Why do they hate us? Americans began to ask this question after 9/11 because they witnessed an apocalypse up close. I want to explore an apocalypse, an absence, riveted memory, and history. The apocalypse was the wartime bombing of North Korea. The absence is American amnesia. The country with burned-in memory is the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). It happened sixty years ago, so perhaps it is “history,” that curious American term for the obliterated, irrelevant past? Imagine yourself a citizen of North Korea: how can it not continue to affect our relations? Here were the most hated countries in the world in 2012: United States, number one; North Korea, number four (Israel and Iran are in between). So, my subject can’t help but be controversial. But perhaps there is reason in putting both the United States and North Korea at the top of this list.
During the three-year air war over North Korea, the US Air Force sowed the wind, and Koreans reaped the whirlwind. But few Americans know anything about this apocalypse, and even fewer care. Absence, forgetting, amnesia—and for the few who know, a willed unconcern (even laughter; so many Americans find it hard to take North Korea seriously, as anything more than a communist opéra bouffe). Yet we Americans continue to reap the whirlwind even today because this war turned the DPRK into an eternal sworn enemy, and now, one with nuclear weapons.

In Philip Roth’s Korean War novel, *Indignation*, the protagonist gets kicked out of college for taking part in a panty raid and ends up in Korea—and dies there. His father, a simple butcher, had tried to teach him “the terrible, the incomprehensible way one’s most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result.”1 Similarly, an ostensibly minor “police action” turns into a vicious three-year air campaign, with a *fundamental lack of proportion* to anything that Koreans could do to us, and to any real American gain in this war.

The air assaults ranged from the widespread and continuous use of fire-bombing (including oceans of napalm), to threats to use nuclear and chemical weapons, and finally, to the destruction of huge North Korean dams in the last stages of the war. It was an application and elaboration of the air campaigns against Japan and Germany, except that North Korea was a small third world country that lost control of the air to the United States within days of the war’s start. After much experimentation and scientific study by Germany, Britain, and the United States, by 1943 it became clear that “a city was easier to burn down than to blow up.”2 Combinations of incendiaries and conventional explosives, followed up by delayed detonation bombs to keep firefighters at bay, could destroy large sections of a city, whereas conventional bombs had a much more limited impact. Magnesium-alloy thermite sticks, manufactured by the million and bundled together, did the trick; when supplemented with mixtures of benzol, rubber, resins, gels, and phosphorus, they formed unprecedentedly destructive blockbuster flaming bombs that could wipe out cities in a matter of minutes (seventeen in the case of the attack on Wurzburg, March 16, 1945). The creation of urban annihilation zones destroyed masses of civilian lives, an outcome
accepted by all sides in the war—and by the people, parliaments, and armed forces. And with that, in Jorg Friedrich’s words, “modernity gave itself up to a new, incalculable, and uncontrollable fate.”

In favorable atmospheric conditions, these bombs ignited firestorms that razed Darmstadt, Heilbronn, Pforzheim, Wurzburg, and, of course, the famous cases of Hamburg (forty thousand deaths), Dresden (twelve thousand), and Tokyo (eighty-eight thousand). Or in Winston Churchill’s words, “We will make Germany a desert, yes, a desert” through the power of incendiary bombing: only this would finally bring Hitler to his knees. The goal was to destroy the morale of the enemy and the people, a horizon that receded even as the attacks intensified. The postwar U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey demonstrated that enemy morale was mostly unaffected by the bombing, but also that the actual level of civilian deaths was less than predicted—that is, “far removed from the generally anticipated total of several millions.” Morale was not broken, and even the harvest of blackened, scorched, blasted, or asphyxiated human beings was anticlimactic (not even several millions).

After his release from North Korean custody, the highest-ranking American prisoner of war, General William F. Dean, wrote that “the town of Huichon amazed me. The city I’d seen before—two-storied buildings, a prominent main street—wasn’t there any more.” He encountered the “unoccupied shells” of town after town, and villages where rubble or “snowy open spaces” were all that remained. A British reporter found communities where nothing was left but “a low, wide mound of violet ashes.” Tibor Meray, a Hungarian correspondent, arrived in August 1951 and witnessed “a complete devastation between the Yalu River and the capital,” Pyongyang. There were simply “no more cities in North Korea” (fig. 1).

