

WORKING PAPER SERIES

Ending the Korean War: Considerations on the Role of History

DECEMBER 2008

WP 08-07

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Note: This paper was prepared exclusively for the U.S.-Korea Institute's Working Paper Series.

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ENDING THE KOREAN WAR: CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ROLE OF HISTORY

In the agreement on steps toward de-nuclearization of the Korean peninsula reached in the Six-Party Talks on 13 February 2007, the parties reaffirmed that the relevant states—most likely North Korea, South Korea, China, and the United States—will take steps toward establishing a permanent peace regime and bring a formal end to the Korean War. Movement toward this end has stalled since August 2008, as the U.S. and the DPRK have failed to agree on a verification mechanism for the declaration of its nuclear program submitted by Pyongyang in June 2008. Nonetheless, the continued desire of the DPRK to improve relations with the U.S. and the strong incentives for all parties involved to continue the earlier forward momentum in the Six-Party talks, suggest that the current impasse will be overcome and the parties will, in the not too distant future, begin the complex task of constructing a peace regime in the Korean peninsula.

It is therefore timely to consider the components that a lasting peace in Korea requires. As is clear from the experience of other former adversaries who have built new relationships that have successfully overcome the legacy of war, this achievement requires sustained, long-term efforts on many fronts. In post-World War II Europe, as is well-known, the solid and durable peace built by the non-communist nations has been under-girded and maintained by a dense, multi-layered web of mutually beneficial ties created over time by a broad range of organizations and individuals. Established governmental, educational, cultural, and religious institutions have contributed to this process, as have a wide variety of informal associations and networks.

The contrasting experience of East Asia following World War II illustrates all too clearly that such a web of new relationships can only be built on the foundation of an honest and thorough examination of the war itself. The lack of forthright engagement with the history of the Pacific War on the part of Japan and other former belligerents has famously prevented the states of the region from moving beyond wartime resentment and mistrust, and thus continues to impede the establishment of new multilateral institutions and ties. In postwar Western Europe, by contrast, a constant confrontation with the past through an open, prolonged, and energetic engagement with the historical record of the war has made it possible over time for the former adversaries to put the devastating conflict behind them. As Lily Gardner Feldman, a specialist on Germany's postwar reconciliation, aptly notes, "History cannot be a mere footnote in the relationship, but rather must act as a constant constructive irritant to structure a fundamentally different relationship from the past."¹

The irritant of constant confrontation with historical inquiry undercuts the natural tendency to simplify and distort the past into national myths that hinder reconciliation. An honest examination of a war's history by all sides in the conflict gradually wears away resentment and builds trust, as former adversaries air grievances, admit responsibility, and gain a broader perspective. As we know from our personal experience as well, the more deeply the parties to a conflict investigate the event, the greater their appreciation of the complexity of its causes, and the more they are able to move from questions of blame toward larger perspectives of understanding.

In the case of the Korean War, the lack of resolution of the conflict and the continuing political antagonism between the two sides has made it impossible for all parties to ground their understanding of the war in an open, honest examination of the record from all sides. Over the last three decades, excellent scholarship has been produced based on the declassified records of several non-communist participants, and the opening of Russian and East European archives following the end of the Cold War has made it possible for scholars and veterans of the war in North America, South Korea, Japan, Russia, Europe, and China to engage in a lively and frank investigation of the conflict on the basis of at least partial documentary evidence from both sides.² At this juncture, as the war's four main antagonists anticipate moving toward a peace treaty, the task of

¹ "Germany's External Reconciliation as a Defining Feature of Foreign Policy: Lessons for Japan?", unpublished report by Lily Gardner Feldman, American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, The Johns Hopkins University, 28 April 2006.

² For a recent survey of scholarship on the major participants in the war, see William Stueck, ed., *The Korean War in World History* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004). For examinations of the war's impact on Europe, see the forthcoming conference volume of papers presented at a symposium at the German Historical Institute in Moscow in January 2007.

scholars is to lay a solid foundation for the peace by broadening the examination of the war to include participants and documentary records from all sides.

