

The Origins of the Korean War

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June 1975



The surrender of Japan to the Allied powers on August 15, 1945, brought an end to the Japanese occupation of Korea. In the Cairo Declaration of November 1943, Nationalist China, the United States, and Great Britain had announced that "mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea (we are) determined that... in due course Korea shall become free and independent."

The Russians had agreed to enter the war against Japan as soon as the German forces collapsed, so, on August 8, 1945, by which time Japan's defeat was certain, the Russians declared war on Japan. Two days later the Soviet armies swept into Korea by land and sea, advancing southward.

With Russian troops threatening to occupy the entire Korean peninsula, U.S. negotiators proposed in the surrender protocols that the Russians accept the surrender of Japanese troops north of the 38th parallel, the Americans south of it. The Russians agreed, and halted their forces in the vicinity of the parallel. On September 8, one month after Russian troops had already occupied North Korea, the 24th Corps under General Hodge entered Seoul to accept the surrender of the Japanese.

While General Hodge, with little knowledge of Korea and almost no instructions from the State Department, struggled with the complex political situation in the South, the Russians lost no time in setting up a firm Marxist regime in the North. On September 21, Kim Il-Sung arrived in Pyongyang and began forming the nucleus of a Soviet-style dictatorship, under close cooperation with the Russian occupation troops. With cadres of Russian and Chinese trained Communists who had fought against the Japanese, "people's committees" were formed in every province.

At first, using united front tactics, Kim offered participation in the government to non-Communists. However, as the true nature of the regime began to make itself known, over 1,000,000 people fled to the South between 1945 and 1950.

Division of Korea

General Hodge soon found the Russians unresponsive to overtures of cooperation or integration of the two zones. The Soviets began by cutting off electric power and water lines to areas south of the parallel. As the months passed, the situation became disastrous for the Koreans. The 38th parallel left two-thirds of the Korean people and most of the food supply in the South, while most of the industry, hydroelectric power, and resources were in the North.

At a Moscow conference on December 16, 1945, the Americans proposed the creation of a four-power trusteeship, consisting of the United States, Soviet Union, China, and Great Britain, to last no longer than five years, to oversee the development of an independent government. The Russians agreed, and the plan was adopted. When news of the agreement reached Korea, the Koreans rose in anger. The Koreans, including at first the South Korean Communists, unanimously denounced the plan.

However, on January 2, the South Korean Communist Party, apparently on orders from Moscow,

suddenly declared support of the Moscow Agreement, reversing their previous stand. In Pyongyang, a "people's rally" was organized in support of the plan, and non-Communists in the North who opposed it were arrested. In the South, non-Communist opposition to trusteeship continued unabated.

On March 20, 1946, the Joint Soviet-American Commission held its first meeting on the subject of political unification of Korea. The Russians immediately announced that only those Korean parties which had not opposed the trusteeship principle were eligible for joining with the commission in forming a government. Since the Korean people, except the Communists, had almost unanimously opposed the idea, that meant that only the Communists would be consulted in the formation of a unified government. The Americans immediately rejected this principle. In twenty-four fruitless sessions afterwards, the issue remained unresolved.

Faced with Russian noncooperation, the U.S. decided to refer the entire problem to the United Nations. In September 1947, Secretary of State George C. Marshall appealed to the world body to take up the problem. Early in November, the matter was brought to a vote in the General Assembly. The U.S. proposal for the establishment of a U. N. Commission to oversee nationwide elections, which would then form a representative government to negotiate for the withdrawal of foreign troops, was adopted. However, when the U.N. Commission arrived in Seoul in January 1948, it was refused entry to the tightly-controlled North.

Without Russian cooperation, there could be no nationwide elections in Korea. Therefore the U.N. Committee voted to hold the elections in the area accessible to it. The elections took place in South Korea on May 10, 1948, giving the Liberal Party of Dr. Syngman Rhee a landslide victory. A constitution was adopted, proclaiming South Korea a democratic republic, and on August 5, authority was transferred from the U.S. military government to the Republic of Korea.



