The Korean War

The country of Korea was invaded and ruled by Japan from 1910 until the end of World War II in 1945. Following the American atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, the Soviet Union, in keeping with an arrangement made with the United States government, declared war on the Japanese Empire on August 8 and entered Korea from the North. President Harry S. Truman ordered the landing of U.S. troops in the South.[1]

On August 10th, 1945 with the Japanese surrender imminent, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to divide Korea along the 38th parallel and that Japanese forces north of that line would surrender to the Soviet Union and those south of that line would surrender to the United States. The peninsula was effectively divided into zones of control in the North and South under the administration of the two major powers, however the USA considered this not to be a permanent division.

In December 1945, the USA and the Soviet Union agreed to administer the country temporarily. This was done without the consultation or approval of the Korean people. Concurrently, both countries established governments in their respective halves, each one favorable to their political ideology. In the process, the USA ran elections supervised by the UN, replacing an indigenous, left-wing government that had formed in June 1945, before the end of the war, with one led by anti-communist Syngman Rhee. The Soviet Union, in turn, approved the rise of a communist government led by Kim Il-Sung in the northern part. The Allies pledged that Korea would be a unified, independent country under an elected government but failed to specify the details.

In the South, a United Nations-supervised election was held in 1948, but the Soviet Union opposed this undertaking, arguing that the joint US/USSR commission, which had been unable to reach a consensus, was in charge in Korea. Instead, they chose to hand power to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea under Kim Il-Sung (김일성), who had been in exile in Moscow, Russia. The South elected the exile Syngman Rhee (이승만) to head the independent Republic of Korea, who had been calling for partial elections, with left-wing parties boycotting the election. Some observers considered the elections unfair or fraudulent despite UN supervision.

These actions by outside powers set the stage for an eventual civil war. South Korean President Syngman Rhee and North Korean General Secretary Kim Il-Sung were each intent on reuniting the peninsula under their own systems. Partly because of Soviet support, the North Koreans were the ones able to go on the offensive, while South Korea, with only limited American backing, had far fewer options. As for the American government, they believed at the time that the communist bloc was a unified monolith, and that North Korea acted within this monolith as a pawn of the Soviet Union (a view that in the case of North Korea is largely substantiated by documents from the Soviet archives showing that Kim Il-Sung, operating with some Soviet assistance, was responsible for the invasion of the South, and discrediting a popular viewpoint of the 1960s and 1970s that the war was just as much caused by western and South Korean provocation). In 1949 both Russian and American forces were withdrawn.

On January 12, 1950 United States Secretary of State Dean Acheson told the National Press Club that America's Pacific defense perimeter was made up of the Aleutians, Ryukyu, Japan, and the Philippines implying that the U.S. would not fight over Korea, and that the country was outside of American concern in the Pacific. This omission, which was not deliberate, encouraged the North and the Soviets.

The People's Republic of China was wary of a war in Korea. Mao Zedong (毛澤東) was concerned that it would encourage American intervention in Asia and would destabilize the region and interfere with plans to destroy the Kuomintang (國民黨) forces under Chiang Kai-Shek (蔣介石) which had retreated to Taiwan. In early 1949 Kim Il-sung pressed his case with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin that the time had come for a conventional invasion of the South. Although he approved of the idea of a united Korea, Stalin refused, concerned about the relative unpreparedness of the North Korean armed forces and about possible U.S. involvement. In the course of the next year, the communist leadership built the North Korean army into a formidable offensive organization modeled after a Soviet mechanized force. By 1950 the North Koreans enjoyed substantial advantages over the South in every category of equipment. After another visit by Kim to Moscow in March–April 1950, Stalin approved an invasion.

