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William Stueck. *The Korean War: An International History.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xii + 484 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03767-7.

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The Necessary War?

Few, if any, topics within the overall purview of Cold War history have attracted quite so much scholarly interest in recent years as the Korean War. And few have remained so steeped in controversy and contentiousness. The reasons behind this state of affairs are hardly difficult to discern. The Korean conflict, probably more than any other event in the four-and-a-half-decades of the Cold War, has served as a fundamental touchstone for conflicting interpretations and perspectives about the nature and meaning of great power rivalry in the postwar era.

The release of significant amounts of Soviet and Chinese documentary materials since the end of the Cold War has permitted a welcome broadening and recasting of scholarly debates. But, as subcribers to H-Diplo and readers of the most recent issue of the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* will hardly need to be reminded, the new archival evidence has brought anything but consensus. Indeed, arguments about the Korean War's origins, course, denouement, and ultimate impact continue to rage with uncommon intensity.

Did Bruce Cumings "get it right" with his magisterial two-volume work on the origins of the war? Or is Cumings' account, as suggested by such scholars as Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, Xue Litai, Chen Jian, Kathryn Weathersby, and Zhang Shu Ghang, fundamentally flawed by his exaggeration of the civil dimensions of the Korean conflict and his corresponding failure to acknowledge the indispensability of the Soviet and Chinese roles? What was the nature of the relationships among Stalin, Mao, and Kim Il-sung, and how did those relationships affect the course of the war? Why did the United States and China intervene in the Korean fighting? What role did other powers, as well as the United Nations, play in limiting or ending the conflict? Why did it take so long to achieve an armistice? And how, in the broadest sense, did the Korean conflict affect the international system as a whole?

William Stueck carefully considers each of these issues–and many more–in his long-awaited work *The Korean War: An International History*. One might reasonably ask, in view of the extensive literature already existing on the Korean War, whether yet another detailed study of the conflict is needed. Stueck's wide-ranging monograph, set on the widest possible international canvas, quickly puts all such suspicions to rest. Impressively researched and cogently argued, this study effectively blends original scholarship with synthesis. Moreover, it stands as a model of truly international history, that hybrid genre that is more frequently discussed than attempted.

In view of his previous work on the subject, Stueck's overarching interpretations contain few surprises. He acknowledges the civil dimension of the Korean strife, for example, but insists that without the support of Mao and Stalin for Kim's adventurism there would have been no Korean War. Likewise, he emphasizes the importance of America's obsession with its international credibility in explaining the Truman administration's decision for intervention.

For Stueck the Communist threat was real and the American response to it appropriate. The war, though it brought undeniably tragic consequences to the inhabitants of the Korean peninsula, was necessary–a kind of substitute, in Stueck's assessment, for World War III; a conflict that, ironically, wound up imparting greater stability to the international system.

The author's judgments about the war's origins (rather standard fare) and its consequences (among the book's more original and provocative sections) constitute just a small portion of the study. The bulk of the book actually concentrates on the diplomacy of the war itself, and it is here that Stueck makes his most important contributions. He emphasizes throughout both the multilateral nature and the global impact of the war, themes that his multinational research strategy allow him to develop with unusual effectiveness.

Among Stueck's other chief themes are the numerous opportunities that both sides squandered for an earlier and less costly resolution of the conflict; the significant limits placed on American actions by such allies as Britain and neutrals such as India; the centrality of the oft-ignored UN to the diplomacy of the war; and the close connection between the military and diplomatic aspects of the war. Stueck's account is also enlivened by his penchant for clever, counterfactual speculation. Though the realm of the counterfactual proves unavoidably murky, Stueck's bold positing of a series of "what ifs" usefully casts new light on a number of perennial issues.

Will *The Korean War* prove the last word on its much-studied subject? Almost certainly not. Nor are its interpretations likely to gain anything approaching universal acceptance among specialists. The topic remains too complex, and too politicized, to place such an impossible burden on any single work of history. But Stueck's book will surely contribute in a major way to the ongoing debates both about the Korean War and about the broader Cold War of which it forms so crucial a part. Indeed, the intelligence, thoroughness, and honesty of this study recommend it to all serious students of international politics during the Cold War era. For those seeking a single volume introduction to this seminal event, *The Korean War* would be a fine place to start.

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