

The Korean War (overview)

Introduction

The "Land of Morning Calm" was shaken on June 25, 1950, as the Korean War, which lasted three years, erupted. The principal combatants were North and South Korea. The South's main allies included the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, although many other nations sent troops under the banner of the United Nations. Allies of North Korea included the People's Republic of China, which supplied military forces, and the Soviet Union, which supplied combat advisors and aircraft pilots, as well as weapons.

But signs of trouble had appeared long before the outbreak of war. The Korean peninsula, under Japanese occupation since 1910, saw the territory split at the 38th parallel soon after the Japanese surrender to the U.S. and the Soviet Union. This resulted in the development of two rival regimes. One, influenced by the communist U.S.S.R. and called the People's Democratic Republic, took the reins in the North. It was led by Kim Il Sung. Syngman Rhee, backed by the U.S., became president in the South.

On June 25, 1950, 90,000 North Koreans crossed the border and invaded South Korea. U.S. President Harry Truman, who in 1947 had announced a new policy to contain communism, quickly secured a resolution from the U.N.'s Security Council to stop North Korea's aggression. Acting as commander-in-chief and without asking Congress to declare war, Truman dispatched U.S. troops to Korea on June 27. General Douglas MacArthur led the forces as Supreme U.N. Commander.

The war did not go well at first for U.S. and U.N. forces because they were outnumbered and lacked proper equipment. Then General MacArthur, going against his advisors, pulled off an amphibious attack at Inchon on September 25. It resulted in a spectacular victory and, within a few weeks, all of South Korea had been recaptured. Bolstered by this victory, President Truman told MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel and move toward the Yalu river, which was the border between China and North Korea.

Mao Zedong, citing national security concerns, had issued warnings that China would intervene if any non-South Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel. Truman regarded the warnings as an attempt to blackmail the U.N. On October 8, 1950, the day after American troops crossed the 38th parallel, Mao issued the order for the Chinese army to be moved to the Yalu river, ready to cross. But the planned attack was postponed until Soviet assistance arrived on October 19.

MacArthur realized he had miscalculated the Chinese threat. Three hundred thousand Chinese troops pushed his army back to the 38th parallel. The Battle of Chosin Reservoir (November 26-December 13) forced U.N. troops to withdraw from the northern part of Korea. On January 4, 1951, communist Chinese and North Korean forces captured Seoul, from where they were expelled two months later.



United Nations forces retreating south across the 38th Parallel following the arrival of Chinese troops to assist North Korea

“Korea,” Wikipedia, Wikipediahttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Crossing_the_38th_parallel.jpg

MacArthur, feeling he was not receiving Truman’s support, started criticizing the President to the press. For this and other reasons, on April 11 Truman dismissed MacArthur, who was replaced by General Matthew Ridgeway. This general was able to regroup the U.N. forces and mount a counter-offensive, slowly driving back the opposition.

The rest of the war involved little territorial change and lengthy peace negotiations. Talks began at Panmunjom in July 1951 but were deadlocked for two years. Meanwhile, fighting continued. Finally, on June 27, 1953, the armistice was signed. By that time the front line was back in the proximity of the 38th parallel. The Korean boundary was set north of the 38th parallel, with a two-and-a-half-mile wide DMZ separating the two Koreas.

The Korean War was the first major “limited war” in American history. The positive results were that Korean communism suffered a blow and democracy was strengthened. This allowed South Korea to become a major economic power in East Asia and one of the economic success stories of the twentieth century. It also showed that U.N. intervention could restore peace and, in this case, the conflict helped prevent another world war.

However, the war negatively affected Truman and his political party. It also showed that the U.S. military had been ill-prepared for war. Accordingly, after the war, the defense budget soared and the Army doubled in size. The war also saw the beginning of racial integration efforts in the U.S. military. In 1948, President Truman signed an executive order calling on the armed forces to provide equal treatment and opportunity for black servicemen. The U.S. still maintains a heavy military presence in Korea as part of the effort to uphold the armistice between North and South.

Lesson 6

Student Handout 6.1—Document A

June 26, 1950

UNCOK Report on North Korean Attack.

Beginning early morning 25 June North Korean Communist Army began armed aggression throughout 38th parallel area. For self protection our brave and patriotic army and navy opened heroic defense operations. This savage and unlawful act of rebel force is commission of unpardonable sin. We representing 30 million Koreans hope UNGA realized our defensive fight against aggression is inevitable reaction of our people and government. We also appeal for your immediate and effective steps to secure peace and security, not only for Korea but also for peace loving people of the world.

Source: Spencer C. Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 870. Reprinted by permission.

Lesson 6***Student Handout 6.2—Document B*****June 26, 1950****Top Secret Report on Military Situation by Shtykov to Comrade Zakharov (Excerpts)**

I report about the preparation and course of the military operations of the Korean People's Army.

The concentration of the People's Army in the region near the 38th parallel began on June 12 and was concluded on June 23, as was prescribed in the plan of the General Staff. The redeployment of troops took place in an orderly fashion, without incident.

The intelligence service of the enemy probably detected the troop redeployment but we managed to keep the plan and the time of the beginning of troop operations secret.

The planning of the operation at the divisional level and the reconnaissance of the area was carried out with the participation of Soviet advisers.

