

The Korean War: 60 years later

Wayne Price

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Background: The Korean War

The Korean War of 1950–1953 has been called “the Forgotten War” or “the Unknown War.” In the section on Military History at my local Barnes & Noble bookstore, there are many volumes on World War II and on the Vietnam War and even on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, but nothing at all on Korea. This is typical.

However, in many ways it was a turning point in world history after World War II. It solidified the pattern of the Cold War of “peripheral” wars but no World War III. It excused the re-armament of the United States, which, among other effects, was a cause of the post-war boom. And for Koreans, it froze in place the painful division of their ancient nation.

The Korean War can only be understood as a confluence of a number of distinct stresses. There was the inter-imperialist conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The U.S. came out of the war as the dominant world power, militarily, politically, and economically. Stalin’s Russia was much weaker than the U.S. (which led to illusions on the left that it was more peaceful). But both powers ruled other countries and both had nuclear bombs, which threatened to exterminate humanity.

But this was not the only conflict. There was also the Korean class struggle of peasants and workers against the landlord class and the capitalists. There was the civil war between two Korean states, each seeking to unify the nation under its own rule. And there was the national liberation struggle of the Koreans, first against the Japanese and their collaborators and then against the U.S. and its collaborators.

History

The Japanese empire formally annexed Korea in 1910 and ruled it until the end of World War II. As colonial regimes went, it was especially brutal and cruel. Thousands of Koreans were forcibly moved about to serve in Japanese factories in Korea and Japan. Many were conscripted into the Japanese army. Korean women were forced to be “comfort women” for the Japanese army. The Korean language was banned in favor of Japanese.

Of course there was resistance in Korea. And many fled the peninsula to join the large community of Korean nationals who had long lived in Manchuria and northeastern China (at one time this had even been part of a Korean kingdom). There they formed guerrilla armies, in alliance with the Chinese Communists, to fight the Japanese. Indeed, whole “Chinese” Communist forces were made up of Koreans. Thousands of Koreans participated in the following Chinese civil war which overthrew Chiang Kai-shek.

Other Koreans collaborated with the Japanese. This included the landlord and capitalist classes and also those who became officers in the Japanese army and police force.

With the end of the World War, hundreds of “people’s committees” were formed throughout Korea. Most were leftist and nationalist, composed of local activists, but not dominated by the Communists (Workers Party). These began to create a unified government.

The U.S. military divided Korea at the 38th parallel, an imaginary line, for the Russians to take the surrender of the Japanese above the line and the U.S. below it. The Russians accepted this “temporary” division. The northern section had most of Korean industry at the time; the southern

section had most of the population (at least 2/3rds). It was expected that a united government would be formed.

In the South, the U.S. military suppressed the people's committees, banned worker and peasant unions, and repressed leftists. Instead it built a regime based on the Korean collaborators with the Japanese. To make this look good, it imported Syngman Rhee, a Korean nationalist who had spent decades in the U.S. He built an authoritarian state, the Republic of Korea, with "democratic" trappings (elections, etc.), but with murder of opponents and outlawry of the left.

In the North, the Russian army had brought in a set of former fighters in the Communist guerrilla forces. They were led by Kim Il Sung. They co-opted the people's committees, and set up a Russian-style Stalinist dictatorship, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea. They broke up the old landlord class and took over capitalist industry. They did not lead the peasants and workers to power. Instead they built up a new, collectivized, bureaucratic ruling class and established the state as the agent of capital accumulation (state capitalism).

Stalin had less interest in Eastern Asia than he did in Eastern Europe, where he tightly controlled the puppet states. He had tried to hold back Mao from completely overthrowing the Chiang regime (which Mao did not forget). He had incomplete control over the North Koreans, who were genuine leaders of a national liberation struggle and who could play off China against Russia.

