

Review Essay on *The Korean War in Asia: A Hidden History*

The Korean War in Asia: A Hidden History, by Tessa Morris-Suzuki. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018, 238 pages, ISBN10: 9781538111901, ISBN13: 9781538111901.

Samuel PERRY

The outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula in June 1950 was one of many instances of social upheaval and anticolonial warfare that followed in the wake of the Second World War in Asia. Few of these conflicts, however, involved the intervention of so many international players as did the war that devastated the Korean Peninsula, massacred millions of its people, and set the stage for a new Cold War order. Recent scholarship by Choi (2016), Masuda (2016), Morris-Suzuki (2012), Nam (2016), Wada (2015) and others has begun to shine light on how many of Korea's neighboring countries played a role in the Korean War and were profoundly affected by it.

The Korean War in Asia: A Hidden History, a collection of essays edited by Tessa Morris-Suzuki, pushes this scholarship one step further, helping to clarify what the author calls "the strange multilayered nature of the conflict, which was at once a civil, an international, and a global war," and which "created multiple confusions about the nature of the participation and the identities of combatants" (p. 4). This remarkable volume offers its readers carefully documented stories about non-Korean actors in the international conflict and the human impact the war had on the lives of a wide range of people living in nearby countries (US-occupied Japan, Taiwan, China and

Samuel PERRY is an Associate Professor of East Asian Studies at Brown University. E-mail: samuel_perry@brown.edu

Mongolia, for example), including people who worked as factory workers, fundraisers, soldiers, spies, minesweepers, activists, and translators.

Morris-Suzuki is a powerful storyteller and her own three chapters, “A Fire on the Other Shore?: Japan and the Korean War Order,” “A War across Borders: The Strange Journey of Prisoner No. 600,001,” and “The United States, Japan and the Undercover War in Korea,” root her volume in the kind of illuminating archival scholarship for which her work is so well respected. Noting how the Korean War was the only conflict after World War II in which Japan has both deployed and lost its own soldiers, Morris-Suzuki challenges the commonly held notion that Japan benefitted only economically from the Korean War and otherwise had little else to do with it. Despite the United States and Japanese efforts to obscure Japan’s participation in the war and Chinese and North Korean efforts to disproportionately magnify it, she argues that Japan’s participation was hardly as “shadowy and equivocal” as it has been remembered, and that a blurry line between Japan’s civilian and military roles continues to conceal Japan’s participation in global conflicts. In Chapter 6, she follows the compelling story of Matsushita Kazutoshi, the only Japanese prisoner of war to be held in a Korean War POW camp in South Korea, and shows how his forgotten story helps to challenge our own “historical and political presumptions” about the war. Morris-Suzuki’s penchant for combining personal histories with archival research—even personal interviews—is an extremely effective way of bringing broader historical issues into an especially clear focus.

Other compelling chapters of the book offer snapshots of how the Korean War was experienced among communities in Asia whose stories are less well known. In Chapter 2, for example, Mo Tian shows some of the effects of the Korean War on neighboring Manchuria, as China emphasized investments in heavy industry and relocated industries (as well as many of its people) from southern to northern Manchuria. The Korean War, according to Tian, had the effect of accelerating social mobilization of Chinese people in northeastern China, as the evacuation of heavily populated areas and the work of transporting military aid led to large-scale movements of people, and as the state’s overarching goal of intervention in the Korean War became

translated into “patriotic compacts” (*aiguo gongyue*) which sought to promote civilian participation in the war effort at every level of society (p. 49).

The ripple effect of the Korean War had profound consequences for places even further afield, such as Mongolia. In his chapter, Li Narangoa argues that the war exacerbated a divide within the “Socialist front of Northeast Asia,” thus prolonging the separation of the Mongolian people, living in both the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) and Inner Mongolia, which had become absorbed into the People’s Republic of China. Both the MPR and Inner Mongolia mobilized its people during the Korean War, sending donations of prized horses and humanitarian aid. The Korean War had the effect of strengthening “communist brotherhood” amongst the Mongolian people in both nations, for whom a great victory had been achieved on the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, the growing gap between Soviet and Chinese policies toward the war led to significant confusion over the extent of MPR soldiers’ direct participation, a hampering of the MPR’s efforts to be admitted into the United Nations, and a decades-long separation of the MPR and Inner Mongolia, whose Cold War border was not re-opened until the late 1980s.

Two particularly strong chapters contributed by Catherine Churchman focus on what Nationalist Chinese (particularly the Republic of China) had to gain from their participation in the Korean War and on the long unacknowledged use of Chinese prisoners of war as spies for the UN forces. While it is well known that Koreans living in Japan participated in activism during the Korean War, Churchman here sheds light on the role of Taiwanese-based Chinese Nationalists and Korea-resident ethnic Chinese in the war, for many of whom the Korean War offered promise of a “new battlefield against Communism.”

In contrast to the main Japanese islands, which regained their sovereignty from the United States in May 1952, the Ryūkyū Islands remained under US occupation throughout the Korean War. In fact, many of the planes which dropped ordinance, including napalm over North Korea, originated in Okinawa, where the US military presence expanded

exponentially during the war. In Chapter 5, Pedro Jacobelli suggests that the Korean War precipitated a wide-spread fear that the Okinawan archipelago would be targeted because of the continued US military presence, and perhaps even invaded by Communist forces from mainland China as the specter of World War III was a cause of particular concern in Okinawa—indeed as it was around the world. The material transformations in the islands brought by US military presence, as well as the fear of WWII, Jacobelli argues, had the effect of intensifying the desire on the part of the Okinawa people to have their sovereignty returned to Japan.

If the volume edited by Morris-Suzuki is somewhat uneven in the depth of its research, the broad scope of the book and its fresh perspectives on the peripheral impact of the Korean War provide us with a truly inspiring model for how phenomena often examined through the lens of a single nation can benefit from a more kaleidoscopic vision that incorporates perspectives rooted in the experience of people in various nations. While the focus of the book is not the countless tragedies that happened to Koreans, *The Korean War in Asia: A Hidden History* is still a very welcome addition to our understanding of how the Korean War played out in the broader context of East Asia. This remarkable volume reminds us of the potential for careful historical scholarship to continue to reshape our memory of this “misremembered” war, and how the effects of the conflict rippled outward into the rest of Asia.

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