All preparatory measures for the operation were completed by June 24th. ...

The political order of the Minister of Defense was read to the troops, which explained that the South Korean army had provoked a military attack by violating the 38th parallel and that the government of the DPRK [North Korea] had given an order to the Korean People's Army to go over to the counterattack.

The order to counterattack was met with great enthusiasm by the soldiers and officers of the Korean People's army. ...

Source: Spencer C. Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 870. Reprinted by permission.

Lesson 6***Student Handout 6.6—Document F*****September 29, 1950****Telegram from Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-Yong to Stalin**

This document is Kim Il Sung's explanation to Stalin of the Inchon invasion and his request for Soviet assistance.

Deeply respected Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin,

On behalf of the Worker's Party of Korea, we express to You, the liberator of the Korean people, and the leader of the working peoples of the entire world, our profound gratitude for compassion and assistance which You constantly provide to our people struggling for the freedom and independence of its Motherland.

In this letter we would like to brief you on the current situation at the fronts of the liberation war of our people against the American aggressors.

Prior to the assault landing at Inch'on (Chemulp'o) one could not judge the situation at the fronts as unfavorable to us. The adversary, suffering one defeat after another, was cornered into a tiny piece of land at the southern-most tip of South Korea and we had a great chance of winning a victory in the last decisive battles.

Such a situation considerably damaged the military authority of the United States. Therefore, in those conditions, in order to restore its prestige and to implement by any means its long-held plans of conquering Korea and transforming it into its military strategic-bridgehead, on 16.9.50 the U.S. performed an assault landing operation ... The enemy took over Inch'on and is engaged in street combats in the city of Seoul itself. The military situation became perilous. ...

Dear Comrade STALIN, we are determined to overcome all the difficulties facing us so that Korea will not be a colony and a military springboard of the U.S. imperialists. We will fight for the independence, democracy, and happiness of our people to the last drop of blood ...

Therefore ... we cannot help asking You to provide us with special assistance. In other words, at the moment when the enemy troops cross over the 38th parallel, we will badly need direct military assistance from the Soviet Union.

If for any reason this is impossible, please assist us by forming international volunteer units in China and other countries of people's democracy for rendering military assistance to our struggle.

We request Your directive regarding the aforementioned proposal.

Respectfully, ...

Kim Il Sung, Pak Hon-Yong

Source: Spencer C. Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 906-7. Reprinted by permission.

Lesson 6***Student Handout 6.8—Document H*****April 11, 1951****President Truman's Address to the Nation (Excerpts)**

My fellow Americans:

I want to talk plainly to you tonight about what we are doing in Korea and about our policy in the Far East.

In the simplest terms, what we are doing in Korea is this: We are trying to prevent a third world war. ...

It is right for us to be in Korea. It was right last June. It is right today. I want to remind you why this is true.

The Communists in the Kremlin are engaged in a monstrous conspiracy to stamp out freedom all over the world. If they were to succeed, the United States would be numbered among their principal victims. It must be clear to everyone that the United States cannot—and will not—sit idly by and await foreign conquest. The only question is: When is the best time to meet the threat and how?

The best time to meet the threat is in the beginning. It is easier to put out a fire in the beginning when it is small than after it has become a roaring blaze.

And the best way to meet the threat of aggression is for the peace-loving nations to act together. If they don't act together, they are likely to be picked off, one by one. ...

If history has taught us anything, it is that aggression anywhere in the world is a threat to peace everywhere in the world. When that aggression is supported by the cruel and selfish rulers of a powerful nation who are bent on conquest, it becomes a clear and present danger to the security and independence of every free nation. ...

Source: Spencer C. Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara: CA ABC-CLIO, 2000), 962. Reprinted by permission.

Lesson 6***Student Handout 6.9—Document I*****July 26 1953****Dulles-Rhee Correspondence**

President Rhee conveys the message that he has been reassured about his nation's security by the latest correspondence.

My Dear Mr. Secretary:

Your letter of July 25 is both reassuring and a little bit disturbing. I am sorry to have given President Eisenhower and you any reason to doubt to any degree the integrity of pledges which I have made to you. As my letter of July 25 indicates, I have had some uneasiness lest the conditions upon which my pledges were founded were somehow being undermined. Had it been possible to secure an early and clear reassurance that General Harrison was not empowered to enter into any agreements with Communists which would negate or circumvent our mutual understandings, there would have been no necessity for my message of July 24. I trust you will convey to President Eisenhower the sense of my letter of July 25, so that he, as well as you, may know that I am a man of my word, and that my only effort has been to regain ground which unrepudiated official reports indicated had been lost. ...

... I am heartily in accord with your expressed confidence that we shall be able to arrive at a mutually agreeable program for achieving our common objective of liberation and reunification of Korea.

I am humbly grateful for splendid spirit of accord and mutual cooperation which have marked our recent negotiations. I cannot express adequately how deeply all Koreans feel the complete accuracy of assurance that "never in all its history has US offered to any other country as much as it has offered to you." I think no one knows better than you that we have tried our best to fulfill our own obligations of our close alliance to very utmost of our abilities. ...

With warm assurances of my friendship, I am sincerely, yours,

Syngman Rhee

Source: Spencer C. Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara, CA: BC-Clio, 2000), 1024. Reprinted by permission.