Korean War (1950-1953)
The war begins (June 25, 1950)

In the predawn hours of June 25, 1950 North Korea struck across the 38th parallel behind a thunderous artillery barrage and 90,000 troops. The Northern government claimed that South Korean troops under the "bandit traitor" Syngman Rhee had crossed the 38th parallel, and thus that the South had started the war. Advised and equipped by the Soviets, with 150 T-34s, and huge reserves of manpower, their surprise attack was a devastating success. At least two thirds of the Korean Army, a paper force of 38,000, were off duty at the time, leaving the country open to attack. North Korea attacked at many key places, which included: Kaesong, Chuncheon, Uijongbu, and Ongjin. Within days South Korean forces, outnumbered and out-gunned, were in full retreat. As the ground attack continued, the North Korean Air Force conducted bombing on Kimpo Airport in Seoul. Seoul was captured by the North Koreans on the afternoon of June 28, but the North Koreans had not accomplished their goal of a quick surrender by the Rhee government and the disintegration of the South Korean Army.

The invasion of South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK) came as a surprise to the United States and the other western powers; in the preceding week Dean Acheson of the State Department had told Congress on June 20 that no war was likely, although a CIA report from early March had predicted a June invasion. Truman himself was contacted hours after the invasion had begun; he was convinced that this was the beginning of World War 3.

Despite the post-World War II demobilization of U.S. and allied forces, which caused serious supply problems for American troops in the region (excluding the United States Marines, the infantry divisions sent to Korea were at 40% of paper strength, and the majority of their equipment was found to be useless), the United States still had substantial forces in Japan, under the command of General Douglas MacArthur. Apart from British Commonwealth units, no other nation could supply sizeable manpower. President Harry S. Truman, on hearing of the invasion, ordered MacArthur to transfer munitions to the ROK Army (ROKA) and to use air cover to protect the evacuation of US citizens. Truman did not agree with his advisors to employ unilateral U.S. airstrikes against the North Korean forces, but did order the Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan, thereby ending the policy of the United States of acquiescing to the defeat of the forces of Chiang Kai-Shek. The Chinese Nationalists government, now confined to Taiwan, asked to participate in the war, but their request was denied by the Americans who felt they would only encourage Communist Chinese intervention.

The other western powers quickly agreed with the American actions and volunteered their support for the effort, but by August the South Korean forces and the U.S. Eighth Army, which had arrived to help South Korea resist the communist invasion, were driven into a small area in the southeast corner of the Korean peninsula around the city of Pusan. With the aid of American supplies, air support and additional reinforcements, the U.S. and ROK forces managed to stabilize a line along the Nakdong River. This became a desperate holding action called the Pusan Perimeter. Although more UN support arrived, the situation was dire, and looked as though the North could gain control of the entire peninsula.

Western reaction

American action was taken for a number of reasons. Truman, a Democrat president, was under severe domestic pressure for being too soft on communism (Republican senator Joseph McCarthy stated that the State Department was "infested" with communists). Especially vocal were those who accused the Democrats of having "lost" China. The intervention was also an important implementation of the new Truman Doctrine, which advocated the opposition of communism everywhere it tried to expand. The lessons of Munich in 1938 also influenced the American decision, believing that appeasing communism would only encourage further expansion. There was also the sentiment that the United Nations Organization needed to be strongly supported in its decision (the Security Council demanded that Northern troops withdraw, and requested help from member states when this was refused), as the organization which it had replaced, the League of Nations, was considered to have failed to preserve peace because great powers such as the USA had not properly backed it (though American deployment was ordered even before the UN had decided what action to take).

Instead of pressing for a congressional declaration of war, which he regarded as too alarmist and time-consuming when time was of the essence, Truman went to the United Nations for approval. Thanks to a temporary Soviet absence from the Security Council — the Soviets were boycotting the Security Council to protest the exclusion of People's Republic of China (PRC) from the UN — there would be no veto by Stalin. The (Nationalist controlled) Republic of China government held the Chinese seat. Without the Soviet and Chinese veto and with only Yugoslavia abstaining, the UN voted to aid South Korea on June 27. U.S. forces were eventually joined during the conflict by troops from fifteen other UN members:
Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, France, South Africa, Turkey, Thailand, Greece, the Netherlands, Ethiopia, Colombia, the Philippines, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Although American opinion was solidly behind the venture, Truman would later take harsh criticism for not obtaining a declaration of war from Congress before sending troops to Korea. Thus, "Truman's War" was said by some to have violated the spirit, if not the letter, of the United States Constitution.

was soon overwhelmed and forced to fall back to Taejon, which also fell. At the Pusan Perimeter, American Eighth Army commander Lieutenant General Walton Walker was able to maneuver his forces to successfully confront the North Koreans as they attempted a flanking maneuver instead of concentrating their forces which may have destroyed U.N. forces in the area, but nonetheless, by September, only the area around Pusan, about 10% of the total Korean peninsula, was still in the hands of the coalition.