Very quickly this air war yielded a wasteland and a surviving mole people who had learned to love the shelter of caves, mountains, tunnels, and redoubts. This subterranean world became the basis for reconstructing the country and a memento for building a fierce hatred throughout the ranks of the population, and it inaugurated what became perhaps the most astounding underground society on earth: North Koreans began digging deep in 1950 and never stopped. US commanders in the South frequently report
that virtually the entire North Korean military, the world’s fourth largest, is underground. The country has more than fifteen thousand underground redoubts of a security nature. For the elderly military leaders, still occupying top positions of power (fig. 2), their truth is not cold, antiquarian, ineffectual knowledge but “a regulating and punishing judge,” as Nietzsche put it, a burned-in conviction that their overriding goal is to persist until victory is finally won—and if the whole of the state needs to be subordinated to this task, so be it. Thus we arrive at our absurd predicament, in which the party of memory remains concentrated on its main task, perfecting a world-historical garrison state that will do its bidding and hold off the enemy; meanwhile, even well-informed Americans know nothing about it and assume that evil resides entirely on the side of the North.

In the end, the scale of urban destruction quite exceeded that in Germany
and Japan, the aggressors in Europe and Asia (North Korea aggressed within historic Korean borders). Friedrich estimated that the Royal Air Force dropped 657,000 tons of bombs on Germany from 1942 to 1945, with the total tonnage dropped by Great Britain and the United States reaching 1.2 million tons. The United States dropped 635,000 tons of bombs in Korea (not counting 32,557 tons of napalm), compared to 503,000 tons in the entire Pacific theater in World War II. Whereas sixty Japanese cities were destroyed to an average of 43 percent, estimates of the destruction of towns and cities in North Korea “ranged from 40 to 90 percent”; at least 50 percent of eighteen out of the North’s twenty-two major cities were obliterated (table 1).9
The party of forgetting and never-knowing pays only sporadic attention when it must, when the North blows off an A-bomb or sends a rocket into the heavens: then the media waters part, we behold the evil enemy in Pyongyang—drums beat, sabers rattle, soldiers goose-step—but nothing really happens, and the waters close over until the next time. Throughout the summer of 2009, CNN ran any story about the DPRK under the title, “North Korea Threat.” A new Korean War could break out tomorrow morning—Obama administration Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told CNN in April 2012, “We’re within an inch of war almost every day.”10 This connotes an astonishing failure of American policy going all the way back to September 1945—when twenty-five thousand US combat troops occupied the South, fearing that with Soviet help, Kim Il Sung would come to power throughout the peninsula. Any new war would kill millions and destroy both Koreas and, quite likely, much of Japan (which would again be a staging area for the US military). If the Kims were a casus belli then, they remain so today—except now they have nuclear weapons. In a new war, Americans would still be in their original state of overwhelming might and unfathomable cluelessness. Armies ignorant of each other would clash again, and the outcome would again yield its central truth: there is no military solution in Korea (and there never was).

Table 1: A Table of Destruction, from United States Air Force Records

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Destruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pyongyang</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chongjin</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamhung</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungnam</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sariwon</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinanju</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonsan</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chris Marker’s Unknown Gift

The brilliant artist, filmmaker, and photographer Chris Marker died in Paris on July 30, 2012, a day after his ninety-first birthday. A renowned practitioner of the essay film, similar to the documentary form but interspersed throughout with personal reflections, he was fascinated by the world exploding around him and fearless in exploring its meaning, as evidenced in films such as *Cuba Si* (1961), *Le Mystère Koumiko* (1965, set at the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics), *Far From Vietnam* (1967, with Alain Resnais), and especially *Sans Soleil* (1983), which juxtaposed Tokyo with West Africa in a series of uncomfortable and revealing cultural dislocations. Cineastes debate backward and forward about the auteur theory of cinema, but there can be no doubt about Marker’s signature in his films: probing, sensitive, open to experience, mindful of his subject and his audience.