I would like to suggest that a fruitful place to begin such a joint investigation is with a component of the war that has had a particularly profound impact on North Korea—the bombing of the DPRK by UN air and naval forces. Of course, the war devastated both Korean states and caused massive loss of life and treasure to China, the United States, and other participants. However, the bombardment of North Korea brought an unusual level of destruction. Over the course of three years of sustained bombing, American planes and ships, along with British, Canadian, and Australian contributions, destroyed not only military installations, industries, mines, and transportation infrastructure, but also hydro-electric plants, irrigation dams, and virtually every city, town, and village in the country. The ground war in the North was also highly destructive, but it lasted only for three months, from October through November 1950. It was the three-year long bombardment that was the overwhelming experience of the war for the people of the North.

The bombing of North Korea has received little attention from scholars and hardly figures in popular images of the conflict in the United States. Indeed, it is probably safe to say that few Americans are even aware of the extent of devastation U.S. bombing caused. For North Koreans, however, the near total destruction of the physical infrastructure of their country, along with the massive numbers the bombardment left dead and wounded, could only have been a profound experience. If the DPRK had won a complete victory over the U.S., the fear and anger caused by the bombing might have gradually faded, as it has in post-war Vietnam. Or if the ensuing decades had brought reconciliation, as in the case of postwar Germany, the effects of the devastation could have diminished as a result of that process. For North Korea, however, the postwar circumstances have only deepened the impact of the war. Since the conflict remained unresolved, with unification unachieved and American troops at high readiness just across the DMZ, the government in Pyongyang has nurtured the emotions and perceptions the bombing left in its wake. Consequently, as the two former adversaries envision replacing the armistice with a permanent peace regime, they must address the lasting effects of this experience.

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Until we study this aspect of the war collaboratively with colleagues in North Korea and China, we clearly cannot adequately understand the lasting effects of the bombing on the people of the DPRK. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest some preliminary conclusions. First, the predominance of this aspect of the war in the North is one reason the DPRK depicts the war as a conflict between the United States and North Korea. War museums and memorials in the DPRK greatly under-represent the role of South Korean armed forces, as well as that of soldiers from other countries that fought under the UN command.³ This focus on North Korea's struggle against the United States, made credible by the experience of the population, has bolstered the Kim Il Sung regime and that of his successor. It has minimized the fratricidal nature of the war, and with it, the danger that Kim Il Sung's role as initiator of violence against compatriots would be exposed. By leaving a legacy of genuine fear of renewed American attack, it has made it easy for the regime to invoke such fears to excuse hardship and justify oppression. Moreover, the sheer fact that the DPRK survived such a sustained attack by the vastly more powerful opponent has enabled Pyongyang to represent the war as a great national victory accomplished under the leadership of Kim Il Sung. This heroic myth of victory over the United States, which, of course, greatly under-represents the contributions made by China and the Soviet Union, may have contributed to Pyongyang's striking tendency since the war to engage in high-risk provocations and brinkmanship.

Second, the unusual degree of destruction caused by the bombing has enabled North Koreans to view themselves as the war's victims. As a post-colonial civil war overlain by the first great power conflict of the Cold War, the Korean War was particularly impassioned and produced atrocities on all sides. However, the widespread international outcry provoked by the ferocity of the U.S. bombing gave the DPRK a victim status that easily overshadowed any considerations of North Koreans'

³ These comments are based on a visit to war museums and memorials in the DPRK in June 2008. I am grateful to the US-Korea Institute at SAIS for the support that made this trip possible.

own culpability.⁴ This outrage also enabled the communist side to mount an effective campaign to falsely accuse the United States of using biological weapons against the Chinese and North Koreans.⁵ In the newly established communist states of East/Central Europe, outrage over the bombing and alleged use of biological weapons galvanized the population to support sending supplies and medical assistance to their suffering Korean comrades, efforts that gained North Koreans a special status within the communist camp as the primary victims of “American imperialism.”

