

Overview: the Korean War and its Legacy(Adapted from Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War*, 2010)

The year 2010 marks the 60th anniversary of the Korean War, which began on June 25, 1950. Following the three years of intensely brutal fighting and subsequent devastation, an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. The signing of the agreement stopped the fighting and put the war on hold without a clear trajectory of future plans. To this day, the legacies of the Korean War continue to remain as a source of tension for the divided Korea as well as the regional and international community.

Background

The Korean War is said to be a civil war between South and North Korea with its historical roots partly in the Japanese colonial experience and legacy. Under the Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, the Japanese imperial government implemented the “divide and rule” policy, which demarcated the Korean peninsula according to its geographic characteristics to utilize and exploit the natural resources more effectively. The mountainous northern part, rich with raw minerals and geographic advantages, was suited for heavy industry, while the southern part concentrated on light industry and production of rice and other crops. More importantly, this delineation coincided with the ideological division within Korea. The communist groups increasingly made their way to the north, where they engaged in guerrilla warfare as the form of resistance against the Japanese, while conservatives and collaborationist groups congregated and operated in the south.¹

At the end of World War II, when Japan surrendered to the Allies in 1945, Korea was liberated from the Japanese colonial rule only to be divided and occupied by the two major super powers of the Cold War era. The United States occupied the southern half and the Soviet Union occupied the northern half. Under the occupation rule by the two ideologically opposing foreign regimes on each side of the 38th parallel, two separate Korean governments were formed in 1948. Backed by the United States, the government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) was headed by Syngman Rhee, while the northern government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) was headed by Kim Il-sung with the support of the Soviet Union. Both Syngman Rhee and Kim Il-sung aimed to

reunify Korea under their own political systems. While Rhee called for a democratic government, Kim wanted to establish a communist government for the reunified Korea. Such competing interests created tensions and mutual enmity between the South and the North and persecutions of the groups and individuals who exhibited affiliation to the opposing political system in each half of the peninsula further polarized Korea.

The War

Against this backdrop, numerous skirmishes in the forms of guerrilla warfare and border conflict occurred between the two Koreas in the period between 1948 and 1950.² With the withdrawal of the occupation countries in 1949, the tensions between the South and the North continued to escalate and the question was who was going to start the war first.³

On June 25, 1950, the Korea People’s Army (KPA) of the DPRK marched southward and crossed the 38th parallel to invade the South. In response to this northern provocation of war, the United States entered the war to aid the South, whose military forces were quickly subdued by their northern counterparts, to fight against the North. Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s decision to intervene and to commit more military forces to the war was supported by President Truman and was later approved by the United Nations.⁴ Even with the dominant numbers of US military forces on the ground, the northern army continued to successfully push southward in the summer of 1950, forcing the ROK and US armies to retreat as far as Pusan, the farthest southeastern port city on the peninsula. By early August, the northern advance was halted and the battle relatively stabilized without any party’s dramatic advance through the end of the month. With the successful landing at Inchon in mid-September, the United Nations Command forces led by General MacArthur recaptured Seoul from the KPA and Kim Il-sung’s initial plan to win or “end the war in a month” then dissipated.⁵

With this newly acquired momentum, the US-led UNC forces advanced past the 38th parallel into the northern territory. Soon, the Chinese armies entered the war on behalf of DPRK in late October, namely, to defend its borders from the American-UNC advance, although the decision was determined by Chairman Mao early in the war. However, North Korean and Chinese archival

documents confirm that Chairman Mao decided to intervene should DPRK face a difficult situation since Koreans sent their military troops and support for the “Chinese revolution, the anti-Japanese resistance, and the Chinese civil war.”⁶ Brutal fighting between the communist China-North Korea military forces and the UNC forces continued until the late spring of 1951, when the fighting stalemated in terms of the battle lines, which resembled the lines where the present-day demilitarized zone is.⁷

In July 1951, truce talks began among the four belligerents (DPRK, PRC, UNC, and ROK) in the war. Another two years of negotiation and “a form of trench warfare” went on before the signing of an armistice on July 27, 1953 by three of the four main actors to the war: DPRK, PRC, and UNC.⁸ South Korea’s Syngman Rhee refused to sign it on the grounds that he refuses to recognize divided Korea. Nonetheless, the armistice agreement went into effect and ended the fighting and established the 2.5-mile-wide demilitarized zone (DMZ). Since this cease-fire agreement was not a peace treaty, both Koreas are still in a state of war in a technical sense.

Legacy

The tragic, destructive fratricidal war left Korea with deep scars at many levels. Sources estimate that as many as three million Koreans, at least half of which were civilians, died in the war.⁹ Aside from the physical destruction of the peninsula by heavy bombings and the astronomical number of human death tolls, the war scarred the Korean psyche in that it was a conflict in which Koreans killed Koreans. The mutual animosity and fear between the South and the North continued to proliferate in the immediate postwar years as incidents of conflicts, such as border skirmishes, espionage attempts, kidnappings and the like, never ceased to arise.

The two Koreas have developed their own states under different forms of government in the postwar recovery and modernization years. South Korea has adopted democracy and capitalism while North Korea remains one of the most stringent and isolated communist states in the world today. In terms of economic development, the North was ahead of South up until 1960. However, since 1960s South Korea underwent a rapid industrialization over the course of three decades and became a competitive player in the global arena.¹⁰ Although North Korea adheres to the “self-reliance” concept of the *juche* ideology, its economy is largely defunct and relies on foreign aid and alternative means to sustain the massive military regime.

In the past decade since 2000, the two Koreas have

warmed their relationship as they held the first inter-Korean summit in 2000.¹¹ However, more recent incidents, including the North’s two missile tests in 2006 and 2009 and the resumption of nuclear proliferation, have generated concerns that attracted international community’s attention and subsequently resulted in various UN sanctions imposed on North Korea.^{12,13} Recognizing the threat of the North’s provocations, the Six-party talks have been held to address and resolve the issues diplomatically among the key countries: North and South Korea, the United States, Russia, China, and Japan.

Perhaps the legacy of the war is more salient on the ground level. The war created numerous war orphans and divided families in both Koreas. In South Korea, it also created US military bases, which have been present for decades, and the mandatory conscription for male citizens. The growing number of North Korean defectors also has been an increasingly frequent and telling phenomenon. These mentioned above are just a few of the legacies of the Korean War. The memory and legacy of the war is likely to continue to be indelible in the minds of Koreans in both halves of the peninsula.

Footnotes

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5. Cumings, B. (2010). *The Korean War: A History*. New York: Modern Library. p. 21.
6. Cumings, B. (2010). *The Korean War: A History*. New York: Modern Library. p. 25.
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8. Cumings, B. (2010). *The Korean War: A History*. New York: Modern Library. p. xviii.
9. Cumings, B. (2010). *The Korean War: A History*. New York: Modern Library. p. 35, 243.
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