

Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea*

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The tragic death of an American student detained during his trip in Pyongyang and the high frequency of North Korea's missile launches and nuclear tests this year have forced many foreign tourists to reconsider their plans of traveling to either side of the Korean Peninsula. For the same reason, few international students have participated in exchange programs or attended summer schools offered by South Korean universities and even fewer opted to go on a usually very popular trip to Panmunjom—a village on the border between the two Koreas where the armistice agreement was signed in 1953. Those students who made it to Panmunjom learned that despite the armistice, in the last 65 years the village has witnessed many spikes in tensions and served as a site for negotiations to alleviate them.

In *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea*, Sheila Miyoshi Jager argues that the Korean Peninsula is in the perpetual state of war between the two “brothers,” North and South Korea. Having originated immediately after Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945 in the divided occupation by the US and the Soviet Union and the fighting among different groups of a fractured Korean polity, the Korean War of 1950–1953 set up a triangular struggle over the peninsula between the US, the Soviet Union, and Communist China. Its irresolution, owing to the conclusion of an armistice instead of a peace treaty, “stoked the fire of simmering

confrontation and tension between North and South Korea as well as their Great Power overseers,” and the flame of this confrontation has been burning ever since, kept alive, above all, by the implacable nature of the two Korean regimes (pp. 4–5).

The four parts of the book correspond to four stages the Korean War, according to the author, has gone through: the Korean War proper (Part I), the cold war (Part II), the local war (Part III), and the post-cold war period (Part IV). Preceded by an overview of the emergence of antagonistic regimes in Korea from 1945 to 1950 (Chapters 1, 2, and 3), almost half of the book (chapters 4 through 12) constitutes a comprehensive examination of the Korean War in 1950 to 1953. Jager synthesizes a wide range of primary and secondary sources—from newest findings of American, Chinese, Russian, and South Korean scholars (including those of the South Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission) to diplomatic documents, telegrams, agency reports, memoirs, oral history records, and interviews—to analyze the military, diplomatic, civilian, and (in) humane sides of the conflict. A lot of attention is devoted to battles. Their depiction is not as exhaustive as those by military historians compared for instance to Allan R. Millet, *The War for Korea, 1950–1951: They Came from the North* (University Press of Kansas, 2010) or Spencer Tucker ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (ABC-CLIO, 2000; 2010). Yet, it is substantial enough to understand how the “antagonisms were hardened and perceptions of the enemy were formed” during the “life-and-death struggles” of the Korean War—the reason for the emphasis on military history as stated by the author (p. 6). Jager makes a largely successful attempt to provide a balanced account while infusing it with life through the usage of memoirs and oral histories of the events’ participants and witnesses from both the communist and the UN sides. The missing parts—such as judgments of the situation and enemy by the North Korean military and the treatment of prisoners of war in South Korean camps—are due to the insufficiency of data and/or are a subject of most recent, ongoing investigations. Equally engaging and extensive is the author’s analysis of the impact of the Korean War on the Cold War during the 1950s and 1960s in general and on the US and China in particular, in Part II (chapters 13 through 15).

Part III demonstrates the change in the character of Korean conflict from international to local in the late 1960s to the late 1980s. According to the author, the inter-Korean struggle during the period in scrutiny had little to no impact on the world at large, becoming a global concern only once, during the 1976 ax murder incident and the US military response to it (p. 355). While the economic, military, and psychological competition between Seoul and Pyongyang intensified, the great powers realized that the Korean conflict had become a source of regional stability because its stalemate kept American forces in South Korea, restraining Japanese rearmament and rivalry in the communist camp at the time of intense change and realignments within the communist camp in East Asia. Jager illustrates this point with the description of President Carter's attempt to withdraw US troops from Korea and the opposition to it not only within the American administration but also by the Soviets and Chinese (chapter 18).