From other examples, we can observe how powerful and long-lasting this victim-creating effect can be. As is often noted, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has given the Japanese an identity as victim that, for many, obscures their role as the instigators of the war and as the perpetrators of atrocities. As late as a century after the United States’ own civil war, when I came of age in Mississippi in the 1960s, white Southerners presented the physical devastation of the South as the dominant story of the war, one that both overshadowed any ethical considerations about slavery and kept alive their sense of grievance and mistrust toward the federal government.

The legacy of mistrust left by the bombing of North Korea is particularly profound because it was directed not only toward the United States, but also toward North Korea’s indispensable patron, the Soviet Union. From the North Korean viewpoint, the fundamental reality of the war was that while American planes and ships vigorously defended the Republic of Korea, the immensely powerful Soviet Air Force and Navy did not prevent the sustained bombardment of the DPRK. The Soviet Navy did not seriously challenge U.S. ships operating off the coast of Korea, and although Soviet fighter planes and air defense units entered the war when Chinese troops intervened in November 1950, their mission was sharply limited. Soviet pilots were charged with defending the bridges across the Yalu River across which Chinese troops and Soviet supplies were entering Korea, the hydroelectric facilities at Suiho Reservoir, and the bases in Manchuria at which Soviet airmen were frantically training Chinese and North Koreans to take their place. Because Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was determined, above all, to avoid escalating the conflict into a war between the Soviet Union and the United States, he forbade Soviet pilots from flying over enemy-held territory or over the sea, lest their presence be exposed in case they were shot down.

Over the course of the war, the Soviet Air Force contribution grew to a substantial size,⁶ but Stalin continued to focus on transferring the burden of the air war to the Chinese and North Koreans as quickly as possible, and to impose strict limits on the sphere of action of Soviet planes. The area the Americans termed “MIG Alley,” which saw a ferocious air war between the Soviet MIG-15 fighter jet and its American counterpart the F-86, extended only from the Yalu as far north as Suiho and east and south to a line running through Huichon and Sinanju. Over the rest of North Korea, US planes maintained complete control of the skies. In later stages of the war, once the fighting was safely contained along a static front line, the Soviets and Chinese repeatedly attempted to establish air bases on North Korean territory from which to engage the Americans more fully. However, for Koreans, the immediate destruction of these fields by American bombers must have underscored the inadequacy of the protection their powerful patron was providing.

Finally, the extreme degree of destruction from the bombing created a context within which the DPRK could succeed in attributing all the war’s atrocities to the United States. North Korean war museums under-represent the effects of the bombing, perhaps because highlighting American technological superiority and the lack of allied protection would raise uncomfortable questions. Instead, they present a narrative of wanton killing and grotesque brutality allegedly perpetrated by American ground soldiers. Photos of shrouded bodies in mass graves are inevitably identified as victims of indiscriminate killing by American soldiers, whatever the actual identity of the bodies or the source of the killing.

⁴ To cite just two examples, Indian newspapers declared the bombing racist, while British papers wrote that American bombers were doing more damage to the democratic cause than were the Communists.

⁵ For a history of this campaign and Russian documents confirming that its claims were fabricated, see Kathryn Weathersby, “Deceiving the Deceivers: Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang and the Allegations of Bacteriological Weapons Use in Korea,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 11 (1998): 176-185; Milton Leitenberg, “New Russian Evidence on the Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations: Background and Analysis,” *CWTHP Bulletin* 11 (1998).

⁶ Approximately 70,000 Soviet pilots, technicians, and gunners eventually served in Korea and Manchuria.

