

## War Trash: Ambiguities in the Historical Record

Ha Jin's novel, *War Trash*, was one of the top ten fiction works in 2004 per the NYT Book Review. Ha Jin was born and grew up in China, served 5 years in the People's Liberation Army, and moved to the US in the mid eighties, when he was in his late twenties. He now teaches creative writing at Boston University. The novel's title is the label the Chinese Communist Party attached to its returning POW's after the Korea War.

While the novel cannot be based on Ha Jin's personal experience as he was too young to serve in the Korean War, it is meticulously grounded in the history of that war, and in addition to Ha Jin's wide reading about that war, is based on his review of personnel records of former Chinese POW's and other Chinese documents.

But before discussing *War Trash*, let us recall how the Korean War began and how it was conducted.

Following its defeat of China in 1895 and of Russia in 1905, Japan annexed the Kingdom of Korea. Japanese rule was generally brutal and autocratic, and over the years incurred the hostility of the Korean population.

One day after atom bombing Nagasaki, on August 11, 1945 the US announced that it would occupy the Korean peninsula south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Soviet Russia, which just a few days before had entered the war, and had announced its intent to occupy Korea north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, raised no objection.

In September a US force under General John Hodges landed at Inchon.

This force dispersed throughout southern Korea. General Hodges followed the most convenient course and relied on those Koreans who had the most administrative experience, the Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese.

In the northern part, the Soviet protégée was Kim Il Sung, who had fought with the Chinese Communists against the Japanese in Manchuria and who received his military training in the Soviet Far East.

In 1948 the Soviets and the US agreed to a mutual withdrawal of their occupying forces, maintaining only military advisors. The Soviets, however, had provided the North Koreans with tanks and heavy artillery while the US armed the South Korean force only with light weaponry so as to minimize the risk of provocative action. Also in 1948 Syngman Rhee, in exile for many years in the US, returned to southern Korea, over the opposition of the State Department, to head a coalition of right wing, anticommunist parties. After a UN monitored election in the South- the Soviets refused to allow the UN to operate in the north- Rhee became president and lasted until 1960. His regime was marked by corruption, brutality, and extreme hostility to Communism.

1949 and the early part of 1950 were marked by skirmishes between north and south all along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, unrest in the south including the army and fierce propaganda attacks from the north.

On June 25, 1950 Kim Il Sung's force of 135,000 attacked all along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel at five separate locations, and routed a South Korean army of 90,000. The North Koreans acted without the encouragement of Stalin, but with his acquiescence, while Mao was kept in the dark. While Soviet Russia was boycotting the UN over the US refusal to replace the Nationalist Chinese government with the Communists, the Truman administration obtained a resolution from the Security Council authorizing force to counter the invasion.

The US had essentially demobilized, and so, much of the remaining US occupation forces in Japan were hastily deployed to Korea. Smaller units from Britain and the Commonwealth countries, France and Turkey eventually joined. The North Korean forces drove UN forces to the Pusan perimeter at the tip of the Korean peninsula.

Gradually, as the build-up of UN forces got underway, there were 70,000 North Koreans attacking 140,000 UN forces, mostly Americans.

On September 15, 1950 began the last successful tactical operation of General Douglas MacArthur's long career, the Inchon landing. US forces trapped thousands of North Korean soldiers in the south. Soon after retaking Seoul US forces drove across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

While the State department sought to limit US forces from advancing very far across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel so as not to provoke a Chinese counterattack, the Joint Chief of Staffs cut back State's directive and merely prohibited US forces from penetrating beyond one hundred miles south of the Yalu River. MacArthur and his ground commanders ignored the Joint Chiefs' directive.

By mid November US forces had reached the Yalu River, and were blowing up bridges across the Yalu into China. On November 25 a large army of Chinese volunteers counterattacked across the Yalu and together with the North Koreans routed UN forces back down the peninsula across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, retook Seoul and drove the UN another 150 miles down the peninsula to the Han River.