**Incheon landing (September 15 - September 28, 1950)**

*article: Battle of Inchon (old spelling)*

Incheon, faced only mild resistance and quickly moved to recapture Seoul. The North Koreans, finding their supply lines cut, began a rapid retreat northwards and the ROK and UN forces that had been confined in the south moved north and joined those that had landed at Incheon.

The United Nations troops drove the North Koreans back past the 38th parallel. The goal of saving South Korea had been achieved, but because of the success and the prospect of uniting all of Korea under the government of Syngman Rhee the Americans, with UN approval, were convinced to continue into North Korea. Other issues included the psychological effects of destroying a communist nation and the liberation of POWs. This greatly concerned the Chinese, who worried that the UN forces would not stop at the Yalu river, the borderline between the PRK and China. Many in the west, including General MacArthur, thought that spreading the war to China would be necessary. However, Truman and the other leaders disagreed, while MacArthur was ordered to be very cautious when approaching the Chinese border. Eventually, MacArthur disregarded these concerns, arguing that since the North Korean troops were being supplied by bases in China, those supply depots should be bombed. However, except on some rare occasions U.N. bombers remained out of Manchuria during the war.

**The Chinese enter (October, 1950)**

be moved to the Yalu River, ready to cross. Mao sought Soviet aid and saw intervention as essentially defensive: "If we allow the U.S. to occupy all of Korea… we must be prepared for the US to declare… war with China", he told Stalin. Premier Zhou Enlai was sent to Moscow to add force to Mao's cabled arguments. Mao delayed his forces while waiting for Russian help, and the planned attack was thus postponed from 13 October to 19 October. Soviet assistance was limited to providing air support no nearer than sixty miles (96 km) to the battlefront. The MiG-15s in PRC colours were an unpleasant surprise to the UN pilots; they held local air superiority against the F-80 Shooting Stars until the newer F-86 Sabres were deployed. The Soviet role was known to the U.S. but they kept quiet to avoid any international and potential nuclear incidents.

On October 15, 1950, Truman went to Wake Island to discuss the possibility of Chinese intervention and his desire to limit the scope of the Korean conflict. MacArthur reassured to Truman that "if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter."

On October 19, 1950, Pyongyang falls to UN forces.

The Chinese assault began on October 25, 1950, under the command of General Peng Dehuai with 270,000 PVA troops. The Chinese assault caught the UN troops by surprise, as war between PRC and the United Nations had not been declared and the Chinese, employing great skill and remarkable camouflage discipline, concealed their numeric and divisional strength after the first engagement with the UN. After these initial engagements, the Chinese withdrew into the mountains; UN forces ignored the stern warning delivered by the Chinese and continued their advance to the Yalu. In late November, the Chinese struck again. In the west, along the Chongchon River, the Chinese overran several ROK divisions and landed
an extremely heavy blow into the flank of the remaining UN forces; the resulting withdrawal of the United States Eighth Army was the longest retreat of an American unit in history. In the east, at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir (November 26–December 13) a 2,500 man task force from the US 7th Infantry Division was virtually wiped out; the Marines fared better; though surrounded and forced to retreat, they inflicted heavy casualties on the Chinese who committed 6 divisions while trying to destroy the Marines.

UN forces in northeast Korea withdrew to form a defensive perimeter around the port city of Hungnam, where a Dunkirk-style evacuation was carried out in late December 1950. Approximately 100,000 military personnel and material and another 100,000 North Korean civilians were loaded onto a variety of merchant and military transport ships and safely evacuated to ports in UN-held territory on the southern tip of Korea.