The most potent images, however, are the numerous paintings that depict grotesque torture of individual Koreans, usually women or children, by U.S. servicemen. These paintings call to mind pictures of the martyrdom of Christian saints that are found throughout the Catholic world, a similarity that is not accidental. As Kim Il Sung struggled to consolidate a Marxist regime in the northern half of Korea before the war, the legacy of admiration and affection for the United States left by American missionaries was a major obstacle.⁷ He thus made use of the suffering the people experienced during the war at the hands of the U.S. to obliterate that legacy by turning familiar Christian images against the Americans. Museums contain written exhortations from Kim Il Sung not to respect the Americans, along with carefully crafted images of the depravity and cruelty of U.S. servicemen. In one, a beautiful young Korean woman is grotesquely tortured and killed with metal rods attached to her private parts. In another, a young boy lies face-up on the ground with a wooden beam across his neck, having been killed by an American soldier who is pressing the cross-like beam onto the child's throat with his boot while laughing with a fellow soldier. As paintings of martyred saints must have done for early Christian Europe, these emotionally powerful images of rarified suffering at the hands of a barbarian enemy appear to create a self-image for North Koreans of a virtuous martyr in a crudely Manichean world.

Of course, it is possible that American soldiers committed atrocities against Korean women and children during their brief campaign in the North. Many had served in the brutal war against Japan that had ended just five years earlier, in which barbarous, racist atrocities were not uncommon.⁸ Those veterans may have transferred their animosity toward the Japanese to their new Asian enemy. Or their experience fighting in the South in the summer of 1950 may have been sufficiently brutal to prompt them to commit atrocities against civilians. These claims must certainly be investigated as thoroughly as possible. However, because the U.S. troops had not been in Korea long when they moved into the DPRK and because their advance was rapid, it seems more likely that they engaged in indiscriminate shooting of civilians than in elaborate torture of Koreans. A more plausible explanation is that non-communists in the North who had suffered severely at the hands of the communists before the war committed the more emotionally-laden atrocities. Whatever actually occurred, the present reality is that North Koreans believe that Americans tortured Korean civilians during the Korean War. This conviction contributes to their fear of renewed American attack and thus, to the difficulty of resolving the nuclear issue, and is clearly an obstacle to creating a durable peace. The reports must therefore be investigated as thoroughly and honestly as possible.

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For the American officers responsible for repelling the DPRK attack on South Korea, reliance on bombing was a matter of using what they had and what they believed was effective. The small North Korean Air Force was clearly no match for American air power and the Soviet Union made no threats to intervene in the conflict. More importantly, however, the advantages the dazzling new technology of air power appeared to offer blinded many of its boosters to the reality of its actual performance. Strategic bombing had not brought a German surrender, nor had the firebombing of Tokyo brought an end to the Pacific War. It may have been the entry of a million and a half Soviet ground troops that convinced the Japanese leadership that they could not continue the war,⁹ but from the American viewpoint, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had finally persuaded Tokyo to surrender. American officers were thus quick to assume that “shock and awe” from aerial bombardment would persuade the North Koreans to withdraw from ROK territory. Thus, the day after the Korean People's Army invaded the South, the Commander of U.S. Forces in the Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur, ordered the U.S. Air Force to hit the North Koreans with every resource at its disposal.

⁷ American missionaries were obliged to leave Korea after the U.S. went to war with Japan in 1941, but over several decades before then they had been highly successful in building schools and hospitals and gaining converts. The center of the Christian presence was the northern part of the country; Pyongyang was even called “the Jerusalem of the East.”

⁸ For an insightful analysis of the racial and psychological aspects of World War II in the Pacific see John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

⁹ For a well-documented and persuasive argument that the Soviet entry into the war against Japan was the deciding factor in bringing Japan's surrender, see Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

At the same time, however, the American political leadership was from the outset concerned about the moral and political hazards of reliance on massive air strikes. President Harry S. Truman instructed the National Security Council to ensure that the bombardment of North Korea was not indiscriminate. The Pentagon thus ordered the Far Eastern Air Force to attack only purely military targets and to drop leaflets warning civilians to leave the area before an attack. The American political leadership was also aware of the danger of provoking charges of racism, since the U.S. had been widely criticized throughout Asia for having bombed Japan with less restraint than it had Germany. Throughout the war in Korea, the leadership in Washington issued directives aimed at minimizing the human and political costs of the bombardment of the DPRK.