On December 27 General Matthew Ridgeway replaced Generals Walton Walker and Edward Almond, a MacArthur protégé. Ridgeway regrouped and reinvigorated the demoralized Eighth Army and by late March had pushed back to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. On April 5, MacArthur's letter to Truman criticizing US failure to bomb Manchuria and to strike with nuclear weapons became public. On April 11, Truman fired MacArthur and he returned to a hero's welcome. Ridgeway moved to Tokyo and General James Van Fleet was appointed commander of the Eighth Army in Korea. From this point on, while there were times of fierce fighting, the position of the opposing armies did not change much in the next two years. The Chinese and N. Koreans dug a network of tunnels and their soldiers remained hidden by day, while probing UN lines at night when they could not be seen from the air.

By February of 1952 the parties in Panmunjom had agreed that the line of demarcation would be the ground the opposing forces presently held. However, the sticking point remained the repatriation of prisoners of war. The UN, after the experience with repatriating liberated Soviet soldiers in WW2, took the position that repatriation had to be voluntary.

In February 1952 the Panmunjom negotiations were further complicated by Chinese and N. Korean charges that the US was engaging in germ warfare, both in North Korea and in Manchuria. The Chinese obtained confessions from captured US fliers to that effect. A self-appointed committee of left wing scientists, chaired by Dr. James Needham of Cambridge University, who spoke fluent Chinese, visited both North Korea and Manchuria, conferred with physicians in both places, as well as with Mao and Zhou en Lai. Needham's group, the International Scientific Committee or ISC wrote a 600 page report corroborating the charges.

In April 1952 further problems arose after UN negotiators at Panmunjom advised their counterparts that two-thirds of Chinese prisoners and one-third of North Korea prisoners opted against repatriation. The North Koreans started training reliable cadres to get themselves captured and lead riots and resistance in the prison camps on Koje-do.

In June 1952 North Korean POW's humiliated the UN by capturing the Koje-do prison commandant, Major General Francis Dodd, submitting him to a mock trial, and extracting an acknowledgment of prisoner mistreatment.

Eventually, both sides agreed to voluntary repatriation, but the Chinese and North Koreans were afforded the chance to interview and persuade in a neutral setting

POW's resisting repatriation. This occurred in late 1953 under the supervision of the Indian army, the only neutral nation acceptable to both sides.

An armistice was agreed to on July 25 to which Syngman Rhee objected, and the US had to take responsibility for South Korean compliance with its terms. This was after Rhee almost torpedoed the talks by engineering in May 1953 the unauthorized release of at least 26,000 POW's who hailed from South Korea but had been conscripted into the North Korea army.

The months leading up to the armistice witnessed some of the fiercest fighting of the war as the Chinese attacked again and again and as the US bombed the dams in the north, crippling both the North's electricity supply and destroying its irrigation system.

The Armistice contemplated an overall settlement, leading to reunification. Despite a few tentative efforts in October 1953 and in Geneva in 1954, the US withdrew from these discussions.

The narrator and protagonist of War Trash, Yu Yuan, is 72 years old and about to return to China where his bones will be buried with his ancestors. He writes this memoir for his grandchildren born in the US. As the story opens, Yuan has just graduated from a military academy in Szechuan, and earlier has learned some English from a missionary. The two most important persons in his life are his mother and his fiancé, Yulan. When Mao's army drives out the Nationalists, he initially embraces the less corrupt Communists.

A year later when war strikes Korea, Yuan, who seeks merely to survive and support his future wife and mother, is caught between two ideologies, exacerbated by the conflict.

He is soon called to defend Manchuria from attack by American troops in their drive to the Yalu River, and travels by rail to Hebei province, northwest of North Korea. On March 22, 1951 he crosses the Yalu and marches south to the Han River where he will take part known in the fifth Chinese offensive, commencing in late April. With the American counter attack a month later, his unit is surrounded, his leg is shattered by a grenade, and he wakes up in a US Army truck heading south towards an American hospital in Pusan. He undergoes four operations, gradually recovers, and befriends his American surgeon, a Major Green, the daughter of missionaries in China who holds respect and affection for the Chinese.

