

# KOREAN WAR 1950-1953

## BACKGROUND

### USSR OCCUPIES MANCHURIA AND NORTH KOREA 1945

As agreed with the Allies at the Tehran Conference (November 1943) and the Yalta Conference (February 1945), the Soviet Union declared war against Japan within three months of the end of the war in Europe, on 9 August 1945. By 10 August, the Red Army occupied the northern part of the Korean peninsula as agreed, and on 26 August halted at the 38th parallel for three weeks to await the arrival of US forces in the south. On 10 August 1945, with the Japanese surrender near, the Americans doubted whether the Soviets would honor their part of the Joint Commission, the US-sponsored Korean occupation agreement. A month earlier, Colonel Dean Rusk and Colonel Charles H. Bonesteel III divided the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel after hurriedly deciding that the US Korean Zone of Occupation had to have a minimum of two ports.

Explaining why the occupation zone demarcation was positioned at the 38th parallel, Rusk observed, *“even though it was further north than could be realistically reached by US forces, in the event of Soviet disagreement ... we felt it important to include the capital of Korea in the area of responsibility of American troops“*, especially when *“faced with the scarcity of US forces immediately available, and time and space factors, which would make it difficult to reach very far north, before Soviet troops could enter the area.”* The Soviets agreed to the US occupation zone demarcation to improve their negotiating position regarding the occupation zones in Eastern Europe, and because each would accept Japanese surrender where they stood.

### KOREA 1945-1949

At the Potsdam Conference (July–August 1945), the Allies unilaterally decided to divide Korea—without consulting the Koreans—in contradiction of the Cairo Conference. On 8 September 1945, U.S. Lt. Gen. John R. Hodge arrived in Incheon to accept the Japanese surrender south of the 38th parallel. Appointed as military governor, General Hodge directly controlled South Korea as head of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK 1945–48). He established control by restoring to power the key Japanese colonial administrators and their Korean police collaborators. The USAMGIK refused to recognize the provisional government of the short-lived People’s Republic of Korea (PRK) because it suspected it was communist. These policies, voiding popular Korean sovereignty, provoked civil insurrections and guerrilla warfare. On 3 September 1945, Lieutenant General Yoshio Kozuki, Commander, Japanese Seventeenth Area Army, contacted Hodge, telling him that the Soviets were south of the 38th parallel at Kaesong. Hodge trusted the accuracy of the Japanese Army report.

In December 1945, Korea was administered by a U.S.-Soviet Union Joint Commission, as agreed at the Moscow Conference (1945). The Koreans were excluded from the talks. The commission decided the country would become independent after a five-year trusteeship action facilitated by each régime sharing its sponsor’s ideology. The Korean populace revolted; in the south, some protested, and some rose in arms; to contain them, the

USAMGIK banned strikes on 8 December 1945 and outlawed the PRK Revolutionary Government and the PRK People's Committees on 12 December 1945.

On 23 September 1946, an 8,000-strong railroad worker strike began in Pusan. Civil disorder spread throughout the country in what became known as the autumn uprising. On 1 October 1946, Korean police killed three students in the Daegu Uprising; protesters counter-attacked, killing 38 policemen. On 3 October, some 10,000 people attacked the Yeongcheon police station, killing three policemen and injuring some 40 more; elsewhere, some 20 landlords and pro-Japanese South Korean officials were killed. The USAMGIK declared martial law.

The right-wing Representative Democratic Council, led by nationalist **Syngman Rhee**, opposed the Soviet–American trusteeship of Korea, arguing that after 35 years (1910–45) of Japanese colonial rule most Koreans opposed another foreign occupation. The USAMGIK decided to forgo the five-year trusteeship agreed upon in Moscow, given the 31 March 1948 United Nations election deadline to achieve an anti-communist civil government in the U.S. Korean Zone of Occupation.

On 3 April 1948, what began as a demonstration commemorating Korean resistance to Japanese rule ended with the Jeju Uprising where between 14,000 and 60,000 citizens were killed by South Korean soldiers.

On 10 May, South Korea convoked its first national general elections that the Soviets first opposed, then boycotted, insisting that the U.S. honor the trusteeship agreed to at the Moscow Conference.

North Korea held parliamentary elections three months later on 25 August 1948.

The resultant anti-communist South Korean government promulgated a national political constitution on 17 July 1948, elected a president, the American-educated strongman Syngman Rhee, on 20 July 1948. The elections were marred by terrorism and sabotage resulting in 600 deaths. **The Republic of Korea (South Korea) was established on 15 August 1948.** In the Russian Korean Zone of Occupation, the Soviet Union established a Communist North Korean government led by **Kim Il-Sung**. President Rhee's régime expelled communists and leftists from southern national politics. Disenfranchised, they headed for the hills, to prepare for guerrilla war against the US-sponsored ROK Government.

As nationalists, both Syngman Rhee and Kim Il-Sung were intent upon reunifying Korea under their own political system. The North Koreans gained support from both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. They escalated the continual border skirmishes and raids and then prepared to invade. South Korea, with limited materiel, could not match them. During this era, the U.S. government assumed that all communists (regardless of nationality) were controlled or directly influenced by Moscow; thus the U.S. portrayed the civil war in Korea as a Soviet hegemonic maneuver.

In October 1948, South Korean left-wing soldiers rebelled against the government's harsh clampdown in April on Jeju island in the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion.

The Soviet Union withdrew as agreed from Korea in 1948. U.S. troops withdrew from Korea in 1949, leaving the South Korean army relatively ill-equipped. On 24 December 1949,

South Korean forces killed 86 to 88 people in the Mungyeong massacre and blamed the crime on communist marauding bands. By early 1950, Syngman Rhee had about 30,000 alleged communists in jails and about 300,000 suspected sympathisers enrolled in the Bodo League re-education movement.

