The Korean War: An International History by Wada Haruki (review)

Kathryn Weathersby

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The Korean War: An International History by Wada Haruki, translated by Frank Baldwin. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 410 pp. Bibliography. $48.00 (hardcover and e-book)

Wada Haruki's remarkable book is the most comprehensive and balanced single-volume history of the Korean War yet to be published. A senior scholar of international history in Japan, Wada draws on decades of research into the archives and scholarly literature of Russia, the United States, China, Korea, and Japan. The breadth of his scholarship is therefore extraordinary, but what most distinguishes this account is that Wada places the Korean War squarely in the context of the modern history of Northeast Asia rather than primarily of the Cold War. Suggesting that the conflict of 1950–53 could more accurately be called the Northeast Asia War, Wada presents the Korean War as a continuation of the Chinese Civil War. Throughout the book he maintains an impressive balance between local and international aspects, military and diplomatic components, and military events and local politics. Moreover, for the first time in a general history of the war, Wada fully incorporates Japan into the narrative.

In straightforward prose, as translated by Frank Baldwin, Wada begins by establishing in convincing detail that in 1949 North Korea and South Korea were symmetrical in their determination to reunify the country by military means, while their Soviet and American patrons were similarly joined in unwillingness to support military action on the peninsula that might damage their national interests. Closely examining the decision-making process that led Stalin to change his mind regarding the Korean venture in early 1950, Wada argues that the return of Korean soldiers from China, along with Stalin's condemnation of the "peaceful revolution" line of the Japanese Communist Party, emboldened Kim Il-Sung (Kim Ilsŏng) to renew his request for permission to attack the South (p. 51). Wada concludes that Secretary of State Dean Acheson's January 12, 1950, speech at the National Press Club persuaded Stalin that an attack on South Korea would not prompt the United States to intervene, a view reinforced by an intelligence report of remarks by Republic of Korea (ROK) prime minister Yi Pŏmsŏk at a cabinet meeting on January 6, 1950, that the United States would abandon South Korea as it had Taiwan. Relying on documents cited by Evgenii P. Bajanov and Natalia Bajanova, Wada details the explanation Stalin gave Kim Il-Sung and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) foreign minister Pak Hŏnyŏng as to the changes in the international environment that made it possible for Moscow to support an attack on South Korea: the psychological impact of the victory of the Chinese Communists on the United States and the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons. Stalin nonetheless cautioned the North Korean leaders to consider carefully the possibility of American intervention, making it clear that if such an eventuality occurred, the DPRK would have to

turn to the People's Republic of China (PRC) for assistance. Kim Il-Sung thus had to secure Beijing's support before the attack could begin.

Wada disputes earlier interpretations of a captured document from the cultural section of the Korean People's Army (KPA) that outlines five stages of political work the KPA was to conduct during the period before the attack through the post-combat era. While Bruce Cumings argues that this document does not prove the KPA attacked first and Park Myung-lim regards it as the most definitive proof that the North did attack first, Wada argues persuasively that it was prepared for training purposes, not as an operational plan for the attack on South Korea (pp. 63–64). Wada reasonably views the telegram Soviet ambassador Shtykov sent to Moscow on June 26, 1950, reporting on the first day of the war, as definitive proof that "every aspect of the North Korean offensive was meticulously planned by the DPRK in conjunction with Soviet advisers" (pp. 76–77).

Regarding the heated debate over whether the United States knew of the impending attack on South Korea, Wada disagrees with the conclusions of Bruce Cumings and Pang Sonjoo that American officials in Washington and Tokyo knew the attack was coming. He concludes instead, along with Masao Okonogi, that the United States knew of the buildup of forces in North Korea but did not take it seriously (pp. 67–68). Regarding the even more heated debate over the nature of the war, Wada disputes Cumings's insistence that it was a civil war, arguing instead that the leaders of North Korea saw the war as both a civil war in Korea and an extension of the Chinese revolution. In light of Stalin's role, Wada concludes that Dean Acheson's view of the attack as a global Communist offensive had some basis in fact (p. 84). Wada furthermore suggests plausibly that Stalin may have continued the boycott of the UN Security Council despite the impending vote on supporting South Korea in order to avoid being seen as a partner in the North Korean action (p. 85).

Wada's discussion of Japan's role in the war includes an account of the enthusiasm with which leftist groups greeted the rapid KPA advance, and the utopian pacifism of the Peace Problems Discussion Group, which saw avoiding a war between the United States and the USSR as the most urgent issue. He analyzes the dilemma of Japanese leaders who feared that American use of air bases in Japan for bombing operations in Korea might lead to retaliatory airstrikes on Japan but who nonetheless believed they were duty-bound to comply with the orders of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (pp. 89–95). He also examines public opinion about whether and in what form to support the UN effort in Korea (pp. 136–38) and details the use of Japanese minesweepers to clear Wŏnsan harbor (pp. 136–39). Wada also discusses the debate within Japan over the proper course to take following the Chinese offensive, revealing the strength of the popular fear that this new development would lead to a new world war. He analyzes the debates in Tokyo, Washington, and Moscow over the conclusion of a peace treaty

with Japan, documenting that Stalin declined to participate in the process because of the USSR alliance with the PRC (pp. 173–74).