In 1959 he published a book evocatively titled *Coréennes* that exemplifies these qualities. It is full of his own haunting photos of North Korea and running commentary of extraordinary insight. Until its republication in Seoul in 2008, with an English translation of his comments, the book was almost unknown outside of France. (In four decades of reading about Korea, I never saw it cited except by one or two friends whom I knew had cherished copies. Revealingly, long obituaries to Marker in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and other publications did not mention it.) I discovered it more than forty years ago in a library and devoured it, while trying to understand the difficult French text, much of it unfamiliar and allusive. After digitized copies of his photos became available in Seoul, I wanted to use some of them in my 2010 book, *The Korean War: A History*. I contacted his publisher, asking if he could put me in touch with Marker’s agent. Within a day, Marker wrote directly to me by e-mail, joking with me about why I thought he would ever have an agent, saying that my books resided on his shelves (an enormous compliment), and giving me permission to use his photos, gratis.

In 1957, Chris Marker spent only six days in North Korea; that may be the most remarkable part of this brilliant book. It is testimony to the wonder of the prepared mind meeting difference and warmly embracing it—not the communist difference; in this regard, he was looking for only a (hoped-for) difference from Soviet practice, also in Vietnam and later, Cuba.
the difference he encounters is the almost purely Korean, as signaled by his spare title, which he accepts with rare openness and ponders with a light-handed, amused sincerity. The result is one of the more memorable Western encounters with Korea.

*Coréennes* begins with observations on the 1866 war between France and Korea (in the same year, it is worth noting, the USS Sherman was burned by Koreans, after it steamed up the Taedong River to the outskirts of Pyongyang without any compunction); in the first few paragraphs, Marker shows an appreciation of Korean history and culture that is rare in the extant travel literature. After noting how fiercely Koreans fought in this conflict, and in a larger war with US Marines in 1871, he cites a Pentagon study of the Korean War: in all history this war “brought together the largest number of combatants and the most bombs per square mile, and caused the greatest number of disasters.” Marker concludes, “When the sweet soul is able to survive such things, it amounts to a virtue” (fig. 3).13

He also writes of “an extreme sensibility” among Koreans, which can lead “an entire theater [to] burst into tears,” and which can turn into an extreme violence “if pricked deeply enough.”14

His group of French journalists was able to walk freely among the populace. (In 2010 he remarked to me that no one since has had such freedom, and he condemned the Kim Jong Il dictatorship, taking note of the “poor wretches” who had to live under it.) His camera finds a bookseller,
an intense man with a beard, bent over a classical text, and he says the first Frenchmen to arrive in Korea were astounded to find so many books in poor village dwellings (fig. 4).

An old story has it that Korean women are prettiest in the North, and women inhabit Marker’s camera and his stories from beginning to end. He hears that the first Korean was a woman, descended from heaven to give birth to Tan’gun; he loves the famous tale of Sim Cheong and remarks on the restraint, integrity, self-respect, and “untranslatable freshness” of women he meets—“comrade young girl.” They are so polite that he decides Korea (along with China and Italy) is “the politest country in the world.”

He visits markets in Pyongyang and Kaesong and lovingly describes the sights: “women’s clothing—the short tapestry bolero, transparent and stiff as a chrysalis, and the long, dark-colored skirt knotted at the first swell of the
breasts—ribbons covered in gilt letters to encourage longevity, cothurne [sic] sandals with incurving prow, blue elephants, pink cats, pens and lamps...."

He finds much of what is marketed arriving there “on Koreans’ heads,” women’s heads; and he finds women’s heads ensconced in hair dryers that Frankenstein might have invented. A proletarian plays the hourglass-like changgo and another the accordion, accompanying more proletarians who dance with each other—“couples of men, couples of women, even a Pierrot Lunaire dancing only for himself.” Half a century later, the reader wonders, where is the bookshop and the classicist? Where are the hairdressers? The drummers, the dancers—and the markets?

The war is never far away, but it is more visible in his photos than in his prose. At one point, he listens to a woman cadre busily explaining the wonders of the enormous Hungnam chemical plant, “so proud of its own smokestack.” Soon they are sitting at lunch, and other forms of pride arrive. Will you marry soon? How does a woman order around a bunch of men? “The she-cadre answered with the most generous kindness, cupping her beautiful plebeian hands over her face.” She is confused, so “our dragoon, Mr. Ok, gleefully explained.” What do your parents do? “The smile vanish[ed] into pain like water drunk by sand.” Her parents had both died during the war. After her tears, she broke the silence by saying that “she hated the Americans who had killed her parents,” but that by working for her country, “she would revenge her dead....” The same emotion is written on the faces of two widows in black, and the young girl behind them (fig. 5).

