

Why They Hate Us - The memory of the 1950-1953 US-led war in Korea

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The US dropped napalm on civilians and leveled entire cities during the Korean War. That's why North Korea is so hostile to America.

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Ask many Americans about the Korean War, and they're apt to tell you it was where the men and women of the 4077th served [1], where Dick Whitman became Don Draper [2], or simply that it was a conflict involving Korea. Ask most people in North Korea, and they're likely to tell you it was an epochal, earth-shaking calamity that left their country a craterous, barren hell and killed at least one of their relatives.

Often, the North Korean leadership's actions are viewed as those of irrational madmen who know only the language of force. But while the dictatorial nature of the DPRK is unquestionable, the fierce anti-Americanism that sits at the core of the Kim dynasty stems from a clear memory of the US-led war in Korea.

Though serious reporting on it was censored at the time, and today it's assumed the mantle of the "forgotten war," living on largely in throwaway pop culture references, the Korean War was a traumatic, foundational event for North Koreans — a first-hand demonstration of both the terrible might of an unleashed US military arsenal, and why the country could never again be caught with its defenses lacking.

A Merciless War

The Korean War managed to kill millions, turn into a proxy conflict between the United States and Soviet Union, and bring the world to the brink of nuclear conflict, all in the span of three years.

Breaking out in June 1950, when the Communist north invaded the anti-Communist south, the war drew in the United States after southern forces quickly collapsed and lost the capital, Seoul. Although Korea was strategically marginal, for the handful of US policymakers determined to involve their country, it was the first Soviet test of US power and prestige in a Cold War world. It ended in stalemate and an uneasy armistice that still exists to this day.

The war upped the ante on airborne devastation, outdoing the already considerable obliteration Allied bombs had visited upon the civilians of the Axis powers during World War II. The world wouldn't see anything like it again until Vietnam [3].

The numbers speak for themselves. The 635,000 tons of bombs dropped on Korea over three years exceeded the tonnage of explosives during the entire Pacific theater in World War II. By the end of hostilities, anywhere between two and three million Koreans were dead, missing, or wounded; around 12 to 15 percent of the North's population had been slain [4]. To put that into perspective, the Soviet Union lost roughly 13 to 14 percent of its pre-war population during World War II [5]; Poland, which suffered the largest casualties, lost around 18 percent [6].

In other words, US-led forces just about did to North Korea what war and the Holocaust had done to Poland.

The Korean War proved a fertile testing ground for a variety of sadistic new weaponry, including cluster bombs and nerve gas. There's even evidence [7] that the US military attempted to use biological warfare [8].

As the war progressed, napalm was deployed in raids on population centers, razing cities and turning the skin of innocent civilians into a blackened, pus-covered membrane. A single raid on Pyongyang on August 29, 1952 saw ten thousand liters of the chemical blanket the city. The whole thing was so unseemly that even Winston Churchill — who had once expressed concern that “psalm-singing uniformed defeatists” would scuttle his plans to “drench” German cities with poison gas during World War II — thought it was too much, calling the devastation [“a very great mistake.”](#) By the end of hostilities, the US had coated the country with 32,000 tons of napalm.

The use of napalm in civilian areas was just one of the restrictions that was gradually lifted over the course of the war. Mass fire raids and attacks on the country's hydroelectric power system were also deemed acceptable.

The shift was prompted by China's entry into the war, and by a change in objectives: by 1951, US forces had given up trying to retake the North and had instead settled on putting the North Koreans through such horrors that they would be forced to negotiate.

As Gen. Matthew Ridgway, the commander of the Eighth Army, explained, the goal was “not the seizure of terrain but the maximum destruction of hostile persons and material at the minimum cost to our forces,” using “the really terrifying strength of our firepower.” Secretary of Defense Robert Lovett gushed that “if we keep on tearing the place apart, we can make it a most unpopular affair for the North Koreans. We ought to go right ahead.” [9]

Attacks quickly became a merciless affair, untethered to any semblance of proportionality or precision. Civilians, combatants — both were fair game. “One thing about napalm,” one pilot recounted, “is that when you've hit a village and have seen it go up in flames, you know that you've accomplished something. Nothing makes a pilot feel worse than to work over an area and not see that he's accomplished anything.” Gen. Curtis LeMay recalled a crew member telling him after three squadrons of B-29s left “three blankets of smoke” amid conditions of perfect visibility: “We don't know what we hit. But whatever it was, we certainly shot the shit out of it.”

Eyewitness accounts testify to the desolation the bombing created. By spring 1951, General Emmett “Rosie” O'Donnell, chief of bomber command, told senators that “almost the entire Korean Peninsula is just a terrible mess. Everything is destroyed. There is nothing standing worthy of the name.” Supreme Court justice William Douglas said the destruction of European cities in World War II [paled in comparison to that of North Korea](#).

