

History of Korea - Part Eleven

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June 13, 2025



The entry into the war by the People's Republic of China was a major setback for the UN forces. The North Korean army had been totally defeated, the American led UN forces had occupied the entire nation up almost to the border with China. The war was basically won. As early as October 1950, American intelligence over flights of China revealed masses of troops on the border with North Korea ready to cross the border. The Supreme Commander of the UN forces, General Douglas MacArthur, decided strategically to drop atomic bombs on China to break up the troop formations and destroy the bridges across the rivers. To do that MacArthur needed authorization from the president of the United States, Harry Truman. Truman was worried about escalating the war and triggering WW 3 with the Soviet Union. He refused permission.

Those troops did pour across the border and surround the X Corps in the east and the Eighth Army in the west. Both had to be withdrawn and PVA, People's Volunteer Army, troops swarmed into North Korea, occupying the whole country, and by January 7th capturing Seoul. MacArthur was sure that he had been right and began spreading the word that he would have won the war and united Korea if Truman hadn't interfered. Truman didn't like being second guessed. When MacArthur shared his point of view with prominent members of the United States Congress, Truman had enough and fired MacArthur of all his commands. The issue was the principle of civilian control of the military. That being said, MacArthur was right, wasn't he?

The UN forces were back on their heels. Forced to withdraw from North Korea, struggling to move men, machines, and equipment South of the Han river they were inundated with a flood of more than 50,000 refugees fleeing the communist hordes. Moon Sun Myung gathered two disciples and fled Pyongyang hours ahead of the advancing Chinese troops. Dressed in odd, mismatched clothing they started south on foot. One of the three had a broken leg and being too big to carry they put him on a bicycle and pushed it along the way. Their biggest problem was to find food. Their only resource was to scrounge food from abandoned houses. In the bitter cold, half starved, they walked most of the way, and endured all the suffering of the Korean people that winter. They arrived in Busan as dirt poor refugees to start over on the 27th of January 1951.

That winter and spring the roads and bridges were overrun with refugees escaping the brutality of the communists. The roads were already clogged with military vehicles and equipment. The military had to go first and civilians had to go wherever and whenever they could. Roads were cleared with machines, bayonets, and airstrikes. War. was proving to be hell. Civilians were roughly treated. The main concern was that North Koreans would infiltrate the masses of civilians. Military police did their best to vet them but it was a herculean task.

By March 17th the UN launched a counterattack and retook Seoul. The capital city had now changed

hands four times. The population had been killed or fled South, the buildings all flattened, and infrastructure destroyed. That spring the UN resistance stiffened primarily due to the US industrial power. Airplanes flying off aircraft carriers, from Japan, and from airstrips behind lines established air superiority. Then the heavy bombers decimated troop movements, supply lines, and infrastructure. The war between China, the North Korean army was essentially out of the picture, and the American led UN forces became a series of offensives and counter offensives in the rugged hills of Korea. In July 1951 ceasefire negotiations began. The negotiations dragged on for two years while the fighting ground down to trench warfare. How would you like to be the last man killed in that war? In July 1953 an armistice was signed. There was a cease fire and fighting stopped. Prisoners of war were exchanged. But no peace treaty was ever signed and the two countries are still divided North and South, and technically still at war.

Both sides began to rebuild. The North received lots of aid from the Soviet Union. The purpose of the aid was to rebuild the industries left by Japan and to feed the starving population. Socialism, Marxist Leninism, and Juche became the guiding ideologies. Kim IL Sung was surely frustrated because there wasn't much room for self reliance. The growing cult of personality centered on Kim may have been some consolation. In the beginning, the North outstripped the South in development after the war. The South had the added burden of defending against aggression from the North.

In the South, the United States signed an economic development and security agreement with South Korea. In addition the US permanently based a large military presence in South Korea guaranteeing the security of the nation. Syngman Rhee was still at the helm but due to his lackluster performance and his increasing authoritarianism grew steadily more and more unpopular. In 1960 due to a nationwide student uprising he was forced to resign. He returned to Hawaii. He seemed to like it there.

The second republic was a short-lived government, only nine months, with a prime minister system. It attempted to grapple with many well entrenched problems. It was inefficient, weak, and unpopular. Eventually the military lost patience and stepped in and overthrew the government. It was replaced by a military government led by a Supreme Council under a General named Park Chung hee. Park was the second in command of the Korean armed forces. He was a graduate of several Japanese military academies, a collaborator.

He took over as the President and the Third Republic was begun. After years of confusion and inefficiency, Park established firm control over the government. A staunch anti- communist he took steps to prevent the nation from being blindsided again by the North. In 1961 under Park, the Anti- Communist Act was enacted. It was used to suppress politicians, journalists, Union leaders, and students who appeared to be leftist and threats to the security of the nation. He also established the KCIA, as the intelligence gathering and anticommunist arm of the government. After securing the nation from aggression from the North, Park began to take steps to revitalize the economy.