Communization of North

Meanwhile, the Russians proceeded to complete the communization of the North. Elections for a Supreme People's Assembly were held on August 5. The Korean Communists claimed that underground elections were held in South Korea at the same time, making the North Korean Assembly the legal body for the entire country. This dubious "election" was recognized by Russia and her satellites, but the U.N.

General Assembly voted 46 to 6 to recognize the R. O. K. government as the only legitimate government in Korea.

The Communists then began a propaganda campaign to have U.S. troops withdrawn from the South, deriding as absurd the fears that such a withdrawal would bring on civil war. With Kim Il-sung's Stalinist regime now firmly in control, Moscow withdrew its forces from Korea by the end of December 1948, thus throwing on the U.S. the stigma of keeping occupation troops in the South.

The South Koreans had good reason to fear U.S. withdrawal. A modern, mechanized army had been activated in the North and had paraded in Pyongyang on day 1. Furthermore, the Communists were provoking armed insurrection in the South and attacks along the 38th parallel.

President Rhee, seeing his government at a severe disadvantage against the heavily-armed North, made increasingly outspoken objections to U.S. withdrawal plans and the U.S. passive policies toward Communism. The U.S., on the other hand, disapproved of Rhee's autocratic ways and his bellicose "march to the North" rhetoric, and had kept military aid to the R.O. K. at a bare minimum mainly to

prevent him from doing just that. The more vehemently Rhee warned of the North Korean buildup, the more cynical U.S. officials became toward his requests.

In fact, the U.S. State Department had long intended to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea. In September 1947, the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent Secretary of Defense Forrestal a recommendation which said, "From the standpoint of military security, the United States has little strategic interest in maintaining the present troops and bases in Korea." Now that Korea was the problem of the U. N., the Americans were glad to leave the troublesome peninsula behind.

On June 29, 1949, the last of the U.S. troops departed, leaving only 500 military advisors and some left-over military equipment for the R.O.K. forces. On January 12, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson made his now famous speech in which Korea was excluded from the U.S. Pacific defense line. Even as he spoke, high Soviet and Chinese Communist officials were conferring with North Korean military leaders on final plans to invade the Republic of Korea.

Invasion Plans

Ever since the D.P.R.K. was established in 1948, the takeover of the South had been its great national goal. The Russians had deliberately exacerbated the division of the peninsula in order to transform the North into a "strong democratic base for the inauguration of a unified, democratic and independent state" throughout the entire peninsula.

At first the D.P.R.K. used border raids, sabotage, guerrilla warfare, propaganda, agitation, and economic pressure to bring down the Rhee government. Despite massive problems and popular unrest in the R.O.K., the Communists failed. The majority of the people in the South did not want unification under the Soviets.

Meanwhile, during the 18-month period between 1948 and 1950, North Korea completed the extensive preparations needed to carry out an invasion of the South. Armies were trained, war materiel and fuel stockpiled, secret agreements with the Soviets and Communist Chinese concluded, and hundreds of subversives sent South to organize uprisings timed with the invasion.

The United States meanwhile showed no reaction to repeated Korean intelligence reports of troop movements along the 38th parallel. By June 15, every regular division of the Immun Gun (the North Korean People's Army) had deployed along carefully planned lines of departure along the DMZ. Even as the North Korean war preparations were under way, the Communists launched a "peace offensive." On June 7, North Korea proposed through Radio Pyongyang that general elections be held in both the South and North on August 15 for territorial unification.

On June 19, North Korea proposed to exchange Cho Mansik, head of the Korean Democratic Party, and his son, imprisoned in North Korea, for two ranking officials of the South Korean Workers' Party, under arrest in the R.O.K. The R.O.K. agreed, but when they brought the prisoners to the scheduled place along the 38th parallel on June 24, the North Koreans never appeared.

On June 18, "Reconnaissance Order No. 1," written in Russian Cyrillic script, was issued by North Korean Intelligence, ordering that all intelligence concerning R.O.K. defense preparations be handed in and verified no later than June 24. The Russian-writing officers in Intelligence got what they wanted; hundreds of spies, some of whom worked directly with U.S. advisors to the R.O.K. army, had accurately pinpointed the strength and deployment of every R.O.K. unit along the parallel.