Hungarian journalist Tibor Meray reported that there were “no more cities in North Korea” [10]; he “travelled through a city of 200,000 inhabitants and I saw thousands of [collapsed] chimneys and

that — that was all.” “Most of the towns were just rubble or snowy open spaces where buildings had been,” said one American POW. The Air Force determined that eighteen of North Korea’s twenty-two major cities had been at least half destroyed by the war’s end. Around 75 percent of Pyongyang was leveled.

One of the more egregious acts took place mere months before the armistice, when the Air Force carried out a series of bombings on North Korea’s dams, one of which was estimated to supply 75 percent of the controlled water supply for its rice production. The staff of the *Air University Quarterly Review*, the official organ of the Air Force’s primary education center, were positively jubilant [11].

“To the communists, the smashing of the dams meant primarily the destruction of their chief sustenance — rice,” they wrote. “The Westerner can little conceive the awesome meaning which the loss of this staple food commodity has for the Asian — starvation and slow death.”

Food production “was the only major element of North Korea’s economy still functioning efficiently,” they noted, something the bombing had undone. They went on to describe “the devastating flood waters” following the wrecking of one dam, “washing away everything in their path.”

Those images were seared into the memories of North Korea’s people, and their leaders.

“The DPRK government never forgot the lesson of North Korea’s vulnerability to American air attack . . . and [would] eventually develop nuclear weapons to ensure that North Korea would not find itself in such a position again,” historian Charles Armstrong wrote on the sixtieth anniversary of the conflict’s outbreak [12]. “The war against the United States, more than any other single factor, gave North Koreans a collective sense of anxiety and fear of outside threats that would continue long after the war’s end.”

If the Korean War doesn’t take up much reflection space in the US, the North Koreans have never forgotten. How can they, when they’re still digging up deadly ordnance left over from it?

Playing With Nuclear Fire

It wasn’t just wholesale devastation that fed into the North’s desire for nuclear weapons. It was also the US government’s reckless abuse of its nuclear capabilities.

Indeed, Donald Trump is far from the first president to threaten North Korea with nuclear annihilation. That dubious honor belongs to Harry Truman, who told reporters on November 30, 1950, that use of the atomic bomb in the conflict was on the table [13]. British prime minister Clement Attlee was so alarmed, he immediately flew to Washington, trying (and failing) to get a written promise from Truman that he wouldn’t deploy the bomb in Korea.

Today, wild threats of laying nuclear waste to Korea are typically associated with Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who led the war effort until his ouster in 1951. And with good reason: MacArthur requested permission to drop thirty-four bombs “across the neck of Manchuria,” and to leave a “belt of radioactive cobalt” between North and South to prevent any future land invasion. But the general was only slightly more histrionic than Truman and the rest of the high command.

As historian Bruce Cumings has outlined [14], the Joint Chiefs of Staff had already weighed whether to employ the bomb before Truman’s press conference (deciding against it for strategic rather than ethical reasons), and again considered the option in June 1951.

In addition, the military-backed Project Vista recommended developing smaller nuclear weapons for tactical deployment on the battlefield [15]. Operation Hudson Harbor involved minutely authentic nuclear bombing test runs that dropped dummy atomic bombs on Korea — which, Cumings points out, the DPRK leadership would never have been sure were fakes or not until the moment they fell.

But even without all this, the knowledge that the United States had the bomb was enough. “Airpower,” the late historian Marilyn B. Young explained [16], “was understood as a special language addressed to the enemy” that “incorporated one very crucial silence: behind all the bombs dropped was the sound of the one that *could* drop but did not . . . yet.”

This wasn’t the end of it. In 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower violated the terms of the armistice and placed nuclear weapons in South Korea.

Eisenhower’s threat to use nuclear weapons against China at the end of the war may have been a myth [17], but it was one presented to the world as truth. And in reality, Eisenhower did seriously consider using the bomb [18], continuing to develop detailed plans for a nuclear strike on North Korea and China even after the armistice.

The use of nuclear weapons remained on the table in the ensuing decades, albeit not publicly. When the North Koreans seized a US spy ship in their waters in 1968 [19], Johnson avoided overly bellicose rhetoric and solved the matter with diplomacy. Behind the scenes, however, US leadership initially thought about dropping a nuke in retaliation [20], and kept fighter planes on Korean airfields loaded with nuclear arms and placed on high alert.

All the while, the North Korean leadership has watched as other states that have given up their weapons — namely, Libya and Iraq — have been swiftly invaded, reduced to rubble, and their leaders arrested, publicly humiliated [21], tortured [22], and killed.

Considering the long, foundational history of threats and devastation, the North Korean leadership’s affinity for nuclear weapons is less perplexing. The horror of the Korean War may not be the only cause for the DPRK’s aggressive behavior. But it sure goes a hell of a long way towards explaining it.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 11.22.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/korean-war-united-states-nuclear-weapons>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068098/>

[2] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0804503/>

[3] <http://inthesetimes.com/article/18964/ted-cruz-carpet-bombing-isis-history-dresden-vietnam>

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