

***King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America's Spymaster in Korea.* By Blaine Harden. New York: Viking, 2017. 260 pp. [9780525429937].**

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Journalist Blaine Harden's exposé-like biography of the curiously forgotten black-ops phenom who led for the whole of the Korean War the most successful of the United States' counter-intelligence operations takes as its premise the War's revisionist history as advocated by historians Bruce Cumings, Jon Halliday, Sahr Conway-Lanz, Su-kyoung Hwang and others, as well as by social historians Hoenik Kwon and Dong Choon Kim. The latter pair would remind us that in the Republic of Korea, where the Korean War narrative overlays the nation-state's foundation story, imprudent unto reckless through the mid-1990s would have been any South Korean's recalling in public either the Autumn Uprising of 1946 or the Jeju Massacre of 1948—two of several pre-War/War events in which many, many thousands of alleged Communists and supposed North-sympathizers were put to death by police and right wing paramilitaries in the loose employ, first, of the United States Military Government in Korea (1945-1948) and, later, of the nascent Republic of Korea. Similarly, the former group would remind us of War events such as the No Gun Ri Massacre of 1950, a diabolically tricky bridge-underpass incident in the early War in which some 300 Korean refugees were gunned down by

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American ground troops. Also, the revisionists would have us recall the United States' apocalyptic carpet bombing of North Korea for much of the War's three years and that sustained act of wartime non-restraint's preposterously faint recording in the mainstream American memory.

About the protagonist of Harden's book, I'll say first that he was present in his official military capacity as a counter-intelligence officer at several of the fratricidal pre-War/War massacres recalled by the above named social historians. He was, too, I'll say second about him, an agent of the carpet bombing insisted upon by the revisionists, for it was he who most successfully supplied the bombers with their targets. Thirdly, I'll say about him that at the end of the seventeen years during which he served without scruple and without discernible concern for life or limb the American military's missions in two Asian wars, he was spirited off the last Korean base on which he served in a straightjacket. Next, he was forcibly removed to a succession of military psych wards, and, lastly, he was subjected for several months to anti-psychotic chemical medications in their maximum dosages, as well as to electroshock therapy. Once released, this former black-ops savant now set adrift would tell his family members that these treatments were "not health care," but, instead, the government's efforts "to erase his brain—because he knew too much" (165). What he knew and what he did, as well as the nature of Kurtz-like person that he was—these are the subjects of Harden's generously researched and ably told inquiry.

So who was this largely forgotten spymaster? When Donald Nichols first arrived in Korea in the summer of 1946, he was a twenty-three year-old master sergeant in the early months of his second Army enlistment. He had on his resumé a first, formative enlistment that had been served during World War II in the South Asian port city of Karachi. There he had serviced trucks destined to carry men and supplies to the war zones of Southeast Asia. Also, because he had volunteered to do so, in Karachi he had assisted in the embalming of those many of his buddies who, less sturdy than he, had succumbed to the region's rampant malaria. And, lastly, on the docks of Karachi, he had made his first forays into the lucrative

field of military misappropriation. Specifically, rather than make sure that arriving supply crates went where they were supposed to (his job), he fiddled with their paper work and re-directed them to his own army unit. For this last activity, his local commanding officers had seen to his promotion from corporal to master sergeant. As for his non-military resumé, Nichols had grown up mostly in South Florida, mostly motherless, the fourth and last son of an “operatically dysfunctional” (18) marital pairing, whose maternal protagonist, before she abandoned her family, had regularly “bathed naked in the kitchen sink and had sex with male suitors in the living room” (18). Yes, Nichols had some schooling—an elementary education and three months of just-completed, crash-course intelligence training, that he was eager to make use of.

Important to recall, the Korea that he came to was not yet a country but, instead, the lower half of a recently-liberated, recently-halved peninsula whose ultimate control by Right or Left—that is, by those favored in the Japanese dispensation or by those beleaguered in it—was in fratricidal, civil-war-like dispute. It was a place that gave fits to Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, the commanding officer of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), the foreign military/government entity charged with putting in place a native government that was at once competent and non-Communist. His and General MacArthur’s decision at about the time of Nichols’s arrival to throw America’s dangerous abundance of muscle and good-guy-ism behind the civil war side that already had the more of both (the Right) resulted in incidents like the Autumn Uprising of 1946 and the Jeju Massacre of 1948 mentioned above, as well as in comparably intransigent actions taken by the other side. Thus, Hodge was of the opinion, expressed to MacArthur, that both the U.S. and Russia ought get out immediately “and leave Korea to its own devices” (26). No such thinking was Nichols’s. He took to the civil strife like a hand to a glove. Traveling with the Korean National Police (KNP) and with the paramilitaries of the Right, he observed their out-of-bounds interrogation techniques and absorbed their Armageddon-ish ethics (if those ethics were not already his by nature). He traveled the countryside,

learned the language, and did magically well exactly what his superiors told him and his handful of Counter Intelligence Corp colleagues to do—extract information and develop contacts.

