

The Korean War

Scott, Marvin. World History Map Activities. Weston, Walsh Publishing. 1997

Much of Korea's history has been the story of a small country caught between larger countries. During the Cold War, Korea was the site of the first shooting war between communism and democracy. The Japanese had ruled Korea from 1910 to 1945 and called it Chosen. After the defeat of Japan in World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States, World War II Allies, agreed that Korea would eventually be free and independent, but in fact they divided it at the 38th parallel. Each set up an occupation, and as the Cold War developed, each set up a government based on their own system. The Soviet Union established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It had a population of 9 million; its capital was at Pyongyang and Kim Il Sung was its premier. The United States established the Republic of Korea on the southern half of the peninsula. It had a population of 21 million; its capital was at Seoul and Syngman Rhee was president. By 1950, both of the occupying great powers had withdrawn their forces.

This division of Korea into North and South Korea, as they were commonly called, was purely a matter of politics. It had no basis in the culture or physical geography of the peninsula. The Korean people are homogeneous. There are no significant minorities, and Koreans share a common heritage, language, and religion. From the Yalu River, which forms the border with China, the Korean peninsula stretches south for 600 miles. In latitude, it is about on a level with Oregon in the north and Los Angeles in the south. Its area is roughly that of Minnesota. Generally, the north has higher mountains and more of them, but the whole peninsula is covered with mountain ranges.

Early visitors said Korea was like "a sea in a heavy gale." The mountains reach over 6000 feet. North Korea is 20 percent lowland while South Korea is about 30 percent lowland. The Koreans farm intensively, growing rice and vegetables. Koreans fertilize their fields with human waste, which gives a distinctive and powerful smell to the country. The climate is sometimes called temperate, but this is a deceptively gentle label. The south has stifling hot, humid summers, while in the north in January the average temperature is 15 degrees, and temperatures can reach 30 degrees to 40 degrees below zero. This frigid air is pushed down on Korea from the land mass of central Asia. Korea is also on the path of typhoons during the months of July through October. These storms move in from the seas surrounding the peninsula –the Yellow Sea, the Koreans Strait, and the Sea of Japan. Japan is a neighbor across the strait.

The Korean War began on June 25, 1950, when North Korean forces invaded South Korea. The attackers had a well-equipped force, including 150 Soviet-built T-54 tanks, an air force, and good artillery. The South Korean forces were quickly pushed back, and Seoul fell in three days. But the world's reaction was also quick. On June 27, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution calling upon members to assist South Korea. Sixteen United Nations member countries contributed forces. They were Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom. U.S. President Harry Truman ordered ground forces to Korea on June 30. He had earlier ordered naval and air forces to support South Korea.

The nearest American forces were those stationed in Japan on occupation duty, hardly preparation for combat. The arrival of the first Americans did little to slow the North Korean advance, but continued reinforcements and support by naval and air forces allowed the United Nations forces to hold a small area near the port of Pusan. North Korean forces kept a fierce pressure on the Pusan perimeter, but North Korea had no navy, and United Nations naval forces could cruise the coastal waters shelling and launching carrier aircraft attacks.

They could also land an amphibious invasion. General Douglas MacArthur selected Inchon as the spot. It was a miserable place for an invasion. The harbor was so narrow ships had entered single filed. The tides ran 27 feet. At low time, landing barges would be stranded on mudflats for hours. Knowing all this, the North Koreans had neglected its defense. The U.S. Marines landed at Inchon on September 25. Soon the Marines had liberated Seoul, and the North Koreans retreated rapidly, became disorganized, and were no longer effective. United Nations forces pushed up from the Pusan Perimeter and in from Inchon. The push continued across the 38th parallel and toward the Yalu. One Marine unit recorded temperatures of -88 degrees and winds blowing 20 to 30 nautical miles an hour. Soldiers called Korea "Frozen Chosen." As the United Nations forces advanced, the Chinese Communist government gave warnings about approaching the Yalu, however the advance continued.

At first there were a few scattered clashes with Chinese troops. Then, on December 9, the Chinese hit the United Nations forces with a major effort. Once again the United Nations forces retreated down the peninsula. Then in January 1951, they counterattacked and drove the Chinese and North Koreans back up to a line slanting across the 38th parallel. Each side selected a defensible line and dug in. The fighting became a trench war somewhat like World War I. But this was 1950 to 1953, and the equipment was more modern. In the air over Korea, the first jet-versus-jet combat was taking place. The communist planes flew from bases across the Yalu in China. United Nations policy forbade attacks across the Yalu. Douglas MacArthur publically disagreed with this policy and was relieved of command. Matthew B. Ridgeway took over.

Truce talks had begun in July of 1951. In October, they were moved to Panmunjom. The talks produced little at first, and the fighting continued until July 27, 1953, when an armistice was signed. Neither side considered the armistice a settlement of the Korean question, but they exchanged prisoners and agreed to continue discussions. Korea has remained divided for more than 40 years. During that time, the Cold War has ended; so perhaps the settlement of the Korean problem will be left to the Koreans rather than the larger powers.