

“Beyond Numbers: The Brutality of the Korean War”
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The cost of the Korean War is commonly tallied in numbers: soldiers killed and wounded, civilians killed and wounded, villages destroyed, refugees evacuated, orphans created, families divided, napalm dropped, bombs exploded. Those numbers are worth repeating, for the sheer physical devastation of three years of war on a peninsula about the size of Idaho (roughly 85,000 square miles) is staggering. An estimated 5 million soldiers and civilians were killed during three years of warfare. Of these, just over 1.2 million were soldiers from 19 countries, including about 217,000 from South Korea, 406,000 from North Korea, 600,000 from China, 36,000 from the United States, and about 5,000 from the other UN nations. The remaining more than 3 million deaths were Korean civilians, including those killed in massacres such as the one at No Gun Ri, or executed as political prisoners by either the South or North Korean armies. The capital city of Seoul changed hands four times during the three years of war, with each change accompanied by massive political killings of civilians. In 1950, the population of Korea, north and south, was 30 million. A civilian death toll of 3 million represents 10 percent of the population.¹

Another estimated 3 million Korean civilians became refugees. An estimated 1 million fled south across the 38th parallel in the months before the war officially began on June 25, 1950.² Three months into the war, 57,000 South Koreans were listed as missing and more than 500,000 homes had been destroyed. In 1954, an international child welfare agency estimated that 2 million children under the age of 18 had been displaced by the war. Then there are the separated families. No one knows how many Koreans were separated by the war and national division, although about 130,000 are currently registered as such with South Korea’s Ministry of Unification. Virtually every Korean is either part of a separated family or knows someone who is, and most estimates hover around 2 million.³

The United States subjected the northern half of Korea to an intense bombing campaign that destroyed virtually every substantial building and left a trail of completely destroyed villages. In just three years, the United States dropped 635,000 tons of bombs, including 32,557 tons of napalm. This tonnage is greater than that which was dropped during the entire Pacific campaign of World War II and more napalm than was used during the Vietnam War. Both journalists and American POWs reported that virtually the whole of North Korea had been reduced to rubble. In November of 1950, the bombing had decimated housing so severely that the North Korean government advised its citizens to dig into the earth for shelter.⁴

But the true cost of the Korean War cannot be plumbed through numbers alone. It cannot be tidily limited to the peninsula and constrained between the dates June 25, 1950 and July 27, 1953. The suffering, the pain, and the consequences overwhelm those boundaries and spill into the immeasurable. It is the innumerable individual experiences of the Korean people themselves, the massive weight of their stories, that can help us begin to understand the full cost of the still unended Korean War, suspended in a ceasefire and lacking a peace treaty.

Let us start with ordinary soldiers like Mr. Moon.⁵ Growing up in a rice-farming family in northern Korea, he volunteered for the Japanese military because he was going to be drafted anyway and doing so would relieve his family of the burden of feeding him and sending him to school. He entered an air force school and became an airplane mechanic. Two months into his first post, the Pacific War ended. Back in his home village, he volunteered for the new North Korean military in order to preempt accusations of collaboration for his Japanese military past.

Unable to endure military life, he faked mental illness, deserted, and escaped to the south. But there, he was drafted into the South Korean Army, and served in the Korean War as an ordnance man. He and his family were among the first post-1965 Korean immigrants to the United States. He never spoke to his family about his military experiences, and had reluctantly agreed to narrate his life history when I asked him to participate in my research on the Korean diaspora. As I was putting away the recording equipment after our interview, he thanked me for not pressing for details, saying that what he experienced in the war was too brutal to be remembered.

Reverend Yoo, also part of that early post-1965 immigration, was an adolescent boy in North Korea when the war broke out. In his own words:

Six-twenty-five [6.25, the war]⁶ erupted and in the middle of October [1950], when the People's Army [the North Korean army] is retreating and the UN and South Korean forces are advancing, and it's right before then, day and night, day and night. Now there's the stealth bomber and the B-52, but then, it was the B-29. Night and day, bombing, innumerable bombs. So at night it's Eunyule, Sariwon, Jinnampo; over there it's bright, dropping bombs constantly. And the flares, because it's dark, they're dropping fire parachutes, flares. I don't know what it is in English. Drop those and it's so bright everywhere, for hundreds of meters around, just like daytime, and then they follow that with the bombs. And from the Yellow Sea comes military ships, they're firing cannons. They're dropping bombs. They're firing cannons. So day and night, we're hiding in holes in the ground. It's unspeakable, unspeakable. It's really unspeakable. Actually, Americans, the 9-11 incident—that's nothing. I saw with my own eyes people hit by bombs and dropping to the ground. It's unspeakable.