In time he is sent to Koje-do, an island off the southern coast of Korea where he lands in a POW compound controlled by a faction supporting the Nationalists and Chang Kai-shek. Declaring his desire to return to Mainland China, he is placed in cramped quarters on half rations. However, he is compromised when he borrows an English Bible to study English and volunteers to translate hymns from English into Chinese for the American Roman Catholic chaplain.

In the spring of 1952, the UN attempts to screen POW's as to their desire for repatriation or to be sent to Taiwan. The Nationalist faction tries through food bribery and then intimidation and coercion to "persuade" the Communists to elect Taiwan. Yuan and his classmate from the military academy are forcibly tattooed on the stomachs with the words "Fuck Communism", and then when that fails to persuade, witnesses other refuseniks have their tattoos cut out and one particularly stubborn communist has his heart cut out while still alive. Fearing for their lives, Yuan and his friend declare for the Nationalists.

But when the UN actually conducts the screening, it is handled professionally and without coercion. Yuan elects again to return to his family on the mainland- and is immediately assigned to an all Communist compound and eventually is sent off to

Cheju-do some 40 miles to the southwest of Koje-do. His military academy classmate misunderstands the UN reference to “free” China and mistakenly opts for Taiwan.

While, with the Communists now at Cheju-do, Yuan rejoins his old unit commissar and in time becomes the compound’s official English interpreter. As an officer, although not a party member, he is also given other responsibilities and trials to test his loyalty. He works with the North Koreans in plotting to kidnap the POW camp commander, General Matthew Bell, and actually translates to the General the accusations at a mock trial. He then translates the general’s acknowledgment of POW abuse. After three days of tension, the general is released and a blood bath avoided.

In another test, Yuan is asked to steal a revolver from an American colonel who has fallen asleep while the Communists are out on a ship unloading detail. In his final test he is assigned to stand in for the aid to Commissar Pei. The aid, one Ming, has joined his commissar in a separate jail cell. Ming, a party member, has been called to re-register in Pusan and Yuan is to wear Ming’s dog tags.

Now Yuan realizes he is being used by the Communists, and he is upset. He is caught in lying about his identity when his finger prints do not match those of the person he stands in for at the re-registration. He only escapes when he shows his anti-Communist tattoo, his story is corroborated by the leader of his old Nationalist compound, Wang Yong, and he agrees to join the Nationalist faction.

Upon Yuan’s return to Cheju-do, the Nationalist faction leader, Wang, befriends him because he thinks the educated Yuan will have a successful military career in Taiwan and can help Wang, who is uneducated, get ahead. Life is even better with the Nationalist supporters on the south side of Cheju-do where those opting for Taiwan are held. They now have access to newspapers and magazines, and receive both better and more plentiful food.

At last an accord is reached at Panmunjom and almost three months later the POW’s arrive in Kaesong, in the de-militarized zone under guard of neutral Indian troops. At the final screening where the Chinese Communist representatives have a last go at recalcitrant POW’s is Yuan’s old comrade from his Communist compound. They embrace, and Yuan who has been agonizing about his choices, now opts to return to the Mainland.

Yuan is soon sent to a repatriation camp for re-education and self-criticism. He is denounced for having allowed himself to be taken prisoner. He receives a letter from his fiancée’s brother advising that his mother died the year before and asking him not to try to write his former fiancée anymore as she cannot possibly come back to him. He and his fellow POW’s all receive a dishonorable discharge. Those who were party members are given only menial jobs and eventually die in poverty, but Yuan, never having joined the Party, is treated somewhat better. He obtains a job teaching English at a middle school in Jilin province in central Manchuria. He marries another pariah, the daughter of former merchant from Shanghai.

In 1980, eight years after Mao’s death all former POW’s are amnestied. Yuan’s son has an opportunity to study civil engineering at Georgia Tech, and eventually the parents join their son’s family in the US.

