

The Korean War: Conflict and Compromise

Adam Polak
Junior Division
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Have you ever wondered why the Korean War started? Or why the United States thought it was worth it to defend the 38th parallel? Well I have, and I think that things may not have had to go the way they did. The Korean War could have been prevented if the United States had honored a territorial agreement made with the Soviet Union. What led up to the United States proceeding into the Korean War? What peace efforts were made? What effects did the war have on each side of the conflict?

Many things influenced the United States to go into the Korean War, such as territorial advancements, fear of communism, etc. At the end of WW2, a conference was held by three world leaders: Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill. During the war, meetings were held with the leaders from the United States, Soviet Union, and Great Britain. They spent a lot of time talking about territorial lines to be used after WW2 and how politics would carry out for the countries of Europe. Hardly any time was spent discussing the parts in the world where the war was going on. While the Yalta Conference was going on, the president of the United States suggested a kind of "trusteeship" be created with the purpose of ruling over Korea when the war was finished.¹ Stalin sided with him, but he wanted the trusteeship to be brief. Arrangements for the future of Korea stayed faint. United States and Soviet military strategists came to terms that when the Red Army joined the battle facing Japan, they would advance to Korea.² (Isserman, Chap. 2, 2016) These agreements were not very clear, which may have caused the U.S. to be confused on June 25, 1950, the day NKPA attacked the

¹ U.S. State Department. "Yalta Conference Agreements." *American History Online*, Facts On File, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=103398&itemid=WE52&primarySourceId=13719. Accessed 14 Feb. 2018.

² Isserman, Maurice. "Causes of the Korean War." *Korean War, Fourth Edition*, Chelsea House, 2016. *American History*, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=103398&itemid=WE52&articleId=398682. Accessed 14 Feb. 2018.

South. The U.S. spent five days strategizing their next move, carefully planning every decision.

On June 27, responding to the attack from North Korea on South Korea, the U.S. launched its first of many air and naval strikes back on North Korea, leading into the start of the Korean War. Twenty-four hours after the attack, the U.S. sent bomber and fighter planes to the fight in Korea. General Douglas MacArthur was placed in total command of the United Nations forces to help South Korea fight the war. On June 30, 1950, South Korean forces were surprised when they heard the news of North Korea invading the 38th parallel. At the end of the first week of the Korean War, South Korea had suffered 44,000 casualties.³ (Isserman, Chap. 1, 2016) The American and South Korean forces were not prepared for the invasion from the North. However, during the fighting, there were peace efforts made to find the light at the end of the tunnel.

The efforts to find peace were a long tough road, but eventually it ended up working out in the end. In the beginning of the war, Truman said on June 29, 1950, that the conflict in Korea was not a war, it was rather “police action” so that other communist nations wouldn’t join in the fight in Korea.⁴ (Uschan, 2003, pg. 79) Ambassadors sent by UN Command, headed by U.S. Navy Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, made contact the first time alongside their opposites from Communist China and North Korea during a peace discussion on July 10, 1951. They assembled in the communist city Kaesong in South Korea. The peace discussion quickly turned negative. The arguing went back and forth

³Isserman, Maurice. “Korean War.” *Korean War, Fourth Edition*, Chelsea House, 2016. *American History*, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=103398&itemid=WE52&articleId=398681. Accessed 14 Feb. 2018.

⁴“Psychological Warfare: Words as Weapons.” *Weapons of War*, by Michael V. Uschan, Lucent Books, 2003, pp. 79–92.a

without end regarding problems like exchanging prisoners of war and the location of the line separating the two nations. The discussions were continuously in danger of ending. Communists stopped the discussions in August 1951. Peace talks didn't pick up again until October 1951 in a different place, a village called Panmunjom in southern North Korea. After barely any progress was made, in October 1952, the UN ambassadors left. Later, in April 1953, the first sign of progression was made, leading way to peace between the two nations. The harsh fighting continued and thousands upon thousands of lives were lost, both civilians and military. The effects finally got through to the people and a new administration was headed for the office, looking for the end of the war.⁵ (Isserman, Chap. 7, 2016) The new president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, had similar plans to Truman, but with his own twist.