His narrative continued with his recollection of killings. The North Korean army killed many people as they retreated, and the South Korean army did the same as they advanced. Between the two armies, he recalled, they managed to kill off entire families. He dug a hole by the side of an outhouse to hide from both armies, and noted with wry laughter that no one thought to look there. Eventually, he and his family were able to board a U.S. military ship and sail down the western coast of Korea. The ship hits something in the water and is forced to dock at Gunsan. There the family was stuck in a refugee camp and then eventually made their way to Gimpo, a small suburb on the west side of Seoul where many northerners, fleeing the war's violence, settled. He left his family in the refugee camp and disappeared for several months. This was cause for great consternation, according to his sister, as he was the youngest and his family was accustomed to coddling him. In his sister's story, the coddled child was transformed into a man who rescued the family from starvation. He showed up, she recounted, with sackfuls of stuff—cans of meat and other foods, packages of rice and noodles, chocolates, all kinds of edibles he had obtained from the PX. During his disappearance, he had worked for American soldiers in order to bring back to his family these goods. This is a familiar narrative that simultaneously highlights and contrasts American bounty with Korean poverty, but in the sister's retelling, it is also a coming-of-age narrative colored by pride and love.

The man himself told a different story. In fact, he never told me the story of his food-laden return to his family. Instead, he told me about the time he spent on base. The toadying up to soldiers to get work and the resulting tips. Getting a job on base manning the soldier's lounge. Eating nothing but the sugar that fell off the donuts he sold at the lounge, because the donuts had to be accounted for but the sugar did not. The flicker of shame at the sight of camptown prostitutes. Constant hunger. Sheer amazement at the power and the waste of the Americans. As he recalled, the contrast between well-fed Americans and starving Koreans, between bombed-out

Korean villages and bustling U.S. military bases, between American might and Korean weakness, was sharply painful. His entire life, he said, from his ambitions to his outrage, from his accommodation to his resistance, were reactions to that contrast.

Mrs. Ahn was a young wife and mother of two toddler boys when the war broke out. Her husband was among the thousands of young men forcibly taken by the North Korean army when it entered Seoul. He never came back, and she became a virtual widow, caring for her parents-in-law and raising her two sons. She and her sons became refugees, forced to flee south, and she remembered the hunger, the fatigue, the hordes of desperate people, and most of all the fear. Fear of soldiers because to the civilians all soldiers, regardless of affiliation, were dangerous. Fear of losing her remaining family. Fear of death. Fear of greater hunger. There was so much fear that eventually she felt numb. Without the children to keep her focused, she said, she might very well have given up. She never remarried, and she spoke about the deep loneliness of a lifetime as a widow caring for family members and wondering about her husband. Decades later, a discreet inquiry revealed that her husband was still alive in the north. She shook her head at the recollection. Too late, she said, and too much distance.

Mrs. Lee was the mother of three young children, living in her hometown in the north with her parents, siblings, and husband, when the Korean War broke out. They were already suspect in the eyes of the North Korean government because of their Christianity and comparative wealth. Medium-sized landowners, they lost nearly all their land under land reform. Mrs. Lee was a nurse who spoke both Chinese and English. She landed a job as an interpreter for a U.S. military unit that camped out nearby when the United States was advancing north in late 1950. One day, the commander asked her to go with them back across the 38th parallel. It'll be only a few days trip, he assured her; the border isn't going to close. But the day after they crossed over to the south, heavy fighting ensued, the border closed, and Mrs. Lee was stuck. She has never been back since, and she never again saw her husband, three children, or other members of her family. Over the next two decades, she worked as a nurse in numerous places, including camptowns where she treated the women and witnessed their exploitation, and in orphanages where she cared for abandoned children. Every night, she had the same nightmare. She stands in front of a thick black river. On the other side, stand her three children, crying out for their mother. She cannot go to them; something invisible holds her back as she strains to cross that thick black river. Every night, she woke up drenched in a cold sweat. On days when she had no work, she would go to the port city of Incheon and trail her hand in the waters of the Yellow Sea, thinking to herself, these waters flow to the shores of the north, where my children are. Eventually, she couldn't tolerate the pain any longer, and she used her missionary connections to obtain a job as a nurse in a California hospital. She hoped that physical distance would end the nightmares, but she noted sadly that they followed her across the Pacific. She never dared to contact her children, she said, because she feared they might be punished for having a mother who had worked for the U.S. military.

