

IMAGINING THE KOREAN WAR

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Masuda Hajimu. *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015. 388 pp. Illustrations, archives consulted, notes, and index. \$39.95.

Larry Blomstedt. *Truman, Congress, and Korea: The Politics of America's First Undeclared War.* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2016. 305 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00.

Just after Karl Marx's famous opening sentence in *The 18th Brumaire*—history occurring twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce—he wrote, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” It is an unobjectionable statement, almost mundane, but essential to understanding that he may have been a materialist, but he was not a determinist. A few years later, in a letter to Engels, he remarked, “Human history is like paleontology. Owing to a certain judicial blindness even the best intelligences absolutely fail to see the things which lie in front of their noses. Later, when the moment has arrived, we are surprised to find traces everywhere of what we failed to see.”¹ This is a different statement. It is about perception, the human eye conditioned to see some things but to be blind to others. It is about concepts, how we miss the nose on our face because we're looking for something else; our assumptions and presuppositions govern our sight.

Both ideas are central to Masuda Hajimu's methodology in *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World*, by far the best book to appear on this war—or both of these wars—in many years. The Cold War was “an imagined reality,” even “a *fantasy*,” that eventually “*became* the irrefutable actuality of the postwar era.” A particular discourse developed around both of these wars in which, the more the discourse was propagated and accepted by a majority of the populace, the more it turned into reality itself (pp. 2–3, emphasis in original). For Masuda, the “cold” conflict emerges quickly after World War II, such that by 1950, the first big “hot” war can be folded into that new imagined reality, however much it may distort the real nature of the

Korean War—as it still does, decades after the Cold War came to an end. This civil war growing out of internecine Korean conflicts that were at least twenty years old materialized in the U.S. imagination as a plot by Joseph Stalin and an expanding communist world, perhaps even the opening shot of World War III. Kim Il Sung's invasion in June 1950 unites both the imagined global and the imagined local, giving a breath of life to McCarthyism, which in turn made it impossible for the American people to grasp the nature of this war. The more some intrepid individuals like I. F. Stone tried to explain what the war was really about, the more repressed such attempts became.

Koreans invaded Korea, and a recently conjured Cold War optic was both reinforced and shattered. This sudden hot war appeared to verify everything the Truman administration had been saying about communist expansion. When Americans joined the war, they seemed to win it quickly by September, then seemed to lose it even more quickly by December. A stalemate soon ensued, while all sides armed themselves to the teeth—and there they still sit along the “demilitarized” zone six decades later, except that the perceived aggressor now possesses nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. Dr. Masuda never quite puts things this way, but his meaning is inescapable: U.S. leaders plunged into the Korean civil war on a set of false assumptions; with an injudicial blindness, they never sought to understand the enemy's “reality” and still don't. Meanwhile, the aporia in the American mind called “Korea” became the occasion for a massive transformation of the U.S. position in the world: a metastasized defense budget and Pentagon; a national security state; hundreds of military bases on the soil of our allies that persist decades after the Cold War has ended; a huge standing army for the first time in U.S. history; and an occluded vision that ineluctably led from the Korean stalemate to a catastrophic defeat in Vietnam.

I have not read another book that so effectively and effortlessly moves from the global to the local and back again. Early on (pp. 14–19), we learn about the massive Sugar Strike in Hawai'i in 1946; the plight of returning African American soldiers who fought for freedom in Europe and the Pacific, only to have to step off of Southern sidewalks when a white person approached; and women who came out of the household by the millions in wartime, only to find themselves ushered back into the kitchen as quickly as possible. At the Ford plant in Highland Park, Michigan, for example, female employees dropped from 43 percent to 2 percent of the workforce in a matter of months. Radical changes during World War II detonated “massive resistance” by 1946 across many walks of American life, but a quickly developing Cold War discourse made labor unrest, civil rights demands, feminism, and even Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal itself look like subversive or “un-American” acts by “pinkos” and communists (pp. 24–25). Then the Korean War reinforced these tendencies much more severely, shifting the political spectrum sharply to the

right and essentially obliterating the forces of the American Left that had dominated the 1930s. Masuda shows in rich detail how the complacent and constricted America that Louis Hartz wrote about so effectively in his 1955 book, *The Liberal Tradition*, in which the absence of a rooted Left predicts the absence of a viable American socialism, was the constructed result of sharp struggle, war, and heightened repression imposed both by the state, and inflicted by a new and very frightened American self.