Instead of analyzing War Trash as a literary work, I want to explore two historical issues the novel raises:

- 1) the treatment of both North Korean and Chinese POW’s by the UN forces, led by the US;
- 2) the charge that the US deployed bacteriological warfare through bombs and shells both on the Chinese in northern Manchuria and on the North Koreans, and by experimenting with Communist POW’s.

1) In the novel, US treatment of POWs is a mixed bag. During the mock trial of General Bell described in the novel, there is no need to read the provisions of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention as relevant provisions of the document are posted everywhere, both in Korean and Chinese.. Yet acts of brutality by individual US guards do occur. When Yuan resists handing over to a GI screening him on his arrival at Koje-do. a pen, given to him by Major Green, the soldier bashes him in the face; when a POW on detail to unload a ship at Cheju-do takes off to relieve himself, the US sergeant in charge attacks him and tries to make him eat his own feces. During the trial of General Bell, North Korean female prisoners partially undress to show him their scars and relate how they were raped by American guards.

As POW resistance increases, countermeasures become more brutal. Commissar Pei refuses to disclose his identity, and he is subjected to a Japanese water treatment, placed in three feet of dirty water and tightly surrounded by barbed wire so that he has to keep standing for hours on end. When the POW's resist screening to determine where they are to be sent after captivity, GI's sweep through the compounds killing scores. GI's sweep through again to confiscate hand made weapons, with the same result, after General Bell's ordeal.

In the final act of defiance, the Communist POW's manage to paint ponchos to resemble the Chinese Communist flag and refuse to take them down when ordered to do so. The GI's charge and 59 POW's are killed and over 100 seriously wounded. When a GI finds a hidden flag, the POW's recapture and burn it in the kitchen. The offending POW's are taken and placed in a pit without food or water overnight, and one of them is randomly killed by a trigger-happy GI guard. The Captain in charge tries to trick one of the POW leaders to sign a confession that it is the Chinese compound leader's fault.

However, as earlier indicated, the prisoners themselves treated each other the most brutally. The episode of forced tattooing, then the skinning of the tattoo from prisoner's bodies and cutting out a Communist prisoner's heart have been mentioned earlier. In the compounds controlled by the Communist factions, the payment is in kind. The novel mentions an incident when Yuan, while on a detail, spots the bruised, dead body swinging from a tree of the POW who helped him recover from his injuries in Pusan. GI's had interrogated this prisoner about the identity of Commander Pei. The interrogated POW had cracked under beatings and revealed the identity. For this Commander Pei made him pay with his life.

These incidents described in the novel comport with the historical record. McArthur announced his adherence to the Geneva convention early on but Truman and Acheson, remembering the catastrophe that befell repatriated Soviet soldiers, over the objections of the military, instituted a policy of voluntary repatriation. This was contrary to the provisions of Geneva convention approved but not yet ratified by the US. This policy led to mistreatment of Communists in Nationalist dominated compounds and vice versa. US guards generally left the compounds to the prisoners to maintain discipline. There was no one in the US Army who could speak Chinese or Korean and they had to rely on the prisoners themselves for translation and let the POW's themselves distribute food and maintain cleanliness.

According to one noted historian of the era, US soldiers deemed unfit to fight were detailed to Koje-do, where they were surrounded by prostitutes, further eroding discipline. GI attitudes were affected by racist feelings that Asians were somehow subhuman. Prisoners were crowded into compounds at a density four times that of federal prisons. Rats and lice were prevalent.

When matters got out of hand, the Americans responded with overwhelming force. However, in those compounds where resistance to screening was intense, General Ridgeway ordered the prison Commandants not to force the issue.

2) Likewise, China and North Korea got considerable propaganda mileage from the charge that the US was selectively employing biological weapons.

Early in the novel, before the Chinese volunteers cross the Yalu, and presumably to pump them up with hatred for the enemy, they are shown a bomb purporting to release insects carrying infectious diseases upon contact with the ground. The novel also mentions Chinese soldiers being told that if they are captured, the enemy is likely to use them for biological experiments. However, the book mentions no cases in which such experiments were actually tried.

