

The Korean War and Why There are Two Koreas

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Image 1. South Korean soldiers patrol inside the barbed-wire fence at Imjingak Pavilion near the border village of Panmunjom, the demilitarized zone which has separated the two Koreas since the Korean War, in Paju, South Korea, on March 27, 2012. Photo by Ahn Young-joon for AP Photo.

On June 25, 1950, the Korean War began when some 75,000 soldiers from the North Korean People's Army poured across the 38th parallel. That was the boundary between the Soviet backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the north and the pro-Western Republic of Korea to the south. This invasion was the first military action of the Cold War (1945-1991). The Cold War was a larger conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was called "cold" because the U.S. and Soviet Union didn't fight each directly, but instead engaged in a war of threats.

By July, American troops and their allies, working with the United Nations, had entered the war to help South Korea. As far as American officials were concerned, it was a war against international communism led by the Soviet Union. Communism is a system where one political party controls all aspects of a country's government and society. After some early back-and-forth across the 38th parallel, the fighting stalled and casualties mounted with nothing to show for them. Meanwhile, American officials worked anxiously to fashion some sort of armistice with the North Koreans. The alternative, they feared, would be a wider war with the Soviet Union and China – or even, as some warned, World War III.

The Two Koreas

Since the early 1900s, Korea had been a part of the Japanese empire. After Japan lost World War II (1939-1945), it fell to the Americans and the Soviets to decide what should be done with it. In August 1945, the U.S. divided the Korean peninsula in half along the 38th parallel, giving the Soviets the area north of the line and the Americans the area to its south.

By the end of the decade, two new countries had formed on the peninsula. In the south, the anti-communist dictator Syngman Rhee enjoyed the reluctant support of the American government. In the north, the communist dictator Kim Il Sung enjoyed the slightly more enthusiastic support of the Soviets. Neither dictator was content to remain on his side of the 38th parallel, and fighting had already taken place along the border – resulting in more than 10,000 deaths.

The Korean War And The Cold War

Even so, the North Korean invasion came as a surprise to American officials. To them, this was not simply a border dispute on the other side of the globe. They saw it as the first step in a communist campaign to take over the world, so they believed that staying out of the war was not an option.

At first, the U.S.-led war effort in Korea was designed simply to get the communists out of South Korea – and it went badly for the U.S. and its allies. The North Korean army was well-disciplined, well-trained and

well-equipped; Rhee's forces, by contrast, were frightened, confused and seemed inclined to flee the battlefield at any provocation.

By the end of the summer, President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur, the military commander in charge, had decided on a new set of war aims. Now, for the U.S. and its allies, the Korean War was an offensive war to "liberate" the North from the communists.

Initially, this new approach was a success. An amphibious assault at Inchon pushed the North Koreans back to their side of the 38th parallel. American troops crossed the boundary and headed north toward the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and Communist China. The Chinese started to worry about protecting themselves. Chinese leader Mao Zedong sent troops to North Korea and warned the United States to keep away from the Yalu boundary unless it wanted full-scale war.

"No Substitute For Victory"

This was something that President Truman and his advisers decidedly did not want. They were sure that such a war would lead to Soviet attacks in Europe, the deployment of atomic weapons and millions of senseless deaths. Yet General MacArthur believed anything short of this wider war meant knuckling under to the communists.

As President Truman looked for a way to prevent war with the Chinese, MacArthur did all he could to provoke it. In March 1951, MacArthur sent a letter to Joseph Martin, a Republican leader in Congress, who leaked the letter to the press. "There is," MacArthur wrote, "no substitute for victory" against international communism.

On April 11, President Truman fired the general for insubordination.

The Korean War Reaches A Stalemate

In July 1951, President Truman and his new military commanders started peace talks at Panmunjom. Still, the fighting continued along the 38th parallel as negotiations stalled. Both sides were willing to accept a ceasefire that maintained the 38th parallel boundary, but they could not agree on whether prisoners of war should be forcibly sent back home. (The Chinese and the North Koreans wanted prisoners forcibly sent home; the United States said no.) Finally, after more than two years of negotiations, the different sides signed an armistice on July 27, 1953. The agreement allowed the POWs to stay where they liked; drew a new boundary near the 38th parallel that gave South Korea an extra 1,500 square miles of territory; and created a 2-mile-wide "demilitarized zone" that still exists today.

Casualties Of The Korean War

The Korean War was relatively short but exceptionally bloody. Nearly 5 million people died. More than half of these – about 10 percent of Korea's prewar population – were civilians. (This rate of civilian casualties was higher than that of World War II.) Almost 40,000 Americans died in action in Korea, and more than 100,000 were wounded.

Directions: After reading the article above, write a one paragraph (3-5 sentence) summary of the most important information from the article.