With a new presidency, breaking the 20 year democratic cycle of presidents, Eisenhower, a republican, had new plans for the Korean War. On February 2, 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower gave his State of the Union address in which he talked about many things, but one very important topic he covered was Korea. During the part of the speech on Korea, he made a very bold statement "I am, therefore, issuing instructions that the Seventh Fleet no longer be employed to shield Communist China. This order implies no aggressive intent on our part," depending on how you look at this, it could be potentially good, or it could be a terrible move.⁶ (Eisenhower, 1953) By making this

⁵Isserman, Maurice. "Peace Negotiations and the End of the Korean War." *Korean War, Fourth Edition*, Chelsea House, 2016. *American History*, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=103398&itemid=WE52&articleId=398675. Accessed 14 Feb. 2018.

⁶ Eisenhower, Dwight D. "State of the Union Address, 1953." *American History, Facts On File*, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=103398&itemid=WE52&primarySourceId=2600. Accessed 14 Feb. 2018.

move, President Eisenhower was no longer guarding Communist China with the United States naval fleet. He opened up room for negotiation by taking away the naval protection that Communist China had from the U.S., however this also could have negatively affected the U.S. by making the communists think that the U.S. did not want to reach a peace agreement by taking away the alliance they had. Eisenhower's speech had not reached out for peace, but the U.S. was still looking to end the war.



The prisoners of war held captive by the UN forces

In the summer of 1953, the peace negotiations were finally making progress and the end of the war was coming near. The UN and communists made an exchange at the end of April of sick or wounded prisoners. The UN received 684 sick or wounded prisoners, in exchange for 6,670 sick or wounded communists soldiers. Only two

⁷ *North Korean and Chinese Prisoners of War.*
online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=103398&itemid=WE52&iid=37469. Accessed 14 Feb. 2018.

months later, July of 1953, the armistice agreement was nearing. After two years of fighting, the war was almost at its end. On July 27, 1953, at 10 A.M., the armistice agreement was signed by Major General William K. Harrison, on the UN side, and on the North Korean side, Lieutenant General Nam Il. However, the war didn't officially end until twelve hours later at 10 P.M. During those twelve hours, the fighting had continued and more lives were lost.⁸ (Isserman, Chap. 7, 2016) Both armies lost a lot of people during the war, all of this loss for what cause? What did they gain, from all the blood, sweat, and tears that were spent in the war?

Both sides went through a lot of loss during the Korean War, but it was all for a cause worth fighting for. Millions of lives were lost, thousands of casualties were suffered by the U.S. soldiers, and about half a million casualties were suffered by the communists. The border was barely changed, however South Korea was saved from communism. The North Koreans, they gained barely anything, however it was their decision to try and invade the South Koreans, so unless they had won the war, they wouldn't have gained much of anything anyways. In the North, things stayed about the same as how they were in the beginning of the war, with Kim Il Sung remaining in power for 40 years. However, in the South, the leadership of Syngman Rhee did not last that long. Seven years after the war was over, the South's leadership had changed. Rhee, the president during the Korean War, being a dictator with a mix democratic ideas and dictatorship ruling, was thrown out due to the South Koreans wanting a total democratic

⁸Isserman, Maurice. "Peace Negotiations and the End of the Korean War." *Korean War, Fourth Edition*, Chelsea House, 2016. *American History*, online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=103398&itemid=WE52&articleId=398675. Accessed 14 Feb. 2018.

nation. This change in political standpoint as a nation was caused by a student uprising in 1960. In the end, both sides received what they had wanted for the most part.

In the end, I think that many things went into the Korean War, however the U.S. could have stayed out of the war and allowed the Koreans to become a communist nation instead of intervening and losing the lives of countless men. The Korean War could have been prevented if the United States had honored a territorial agreement made with the Soviet Union. Yes, the agreement at the Yalta Conference was vague, however the U.S. still had known that Stalin was planning on pushing forward onto the border of North and South Korea. They could have left the communists to take over Korea and allowed it to be a unified nation, this may have been a better outcome than losing the lives of so many people. If the U.S. had not intervened, they would still have 54,246 soldiers alive and well. Instead, they fought for a country on the other side of the world; the U.S. had been warned to stay out of this fighting and let the communists push forward on the border. The Cold War may have had some effect on the judgement of the U.S., but that is still no excuse to sending 54,246 soldiers onto the battlefield to die. So, in conclusion the Korean War didn't change many things, other than the mass loss of lives from both sides, but it did stop South Korea from becoming a communist nation.

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This article by Maurice Isserman was very helpful as it explained many key parts as to why the Korean War began.

"Psychological Warfare: Words as Weapons." Weapons of War, by Michael V. Uschan, Lucent Books, 2003, pp. 79–92.

The chapter "Psychological Warfare" from the book "Weapons of War" showed the psychological part of war that both sides had to go through to fight the physical war.