On January 4, 1951, Communist Chinese and North Korean forces captured Seoul. Both the 8th Army and the X Corps were forced to retreat. General Walker was killed in an accident. He was replaced by Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway, who had led airborne troops in World War II. Ridgway took immediate steps to raise the morale and fighting spirit of the battered Eighth Army, which had fallen to low levels during its retreat from North Korea. Nevertheless, the situation was so grim that MacArthur mentioned that atomic weapons might be used, much to the alarm of America's allies. In March 1951, in Operation Ripper, a revitalized Eighth Army - restored by Ridgway to fighting trim - repelled the North Korean and Chinese troops from Seoul.

MacArthur was removed from command by President Truman on April 11, 1951. The reasons for this are many and well documented. They include MacArthur's meeting with ROC President Chiang Kai-shek in the role of a U.S. diplomat; he was also wrong at Wake when President Truman asked him specifically about Chinese troop buildup near the Korean border. Furthermore, MacArthur openly demanded nuclear attack on China, while being rude and flippant when speaking to Truman. MacArthur was succeeded by Ridgway, who managed to regroup UN forces for an effective counter-offensive. A series of attacks managed to slowly drive back the opposing forces, inflicting heavy casualties on Chinese and North Korean units as UN forces advanced some miles north of the 38th parallel.

(July, 1951)

The rest of the war involved little territory change and lengthy peace negotiations (which started in Kaesong on July 10 of the same year). Even during the peace negotiations combat continued. For the South Korean and allied forces, the goal was to recapture all of what had been South Korea before an agreement was reached in order to avoid losing any territory. The Chinese did a similar operation at the battle of "The Hook" where they were repelled by British forces. A major issue of the negotiations was repatriation of POWs. The Communists agreed to voluntary repatriation, but only if the majority would return to China or North Korea. However, when polled the majority elected to not return. The war continued until the Communists eventually dropped this issue.

U.S. President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower on November 29, 1952 fulfilled a campaign promise by travelling to Korea to find out what could be done to end the conflict. Eventually a cease-fire was established on July 27, 1953, by which time the front line was back in the proximity of the 38th parallel, and so a demilitarized zone (DMZ) was established around it, which is still defended today by North Korean troops on one side and South Korean and American troops on the other. The DMZ passes to the north of the parallel towards the east, and to the south as it travels west. The site of the peace talks, Kaesong, the old capital of Korea, was part of the South before hostilities broke out but is currently a special city of the North. No peace treaty has been signed to date.

Air War

The Korean War was the last major war where propeller-powered fighters such as the P-51 Mustang, F4U Corsair, A-1 Skyraider, F4U-5N, and aircraft carrier-based Supermarine Seafire, Fairey Firefly, and Hawker Sea Fury, deployed by the British Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy, were used, as jet fighters (US Air Force F-80s, and US Navy or US Marine Corps Grumman F9F Panthers, and McDonnell F2H Banshees) came to dominate the skies, overwhelming North Korea's propeller-driven Yakovlev Yak-9s and Lavochkin La-9s.
From 1950, North Korea introduced MiG-15 jet fighters, piloted by experienced Soviet Air Force pilots, a casus belli deliberately overlooked by the UN allied forces who were reluctant to engage in open war with the Soviet Union and China. At first UN jet fighters, which now included Royal Australian Air Force Gloster Meteor Mk.8s, had some success against inexperienced Soviet pilots, but the superior quality of the MiGs soon held sway over the first generation jets used by the UN, leading to the loss of 3046 allied aircraft during the Korean war.

Even after the USAF introduced the more advanced F-86, its pilots often struggled against the Soviet jets, as the MiG-15 had better high altitude capability, rate of climb, longer range, and more powerful armament (3 cannons vs. 6 machine-guns), although dive speed and roll rate were inferior. The U.N. gradually gained a numerical advantage, which gave them an air superiority that lasted until the end of the war — a decisive factor in helping the U.N. first advance into the north, and then resist the Chinese invasion of South Korea. The Chinese also had jet power, but the American forces had superior training for their pilots.