Masuda illustrates the constricting of the postwar U.S. political spectrum both at home and abroad, particularly in Japan where General Douglas MacArthur and his chief of intelligence, Gen. Charles Willoughby (whom MacArthur liked to call "my little fascist") got going well before Joe McCarthy in seeking out subversives in the American Occupation. One of the victims, Andrew Grajdanzev, who wrote what was for decades the best book on the Japanese colony in Korea, titled *Modern Korea* (1944), was tailed, had his home searched secretly, and was generally hounded by MacArthur's minions until the only job he could find when he returned to the United States was in a small local library (p. 30). The author also illustrates the shaping of the so-called "reverse course" in the cities and towns of Japan (pp. 32–37), where a strong Left emerged after the war, along with an invigorated Japanese Communist Party (almost the only political entity to oppose Japan's rampage through East Asia). But these soon met incessant repression, setting the stage for the center-right Liberal Democratic Party to have its long run, right down to the present, in what became a single-party democracy.

There is one unfortunate omission in this remarkably wide-ranging book, and that is the coterminous unrest and rebellion in southern Korea from 1945 to 1950, which mirrored similar unrest in Japan but was much more massive and helped determine the ruthless and dictatorial political system that the United States chose to defend in 1950. This turmoil gets a bare mention in one paragraph, and yet is the key to unlocking the true nature of the Korean War. Still, it is clear that Masuda understands this history, as he deftly shows the mild reaction that the majority of Koreans had to the outbreak of the fighting. Most people stayed in place; the soldiers looked "more like brothers," according to one Korean informant—"nobody feels animosity when seeing them speaking calmly with smiles" (pp. 59–60). For Kim Il Sung and his allies, this war was fundamentally anti-colonial, directed especially at the multitudes of Korean collaborators with Japan who occupied top positions throughout the South Korean government and military. Masuda even samples opinion in Egypt, as Cairo Radio noted that the invaders of Korea were Koreans, whereas the invasion of Palestine by the Jewish diaspora was, in their eyes, far worse.

The brilliance of Masuda's method of probing imagined realities and real truths is perhaps best illustrated in chapter three, "Cold War Fantasy." He notes the remarkable transformation worked on U.S. global strategy by the

decision to move from containment to rollback in September 1950, although his analysis of that decision misses the dialectic between the two strategies that had been percolating inside the Truman administration for more than a year. Invading North Korea was imagined to be a simple lark, both in Washington and especially in MacArthur's Tokyo; somehow forgotten were the extraordinary battles of the summer of 1950 that saw the Korean People's Army nearly envelop the peninsula. After the success of the Inch'on landing on September 15, just about every important policymaker in Washington was carried along by the fervor to rush up to the Yalu River boundary with China—except for George Kennan, architect of containment, who opposed this attempt at regime change and later, in his diary, linked it with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the two most cataclysmic and thoughtless decisions in the postwar era.² The choice for rollback was made in Washington, but MacArthur aided and abetted it in every way possible; on October 19, 1950, when U.S. troops entered Pyongyang, "MacArthur was in a cheerful mood." When General Walton H Walker greeted him at Pyongyang airport, MacArthur asked: "Any celebrities here to greet me? Where is Kim Buck Too?" (p. 113). Four days later, Chinese and North Korean forces stormed out of the mountains, and by New Year's Eve 1950 they were poised to occupy Seoul again.

This book combines a sophisticated method of constructed and imagined "realities"—not with a postmodern sensibility that there are no truths, but with an eagle eye for the best scholarship and documentation on the Korean War, and really on the entire decade after the second world war ended. Dr. Masuda reads most of the relevant languages, visited fifty-eight different archives and libraries in eight countries, and has written a book that is very up-to-date and that builds effectively on the existing literature. His account of the wrenching Chinese decision to enter the war and of Stalin's vacillating role in it is the best that I have seen. The text contains many compelling pages on the Chinese domestic milieu and the quickly increasing repression occasioned by the Chinese entry into the war. Unfortunately North Korea drops out of the story at this point, even though it still fielded nearly 200,000 soldiers and was judged by U.S. officers, including General Edward M. Almond, to be a better fighting force than the Chinese in the winter of 1950–51. Tens of thousands of North Korean guerrillas were behind American and South Korean lines while MacArthur and his staff were lighting victory cigars in Tokyo.³ In the end, though, Masuda is right that this very real war gave to the official and popular constructions of the nature of the Cold War, imagined since 1946 in a distorting wilderness of mirrors, a "verisimilitude [that made] anti-communist claims conclusive" (p. 209).

