

# 1. A Divided Nation

Korea is a peninsula located in East Asia. It borders Russia and China in the north and west and Japan lies to the east across the Sea of Japan. Japan ruled Korea as a colony from 1910 – 1945, however after Japan's surrender in World War II, Allied leaders considered the question of Korea's future. Allied leadership decided that Korea would be liberated from Japan but would be placed under Allied control until the Koreans were deemed ready for self-rule.

Like Germany, the country was divided following the Second World War. According to an understanding reached between the United States and the Soviet Union, Soviet forces would occupy Korea north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel of latitude and American troops would occupy Korea south of the dividing line.



Map of the Korean divide at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, before the war

The division of Korea into two occupation zones was established as a temporary measure until a unifying Korean state could be implemented over the entire peninsula. As Cold War tensions worsened, however, Korea remained divided. By the end of the 1940s, two new states had formed on the peninsula. Anti-communist dictator Syngman Rhee was elected leader of South Korea. The United States backed the noncommunist government in South Korea. Kim Il Sung became the communist dictator of North Korea. The Soviet Union supported North Korea's Communist government. Neither dictator was satisfied with remaining on his side of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, however, and skirmishes along the border were common. Even before the Korean War began, the armed forces of each side engaged in a series of bloody conflicts causing thousands of deaths.



Map of the Korean peninsula and surrounding area

Source: Berson, M. J., Green, R. P., McGowan, T., & Salvucci, L. K. (2003). *Harcourt horizons. United States history: From civil war to present*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

## 2. The War Begins



Thousands of South Koreans fleeing south to escape the invading North Korean army

On June 25, 1950, North Korean troops launched a surprise invasion of South Korea. This marked the official beginning of the Korean War. President Harry Truman believed the Soviet Union had backed the invasion and decided to follow through on his policy of containment, refusing to allow communism to spread anywhere in the world. Truman asked the United Nations for help on the Korea peninsula, and the UN voted to send in troops to restore peace. It was the first time in history a world organization went to war to stop one country's attack on another country. The United Nations allowed Truman to select a general to lead the UN forces. President Truman chose General Douglas MacArthur as commander of all UN forces in Korea. Sixteen UN nations sent troops to Korea, however, about 80 percent of the troops were American.

The initial invasion of 75,000 North Korean soldiers into South Korea overwhelmed UN forces. The UN forces were outnumbered and poorly supplied. North Koreans swept farther south until they occupied almost all of South Korea. By September 1950, UN forces held only a small defensive perimeter in the country's southeast region. General MacArthur launched a daring counterattack by sea. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, UN forces landed at a city called Inchon, 150 miles deep into communist-held South Korea. By landing behind North Korean forces, MacArthur hoped to cut off their supply lines. The attack so surprised the North Korean forces that the battle was over in one day. UN troops broke through enemy lines and recaptured the city of Seoul, South Korea's capital, by the end of September. By early October, UN forces had pushed the North Koreans back across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.



U.S. Marines engaged in street fighting during a battle for Seoul

**Source:** The Korean War (article) | 1950s America. (n.d.). Retrieved January 18, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1950s-america/a/the-korean-war>

### 3. China Joins the Fight

After United Nations forces drove the invaders out of South Korea, the Truman administration received UN approval for MacArthur to continue pushing into North Korea. Truman and his advisers wanted to unite Korea and punish North Korea for its aggression. For weeks UN troops advanced deep into North Korea.

As UN forces approached the Yalu River – which forms the border between North Korea and China – the Chinese government warned that it would not “sit back with folded hands” as America invaded North Korea. The Chinese viewed the approach of American forces as a threat to its own security. China’s communist government supported North Korea. Chinese equipment and troops began crossing the border. By the end of November, more than 300,000 Chinese troops had entered North Korea.