## **1950 – THE KOREAN WAR STARTS**

In the first half of 1950, Kim Il-Sung travelled to Moscow and Beijing to secure support for reunification with the South by force. The Soviet military became extensively involved in North Korea's war planning. There are differing accounts of the degree of Soviet support, ranging from support if the North was attacked, to approval, to actually initiating the war. Similarly, some accounts indicate that Chinese support was stronger than Soviet support, and some say it was reluctant.

Declassified documents from the Soviet Foreign Ministry and Presidential Archives now show a much clearer, but complex picture of the interactions between Kim, Soviet leader Josef Stalin, and Chinese leader Mao Zedong regarding the decision to invade South Korea. By 1949, South Korean forces had reduced the active number of communist guerrillas in the South from 5,000 to 1,000. However, Kim Il-Sung believed that the guerrillas had weakened the South Korean military and that a North Korean invasion would be welcomed by much of the South Korean population. Kim began seeking Stalin's support for an invasion in March 1949.

Initially, Stalin did not think the time was right for a war in Korea. Chinese Communist forces still were fighting in China. American forces were still stationed in South Korea (they would complete their withdrawal in June 1949) and Stalin did not want the Soviet Union to become embroiled in a war with the US. But by 1950, Stalin believed the strategic situation had changed. The Soviets had detonated their first nuclear bomb in September 1949; Americans had fully withdrawn from Korea; the Americans had not intervened to stop the communist victory in China, and Stalin calculated that the Americans would be even less willing to fight in Korea – which had seemingly much less strategic significance. Stalin began a more aggressive strategy in Asia based on these developments, including promising economic and military aid to China through the Sino-Soviet Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance Treaty.

Throughout 1949 and 1950 the Soviets continued to arm North Korea. After the Communist victory in China, ethnic Korean units in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) were released to North Korea. The combat veterans from China, the tanks, artillery and aircraft supplied by the Soviets, and rigorous training increased North Korea's military superiority over the South, which had been armed by the American military.

In April 1950, Stalin gave Kim permission to invade the South under the condition that Mao would agree to send reinforcements if they became needed. Stalin made it clear that Soviet forces would not directly engage in combat, to avoid a war with the Americans. Kim met with Mao in May 1950. Mao was concerned that the Americans would intervene but agreed to support the North Korean invasion. China desperately needed the economic and military aid promised by the Soviets. At that time, the Chinese were in the process of demobilizing half of the PLA's 5.6 million soldiers. However, Mao sent more ethnic Korean PLA veterans to Korea and promised to move an Army closer to the Korean border. Once Mao's commitment was secured, preparations for war accelerated.

Soviet generals who had extensive combat experience in the Second World War were sent to the Soviet Advisory Group in North Korea. These generals completed plans for the attack by May. The original plans were to start with a skirmish in the Ongjin peninsula on the west coast of Korea. The North Koreans would then launch a “counterattack” that would capture Seoul and encircle and destroy the South Korean army. The final stage would involve destroying South Korean government remnants, capturing the rest of South Korea, including the ports.

On 7 June 1950, Kim Il-Sung called for a Korea-wide election on 5–8 August 1950 and a consultative conference in Haeju on 15–17 June 1950. On 11 June, the North sent three diplomats to the South, as part of a planned peace overture that South Koreans were certain to reject. On 21 June, Kim Il-Sung requested permission to start with general attack across the 38th parallel, rather than a limited operation in the Ongjin peninsula. Kim was concerned that South Korean agents had learned about the plans and South Korean forces were strengthening their defenses. Stalin agreed to this change of plan.

Albeit South Korean and American intelligence officers had in fact predicted an attack, they had incorrectly done so many times before. The Central Intelligence Agency noted the southward movement of North Korean forces, but said it was a “*defensive measure*” and concluded an invasion was “*unlikely*”. South Korean and U.S. forces were unprepared. On 23 June, UN observers had inspected the border and failed to notice the imminent attack. The KPA crossed the 38th parallel behind artillery fire at dawn on Sunday 25 June 1950. The KPA claimed that Republic of Korea Army (ROK Army) troops, under command of the régime of the “*bandit traitor Syngman Rhee*”, had attacked first, and that they would arrest and execute Rhee. There had been frequent skirmishes along the 38th parallel. Fighting began on the strategic Ongjin peninsula in the west. There were initial South Korean claims that they had captured the city of Haeju, and this sequence of events had led some scholars to argue that the South Koreans actually fired first. For South Koreans, the Korean War is sometimes called the “*June 25th incident*”.

Whoever fired the first shots in Ongjin, within an hour, North Korean forces attacked all along the 38th parallel. The North Koreans had a combined arms force including tanks supported by heavy artillery. The South Koreans did not have any tanks, anti-tank weapons, or heavy artillery that could stop such an attack. In addition, South Koreans deployed their outgunned forces piecemeal and were routed within the first few days. On 27 June, Rhee secretly evacuated from Seoul with government officials. On 28 June, at 2am, the South Korean Army blew up the highway bridge across the Han River in an attempt to stop the North Korean army. The bridge was detonated while 4,000 refugees were crossing the bridge, and hundreds were killed. Destroying the bridge also trapped many South Korean military units north of the Han River. In spite of such desperate measures, Seoul fell that same day. A number of South Korean National Assemblymen remained in Seoul when it fell. 48 subsequently pledged allegiance to the North.

The South Korean forces, which had 95,000 men on 25 June, could account for less than 22,000 men by the end of June. In early July, when U.S. forces arrived, South Korean forces were placed under U.S. operational command of the United Nations Command (Korea).