The Korean War

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26 MINUTES
VHS FORMAT
COLOR. BLACK AND WHITE.

Few video resources exist for the Korean War or for the two Koreas after World War II or after the armistice of 1953. That is unfortunate, since a properly focused study of Korea provides a micro view of the postwar era in several important aspects. The war was an early, intense, and significant part of the Cold War. It was in Korea that the United States and its allies in the United Nations showed how seriously they took—and intended to apply—the policy of containment. The two Koreas, in their divergent paths of development, also exemplify the differences between communist and noncommunist ideology, economics, and politics.

Were this videotape even reasonably good in describing either the war or the two countries, it would be a useful addition to any school's collection. Unfortunately, it fails in so many ways that it cannot be recommended. To begin with the most superficial problem, information on the box is inaccurate. The title is misleading: only about a third of its length deals with the war. The copyright date on the box is 1993, leading one to expect a fairly current visual document. The date given at the beginning of the videotape, though, is 1990, and that is the date to believe, since nothing which occurred after 1989 is depicted. And instead of 30 minutes, as the box states, it is slightly more than 25 minutes long, exclusive of title and credits.

That problem is the least serious one. Coverage of the war lasts only about eight minutes. The narration was not written in a way that enhances aural understanding; its terseness and long sentences are better suited to reading it in written form. This problem could be overcome if there were good maps (only one or two appear for a few seconds each) or if images closely correlated what is being said. Visual footage has been cobbled together from a variety of sources (some in color, but most in black and white), and pictures seldom correspond to the narration. One example (of many that could be given): While the narrator states, "The U. S. Tenth Corps retreated to a beachhead. . . ," one sees a tall smokestack being blown up.

These technical problems are serious enough in themselves to question the usefulness of this videotape as a resource for the Korean War, but they could be corrected by re-editing the visual clips and rewriting the narration. Such improvements, though, would not solve a fundamental interpretive flaw: its subtle but unmistakable bias against the United States. The very first statement one hears sets the tone: It may have been because Secretary of State Dean Acheson did *not* name South Korea among the countries that the U. S. would fight to protect. The long and bloody war began on June 5 [sic], 1950, when a hundred Soviet-built tanks led a force from North Korea across the 38th Parallel. (Emphasis in the narration.) The North Korean attack is not portrayed as aggression or an invasion, and the impression is given that the North's attack on South Korea may have been the fault of the United States.

The second segment deals with North Korea. It looks and sounds as if it came straight from the Propaganda Department in Pyongyang. It begins with a panoramic sweep of the almost deserted capital while the narrator extols how the city was grandly rebuilt from ashes. A 60-foot-high statue of Kim Il Sung provides the visual reinforcement for the bland statement that the aspirations of the North Korean people are guided by the teachings of their leader, President Kim Il Sung. His statue stands beside a dramatic mural which depicts the war against the Japanese who occupied *North* Korea for 35 years, until the end of World War II. (Emphasis added.) Viewers are left to wonder whether the South Koreans were all collaborationists; in any event, nothing is said about Japan's annexation of the entire Korean peninsula. Scenes of North Korea show smiling children marching to school singing songs, girls taking ballet lessons, boys practicing gymnastics, and farmers in their fields. Although militarism has been one of North Korea's hallmarks, the only time soldiers appear is during an elaborate celebration in a huge stadium, and then they are performing an intricate routine that would rival the Ohio State Marching Band at half time.

The economy also receives a pro-Pyongyang spin: North Korea was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial nation at the same time that the acreage farmed increased. . . . Production grew steadily after World War II. . . . By 1959, all North Korean farmers were amalgamated into 4,000 cooperatives, each of about 800 acres, and farmed by about 300 families. The country's agricultural output was on the increase. There are no statistics on production or productivity figures to substantiate that generalization, which is all the more problematical since North Korea can hardly feed its people now and is dependent upon foreign assistance to prevent widespread starvation.

Although North Korea gets the most positive interpretation put on its repressive government and regressive economy, South Korea comes in for almost unmitigated criticism for political repression, and its economic dynamism is glossed over. Lacking other sources of information, students viewing this videotape would get the impression that the history of South Korea since 1953 has been an unending series of street demonstrations. Progress toward more democratic government hardly seems to count when openness to outside news media provides dramatic scenes of students taking to the streets. In contrast, the lack of any overt popular opposition to the government in North Korea is interpreted as proof that the people there are completely satisfied economically and politically.

As distorted as this videotape's depiction is of South Korean politics, misrepresenting its economic resurgence is more egregious. Even when two very modern factories are shown, the narration makes no mention of their high degree of technical development, but states that South Korea's competitiveness has been eroded by large wage increases and a

Continued on page 70

Continued from page 69

continuing appreciation of the Korean currency against the U. S. dollar. Only a warped ideological prism could make big pay raises for workers and a strengthened currency appear as mistakes in planning. Nowhere is it stated that South Korea is one of four mini-dragons (along with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) whose economy is admired and even envied elsewhere. That South Korea has managed to produce Hyundai automobiles or Samsung VCRs is completely overlooked in this videotape. There is one positive—but not unqualified—statement: Under [President] Chun's rule, the economy flourished (as another street demonstration is shown, complete with clouds of tear-gas) but South Korea's relative stability was bought at a price. Government forces, strengthened by Chun, came down hard on any forms of dissent. Violence has characterized Korean politics and it continued under his autocratic rule. Kim Il Sung, on the other hand, is never referred to as autocratic, much less dictatorial.

The Korean War is part of the series, "Archive of the 20th Century." One wonders how the executives at Films for the Humanities and Sciences define archive. If this videotape is any indication, it must mean what Bernard Lewis calls invented history. . . history for a purpose. It does not take much imagination to figure out what that purpose might be. *Caveat emptor*.

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