



Teaching About the “Forgotten War”

By Michael Seth

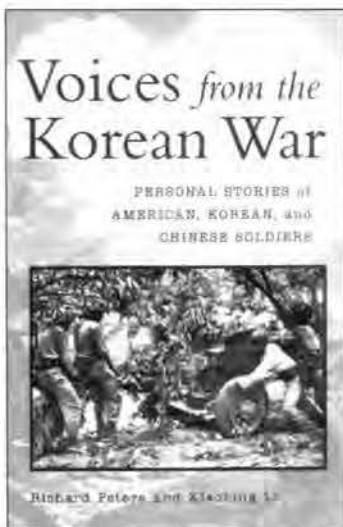
VOICES OF THE KOREAN WAR Personal Stories of American, Korean, and Chinese Soldiers

BY RICHARD A. PETERS AND XIAOBING LI

LEXINGTON: UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY, 2004

HARDCOVER: 288 PAGES

ISBN: 0-813-12293-7



Although often labeled the “forgotten war,” there is a large and growing literature on the Korean War. The two very different books reviewed here present additions to this body of work that are useful for teachers and students.

In *Voices of the Korean War* Richard Peters and Xiaobing Li provide twenty previously unpublished firsthand accounts of the Korean War from American, Korean, and Chinese participants. They average about nine or ten pages each and are invariably fascinating. All are easy to read and

should be accessible to secondary school students as well as undergraduates. Peters and Li sometimes give accounts of the same events from different sides. For example, the experience of a US marine in the Chosin Reservoir fighting is followed by the account of a Chinese captain. It is interesting to contrast the stories; particularly revealing is the hardship of the much more poorly supplied and equipped Chinese forces. The editors have added a succinct summary of the origins and course of the Korean War, focusing on US military involvement. This is useful for the reader with little background on the war and enhances the book’s value as a classroom text.

One limitation of the book is that twelve of the twenty accounts are from Americans. Only four are from Chinese, and more seriously only four are by Koreans, and only one of these is by someone who fought on the North Korean side. The editors address this in the preface, explaining that only recently have Chinese officers and soldiers felt comfortable talking about the Korean War (xiv) and cite similar problems with Korean sources. The US-centric slant of the book is also apparent in the short essay “Perspectives on the War” at the end of the book. Author Peters’ conclusion is that “although the human

costs of the war were much higher than anyone expected at the outset, the Korean War succeeded in achieving its original goal—the expulsion of the North Korean Communist forces from South Korea back to the 38th Parallel” (264). Another limitation is the emphasis on soldiers when most of casualties were civilians. Just two accounts give the reader some idea of what the Korean War experience was like for the Koreans. One is the story of a seventeen-year-old high school student forcibly conscripted to the North Korean army, who after a few months escapes and joins the South Korean Marine Corps and fights under them. The other, and most riveting account in the book, “A Korean Housewife’s Story,” is of a woman and her family who fled Seoul during the North Korean invasion. They walked for fifteen days to a town in the south where her husband’s family lived, only to have the town occupied by the North Koreans two days later. She recounts their suffering under the brief North Korean occupation of South Korea; during which her husband had to hide in a basement. While more focus on the Koreans and Chinese would have made this a better book, *Voices of the Korean War* is still a useful resource for secondary and college students.

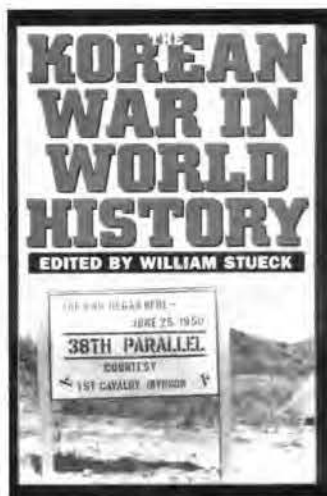
THE KOREAN WAR IN WORLD HISTORY

EDITED BY WILLIAM STUECK

LEXINGTON: UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY, 2004

HARDCOVER: 232 PAGES

ISBN: 0-813-12306-2



In a collection of essays, William Stueck and five other contributors examine the origins and impact of the war. The introduction and conclusion by Stueck is especially valuable as a summary of the issues, controversies, and scholarship on the Korean War. Unlike the previous book, which requires little or no background knowledge, this one is aimed at the reader already familiar with the basic history of the conflict.

Allan Millet’s essay gives the Korean background to the conflict. Katheryn Weathersby provides a summary and update on her studies of the Russian archival documents that have shed light on the Soviet

role in the conflict. She explains Stalin's key role in giving the go-ahead to Kim Il-sung for the invasion, his caution in avoiding a direct US-Soviet clash, and his role in dragging on the war after truce negotiations had begun. Stalin's death seems to have been the key to ending the conflict. Documents also show that Communist accusations that the US used biological weapons were based on evidence fabricated by China and Russia. In a clearly written and illuminating essay, Chen Jian provides a summary and update on his studies of the Chinese role in the conflict. He explains how China's decision to intervene in the conflict has to be understood "in terms of Mao Zedong's determination to create new momentum for pushing forward his "continuous revolution" and to defeat "American arrogance" (94). The Korean crisis was a test of China's promotion of an Asian and world revolution and a means to mobilize society.

Lloyd Gardiner in a carefully nuanced essay analyzes a letter from Truman to Acheson in early July 1950 as a key document for understanding the reasons for US intervention. Michael Schaller looks at the impact of the Korean War on Japan, convincingly arguing for its importance in shaping that nation's postwar economic and political direction. He points out the issues relating to the rearmament of Japan and its military relationship with the US, and concludes that there was no consensus until the Korean War "propelled Japan along a new path," and that "without the Korean War, the relationships forced among the United States, Japan, China, the Soviet Union, and the two Koreas would have been dramatically different" (170).

The Korean War in World History is probably too demanding for secondary or introductory undergraduate students. However, it is an important work that should be read by teachers interested in the conflict and would be useful in upper division history courses. While many questions about the Korean War remain, the work of William Stueck and the contributors to this book have done much to help us better understand the conflict. ■

MICHAEL SETH is an Associate Professor of History at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He is a specialist on Korean history and author of *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea* (2002).

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