In practice, however, the circumstances of the war led to indiscriminate bombing of the North. First, U.S. doctrine governing strategic bombing had been developed for enemies with large-scale, widely dispersed industrial plants. Because the DPRK's five major industrial centers were concentrated into relatively small areas, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) abandoned its practice of prioritizing targets by their contribution to the enemy's war-making capacity in favor of attack by geographical area. For the same reason, SAC concluded that most target areas could be most efficiently destroyed by using predominantly incendiary bombs. The result, of course, was widespread destruction of infrastructure and population.

More fundamentally, the outrage and fear that the North Korean invasion of South Korea provoked throughout the Western world set the stage for an all-out response by the U.S. The sudden, massive tank-led attack across the ROK border evoked memories of the piecemeal Nazi aggression in Europe that, unopposed, had led to the cataclysmic world war concluded just five years earlier. Viewing the North Korean assault as an act of aggression by the Soviet Union, Western leaders immediately and unanimously concluded that the invasion must be resisted lest Moscow move against other countries along its border, culminating in a third world war. The United States thus viewed its intervention in Korea as preventing World War III, a cause that justified an all-out response. As Major General Emmett O'Donnell, a veteran of the strategic bombing of Japan, argued, the U.S. should "cash in on our psychological advantage in having gotten into the theater and into the war so fast by putting a very severe blow on the North Koreans with an advance warning, perhaps, telling them that they had gone too far in what we all recognized as being an act of aggression....and go to work burning five major cities in North Korea to the ground, and to destroy completely every one of about eighteen major strategic targets."¹⁰

By September 15, the U.S. had destroyed all major North Korean industrial targets identified as contributing to the DPRK's war-fighting potential. In late September, the Far Eastern Air Force turned its attention to attacks on the extensive complex of hydroelectric facilities Japan had built in northern Korea to supply its chemical and light-metals industries. After UN ground forces crossed into DPRK territory in October, the strategic bombing was temporarily replaced by tactical support for ground troops. Heavy bombers still attempted to destroy the bridges across the Yalu, however, a mission which became much more difficult after Soviet MIG-15 fighter jets entered the fight in November, thinly disguised as North Korean units.

The large numbers of Chinese troops who entered the war in November succeeded in forcing UN forces out of DPRK territory by the end of the year. After the failure of a spring 1951 offensive by the Chinese and North Koreans, the fighting stabilized along a line roughly corresponding to the prewar border. Once the two sides opened negotiations for an armistice in June 1951, the aim of the U.S. Air Force became to prevent the transport of supplies to enemy troops on the front line. Under "Operation Strangle," U.S. planes continuously bombed North Korea's roads and railways. However, since North Korean and Chinese crews rebuilt the roads as quickly as they were destroyed, by summer 1952, Operation Strangle was replaced by a policy termed Air Pressure, designed to persuade the enemy to agree to armistice terms by bombing Pyongyang and selective targets such as power plants, dams, and mines.

Kim Il Sung had, in fact, pressed his allies to conclude an armistice as early as February 1952, to spare his country further destruction from the bombing. Mao and Stalin insisted that the war continue, however, although by August 1952 the Chinese

¹⁰ Robert Frank Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953* (Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, Washington, DC 1983): 185-186.

leadership began to suggest to the Soviets that they reach a negotiated settlement. Stalin, dismissing Kim Il Sung's concerns about casualties and physical destruction, continued to press his allies to continue the war, presumably because of the benefits he believed it brought the Soviet Union. It was thus Stalin's sudden death in March 1953 that opened the door to the conclusion of an armistice.¹¹ The new leadership in Moscow, faced with threats at home and in Eastern Europe, instructed Beijing and Pyongyang to reach a negotiated settlement. The Chinese nonetheless continued the fighting for some weeks in order to gain an advantageous military and political position at its conclusion. During this final period, the increasingly desperate Americans took the bombing to a new level by destroying irrigation dams at Toksan and Chasan, justifying this act on the grounds that the resulting floods would destroy lines of communication.

