
BACKGROUND BOOKS

KOREA

The final entry in Marine Sergeant Martin Russ's diary is dated September 10, 1953, Ascom City, outside of Seoul. The war in Korea was over; he and his comrades were going home after fighting the Chinese and the cold and the mud for 10 months.

"I dare say," Russ writes in *The Last Parallel: A Marine's War Journal* (Rinehart, 1957; Greenwood reprint, 1973) "that most of the men here are glad they went through the past year, and I dare say that most of them would be at a loss if asked why.

"This morning some of the new replacements landed at Inchon and were brought here. . . . They are less fortunate than we who made the varsity and played games in that enlarged playing field, No Man's Land. But they will get the feel of this sad country with its fine people and its awesome mountains."

A problem for most American readers is that few books convey the "feel" of Korea or of the U.S. experience there. The Korean War produced two or three novels but nothing to compare to those from World War I or II, or even, lately, from Vietnam. Russ, a St. Lawrence College dropout who joined the Marines in 1952, provides the best available equivalent of the fictional treatment given to earlier wars by the Ernest Hemingways and the James Joneses.

Korea's history did not, of course, begin with the U.S. entry into the 1950-53 war, although that period undoubtedly marks the beginning of many Americans' recognition of the Koreans as a separate people.

The strategic location of the Korean peninsula meant that from the

beginning its inhabitants were often subjugated by outsiders, especially, for centuries, by invaders from the Chinese hinterland. The Chinese ruler Ch'i Tzu in 1122 B.C. subdued Korea's "Nine Barbarian Tribes" and found them "a fierce and ungovernable people," according to Canadian missionary historian James Scarth Gale (1863-1937).

Gale's *History of the Korean People*, first published in the *Korea Mission Field* magazine, 1924-26, and incorporated into Richard Rutt's biography, *James Scarth Gale and his History of the Korean People* (Univ. of Washington, 1972), reads like a romantic epic, with frequent references to what was happening in Europe at the time when Korean courtiers were composing lyric poetry and Korean warriors were fighting the wars that Gale chronicles, century by century. He describes the unification of the kingdoms of Korea in the 7th century and the turbulent period of Mongolian domination in the 13th and 14th centuries when "refugees from all parts of China made their terror-stricken way to Korea." In time Mongol gave way to Ming and Ming to Manchu overlordship. All this while Korea was developing its own distinctive culture.

The first Christian missionary did not arrive until 1836. But by 1866 half the world—Russians, French, British, Americans, Germans—seemed intent on forcing its way into a still closed Korea. During the latter years of the 19th century many foreigners did come in. War broke out between China and Japan—with Japan vic-

torious—and pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese factions emerged within Korea's ruling family. Then in 1895 the anti-Japanese Queen Min was assassinated, and the King and Crown Prince, hidden in sedan chairs, fled from the palace to the Russian legation, where they resided for a year. In 1904 the Russo-Japanese War began. It ended with the Russians' defeat and eclipse in the Far East, followed by the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 and a period of severe repression of the Korean people.

A good picture of the customs that developed in Korea over the centuries is given by Yale anthropologist Cornelius Osgood in **The Koreans and Their Culture** (Ronald Press, 1951). Osgood describes Buddhism and Confucianism as they have evolved and are practiced in 20th-century Korea, and the country's distinctive forms of social organization, its painting, pottery, printing, music, and literature—all Chinese-influenced but clearly Korean.

"It is important to remember," Osgood writes, "that the Koreans speak a language as different from Chinese as is French and that the people still show conspicuous contrasts in temperament, being no more like their neighbors in this respect than the Irish are like the typical Englishman."

Best of the studies of the 1950–53 Korean conflict is David Rees's **Korea: The Limited War** (St. Martin's, 1964, cloth; Penguin, 1970, paper). Out of print since 1976 but still available in libraries, it covers both the U.S. politics and the allied military actions that shaped the progress and outcome of the war.