When, after the War General Ridgeway transfers to assume command of NATO, he is met with massive street demonstrations in Western Europe and "Go Home, Ridgeway" graffiti. Ridgeway is regarded by many Europeans as the driving force behind bio warfare in Korea. Further, a fair number of well-known scientists, such as Joliet Curie, as well as other leftists, sign onto the 600 page report of the ISC confirming US use of biological weapons.

Another, who signs on is a Canadian missionary, James Endicott, who had spent much of life in China. Endicott writes his own book of his experiences investigating the evidence of biological warfare and in 1952 is awarded a Stalin peace prize.

Forty-five years later, Endicott's son, Stephen, an historian at York University in Toronto, with a colleague, Edward Hagerman, also an historian at York, pick up the torch. In their 1998 book "The US and Biological Warfare," the two historians conclude that circumstantial evidence strongly supports the Needham report. They base their argument on the following:

- 1) exhaustive examination of official Chinese medical records of the time reporting isolated cases of diseases such as plague, encephalitis, anthrax and cholera without any contagion occurring;
- 2) the US granting immunity to Japanese scientists, who conducted germ warfare experiments on thousands of Allied POW's and Chinese during WW2, on condition of their sharing of information with US scientists;
- 3) the US secretly embarking on a biological weapons program and US denials of the fact;
- 4) US practices in conducting total war against civilians in order to save lives of American soldiers.

A few serious US scholars, without accepting the entire thesis of the Canadians, have commended their work. These include Stephen Ambrose, who terms the book "disturbing to an extreme degree", and the Princeton scholar in International Law, Richard Falk. Falk declares that never before have these Korean War allegations been told so "authoratively and with such a convincing foundation..."

In 2001 a Russian friend visiting the US gave me a copy of the Russian magazine Vlast or Power. By chance it held an article that caught my eye. It was entitled "An Infection of a False Type". Russian journalist Evgeniya Zhirnov read old Pravda reports seemingly confirming the charges of bio warfare, as well as reports promulgated by leftist Westerners. She interviewed former Soviet and Chinese Communist officials, who were evasive. She focused on two reports, one by the Council of Peace, an organization located in Oslo that sought to grapple with Cold war issues, and one by the Director of the Council of Peace, the former French resistance hero and French Minister, Yves Farge. She found internal discrepancies in the reports as to the

numbers of attacks, as many as 804 bio bombs dropped, as few as 50; as to the agent spreading anthrax being, sometimes beetles, sometimes flies, sometimes feathers.

She found a flat statement in Farge's report finding that until 1950 North Korea had never had a case of plague in many years. She cross checked this against Soviet records, and found a message from the Minister of Interior to Molotov reporting that in 1948, based on the recommendation of the Ministry of Health, he had ordered the closing of the border between the USSR and Korea because of a plague epidemic in Korea. The only exception were two crossing points where travelers would have to undergo quarantine for a minimum of 9 days.

Zhirnov dug further and found a report by the Soviet Vice Minister of foreign affairs, who reviewed the data in 1955 and found the charge of bio weapons was a propaganda ploy of the Chinese and North Koreans. She found a notation in the memoirs of Andrei Sakharov reporting that in a discussion when Lieutenant General Korubov, head of Soviet Security Forces remarked that the charge of bio war was unbelievable, he, Sakharov, objected on the grounds that so many reliable Western scholars had confirmed the charges. To this, the General observed that money could accomplish a great deal. According to Zhirnov, Korubov was executed in 1955 for disclosing state secrets.

in 1952 for his work in disseminating information about US use of bio weapons, Yves Farge also received the Stalin peace prize and the accompanying \$25,000 in cash. When he went to Moscow to accept the prize, he was reportedly pressed to declare that the doctors recently arrested in the Doctors' Plot had not been tortured. He refused. A month later Farge died in an automobile crash in Tbilisi under mysterious circumstances and his body was returned to France in a coffin.