On June 22, "Battle Order No. 1," written in Korean, was issued to all regimental commanders of the divisions along the parallel with orders detailing the invasion routes and objectives. Observations made by the U.N. Commission on Korea June 24 in the vicinity of the 38th parallel reported that: "The R.O.K. forces are organized completely for defense and are not in a condition to launch a large-scale offensive against North Korean forces... As the R.O.K. forces are lacking in armored equipment, air force and heavy artillery, they are incapable of taking any action aimed at aggression from a military viewpoint."

On the morning of June 25, Premier Kim Il-Sung broadcast over Radio Pyongyang that the R.O.K. had "dared to commit armed aggression... north of the 38th parallel." Thus, he said, he ordered North Korean forces to "counterattack" to repel the "invading troops."

On June 25, 1950, at 4:00 a.m., the North Korean army invaded South Korea all along the 38th parallel. The ill-prepared and poorly-equipped R.O. K. army, caught completely by surprise, was no match for the North Koreans' overwhelming superiority in tanks and artillery. After three days, the R.O.K. army abandoned Seoul to the Communists.

The Korean War

On the day of the invasion, the U.N. in emergency session branded the assault as aggression, and called for volunteer military forces from member nations. Sixteen nations eventually sent troops to Korea: Australia, Belgium, Great Britain, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, Union of South Africa, and the United States. (The U.N. move was only possible because the Soviet Union was boycotting the Security Council due to the U.N.'s refusal to seat Communist China, and was not there to exercise its veto.) The U.S. supplied the bulk of troops and material, and General Douglas MacArthur was made Commander of the U.N. Forces.

The U.N. and R.O.K. troops were driven back to the Pusan perimeter, protecting their supply beachhead at that harbor. Then, on September 13, the U.N. Forces landed at Inchon harbor, taking the enemy by surprise and interdicting his supply lines. The Inchon assault, coupled with a counteroffensive along the Naktong River in the east, encircled the overextended enemy and forced a disorderly retreat with heavy losses. Only 25,000 of the original 90,000 invading troops made it back across the parallel.

Seoul was recaptured, and the victorious U.N. troops pursued the enemy across the 38th parallel.

R.O.K. troops reached the border with Manchuria along the Yalu River on November 20. Then, 600,000 Red Chinese "volunteers" entered the war on the side of the North, using human wave tactics, trapping the U.N. forces, and forcing a general retreat.

General McArthur, opting for all-out victory, urged the bombing of the Chinese mainland, blockading the coast, and setting Chiang Kai-shek free to fight both in Korea and in China. President Truman, fearing that such a course would lead to the third world war, ordered MacArthur to hold the line at the 38th parallel while the U.N. hammered out a political settlement. MacArthur's outspoken objections to this "limited war" policy led to his dismissal on April 11, 1951, being replaced by Matthew B. Ridgeway.

Chinese and Korean Communist forces now drove South. Seoul changed hands again, and then again, as the U.N. forces under Ridgeway struck back with superior firepower, and two Chinese spring offensives were crushed. The Russians proposed ceasefire talks in June 1951 as the war settled down to a series of stalemated seesaw battles in the general vicinity of the parallel. After Stalin's death in March 1953, the Communists were more willing to end the stalemated war. Finally on July 27, 1953, the Korean Armistice was signed at Panmunjom. Nobody won the Korean War.

Korea remained divided, and the real losers were the Korean people. The total casualty toll, military and civilian, for both sides was close to 2 million. It is estimated that 50 percent of all industrial facilities in South Korea, and probably more than that in North Korea were destroyed. Millions of North Koreans took advantage of the war to flee to the South, demonstrating their loathing of Communism.

South Koreans will never forget the massacre of civilians which accompanied the Communist takeover of South Korean territory. Discoveries of mass graves of U. N. prisoners of war and civilians became commonplace as the U.N. forces moved North.