In short order, he had assembled the largest, perhaps only, network of credible informants. He gathered his spies from among the thousands of young, Leftist-looking South Koreans that he and the KNP interrogated and from the hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees (“Japanese collaborators”) that Kim Il-sung was harrying out of the North, and that he and the KNP also interrogated. His *modus operandi* with these informants was to drop them into North Korea, charging them as he did so to pick up whatever tactical information they could as they tried to make their way back to the South. As inducements for this dangerous work—many never returned—he posed to them some combination of persuasions negative (more interrogation by the KNP and/or torture) and motivations positive (incorporation into the South Korean military and/or cash remuneration).

Nichols did something else in the years that preceded the War that also made him indispensable in Korea and that inclined his commanders to award him powers and breathing room beyond his rank. He established the most outsized of all contacts that could be wished for by an intelligence guy such as he, a friendship with Syngman Rhee, the Korean politician long-in-exile whose path to the Presidency was being anxiously cleared by the Americans who saw in him, a Princeton-educated foe of the Communists, the least mysterious of their several inscrutable options. How and where Rhee and Nichols first met, and why Rhee was so drawn to the non-officered, mostly un-uniformed serviceman as to call him “son” and to admit him into both his confidence and his inner circle is one of the historical mysteries that Harden more marvels at than deciphers. Still, as Harden sees it, along with Nichols’s willingness to do what it took to get intelligence, the fact that he was the Yankee in Rhee’s court was the first, earliest key to his longevity in Korea and to his commanders’ awarding him powers beyond his rank, among them, charge of his own counter-intelligence unit and permission to move it off base to a sep-

arate compound, where “he and his men had more privacy and flexibility in interrogating suspects, recruiting agents, and entertaining high-level visitors from the South Korean government” (41).

And then came the months and weeks that immediately preceded the North’s incursion on June 25, 1950. As were the reports of other American intelligence operatives, those of Nichols were full of depictions of Soviet military hardware moving toward the 38th parallel and of North Korean citizens being evacuated. However, only he saw in the straight-line arrangement of North Korean airfields an offensive posture, only he screamed that an attack was imminent, and only he was right. Of course, his prescience would only become apparent to his commanders after the fact, that is, after they were caught flatfooted and flummoxed by the mid-summer North Korean blitzkrieg. However, once Nichols’s foresight was recognized, he immediately and thereafter became in the eyes of those of his superiors who needed such a guy, the swami of North Korean tactical positions, the untransferrable intelligence operative, and the man whose own tactics ought not be examined too closely.

During the War, Nichols’s exploits were several. In the early, backpedaling days of the War, with the South Koreans’ stealth personnel’s collaboration, he set up a successful, Korean-language code breaking unit. Also, in those desperate days, he supplied the Far East Air Forces with maps of Seoul on which he had annotated their most necessary targets. Later, as the War progressed, this pinpointing of targets would be his most sustained contribution to the American effort. Again, early in the War, he himself went behind enemy lines to salvage the parts and technical papers of a disabled Russian-made T-34 tank. Invulnerable to American bombardment up until that moment, the tank did indeed have a weak spot, whose discovery by Nichols turned from hopeless to promising the Americans’ stopping of the North Korean advance. Later in the War, he oversaw the salvaging of a downed Russian-made MiG-15.

For sure, as Harden’s book abundantly intimates, “the spy who came in from the motor pool”(1) was a significant player in the Korean War, and his role in that War’s history is suspiciously overlooked. However, de-

spite Harden's writing capably and lucidly about Nichols and despite his offering an admirable short course in the War's remote ebb and flow, I don't expect that any time soon squadron commander Major Donald Nichols (his highest achieved rank) will become a fixture in civilian America's Korean War memory. Too off-putting were his modus operandi and too many the genteel commanders whose legacies his remembrance would contaminate. Large too is the problem of his unconscionable behaviors after the War. In *Spies'* concluding chapters, Harden investigates the two last, civilian phases of Nichols's life, both hallmarked by charges of child sexual predation. No, don't hold your breath until Major Nichols is comprehensively owned by the Korean War's patriotic historians. That Harden himself understands this is my reading of the sensationalistic, yellow journalism note that he occasionally plays in *Spies*. That note is my only sticking point with his book, which is in all other regards engaging, instructive, sane and searching.