Many questions about the U.S. air war need to be explored as the former enemies move toward creating a peace regime. At this preliminary stage, however, I would like to emphasize that for the American airmen who carried out the bombing of North Korea, the war was a battleground of the larger Cold War. The fighter jets they confronted, when they met the enemy at all, were Soviet planes piloted by experienced Soviet airmen, and later flown by Chinese and North Korean pilots. The epic battle between the MIG-15 and F-86 in the skies over North Korea was, in fact, the longest and most extensive conflict Soviet and American armed forces engaged in over the whole span of the Cold War. The strict prohibition against admitting publicly that Soviet pilots were flying the fighter jets, although American airmen could hear them speaking Russian over the radio, and the frustrating order not to cross into Chinese or Soviet airspace, reinforced the Americans' perception that they were fighting a larger war against the worldwide communist enemy. Thus, in their view, the stakes in Korea were very large, and extreme measures were therefore justified.

It is also worth noting that the experience of the war for American airmen was highly impersonal. Air Force veterans describe it as having been a "commuter war." Their daily routine was to leave their base in Japan in the morning, fly their mission, and return home in time for dinner. Their memories of the war overwhelmingly focus on the performance of their aircraft, and secondarily on the painful loss of fellow airmen. Having never seen at ground level the destruction they brought, they naturally had little awareness of its impact on the people of North Korea.¹²

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This brief discussion offers some preliminary thoughts about some of the many issues that a collaborative investigation of this aspect of the war could profitably address as the two sides approach the process of building a peace regime. On the North Korean side, it will be important first of all to document the level and forms of destruction the DPRK suffered from the bombing. It would also be worthwhile to explore various aspects of North Korea's success in keeping the war going despite the bombardment. What factors were most important in this process? How did the regime mobilize the population and what effect did the destruction have on attitudes toward the North Korean government, the Soviet government, and the Chinese government? What was the North Koreans' experience of working together with the Chinese to rebuild roads and other facilities? How did the various stages of the bombing strategy affect the approach to the armistice negotiations on the North Korean/Chinese side? How is the experience of the bombing recalled by people who lived through it and how does it affect attitudes toward the United States today?

On the American side, it would be appropriate to begin with a full examination of the discussion about the bombing on the part of the military and political leadership as strategy evolved over the course of the war. How strongly did ground

¹¹ For documentation from Russian archives supporting this analysis, see K. Weathersby, "Stalin, Mao, and the End of the Korean War," in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Stanford University Press, 1998): 90-116.

¹² I have had the privilege of talking to many veterans of the war, but these observations come primarily from participating in the very interesting three-day conference the Air Force convened in Honolulu in July 2001 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the air war in Korea. Veterans from all branches of the Air Force and from several countries that fought under UN command recounted the war, taped interviews about their experience, and created exhibits of artifacts. At the concluding reception in a hangar at Hickham Air Base, current servicemen proudly unveiled two vintage planes they had painstakingly restored for the occasion—an F-86 and a MIG-15.

commanders disagree with aspects of the air war and what effect did this dispute have on war strategy? How did assessments of the bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan figure into decisions regarding the air war in Korea? How did the U.S. government respond to the international criticism of the bombing? From what we can learn of the evolution of strategy toward the armistice on the communist side, how do we assess the accuracy of American perceptions of the efficacy of bombing in bringing pressure to bear on the negotiations?

Finally, it would be useful for the parties to a peace treaty to examine the effects of the bombing on postwar attitudes in the two Koreas, China, the U.S., and other countries affected by the war. It seems likely that ROK citizens had ambivalent reactions to the bombing, which, while protecting them, was nonetheless destroying half their country, including the original family homes of many in the South. How did their reaction affect their attitudes toward the U.S.? In China, how did the ability of their side to withstand such an attack affect their attitudes toward the newly established communist regime and toward the United States? On the American side, it would be worthwhile to examine how perceptions of the efficacy of the bombing affected postwar strategic thinking about security in Korea. Most importantly, a joint investigation of this aspect of the war can illuminate some of the principal forces driving the continued mistrust and animosity between the DPRK and the U.S., an understanding that is essential if the two sides are finally to bring the Korean War to an end.