Wada's discussion of the Chinese intervention and the vexed negotiations over Soviet provision of air cover is sound but has been superseded by the latest writings of the Chinese historian Shen Zhi-hua. Wada's account of the creation of a unified Chinese/North Korean command does not draw on Shen's important article on this subject, although this work is listed in the book's bibliography.[1] Perhaps for this reason Wada omits Stalin's key role in forcing the DPRK leadership to accept Chinese leadership of the war.

Emphasizing the symmetry in the difficult relations both Kim Il-Sung and Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŭngman) had with their respective patrons, Wada suggests that nonetheless both Korean leaders emerged from the war with their political position enhanced. He concludes that Kim Il-Sung gained control of the Korean Workers' Party by November 1951, arguing plausibly that Stalin must have approved his demotion of Soviet Korean Hŏ Kai (pp. 205–7).

The only major aspect of Wada's narrative that remains unconvincing is his argument that Stalin wanted to end the war by the fall of 1952, and therefore his death in March 1953 was not the decisive factor enabling the Communist side to conclude an armistice, as this reviewer and others have argued. Wada omits discussion of Stalin's meeting in January 1951 with political and military leaders of the Soviet bloc, at which Stalin explained that the war in Korea would tie down American forces for two or three years and therefore provide a crucially important opportunity for the Soviet bloc to build up its armed forces. Instead, Wada argues implausibly that Stalin unleashed the purges in the Soviet party in the fall of 1952, and in the Korean and Japanese parties in early 1953, in order to create scapegoats for the "misadventure in Korea" (p. 246). Wada supports this view by citing Stalin's interview with the *New York Times* on December 25, 1952, in which he spoke of "peaceful coexistence" and sought Eisenhower's cooperation to end the war. Interpreting this interview at face value, Wada concludes that "Stalin had sent Eisenhower a clear message that he wanted to terminate the Korean War, and the people of the Soviet Union and China were now aware of it" (p. 252). Of course, the wily Soviet dictator could have designed those statements for a range of purposes, such as putting the new US administration off guard in order to reduce the risk of a new offensive.

The above caveat aside, Wada's new book marks a substantial advance in scholarship on the Korean War. Shifting the context to Northeast Asia is long overdue and opens the way for new perceptions of the web of interconnections that both produced and emerged from the war. The book's relative brevity and straightforward style make it suitable for students while the scope and balance of its scholarship make it essential reading for any scholar interested in this most complex conflict.

NOTE

1. See Shen Zhi-hua, "Sino-North Korean Conflict and Its Resolution during the Korean War," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 14–15 (Winter 2003–Spring 2004): 9–24.

Kathryn Weathersby
Korea University

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K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea by John Lie. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. 248 pp. $34.95 (paperback)

K-pop never had its roots in authentic Korean music. In his latest work, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, John Lie spearheads this simple yet daring premise. It is truly a timely and ambitious account of South Korean popular music in a broader historical context. The book's most obvious contribution is introducing a new perspective on K-pop through the exploration of South Korean music history, rather than its global *impact* embodied in the discourses of the Korean Wave—a transnational circulation—or of course, the latest international dance craze "Gangnam Style" by Psy. Lie's intellectual curiosity embraces the wider historical context of modern Korea in which he examines the morphology of South Korean popular music from its nascent form to its present iteration. This point of view has rarely been seriously considered prior to this work. The scope is highly extensive, encompassing almost every significant moment and leap in modern South Korean history, placing the development of popular music at the epicenter of its discussion. Lie addresses the decline of traditional music and the subsequent rise of popular music in the early twentieth century, radical changes in music that accompanied South Korea's transition from a colonial state to an independent nation, popular culture that emerged from the era of the military regime to the age of democracy, and finally the global success of K-pop in the twenty-first century. But what makes his work stand out is not the material he covers but the way in which he frames his cultural observations within a broader understanding of South Korean socioeconomic change.

In the chapter titled "How Did We Get Here," he offers brief, yet thorough, insights on the earlier development of South Korean popular music from the birth of popular music to the rise of modern K-pop. The concise configuration of the book may not be able to capture more interesting themes and motivations in making music, such as identity, agency, gender, etc., but he strikes a balance between offering historical facts and inserting his own personal interpretations,