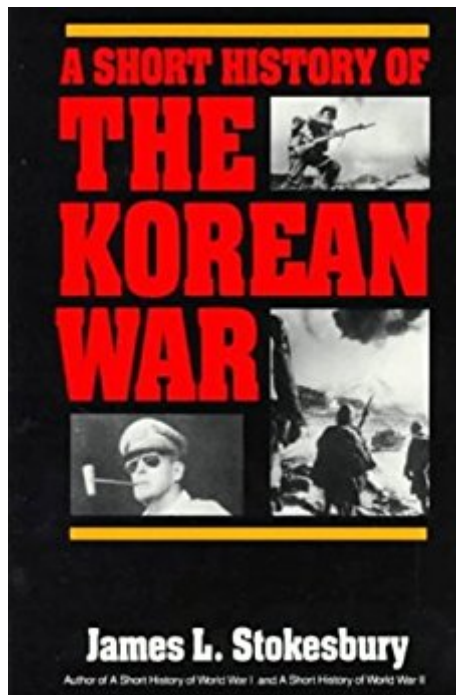




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A Short History Of The Korean War



Synopsis

As pungent and concise as his short histories of both world wars, Stokesbury's survey of "the half war" takes a broad view and seems to leave nothing out but the details. The first third covers the North Korean invasion of June 1950, the Pusan perimeter crisis, MacArthur's master stroke at Inchon and the intervention by Chinese forces that November. At this point, other popular histories of the war reach the three-quarter mark, ending often with a cursory summary of the comparatively undramatic three-and-a-half years required to bring the war to its ambiguous conclusion on July 27, 1953. Stokesbury renders the latter period as interesting as the operational fireworks of the first six months: the Truman-MacArthur controversy; the political limitations on U.S. air power; the need for the Americans to fight the war as cheaply as possible, due to NATO commitments; the prolonged negotiations at Panmunjom over the prisoner-exchange issue; and the effect of the war on the home front. Whether the United States could have/should have stayed out of the war in the first place comes under discussion: "no" on both counts, according to the author.

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Customer Reviews

In the United States, the Korean War is sometimes called "The Forgotten War" because the latter two-thirds of it was spent in stalemate and it occurred between World War II and the Vietnam War, both of which left a huge cultural impact. However, the Korean War was an important military event in the early Cold War and certainly changed the face the Korean peninsula. In the post-World War II period, Korea, previously under Japanese rule, was split across the 38th parallel with the Soviet Union occupying the northern half and the United States occupying the south. It was supposed to be temporary, but in the new Cold War world, this would not be. The Soviets turned the north into a communist state while the United States supported the rightist president Syngman Rhee in the south. In June 1950, North Korea invaded and attempted to wipe out South Korea. Because of U.S. policy of leaving South Korea without an unnecessarily powerful military, they were crushed by North Korean forces. The United States and the United Nations reacted. The U.N. Security Council passed resolutions condemning the invasion and called on U.N. member states to join and repel the invasion. South Korean and United States forces would dominate the repel effort. With the South Koreans stuck in the southeast corner of the peninsula, General Douglas MacArthur thought up of a risky scheme to take over Korea. He concocted the landing at Inchon and allied forces would meet up in the middle. It succeeded fabulously. Then came the decision of where to go from there. North Korea was back across the 38th parallel, but the United States decided not to pass up the opportunity to simply wipe the communist state off the map, or at least leave it severely smaller. So, U.N. forces continued up the peninsula with the goal of the Yalu River. This ended up bringing Communist China into the war. With their support, North Korea again was pushing south below the 38th parallel. Eventually the front stabilized around the 38th parallel itself. For about the last two years of the three year conflict, the fighting was marked by stalemate. One side might grab some hills only for it to be taken back later. Negotiators attempted to bring the war to an end, but several sticking points, such as voluntary repatriation, caused the talks to drag out for about two years. Aside from the action on the ground, the book also takes a look at several other aspects of the war. It includes for example how the U.N. was able to dominate control of the seas. There is also discussion about the Korean War in the context of the Cold War, how the politics of the war played out in the United States, and what the international forces looked like. Eventually, the negotiations, with some compromises, came to an end in July 1953 and with it the war. The effects of Korean War continue to exist today. North Korea is firmly a communist state while South Korea has become a vibrant, capitalist republic. I found this book to be a very informative and detailed look at the Korean War. I would recommend this book to those interested in military history, Korean or American history, or the Cold War.