In October to November 1946, there were sizeable uprisings in the South against the Japanese-collaborationist, pro-landlord, regime. These were put down with great repression, including the use of the U.S. military. In April 1948 there was a large scale uprising on Cheju Island, which was also suppressed. In October 1948, mutinies and rebellions in the South led to guerrilla warfare throughout large parts of South Korea, in some places lasting until the outbreak of the official war. (For details about the South Korean uprisings and guerrilla war, see the books by Cumings.)

The two Korean regimes each declared their intention to unify Korea under their state. They built up armies and posed them at the 38th parallel. Each engaged in small boundary crossings and provocations of the other. The U.S. deliberately held back some materiel from the Southern army, to keep it from being able to invade the North, as its government and army threatened to do.

In the event, it was the North which attacked the South, in June 1950. This was not under the orders of Stalin, but Kim Il Sung had apparently gotten permission from Stalin and at least consulted with the Chinese. However, it was his state's own interests which drove him. (When it happened, the Soviet Union was actually boycotting the UN's Security Council, so it was unable to veto the UN's endorsement of the U.S. war.)

At first, the Korean People's Army (the North) smashed through the South's armed forces (the Republic of Korea Army), which collapsed, fled, or surrendered. The U.S. military did not do much better. The North drove the U.S. and the South Koreans back to the southeastern port of Pusan, taking 90 percent of Korea by August. Meanwhile they carried out land reform wherever they could and imposed their own rule.

But the U.S. and its allies (especially the British) immediately responded. Under the orders of President Truman, they flooded into Korea, officially under the flag of the UN (although the US was the main force and would have gone in without the UN). They built up in the south and then, in September, made an amphibious landing at Inchon Peninsula, behind North Korean lines. Now it was the turn of the Northern forces to scramble in retreat.

The U.S./UN could have driven the North back to the 38th parallel and declared victory—especially since the Chinese Communists threatened to intervene if the U.S. went into the North. But the U.S. and ROK forces did go into the North, in October, driving toward the Chinese border (the Yalu River). The Southern forces took over Northern cities and villages and began to expand their state.

The Chinese Communists saw this as an attack on their own revolution. In fact, there were forces in the U.S. that did see the Korean War as a stepping stone toward attacking China. The U.S. navy was dispatched to the Taiwan straits to prevent the Chinese Communists from finishing their own civil war by pursuing Chiang into Taiwan.

As they had promised, the Chinese poured in during October, and linked up with the North Korean forces. By the end of January, they had trapped the U.S. and South Korean military and drove them back down to around the original parallel. Now the two sides spent two years with a World War I-type stalemate, with trench warfare and back-and-forth small attacks.

Throughout the last years, the U.S. used its industrialized military power against its enemy—and against the Korean people. U.S. planes dropped bombs up and down the North and parts of the South. Incendiary bombs were used to burn down cities and napalm was widely used against the population. Every northern city and most towns were wiped out. Finally the U.S. bombed the two main irrigation dams of the North, causing gigantic flooding and loss of life. Meanwhile the U.S. and the South treated refugees from the war as enemies and committed a series of massacres.

There was also very serious discussion within the U.S. government about possibly using nuclear bombs in Korea or China. There were airplane flights over North Korea to practice for possible atomic bomb dropping. Thankfully, the U.S. decided against it each time. Tensions within the U.S. government over the conduct of the unpopular war rose so high, that President Truman had to fire his leading general, Douglas MacArthur, for advocating nuclear bombing and the expansion of the war into China.

After two years of negotiations, in July 1953, the war ended in an armistice, which is to say that officially it never ended (and the South never signed it). There had been misjudgments on all sides. The North had been sure that the U.S. would not back up the South in a big way. The U.S. had been sure that the Chinese would not come in if the U.S. went into the North. After three years of war the peninsula was devastated, more than 3 million Koreans were dead, and millions of refugees wandered across the blasted landscape. Yet the two sides were back where they had started (the Demilitarized Zone being pretty close to the 38th parallel).

Nearly 35 thousand U.S. soldiers had died. The war had become very unpopular and President Truman's support was at an all-time low; he decided not to run again. Unlike the later Vietnam war, there was no peace movement, especially given the rise in anti-communist hysteria at the time. Instead, the Republican "Ike" Eisenhower was elected U.S. president on an implied promise to end the war.