It is far more typical of the Korean War literature in the United States, however, to barely make an attempt to understand the nature of this war, or indeed Korean history itself, and to act as if decades of careful, primary-

source-based scholarship either doesn't exist or can be dispensed with in writing new books about the war. David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter* (2007), running more than 700 pages, names exactly two South Koreans—Syngman Rhee, the southern leader, and the venerable if deeply tainted general, Paik Son-yop, who cut his military teeth fighting on behalf of the Japanese in the Pacific War, and then did more of the same for the Americans. A PBS two-hour documentary on the battle of the Chosin Reservoir that screened nationwide on November 1, 2016, could have been made in the 1950s; when I pointed out to the producers that this was the Japanese name for the reservoir (U.S. military maps carried over Japanese names for towns and cities in Korea that had been developed during World War II), I couldn't make a dent on this or their other illusions about this war.

Larry Blomstedt has written a useful, workmanlike account of Harry Truman's attempts to sell the Korean War to Congress and the American people, something that was miraculously easy in the early stages (for reasons that Dr. Masuda effectively points out—it fit perfectly with, if deeply darkened, the already existing imaginations of the Cold War). It became increasingly hard as the war bogged down and Truman saw whatever hopes he might've had of running for president again in 1952 evaporate. But as in a number of other books that ostensibly deal with the war, the Korean side of the story is basically nonexistent. There is nothing new to be learned here, and many of the author's interpretations show little acquaintance with the existing literature.

Readers interested in what a lot of politicians had to say about the Korean War at the time will be rewarded. Mostly forgotten legislators come back to life in this book, including Senator Edwin Johnson (D-Colorado), who tabled peace proposals that the administration should have taken seriously; and Senator Brien McMahon (D-Connecticut), who courageously launched an investigation of Chiang Kai-shek's corrupt China Lobby. The author is at his best in his thorough account of the controversy generated by Truman taking his case for war to a legislature that he trusted—namely the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council—rather than getting a declaration of war from Congress, as the U.S. Constitution demands. Blomstedt shows that Truman was much more arrogant about this unprecedented action than previous scholarship has suggested. "I don't ask their permission," President Truman said of Congress, "I just consult" (p. 116). Truman's actions were the first in what is now a long line of wars (Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq) authorized by the executive branch. But the author's intense interest in Congressional and public opinion, in my view, blinds the reader to the fact that major Washington figures such as Secretary of State Dean Acheson and George Kennan—and apparently the president himself—had little use for it. Blomstedt quotes Acheson as saying that attempts at bipartisanship were

“holy water sprinkled on a political necessity” (p. 10), but he leaves out more telling comments attesting to Acheson’s belief that most Congressmen were idiots who knew nothing about foreign affairs, and whom he likened to boys playing in apple orchards.⁴

Many unfortunate errors and misinterpretations mar this volume. Scholars have shown for more than three decades that NSC 48/2 in December 1949 brought containment to East Asia, but Dr. Blomstedt writes that it was about giving “a higher priority to hindering Soviet expansion in Europe” (p. 13). He accepts Truman’s public justifications for going to war—that Korea was “a land grab orchestrated by the Soviet Union” and another Munich (pp. 23, 57)—but he does not mention Truman’s initial, private reaction in June 1950: that Korea was another Greece—in other words, a civil war. Blomstedt says Kim Il Sung attacked the South with 110,000 soldiers (p. 24), when in fact about 40,000 troops joined the invasion; the entire Korean People’s Army had fewer than 110,000 soldiers at the time. He has a North Korean regiment occupying Kaesong on the morning of June 25 (p. 24); however, North Korea had been in possession of that part of Kaesong north of the 38th parallel since 1945. The parallel basically bisected this ancient Korean capital. Unlike Masuda, who understands that the Inch’on landing was prefigured in Pentagon and South Korean studies before the war began, Blomstedt revives the old saw that the operation illustrated MacArthur’s brilliance. Meanwhile, he shows no understanding of how the decision to try to roll back communism when the chance presented itself had been discussed inside the Truman administration since July 1949; instead he accepts the 1950s verdict that Korea’s real meaning is to be found in the new concept of “limited war” (p. 120). Finally, he notes Truman’s abysmal public approval rating of 22 percent in 1952, but he doesn’t seem to understand how deeply unpopular the Korean War had become by the time Truman’s presidency ended.

Professor Blomstedt tells us that his study provides “the most detailed political history to date of the Korean War during the Truman administration” (p. xv), but Masuda’s book, which appeared a year before this one, is more informative and wise on this subject, even though it is just one among many subjects in his far-reaching book. Masuda also understands that people may write their own histories, but not just as they please; shouldn’t a first rule be that they master the existing literature, before putting pen to paper?

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1. Letter, Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, March 25, 1868, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_03_25-abs.htm.
2. George F. Kennan, *The Kennan Diaries*, ed. Frank Costigliola (2014), 246–48, 252–58, 678–80.
3. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2 (1990), 741–44.
4. Oscar William Perlmutter, "Acheson and Congress," *The Review of Politics* (1960): 5–44.