Rees's prose is not pedantic. (Witness his description of the allies' first recapture of Seoul: "Surrounded by hills blazing with napalm and huge

benevolently smiling posters of Stalin and Kim Il-sung, the Stars and Stripes floated over the shattered fifth city of Asia.") The political vulnerability of the Truman administration as the war went on, he writes, reflected the American public's "vast discontent with containment of the Communists." Yet, "rarely in history," Rees concludes, "has a great power sacrificed so much for so little material gain as the United States would do in defending . . . Korea."

The dramatic events in Washington and Korea during the first week of the Communist invasion are reconstructed in Glenn D. Paige's **The Korean Decision, June 24–30, 1950** (Free Press, 1968, cloth & paper).

Veterans of this era provide valuable insights in Paige's volume and in their own books. These include President Truman's **Memoirs, Vol. Two: Years of Trial and Hope** (Doubleday, 1958); General Douglas MacArthur's **Reminiscences** (McGraw-Hill, 1964); Dwight D. Eisenhower's **The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953–1956** (Doubleday, 1963); General Matthew W. Ridgway's **The Korean War: How We Met the Challenge; How All-Out Asian War Was Averted; Why MacArthur Was Dismissed; Why Today's War Objectives Must Be Limited** (Doubleday, 1967); and other recollections by diplomats Dean Acheson, George F. Kennan, and John W. Allison, and by Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins.

The best of the official military histories are those done by the Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History. These include Roy E. Appleman's **South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu, June–November 1950** (1961); Walter G. Hermes' **Truce Tent and Fighting Front** (1966); and James F. Schnabel's **Policy and Direction: The**

First Year (1972).

The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953 by Robert Frank Futrell (Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1961) describes the failure of "Operation Strangle" to block enemy supplies, the bombing of the Yalu bridges, and the destruction of North Korea's irrigation dikes, almost at war's end.

Two books that assess the role of Korea in American global thinking are Joyce and Gabriel Kolko's revisionist **The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954** (Harper, 1972, cloth; Pathfinder Press, paper) and Bernard Brodie's **War and Politics** (Macmillan, 1973, cloth & paper). In both books, Korea is one of several subjects discussed.

The Kolkos give it 100 of 716 pages. They probe the antecedents of the June 25, 1950 attack, including both Syngman Rhee's and General MacArthur's roles and intentions at this time and later when the Chinese entered the war. In the Kolkos' view, the symbolic importance of Korea to U.S. policies in Europe determined the reactions of Truman and the State Department throughout the war.

Brodie argues that the constitutional issue involved in Truman's decision to bypass congressional approval of his commitment of troops to help South Korea failed to become a key political question only because of the swiftness of events during the critical first year of the war. By the time the increasingly unpopular American involvement had come to be regarded as "Truman's War," armistice negotiations had begun.

The view from Peking is analyzed by Allen S. Whiting in **China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision To Enter the Korean War** (Macmillan, 1960; Stanford reissue, 1968). This RAND study explores the motivations for China's surprise late 1950 intervention, which was at first cautious and limited. Factors included China's fear of U.S. intentions and its wish to promote Communist revolutions in Asia.

In general, the period since the Korean War ended has not been broadly treated in books suited to general readership. Recent specialized collections are **The Two Koreas in East Asian Affairs**, essays edited by William J. Barnds (New York Univ., 1976), and **The Future of the Korean Peninsula**, papers from a conference on Korea and the major powers edited by Young C. Kim and Abraham M. Halpern (Holt, Praeger Special Studies, 1977).

One broader account that does cover the postwar period in readable fashion is Gregory Henderson's overall examination of the Korean political character from its beginnings in the traditional culture 2,000 years before Christ to the mid-1960s. In **Korea: The Politics of the Vortex** (Harvard, 1968), he sums up the situation a decade ago: "If South Koreans lack the cohesiveness and loyalties of previous attachments, they also lack the traditionalism, the resistance to change, the nostalgia that the world of class and feudalism brings. Korean society is an unusually open one."

No major study has yet been done on the less open South Korean society of the 1970s.

EDITOR'S NOTE. Ralph Clough and Samuel F. Wells provided advice on this selection of background reading. Additional recommendations were made by Donald P. Gregg, who served as special assistant to the U.S. Ambassador in Seoul, 1973-75.