There are many more stories. There is the wholesale business owner in Philadelphia who as a young boy witnessed the execution of his father by the North Korean military and became virulently anti-communist. There is the pediatrician in Atlanta who nearly lost her family while fleeing to Busan, survived numerous bombings, and now abhors being alone in a dark house. There is the grandfather in northeastern China whose experience as a draftee in the Japanese military was so terrible that he hid for years to avoid being drafted into the Chinese army for service in the Korean War. There is the housewife in Osaka who starved as a child during the war and now must always have several months' worth of rice in the home. There is the second-

generation Korean American college student who declared that North Korea is the enemy of his homeland, only to discover that his grandfather is from the north and yearns for reunification.⁷ There are the sons and daughters and grandchildren who do not understand the silences and dark spaces in their families because their elders cannot bring themselves to talk about the war.⁸ Each story illustrates what Mrs. Ahn once told me: “The war is not only a national tragedy; it is also [her] personal tragedy.”

What these stories tell us is that the cost of the Korean War lies not only in the direct devastation of war, but also in its long-term human consequences: the memories too searing to be remembered, the destruction of families, and the collective trauma of generations.

¹ Casualty statistics for the Korean War vary among sources depending on how deaths are counted. The most accurate statistics are for U.S. soldier deaths and come from the Department of Defense. The figures used here are from “American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics,” a Jan. 2, 2015 report from the Congressional Research Service. Figures for both civilian casualties and soldier deaths for other countries are taken from Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, “Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths,” *European Journal of Population* (2005) 21: 145-166; David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: American and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), p. 4, and Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011).

² Between 1945 and the official start of the war, there was much military fighting along the 38th parallel as both the northern and southern armies crossed over and engaged in battle. Any one of those battles could have been chosen as the official start of the war. It is worth noting that the Korean War has never been legally recognized as a war. The U.S. Congress defined it as a “police action,” and the UN defined it as a defensive action on behalf of South Korea. For a fuller discussion of how the Korean War is interpreted, remembered, and forgotten, see Cumings, *The Korean War*.

³ Statistics for refugees, orphans, and divided families vary widely. These figures are taken from Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011). South Korean newspapers have reported that as many as 10 million Koreans were separated from their families by the end of the war. A recent household census, however, found that about 1.5% of South Koreans (just over 700,000) report that they have direct family members—parents, children, spouses, siblings—in the north. See “2005 South Korean Household Census—First Complete Survey of Separated Families” (2005 hanguk ingu jutaek chongjosa—cheot nambuk isan gajok hyeonhwang jeonsujosa irwojyeo),” accessed July 29, 2015 at <http://www.voakorea.com/content/a-35-2006-06-12-voa16-91232844/1301462.html>.

⁴ Charles Armstrong, “The Destruction and Reconstruction of North Korea, 1950-1960.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 8 (December 20, 2010), 51; Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011).

⁵ All names are pseudonyms. Oral history interviews were conducted by the author in the United States, China, and Japan between 1999 and 2012 for an ongoing book project on the Korean diaspora.

⁶ Most South Koreans call the Korean War “Yook-ee-oh,” for 6/25, the commonly accepted start date for the war. The formal term is “hanguk jun-jaeng,” literally “Korean War,” and is used on the air and in print.

⁷ The individuals mentioned in this paragraph include oral history narrators, family members, colleagues, and students who spoke with the author.

⁸ The multimedia exhibit “Still Present Pasts: Korean Americans and the Forgotten War” explored the legacies of the war via oral history, film, visual and performing arts, and history. It is now accessible online at <http://stillpresentpasts.org/>.