The Response of the Left

Leftists in the U.S., Western Europe, and elsewhere had one of three opinions:

(1) Liberals and reform socialists (social democrats) generally supported the U.S. side. They were impressed by the argument that the North Koreans had started the war (untrue and meaningless) by crossing an international border (not true). They bought into the claim that this was

not U.S. aggression but a UN “police action” (when the U.S. was actually imposing its will on a colonized nation, against the wishes of a majority of its people, and using the UN as a cover). This was part of the liberal/social democratic left’s support for Western imperialism.

(2) Some leftists (socialists and liberals) supported the Communist side of the war. They saw the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and North Korea as “socialist” and progressive. The orthodox Trotskyists saw these countries as ruled by “workers’ states” (“degenerated” or “deformed”) which should be defended against capitalism. Actually they were state-capitalist dictatorships which the workers had no control over but which treated the workers similarly to the way Western capitalism did.

They also saw the Korean War as a war of national liberation against the main imperialist power, the United States. They saw it as part of the world-wide revolution against colonialism and imperialism. This included the Chinese revolution (including the Chinese intervention in Korea), the struggle for independence of India, the national struggles in Africa and the Middle East, and efforts of Latin American countries to assert themselves.

This part of their analysis had a lot of truth to it. But the defeat of the working class in Europe and the U.S. put limits on these liberation struggles. They were unable to go beyond Stalinist or bourgeois nationalist programs—without the program of internationalist working class revolution. While they made some improvements in the lives of ordinary people, they could not break out of subordination to the world capitalist system (which included Russian state capitalism). For this reason, among others, it was a dangerous mistake to idealize the nationalist/Stalinist governments of these states. This was true no matter how much it was necessary to be in solidarity with their people against imperialism.

(3) A few leftists rejected both Stalinism and Western capitalism. This included most anarchists as well as dissident Trotskyists, radical pacifists, and a few others. These rejected both sides in the Korean War. Holding this view, Natalia Sedova, Trotsky’s widow, resigned from the Trotskyist Fourth International (see Sedova Trotsky, 1951).

These militants were correct to oppose the U.S. side of the war, to oppose the South Korean regime of collaborators with the Japanese and the U.S., and to reject the fraud of the UN police action. They were right to demand an immediate end to the war and the withdrawal of the U.S. troops.

They were also undoubtedly right to reject the analysis of the Communist states, including North Korea, as socialist or working class or progressive. These were reactionary, oppressive, state-capitalist, governments, allied with the imperialist state of the Soviet Union.

However, in my opinion, such leftists tended to overlook the degree of independence of North Korea and China, seeing them as puppets of Stalin’s imperialism (which they were not). They underestimated the extent to which North Korea and China were motivated by a genuine desire to be free from imperialism, a desire supported by their people. (The leftists also had a reasonable fear of the Korean War setting off World War III.) While the anarchists and others were right to not support the Communist Party dictatorships, they should have expressed solidarity with the oppressed people of Korea who wanted to be united and free of Japanese and U.S. imperialism and its stooges.

This is a discussion of broad positions. There is a history of Korean anarchists and libertarian socialists. I am not making tactical suggestions of what Korean anarchists should have done, before or during the Korean War, if any had survived the Japanese and the Stalinists. Clearly the pro-Western forces and the Stalinist-nationalists did an awful job between them in the destruc-

tion caused by the Korean War. Since the war, things have changed in significant ways in Korea (as in the rest of the world). There is now a chance for a better politics which can really end national division, capitalist (and state-capitalist) exploitation, and imperialist domination, in Korea and everywhere else.

Recommended Readings on the Korean War

Cumings, Bruce (2005). *Korea's Place in the Sun; A Modern History* (updated edition). NY: Norton.

Cumings, Bruce (2010). *The Korean War; A History*. NY: Modern Library.

Halberstam, David (2007). *The Coldest Winter; America and the Korean War*. NY: Hyperion.

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