

## **Korean War**

**Editors:** John Merriman and Jay Winter

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### **KOREAN WAR.**

Although the brutal conflict to reunify the Korean peninsula that broke out in June 1950 was rooted in civil war, it was provoked and sustained by superpower rivalry: Korea was where the Cold War turned hot. The belligerents agreed to an armistice in July 1953, but no peace treaty has been signed and the two Koreas remain, formally, in a state of war.

### **ORIGINS**

Since the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, Korea had been completely under Japanese control. When Japan collapsed in August 1945, the Americans arranged that their troops would take

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the surrender in the south and the Soviet army would do so in the north. A convenient demarcation line was the thirty-eighth parallel, which divided the peninsula almost equally and left the capital, Seoul, in American hands.

This was supposed to be an interim arrangement, until a democratic government could be formed for the whole country. But, as in Germany, the Soviets sealed off their zone and helped local communists to sovietize its institutions; in the south, the Americans fostered a rightist coalition of anticommunists. Following dubious elections in both Koreas in 1948, the superpowers withdrew most of their troops, hoping to sustain their client regimes by military aid.

But neither Kim Il Sung (1912–1994) in the north nor Syngman Rhee (1875–1965) in the south accepted partition as permanent. Each tried to reunify the country on his terms, and more than a hundred thousand people died in guerrilla operations and border clashes even before the formal war began. The critical step in escalation was Kim Il Sung's visit to Moscow in April 1950. There he persuaded Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) to back an all-out invasion of the south, arguing that the Americans were unlikely to intervene (having just done little to stop communist victory in China's civil war) and that, in any case, South Korea would be overrun in only a few days. Stalin provided arms, equipment, and advisors, and Soviet planners even drafted the operational plan. Kim also obtained the backing of the new Chinese communist government under Mao Zedong (1893–1976).

### **CRISIS, 1950–1951**

North Korean troops crossed the thirty-eighth parallel on 25 June 1950 and drove rapidly southward. But Kim's predictions of American acquiescence proved fatally wrong. President Harry Truman (1884–1972) was under attack in Congress for "letting China fall"; he also believed that appeasement in the 1930s showed the dangers of not nipping aggression in the bud. Truman immediately ordered American troops into action and also secured the endorsement of the United Nations Security Council. This backing, immensely important for international credibility, was only possible because the Soviet Union was boycotting the council in protest of communist China's exclusion. Otherwise Stalin would have imposed a veto on making Korea a UN operation. Eventually seventeen countries contributed troops to the UN command, though the bulk came from South Korea and America.

By late August 1950 only the southeast corner of Korea was not in communist hands. But on 15 September the American commander of the UN forces, General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964), mounted a major amphibious landing behind enemy lines at the west coast port of Inchon. Now the North Koreans were in turmoil. On 28 September Seoul was retaken; two days later UN forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, seeking to implement the old policy of a unified, democratic Korea.

It was the American turn to miscalculate. Although unwilling to get directly involved, Stalin persuaded Mao to commit Chinese troops. The Americans were clearly warned through the Indian government that, if UN troops crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, they would provoke Chinese resistance, but

this was dismissed as bluff. On 25 November MacArthur's final push to the Yalu River, North Korea's border with China, brought a major counterattack from three hundred thousand Chinese, and UN forces fell back in chaos.

On 30 November 1950 Truman told reporters that the United States would use "every weapon we have" to meet the crisis in Korea. Asked about the atomic bomb, he said there had "always been active consideration of its use." Alliance partners were shocked and the British prime minister, Clement Attlee (1883–1967), flew to Washington to urge restraint. The Republican Right and MacArthur himself now favored using the bomb against North Korea and China; there were real fears of a third world war.

### **STALEMATE, 1951–1954**

By late January 1951 the northern quarter of South Korea was back in enemy hands. But then the UN line stabilized and its advance resumed. Seoul was recaptured on 14 March, changing hands for the fourth time since June 1950. Chastened, Truman was now ready for a peaceful settlement, but MacArthur undercut his efforts by calling publicly

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**A British officer (with**

**field glasses) and South Korean soldiers in a trench overlooking the Naktong River during the Korean War, 1950. ©HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS**

for Chinese surrender. The president finally lost patience, and on 11 April MacArthur was relieved of his command. After an upsurge of fighting in the spring, the war settled into stalemate.

In July the belligerents began armistice negotiations. The biggest sticking point was the return of prisoners of war, which the Americans insisted should be voluntary—in other words, allowing North Korean and Chinese troops a choice about whether or not to go home. This impasse was not broken until 1953, mainly because of Stalin's death in March 1953 and the eagerness of the new Soviet leadership to extricate itself from Korea. Threats of escalation by the new Eisenhower administration may also have played a part. But although the armistice was finally signed on 27 July 1953, the international conference on Korea, held in Geneva the following spring, made no progress. Unable to unite the peninsula on its own terms, each superpower effectively agreed that a divided Korea was the best outcome for the foreseeable future.

## **LEGACIES**

The human cost of the war was appalling: at least three million Koreans died, and probably a million Chinese were killed or wounded, including one of Mao's sons. The American death toll was thirty-three thousand. The United States and China were locked in bitter enmity for a generation. The war also had a profound effect on Europe. Fearful that the North Korean attack presaged a similar assault on Western Europe, the United States committed new combat divisions to Germany and turned the North Atlantic Treaty into a full-scale military alliance. And although other similarly partitioned countries such as Vietnam and Germany were eventually unified, albeit in very different ways, the two Koreas remained into the twenty-first century as grim relics of the Cold War.

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DAVID REYNOLDS

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