Uncle Sam.

And, of course, once the war broke out in full force in 1950, the US and its South Korean ally used brutal means to push back Kim Il-sung’s forces who — given their support among the population as well as their formidable fighting skills which had been well-honed during their fight against Japanese occupation — moved quickly in overrunning South Korea, threatening to unify the peninsula once and for all.

Without the US intervention, there would have been no stopping Kim’s patriotic forces. But, of course, the US did intervene, and with its superior military capability and air power, the US was able to push these forces back to the 38th parallel and beyond, with Mao’s red army coming to the aid of Kim to allow his forces to at least keep control over North Korea. And, when it was clear that the war was ultimately deadlocked at the 38th parallel, the US decided to do what it would later do in Vietnam when it became apparent that victory was impossible – it bombed North Korea back to the Stone Age, leaving at least 3 million dead and nearly no building standing. For good measure, the US bombed all of the irrigation dams — dams which the North Koreans depended upon to sustain food production.

As Gowans explains, the Koreans in the north were forced underground into tunnels where they learned to live and thrive, leading some to refer to the North Koreans as “mole people.” Notwithstanding this senseless brutality and destruction, and the fact that the DPRK has never once attacked another nation, it is North Korea’s government which is considered “crazy”, and not the US government which has time and again earned this moniker through its overkill operations against poor, Third World nations.

Some re-evaluation of such beliefs is, as Gowans urges in his book, quite overdue, especially as another conflict with the DPRK seems quite possible in the near future.

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