Examining the first North Korean nuclear crisis in Part IV, the author argues that "the same regional concerns that had frustrated Carter's efforts to withdraw US ground troops from South Korea in the 1970s also complicated Clinton's attempts to get tough over the North Korean nuclear program" as "no one in the region wanted to upset the fragile balance of power on the Korean Peninsula and risk another conflict" (p. 438). Despite the continuation of its nuclear development program, North Korea in the post-Cold War world clearly emerged as the loser in the legitimacy war with the South. The impoverished regime is barely able to survive by maintaining its policy of national isolation, aid-extraction, and politics of terror. Using rich ethnographic material Jager collected in the War Memorial in Seoul, she shows how the victors, South Koreans, in preparation for unification on their terms, create a usable past where North Korea's responsibility for the war is tacitly forgotten and the emphasis is put on commemorating the war as a national tragedy. The epilogue brings attention to the role of China in shielding the North Korean regime from economic and political collapse.

The biggest value of the book can be found in its approach to the situation in Korea and the strategies of the involved parties after the end of the hostilities in 1953 as a continuation of the Korean War to this day. The author makes a major contribution to the discussion of reasons for persistent tensions on the

Korean Peninsula. The focus of the debate in South Korean scholarship has turned in the last few years to the workings of the so-called “Panmunjom system” (Kim Hakchae) or “armistice system” (Park T’aegyun, Nan Kim, and others). In a similar vein, Jager focuses on the fact that the armistice agreement did not terminate the war. Yet her main interest lies not in the system created by the armistice but in the way the lessons of the Korean War were perceived and applied by the two Korean regimes, the US, Russia, and China in the following decades. Part II, for example, reveals the effect of the Korean War experience on China’s domestic and foreign policies and the American and South Korean engagements in Vietnam. Part III demonstrates how the stalemated Korean War operated as a stabilizing mechanism in the region during the détente period of the 1970s. Part IV highlights “the power of the unending Korean War to shape contemporary events” (p. 433) by explaining the survival of the regime in Pyongyang after the Cold War in terms of pursuing strategy of maximizing economic aid and navigation between great power interests, developed by Kim Il Sung in the wake of the Korean War. The epilogue points out the utilization of the Korean War memories in the forging of a new relationship between North Korea and China in the 2010s. In this light, the book offers a middle ground between the interpretations concentrating on the autonomous, self-generating power of the Korean conflict and the vision of it as an embodiment of the conflictual relationship of the US, Russia, and China, where Seoul and Pyongyang have little say. It thereby avoids oversimplification and testifies to the complexity of the Korean problem.

On the other hand, a consequence of the attempt to embrace both types of perspectives is that the narrative is not fully developed structurally. It feels like a compilation of events and developments related to the Korean War rather than a portrayal of a continuous struggle the reader may anticipate from the reference to “unending conflict” in the book’s subtitle. An examination of transformations in unification proposals and strategies of the two Koreas throughout the period in scrutiny, for example, could have enhanced the coherence to the narrative. In addition, future editions of the book shall have corrected certain factual inaccuracies, which are hard to avoid in a first edition when dealing with such a vast range of data from both inside and outside of the Korean Peninsula and

covering a period of over seventy years. The inaccuracies include the depictions of the Cairo conference in 1943 (p. 13), the liberation day of August 15, 1945 (p. 16), the first economic development plan of the Park Chung Hee regime (p. 341), the 1976 conference of Nonaligned Nations in Colombo (p. 399), and the Kwangju uprising (p. 418).

Despite these issues, *Brothers at War* is a welcome addition to the extremely small pool of literature on history of inter-Korean relations in English, especially given that the previous two major volumes—Barry K. Gills's *Korea versus Korea: A Case of Contested Legitimacy* (Routledge, 1996) and Don Oberdorfer's *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Basic Books, 1997)¹—were first published some twenty years ago. As such, *Brothers at War* can be recommended to students and general readers as a book to learn about the Korean War and its ramifications to this day. Furthermore, Jager has opened a new stage for the scholarly discussion of Korea's past and present. Following its logic, the current security crisis caused by North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile tests, for example, may repeat the pattern of the 1970s and the 1990s but it may also start a new phase in the unending Korean War.

1) Oberdorfer's work has been updated several times, with the last edition, a collaboration with Robert Carlin, published in 2014.