U.S. Soldiers in action, November 1950

On November 26, 1950, Chinese and North Korean forces attacked. The Chinese overwhelmed the UN forces, driving them back deep into South Korea. UN forces were able to regroup and pushed the communist forces back into North Korea. By March 1951, UN troops had regained control of South Korea, however the war then turned into a bloody stalemate, with neither side able to advance.



American bombers targeting supply warehouses and dock facilities in Wonsan, North Korea, 1951

**Source:** Berson, M. J., Green, R. P., McGowan, T., & Salvucci, L. K. (2003). *Harcourt horizons. United States history: From civil war to present*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

## 4. "No Substitute for Victory"



General Douglas MacArthur (seated) observes UN naval shelling

With both sides locked in a bloody stalemate, a disagreement arose between General MacArthur and President Truman. MacArthur believed that to break the deadlock and win the war, UN forces needed to attack China. President Truman and his advisers were decidedly against such action. They feared an attack on China might lead to another world war. Truman hoped to restore the border at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and limit the war as much as possible. MacArthur, however, viewed such action as unacceptable. He felt that America was yielding to the communists by not attacking China.

As President Truman attempted to avoid an escalation in fighting, MacArthur did all he could to provoke it. A frustrated MacArthur complained publicly that he was being held back. In a letter leaked to the press, MacArthur stated the need for all-out war on China, writing, "We must win...There is no substitute for victory" against international communism.

Truman was furious with the popular general. On April 11, 1951, the president fired General MacArthur for insubordination. Truman declared that MacArthur's statements were undermining efforts to reach a peace settlement. Many Americans were outraged by Truman's actions. MacArthur returned home to a hero's welcome. In response to growing outcry, Truman defended his decision by pointing out that the President is commander in chief, responsible for key decisions about war and peace.



U.S. Marines move through communist Chinese lines

## 5. Armistice

By the spring of 1951, both sides were in a bloody deadlock. For two years the front lines moved very little in either direction as UN troops battled the North Koreans and the Chinese. As the American death toll grew, the war became a major issue in the 1952 election. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the popular World War II general, won the election. During his campaign he promised to work to end the war if elected. Soon after his victory, he traveled to Korea to move stalled peace talks.



Korean refugees in front of an American tank

Finally, in July 1953, both sides signed an armistice to end the fighting. It reestablished the border between North Korea and South Korea near the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, close to where it had been before the war.

The armistice also created a demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the border. The demilitarized zone forbids military forces within the area. The two-and-a-half-mile-wide DMZ, however, has heavily armed troops on either side. The demilitarized zone, and the heavily armed troops along the outside of the DMZ, remain there today.



North Korean soldiers standing guard outside the demilitarized zone, 2005

**Source:** Berson, M. J., Green, R. P., McGowan, T., & Salvucci, L. K. (2003). *Harcourt horizons. United States history: From civil war to present*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

## 6. Results of the Korean War



Map of Korea following the war, which shows the change in territory from the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel to the current divide

The human costs of the Korean War were astounding. Although the conflict was relatively brief, it was exceptionally bloody. 3 million people died in the Korean War, the majority of whom were civilians. About 36,500 American soldiers died in action, and over 100,000 were wounded.

Politically, very little was changed by the Korean War. As part of the armistice, a new boundary was created near the original dividing line of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The new boundary gave South Korea an extra 1,500 square miles of territory. A 2-mile-wide demilitarized zone was established between the North and South. Both sides of the zone are heavily guarded as relations between North Korea and South Korea remain poor to this day.

While the war resulted in few changes politically, UN forces were able to push back North Korean forces and maintain South Korea as an independent country. The Korean peninsula is still divided today. In Korea, the United States demonstrated its global leadership and commitment to fighting the spread of communism. America's involvement in the war delivered a clear message to the world that the U.S. was ready to fight to prevent Communist expansion anywhere in the world.



An American soldier comforts another soldier whose friend had been killed in action, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1950

Source: The Korean War (article) | 1950s America. (n.d.). Retrieved January 18, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1950s-america/a/the-korean-war>