Among other factors which helped tip the balance toward the U.N. Jets include the F-86s' better radar gunsight, which led to installation of first radar warning receiver on MiG fighters, better cockpit visibility, better stability and control at high speed and high altitudes, and the introduction of the first G-suits. The U.N. pilots claimed to achieve impressive success with the F-86, stating to shoot down 792 MiG-15s and 108 additional aircraft for the loss of 78 Sabres, a ratio in excess of 10:1. Post-war research was only able to confirm 379 victories. Direct comparison of Sabre and MiG losses seem irrelevant, as primary targets for MiGs were heavy B-29 bombers, and primary targets for Sabres were MiG-15s. Recently exposed Soviet documentation admits 345 Soviet MiG-15s lost during the Korean war, which, when combined with estimated Chinese and Korean losses, supports the figure of 379 Sabre victories. Soviet sources claim ~1300 victories and 335 MiG losses, which may be roughly correct, but they include all MiG air-to-air wins, not Sabre-vs-MiG duels, Chinese and Korean aircraft losses are not included.

Throughout the conflict, the United States maintained a policy of heavy bombing, especially using incendiary weapons, against any and all North Korean settlements. Although images of the civilian victims of the weapon were to be ingrained upon the memory of the world in Vietnam, significantly more napalm was dropped on North Korea, despite the relative short length of the conflict. Tens of thousands of gallons were dropped on targets in Korea each day.

In May and June of 1953, the United States Air Force undertook a mission to destroy several key irrigation and hydroelectric dams, in order to critically hamper agriculture and industry in the North. The Kusŏng (구성), Tŏksan (덕산) and Pujŏn (부전) River dams were all destroyed, severely flooding vast areas of land, drowning thousands and ultimately starving many more.

**Atrocities**

- North Korean and Chinese troops reportedly tortured and executed prisoners on a number of occasions, including shooting wounded soldiers lying at their feet.
- American troops were under orders to consider any unidentified people on the battlefield approaching their position as hostile and neutralize them. The reason for these orders was that communist infiltrators frequently hid among Korean refugees or that supposed refugees were actually composed of communist infiltrators. On some occasions (No Gun Ri) hundreds of refugees caught in the fighting were allegedly shot and strafed.
- Communist forces rounded up and executed thousands of civilians in captured villages. It is claimed that more than 100,000 were killed in 1950 during the capture of Seoul alone.
- South Korean forces executed without trial tens of thousands of alleged "Communist sympathizers".

Many consider these events to be atrocities and some refer to them as "war crimes". It is of little doubt that the killing of prisoners of war or wounded soldiers by signatories of the Geneva conventions (especially GCIV) are war crimes, as these conventions specifically disallow it. However, no conventions of the time forbade the killing, purposefully or accidentally, of enemy civilians, and there does not seem to be any legal basis in calling these actions "war crimes." It is more reasonable to label them as crimes against humanity. There are Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention formed in
1977 which call for the protection of civilians, as do several UN Security Council Resolutions, but these all appear to post-date the war in Korea.

There are many more cases than those listed above but evidence, rather than accusations, is hard to come by. At the time, many of the killings were felt justified because of the fear of infiltration by irregular forces by the South Koreans and as a terror tactic by the North Koreans. It is also worth keeping in mind that the Korean war began only five years after the Second World War ended, a war during which targeting of civilians was severe and routine by all major parties involved.

All parties have denied these actions during the war and afterward, but the U.S. has admitted their policy on strafing certain refugee groups.

Legacy

The Korean War was the first armed confrontation of the Cold War, and it set a model for many later conflicts. It created the idea of a limited war, where the two superpowers would fight without descending to an all out war that could involve nuclear weapons. It also expanded the Cold War, which to that point had mostly been concerned with Europe.

Korea

. More than 80% of the industrial and public facilities and transportation works, three-quarters of the government offices, and one-half of the houses were destroyed.

The war left the peninsula permanently divided with a garrisoned pro-Soviet, totalitarian led state in North Korea and a pro-American semi-free (though not always democratic until the late 1980s,) republic in the South. American troops remain in Korea as part of the still-functioning United Nations Command, which commands all allied military forces in the ROK - American Air Forces, Korea, the Eighth U.S. Army, and the entire ROK military. The DMZ remains the most heavily-defended border in the world.