As the title suggests, this is a short history. It provides a good overview of the Korean War, but I did not find it a terribly engaging read. The brief sketch of MacArthur was good, showing both his genius and his vast flaws. The book really started to drag in the last third or so of the book which deals with the negotiation of the armistice. This period in the war was a constant struggle over minor territory in order to gain advantage at the bargaining table. What is tragic is that people died taking hills with at best arguable result and at worst for no reason. The flaw of this book is that while the reader gets a sketch of the war, there is little meat to this beyond events. Perhaps this is the nature of a short history. But it does not make for a very satisfying read.

Time line
46 March: Iron Curtain speech by Churchill
46 Fall: Greek Civil War started by Greek communists
47 June: Truman Doctrine/Marshall Plan
47 Winter: Manchuria falls under control of Mao's forces
48 February: Communist coup in Czechoslovakia to prevent govt from accepting Marshall Aid.
48 February: "People's Republic of North Korea" proclaimed
48 June: Berlin blockaded (at a time when only 1 USA division remained in all of Western Europe)
49 April: NATO formed
49 May: Federal republic of Germany proclaimed
50 January: USSR walks out UN Security Council (in protest over not seating Mao over Chiang Kai-shek)
50 June 25: North Korea invades South Korea, with an estimated 135,000 men under arms and between 120 and 150 Russian-made T34 tanks. South Korea on day one of the invasion had 95,000 men. "It had no tanks, few antitank weapons, and no heavy artillery." What happened next is then thoroughly detailed: how the US intervened; how MacArthur righted the situation and how the situation stabilized. Most of the book concerns the first year of the war, but that's owing to the fact that the front line barely moved between July 1951 and July 1953. (Post-MacArthur, the policy was, in effect, to build a defensive wall and let the commies bang their heads against it until exhaustion and, thus, this period, in some respects, was less dramatic and/or eventful, from a military perspective, than the first year of the war.) This book is basically thus a military history of the Korean War. And, toward that end, the author actually does a fine job characterizing the strategies of various campaigns; with the relevant details of which army did what, when, and for what goal. It is, moreover, a military history for the general reader, nevertheless. The book is a very manageable 218 pages (258 pages if maps and title pages are counted) and pretty much gives you enough detail on most campaigns, as well as an adequate treatment of General MacArthur and his subsequent dismissal by America's commander in chief at the time. Why North Korea chose to invade, however, or even why it chose to invade at the time it did are questions pretty much ignored by the author. What did, if anything, the Soviet Union and/or

China have to do with this? Interestingly, Stalin only merits 5 mentions in this book. 4 of the mentions are basically asides. The fifth mention is the only relevant one: "The precise relationship between the North Korean regime and the Soviet Union remains murky. One authority maintains that Joseph Stalin, appraised of Kim Il Sung's intention to invade South Korea, came back with a "Do it but I don't want to know about it" type of reply. Yet whether it was coincidence or not, the first big break in the logjam came shortly after Stalin's death. This occurred on March 5." What about the Chinese? How had they affected, or not affected, the start of the war? The author has little to say about the Chinese either. He does point out though that the Chinese shortly thereafter really were running the war. The Korean War, one could easily argue, was not between Koreans, but between the USA and China, although it was started by Koreans (from the North) and stabilized by the south's forces after America was able to check the 400,000 Chinese that came to "the aid of North Korea." Initially the Korean Communists from the North were extremely successful, of course, but then almost were routed by MacArthur's Inchon landing masterstroke and counterattack. Then it became a war between the Chinese on one hand and Americans and Koreans from the south on the other side. In 1951 China had upwards of four hundred thousand soldiers engaged in the war, four times the number of soldiers that North Korea was able to keep in the field, whereas the division between American and Korean forces from the south was approaching 50-50 at around this juncture. To boot, the Chinese had many more forces just north of the Korean border in Manchuria to draw upon through rotations or what have you; from a Manchuria it should be highlighted that was a safe haven. The title Korean War thus is somewhat of a misnomer. Yes, it was a "police action" to be legalistic, but it was far from a war between Koreans, as popular culture seems to think of it as, wherein America bucked up one side to keep it from falling to the other side. If it wasn't for the Chinese there wouldn't be such a sad state as North Korea now and while the Korean War was started by Koreans (from the North) it was in great measure, after the initial period, fought by the Chinese Army. 'The War over Korea' would be a more accurate classification of the conflict as this book makes clear, since for most of the time the war was between China on one side with America and Koreans from the South on the other side. (09Aug) Cheers

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