

Peter Lowe. *The Korean War.* New York: St. Martin's, 2000.

The Korean War has at last entered the mainstream of history. Peter Lowe's latest contribution to writing on the subject joins a number of recent histories clearly aimed at the text book and general readership markets, suggesting that the "forgotten" war has been reclaimed. Lowe's book provides a concise, erudite and elegant view of much recent scholarship on the Korean War. A decade after the end of the Cold War permitted some fundamental revision of existing knowledge through access to materials from the Communist side, the fruits of that more specialized work are being absorbed and presented to a wider audience. Lowe makes judicious use of the work of others such as Chen Jian, Rosemary Foot, Katherine Weathersby and Zhang Shuguang. He is at his best when dealing with high level policy and diplomatic activity, and with the political involvement of the United Nations during the war's first year. Reflecting his own background as a diplomatic rather than a military historian, he is less sure when dealing with events on the battlefield and more overly reliant on a smaller range of sources. These sources in themselves are fine, but Lowe does not always use them as well as he might, nor cast his net as widely as he ought. His treatment of the Chinese Fifth Phase Offensive takes barely one and a half pages (pp. 70-71) and appears to be based exclusively on the relevant volume of the British official history. The latter is a fine book, but Lowe's use of it might lead the unsuspecting reader to conclude that the Chinese were defeated largely through the efforts of the British 29th Brigade at the Imjin River. Gallant though the last stand of the Glosters undoubtedly was, there is a little more to it than that.

Similarly, the sometimes overly British slant of his treatment leads him to dismiss the military contribution of the non-US UN forces (p. 122), which is certainly unfair to the Turks and probably to the French as well, while he overstates the extent of the British contribution to the 1st Commonwealth Division. (p. 121) All this will appear even more perverse to an American readership given that the Marine Corps' epic fight at Chosin receives no mention, even in passing.

This book demonstrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of current writing on the war. The handling of diplomatic and strategic policy is generally sophisticated, nuanced and based on as wide a reading of the sources as their availability permits. The operational level suffers by comparison and is generally not as well integrated into the narrative as it needs to be. Likewise, the South Koreans generally make little impact outside the admittedly formidable personage of Syngman Rhee. Lowe argues that Korea was essentially a revolutionary civil war fought out within an international, Cold War context, a judgment with which I would entirely concur. But this means that the South Korean side needs more concerted treatment than it customarily receives. Lowe has made good use of sources that reflect the North Korean side, but his bibliography makes no reference to either Paik Sun-yup's memoirs or the English translation of the Korean Institute of Military History's three-volume revision of the official Korean War history produced by the ROK Army, to pick two quick examples. The result is that the South Koreans remain a shadowy and ill-defined presence in their own history.

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