United States

The first American war dead were brought home aboard the USS Randall, shown here departing Yokohama on March 11, 1951

There has been some confusion over the previously reported number of 54,246 Korean War deaths. That number was divided by the Defense Department in 1993 into 33,686 battle deaths, 2830 non-battle deaths, and 17,730 deaths of Defense Department personnel outside the Korean theatre [2]. There were also 8,142 US personnel listed as Missing In Action (MIA) during the war. US casualties in Korean war are less than in the Vietnam War, but they occurred in 3 years as opposed to 13 years (1960-1973) in Vietnam. However, advances in medical services such as the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital and the use of rapid transport of the wounded to them such as with helicopters enabled the death rate for UN forces to be much lower than in previous wars. For service during the Korean War, the United States military was issued the Korean Service Medal.

Later neglect of remembrance of this war, in favor of the Vietnam War, World War I and II, has caused the Korean War to be called the Forgotten War or the Unknown War. On July 27, 1995 in Washington, DC, a museum called the Korean War Veterans Memorial was built and dedicated to veterans of the war.

The U.S. military had been caught ill-prepared for the war. Accordingly, after the war, the American defense budget was boosted to $50 billion, the Army was doubled in size, as was the number of Air Groups, and they were deployed beyond American soil in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere in Asia.

The war also changed America's view of the Third World, most notably in Indochina. Before 1950 the Americans had been very critical of French endeavours to reestablish its presence there against local resistance; after Korea they began to
heavily support the French against the Viet Minh and other nationalist-communist local parties, paying for up to 80% of the French military budget in Vietnam.

The Korean War also saw the beginning of racial integration efforts in the US military service, where African Americans fought in integrated units. President Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, calling on the armed forces to provide equal treatment and opportunity for black servicemen. The extent by which Truman's 1948 orders were carried out varied among the branches of the military, with segregated units still in deployment at the start of the conflict, and eventually integrating towards the end of the war.

The United States still maintains a heavy military presence in Korea, as part of the effort to uphold the armistice between South and North Korea. A special service decoration, known as the Korea Defense Service Medal is authorized for U.S. service members who serve a tour of duty in Korea.

China

From official Chinese sources, PVA casualty during the Korean war was 390,000. It breaks down as follows: 110,400 KIA; 21,600 died of wounds; 13,000 died of sickness; 25,600 MIA/POW; and 260,000 more WIA. However various Western and Eastern sources estimate that about 500,000 to 1 million Chinese soldiers were either killed in action or died of disease, starvation, exposure, and accidents. Overall total Chinese killed, wounded and missing equal to about less than 1 million. Chairman Mao's only healthy son, Mao Anying, was also killed as a PVA during the war.

As the PVA rotated about 2 million troops during the war. The casualties figure of most western sources seems too high. If the PVA suffed 500,000 casualties (1/4 of all troops rotated) or 1,000,000 casualties (1/2 of all troops rotated) the PVA would be so weaken that they would not be able to defend the line let alone mount any meaningful offensive. However, as the battle line hardly moved from 1951 to 1953 the high casualties figure should be greatly scrutinized.

The Korean War also led to other long lasting effects. Until the conflict in Korea, the United States had largely abandoned the government of Chiang Kai-Shek, which had retreated to Taiwan, and had no plans to intervene the Chinese civil war. The start of the Korean War rendered untenable any policy that would have caused Taiwan to fall under Communist control and Truman's decision to send American forces into the Taiwan straits saved the Kuomintang's government from defeat and ended any immediate hopes of conquering that island for the Communist Party of China. The anti-communist atmosphere in the West in response to the Korean War contributed to the unwillingness to diplomatically recognize the People's Republic of China by the West until the 1970s.

It also contributed to the decline of Sino-Soviet relations. Although Chinese had their own reasons to enter the war (i.e. a strategic buffer zone in Korean peninsula), the view that the Soviets had used them as proxies was shared in the Western bloc. China had to use the Soviet loan, which had been originally intended to rebuild their destroyed economy, to pay for the Soviet arms. However, the fact that Chinese forces held their own against American forces in this war heralded that China was once again becoming a major world power. The war is generally seen as an honour in the People's Republic of China history by most Chinese as it was the first time in a century a Chinese army was able to withstand a Western army in a major conflict, in spite of China's heavy losses.