[Book Review]

The Korean War

by Max Hastings

Touchstone/Simon & Schuster Inc.
1987; 389 Pages.

Despite the embarrassing paucity of books written on the Korean War, there have fortunately been some impressive, not to mention classic historical accounts written about the conflict. Likewise, if there were a list of “must read” books on the Korean War, Max Hastings’ classic military study of the conflict would be at the top of the list. His finely textured narrative of the Korean War offers readers a basic primer on the war from its causes and military operations to stalemate and armistice.

The strength of Hastings’ history of the Korean War lies in its readability. He packs in a lot of information — leaves no stone unturned as it were — in three hundred and eighty-nine pages, but readers won’t get lost in any historical labyrinth of facts and events. Instead, his chronicle is strengthened (and likewise its readability) with direct quotes and stories taken from interviews he conducted with veterans (including survivors of Task Force Smith), government officials

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and diplomats, as well as Korean nationals.

In his analysis of the origins of the conflict, Hastings clearly delineates the political and diplomatic instability on the Korean peninsula following WWII. He provides readers with a concise overview of many of the key issues, including, but not limited to, reunification of the peninsula, Soviet intentions, and America’s role as “protectorate.” Similarly, he notes some of the problems with the United States’ “clumsy and ill-conceived” handling of Korea’s affairs, especially in dealing with Syngman Rhee.

With the invasion of South Korea, Hastings thrusts the reader right into the middle of the action. (Interestingly enough, Hastings opens his chronicle with the Task Force Smith debacle.) Conversely, Hastings gives a comprehensible overview of the West’s response to the invasion and consequently the passage of the U.N. resolution on Korea allowing U.N. intervention to take place. Even though he doesn’t spell out all the diplomatic maneuvering with this landmark decision, he puts it all into its proper historical context.

Although Hastings focuses on most of the major military operations that took place during the war, he also highlights the plight of thousands of Koreans who were displaced by the war. Accounts of the Communist occupation of Seoul and subsequent atrocities committed by the Communists provide readers with a chilling historical sidebar. Korea might have been the battlefield where the West confronted Communism, but for Koreans, it was also where they clung for their survival during “three years of unspeakable tragedy, privation, and sacrifice.”

From the defiant stand by forces at the Pusan Perimeter to MacArthur’s masterstroke Inchon invasion and beyond, Hastings gives readers a reasonable analysis of the military operations as well as the arrival of U.N. forces during the first few months of the war. Despite his rough assessment of U.S. forces at times, when it comes to Inchon, he does not oversimplify its historical importance. He admits, “the name of Inchon possesses a wonderfully resonant American quality”