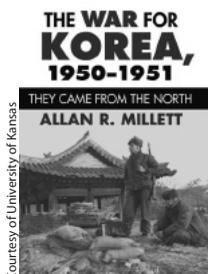


Book Reviews



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The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North

by Allan R. Millett

Reviewed by Richard Halloran, freelance writer and former foreign and military correspondent of *The New York Times*

To military historian and one-time US Marine officer Allan R. Millett, the Korean War is not so much the forgotten war as the neglected war. He opens by chastising his fellow historians for their Eurocentric studies of the Cold War, noting that one devoted eight pages to the Korean War, another a page and a half, and a third skipped over the Korean conflict from 1948 to 1953. Millett, to the contrary, asserts that strategic thinkers and serving officers could learn much from the Korean War that is applicable today.

The author, a professor at the University of New Orleans, asserts: “I propose that the Korean War is an example of the one great lesson of twentieth-century warfare: that no conflict should be categorized as simply an interstate war or civil war or even a limited insurgency. While such definitions may advance statistical analysis, they are not much help for field diplomats and soldiers.” He adds: “Understanding the Korean War will provide even more relevant examples of a war that embodies almost every aspect of contemporary conflict.”

Particularly pertinent: “The Korean conflict remains a major window on the Chinese way of war.” The most appropriate way to view it, Millett writes, would be “as a Maoist people’s war, the global socialist template for wars of national liberation and postcolonial succession.” Phase One began in 1945 with the end of World War II and the division of Korea in which the Soviets took the Japanese surrender north of the 38th parallel and put Kim Il Sung in power while the US took the surrender in the south—and then went home. Phase Two started in 1948 when North Korea sent a column of 1,800 partisans into the south to take advantage of a rebellion there. But South Korea, Millett asserts, “won the unknown war before the forgotten war.”

That brought on the North Korean invasion of June 1950, which had the backing of Joseph Stalin in Moscow and Mao Zedong in Beijing. Millett labels that Phase Three of the conflict in Korea but contends that Stalin and Mao guessed wrong on the North Korean army’s ability to conquer South Korea, which led to the intervention of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Force (CPVF) in November of 1950. “That,” Millett says, “is the subject of this book,” the second in a trilogy on the Korean conflict.

The author, whose writing is a model of clarity, doesn’t say it outright but he might well have renamed the Korean War the “Sino-American War.” Note the book’s title, “The War for Korea,” not the “War in Korea” or “The

War between the Koreans.” Both the South Korean and North Korean armies turned in spotty performances, to the dismay of their respective American and Chinese allies, leaving the brunt of the battle to the two foreign armies. Mao’s motive, having come to power in Beijing just a year before, was to drive the United States off the Asian mainland. The objective of the United States was to prevent that. Today, a potential Sino-American confrontation is driven by much the same intentions.

Millett, citing Chinese and Korean as well as US sources, focuses on leaders of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) who provided the forces to the CPVF; they are the forefathers of PLA leaders today. The commander, Peng Dehuai, a veteran of the Eighth Route Army that had fought the Japanese and the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek, was among the PLA’s most respected commanders. A realist, he “knew that the Chinese People’s Volunteer Force had never faced an enemy as potent as the US Eighth Army.” Moreover, “his subordinates were the most professional senior officers of the PLA,” Millett says.

As the CPVF waited in Manchuria for orders into Korea, “they trained for an asymmetrical campaign that would turn their weaknesses into advantages.” The lack of logistics was perhaps the CPVF’s primary weakness. A Chinese division operated on 25 tons of supplies a day for a division of 10,000 soldiers; an American division required ten times that for a division of 15,000. “As planned,” Millett reports, the CPVF resupplied itself “with captured weapons, ammunition, food, and medical supplies from the rolling larder behind every American division.” Even today, when Chinese officers visit the United States, they ask how the United States provides logistics to forces in the field. American officers have said they don’t answer that question.

Throughout the war, Peng Dehuai had two tribulations that would sound familiar to American officers of that period—and later. One was Mao micro-managing from Beijing “by war on the map.” General Douglas MacArthur, until he was relieved by President Harry S. Truman in April 1951, did much the same from his headquarters in Tokyo. Peng was constantly vexed by the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, who refused to establish a joint headquarters or to commit forces in accord with Peng’s operational plans. Millett says: “Not the least of General [Matthew B.] Ridgway’s challenges was keeping the South Korean army in the war.” In addition, “Ridgway faced a major problem with Syngman Rhee,” the imperious South Korean president, who feared the United States would abandon Korea.

In sum, throughout Millett’s meticulously researched narrative, end-notes, bibliographic essay, and index, is evidence of first-rate scholarship. The author cautions, however, that the Korean conflict should be seen for what it was, no more, no less. “Those who claim that the war served as a surrogate World War III,” he argues, “should take another sip of soju,” the Korean wine that has been known to cause the ears of unsuspecting Westerners to emit blue flames.