He focused on major industries like steel manufacturing, ship building, and electronics, all judged to have export potential. Through policy and investments he endeavored to build these industries into export engines to drive the economy. During this period of time the government controlled banking and credit directing it towards activities that supported strategic sectors. The government established a series of five year plans and used them to manage and track the economic development. Park also sought to boost the agriculture sector through land reform and the 세마일, new village movement, to enhance rural life. Park's tenure also saw the rise of the Chaebol. The Chaebol was the government working hand in hand with private family controlled conglomerates promoting their dominance over key industries.

The best known are Samsung, Hyundai, and LG. They dominate 40% of South Korea's economy today. All of this effort created a surge in South Korea's economy, from a war torn basket case desperately in need of aid to a global powerhouse, a key ally of the United States, and not only an exporter of steel, ships and electronics but increasingly movies, music, dance, and other cultural artifacts. It is widely known as the Miracle on the Han. It was not all a bed of roses. There was a price to pay and the cost mostly were the freedoms that individuals aspired to obtain. Despite the gains on the economic front, Park Chung hee fell out of favor with many for his strict authoritarianism. Park's regime was characterized by the suppression of any form of political opposition or dissent, as well as the complete control of the military. In the mid sixties Park made a deal with Lynden Johnson to provide Korean troops to fight in Vietnam. Money did change hands and it was not a popular move in Korea.

In 1971 Park narrowly won another term. In December, he declared a national emergency citing a dangerous international situation. The National Assembly gave him sweeping powers to suppress opponents, the press, and students. The following year he disbanded the National Assembly and suspended the 1962 constitution and replaced it with the Yushin constitution which gave him unlimited access to terms in office.

In October 1979, Park was having dinner and drinks at a KCIA safehouse near the Blue House in Seoul. Present were Park, Kim Jae kyu, the director of the KCIA, and several presidential staff members, along

with two young women. There was a great deal of talking, arguing, and fighting among the men. At some point Kim got up, went out, and got his service revolver. He came back shooting, killing his boss, the president, and another male. Kim fled the compound but was arrested later that night. The question is why did he do it? Kim Jae hyu and Park were friends and worked together. There has never been an answer given to everyone's satisfaction. Some say it was an on going leftist uprising in Masan, Park wanted to crush them but Kim wanted to negotiate with them. Others said it was general disagreements on policy and the direction the country should take. When I lived in Korea I knew a guy who claimed to have inside information. He said it was over a woman both Park and Kim were in a relationship with. Powerful men, sitting at a table, drinking whiskey in Korea there are always women involved. They both wanted to be with the same young woman, Kim in a drunken rage got his revolver and shot his boss. It makes sense to me. He even gave me the woman's name but I won't mention it here. She was a rising Kpop singer in the seventies. Ah well, it's kinda like the Korean version of, 'who killed the Kennedys.'

The reins of power were taken up by another General, Chun Doo hwan. Chun was a graduate of the Korean military academy, came up through the ranks, led a division of Korean soldiers in Vietnam and served in several positions in Park's government. He was an early supporter of Park's 1961 coup and at the time of the assassination Chun was serving as the head of the Military Security Council. He was appointed to investigate the assassination. Using this as a leg up along with accusing rivals of complicity in the assassination he was able to gain control of the committee running the government after Park's death.

Two years later he was appointed President of the Fifth Republic. In the two years before the Fifth Republic Chun was the de facto leader of the nation and ordered the military to suppress the pro-democracy uprising in Gwangju. During his term he governed under a constitution that was less authoritarian than the Park Yushin constitution but he used subterfuge, duplicity, and selective violence to maintain power. During Chun's tenure the economy of South Korea grew at its highest rate ever. The nation was planning to showcase the Miracle on the Han as hosts for the 1988 Seoul Olympic Summer games. Despite the economic growth, the democracy movement increasingly agitated for more democracy and freedoms in society.

As much as Chun tried to circumvent it, the constitution restricted Chun to one term in office. Finally Chun conceded and allowed for the first free and open, direct election for president since 1961. His friend and ally Roh Tae woo won the election. The age of the dictator was coming to an end. Although Roh was a classmate of Chun, a commander of Korean troops in Vietnam, and complicit in the crack down on the uprising in Gwangju, he made verbal commitments to continuing the democratization and served out his term without incident. Both Chun and Roh were indicted for corruption, treason, and the brutal suppression of the Gwangju uprising. They were convicted and sentenced to death. Later the sentences were reduced to life and then they were pardoned.