“Extermination passed over this land,” Marker then wrote, with 4 million dead—and yet people still try to say that the other side started it. “Spare me passionless judgments. . . . When a country is split in two by an artificial border and irreconcilable propaganda is exercised on each side, it’s naive to ask where the war comes from: the border is the war.” Having uttered the primary truth of this war, one still alien to the American telling of the war (even though the Americans drew the border), he remarks that the North Korean view of Americans “may be strange,” but he lived in the United States around the end of the war, “and nothing can equal the stupidity and sadism of the combat imagery” circulating at the time: “The Reds burn, roast, and toast.”15
Marker writes little else about this war, but it hovers in almost every photograph—“the soldier who (foresightedly) buys a civilian’s sun hat,” walking by the half-rebuilt ruins of major buildings in central Pyongyang, four years after the war’s end (fig. 6); women in pigtails jointly hoisting bricks, while an unexpected man in a porkpie hat walks in the background (they are working, he is not); the workers struggling with “ruined Japanese locomotives that they make sparkling new” (fig. 7); the reconstruction of a great city going on “all night long, the aurora borealis of welding torches, spotlights on cranes, reflections of the moon . . . and the coarse chants of the haulers, the porters, mounting in waves. . . .”

At the end he remarks that if Koreans have one sin, it is pride, hubris; they refuse the “lessons in political realism from the honest scribes of the Great Agony.” It might sound like an epitaph for North Korea in the late
1950s, but it is the one truth about this country that is still inescapable: they will not give up, fold their hand, declare an end to their history, just because practitioners of realpolitik in Washington want them to, just because it is the prophecy of realist theory. Eventually one asks, whose pride is it of which we speak?

As for Chris Marker, he originally wrote that his six-day trip was one of inquiry and “human friendship. The rest is silence.” In his postscript four decades later, as stories of famine and terror proliferated, he wrote that the North Koreans had lost their wager on socialism, “terribly,” again through an excess of pride—“always excess, in sentiment, in war, in history.” He had gone there as a post-Stalinist, soon denoted as the New Left, hoping to find a departure from Soviet socialism, a different model, whether in North Korea, in Cuba, or elsewhere. He hoped that postcolonial revolutionaries would not “kneel before dogma elaborated by bureaucrats born from a Leninist host-mother inseminated by Kafka. The answer is: they did.” At the same time, he wrote his own epitaph: “If I ever had a passion in the field of politics, it’s a passion for understanding . . . which immediately put me on the side of the people who seek and make mistakes, as opposed to those
who seek nothing, except to conserve, defend themselves, and deny all the rest.”¹⁶ So we end with an epitaph for ourselves: North Koreans defying every expectation and desire that they erase themselves; Americans refusing to seek an understanding with their very old adversary, always defensive about their own actions and responsibilities, steeped in denial about a war that is both sixty years old and always “within an inch” of breaking out again. Nearly twenty-two thousand days have passed since the Armistice came into effect; Americans don’t count them and don’t change their quotidian principle: blanket hostility to North Korea. Meanwhile, North Korea’s leaders are happy for every day that passes without war or their own demise. Chris Marker’s epitaph is this: a foreign observer who spent a scant six days in Korea and got as close to the heart of the Korean conflict as anyone. Following Simcheongga, he wrote of the promise of “one more day” for North Korea:

Is there no one
to keep the moon
from disappearing,
to tie the morning sun
beneath the horizon?
Then I would live one more day.

Notes

3. Ibid., 53.
4. Quoted in ibid., 61.
5. Ibid., 151.
8. Thames Television, transcript from the fifth seminar for Korea: The Unknown War (November 1986); Thames interview with Tibor Meray (also 1986).


12. That is also the basis upon which the photos are reproduced here. Anyone who sees them should want to buy a copy of the Seoul version, reprinted beautifully.


15. Ibid., 9.

16. Ibid., 29.