

Korea
Why is it called
“The Forgotten War?”

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Annotated Chronology

1945. Japan surrenders. Their Korean colony is returned to the Korean people. The Russians occupied Korea in the North stopping at the 38th Parallel. The Americans occupied the South.

1946-49. The Russians installed Kim Il-Sung into the leadership of the North. He had a reputation as a guerilla fighter against the Japanese. In reality, he spent most of the war in a Russian military base. Upon returning to Northern Korea, he began to purge the local communist Korean organizations, slaughtered the Christian and nationalist opposition, and built up a strong military with Russian tanks and air support.

Syngman Rhee was supported as the leader of Southern Korea. In his youth, he had been an opponent of Japanese colonial rule. He fled to America and stayed abroad for nearly forty years. He had very little support from the local Koreans. He was also hampered by his marriage to a non-Korean – a German woman. Upon arriving back in Korea, he re-mobilized the Japanese troops and police to bring order to Korea, allied himself with the pro-Japanese industrialists, and began to destroy the alleged pro-Communist and nationalistic organizations. In 1946, he slaughtered one third of the population of Jeju Island, and in 1947 purged and imprisoned or killed members of the Korean Officer Corps. In a program called Operation Rat Killer, he worked with the Americans in killing about 125,000 Korean opposition leaders, including the assassination of national leaders.

A United Nations sponsored Plebescite to re-unite Korea failed. The left in South Korea refused to participate because Rhee was ordained to be president. The North refused to cooperate because it feared the South would become dominate.

1949. Skirmishes occurred on the 38th parallel. Initially, President Rhee appeared to be the aggressor. The North was better prepared than the South militarily and diplomatically. Truman was cutting back on the army and did not want a war in Asia. He was not happy with Rhee. Secretary of State Dean Acheson implied that America would not support Rhee in case of an attack.

Stalin, too, was not impressed by Kim's military strength or even leadership. However, Kim had Korean troops who had fought with the Chinese Communists against the Japanese. He also believed that the South would rise up against Rhee. Kim made two trips to Moscow asking for help. The first time he was rebuffed. The second time, Stalin gave a very qualified assent. And even then, he did not follow through.

1950. June 25. The war begins. There is much controversy about who began or instigated it. At first, it appeared that Rhee had attacked and the North had counter-attacked. Irrespective of who started the war, the North was better prepared. Its armed forces were equipped with Soviet tanks, fighter planes, and attack bombers. Its logistics were not reliable. It forced many Korean civilians to move supplies. These were later indiscriminately bombed and strafed by American planes and arms. Hundreds of civilians lost their lives in this army of civilian hostages. (The same was true of the South)

The Northern armies reached Seoul within three days. Rhee's army was routed. Despite the crushing blow and questionable loyalty of Southern forces, the South did not explode into civil war. The Northern assault nevertheless had a good chance of victory if not for Western reaction.

One reason the war was easily "forgotten" is that it had different names. Truman called it a police action so he could get it past Congress. It was not officially a war. It was the Korean Conflict. At first, the South called it 6-25. Later it was called the Korean War. The North called it the Fatherland Liberation War. In China, it was known as the War to Resist America and Aid Korea. In fact, like Truman, Mao Tse Tung of China refused at first to call it a war.

Western Reaction

On June 20th, five days before the war, Dean Acheson, Secretary of State, told Congress that a War in Korea was not likely. The first reports to America on June 25th were that Rhee had invaded the North. Truman believed that this was the beginning of World War Three.

On June 25th, the UN Security Council legitimized a UN force to support the South. The Soviet Union had boycotted the Security Council and so did not veto the resolution.

The War is forgotten because the origins and the reactions were unclear. If it was a Civil War, then the UN had no business in interfering. If it was an international war, then what evidence was there that the Russians were involved – other than supplying weapons. There were no Russian Divisions. This was the beginning of proxy wars.

Truman's response was based on several reasons: 1) anti-Communism was by now a major ideology in America. 2) The Truman Doctrine in Europe had been created to stop Communism anywhere. The so-called police action in Korea was an extension of that Doctrine in Asia.

Korea became Truman's War. Although sixteen nations joined the UN forces, the US provided nearly 40% of the ground forces, South Korea had over 50%. The US added up to over 85% of the naval power and 93% of the air power.

South Korea had 670,000 dead. The US had nearly 40,000 dead.

2 million. This was about 10% of the population. The North Koreans lost over 25% of their population through death, casualties or as refugees.

The US suffered over 100,000 casualties and 8,142 MIAs. Our other allies were not as involved in combat. The British suffered 1,100 dead and 2,600 wounded. They had nearly 1,100 MIA.

There are still discoveries and returning of body parts of Americans to this day. The most recent was in April 2007.

In August 1950, the North Korean troops had driven the Americans and South Korean forces down into the Southeast corner of the Korean peninsula. The Western forces had control of less than 10% of the territory of South Korea. They were being surrounded and defeat seemed imminent.

The counterattack was an incredible effort. The US was able to use its arsenal in Japan to support the troops in Korea. More importantly, it used the air and naval power to incinerate and destroy nearly every structure in the South – bridges, buildings, roads, North Korean army units and military hardware. The result was not only a devastating attack on the Northern soldiers, but also on the local population.

In the last years of the Second World War, the Japanese had exploited Korea for the war effort. Millions were undernourished because the rice was exported to Japan; hundreds of thousands became slave workers in Japanese industry and agriculture, and Japanese colonial rule killed off any resistance. Five years later, the Koreans were again being slaughtered. Not until the 1980s would the Koreans be able to realize a normal existence of adequate food, health, and freedom.

But the North was also responsible for the West's restored power. Kim Il-Sung had believed, like Napoleon and Hitler, that the invasion (of Russia for the European dictators) of Korea would be short-term. He did not give the soldiers enough supplies – militarily, or food and clothing. They had almost literally run down the peninsula to Pusan, chasing the enemy when they found that they were isolated from new equipment, and provisions.

By early September, the Americans had been able to rush in enough troops that their 180,000 fresh troops outnumbered the exhausted Northern contingent of 100,000.

The landing on Inchon in Northwest Korea was both a reason to be overjoyed and regretful.

General Douglas MacArthur used a Hail Mary shot to reverse the fortunes of the war.

Inchon was a remorseless and dangerous harbor that had tides of over 15 feet. This meant that any naval invasion force could be stuck on sandbars and would thus be an easy target for shore batteries. However, the North Koreans did not expect such an adventurous gamble, and their forces were thinned out.

The Pentagon was against such a daring attack. In fact, MacArthur only gave them his detailed plan after he began the attack. This resulted in poor communication with the American army around Pusan. MacArthur was a Maverick. His own background was one of unpredictable and iconoclastic behavior. He had used military power against the bonus army from World War One, had left his troops in the Philippines under desperate situations, had seriously neurotic relationships with women, and was willing to place himself in precarious battle situations. He was the American viceroy in Japan during the occupation and took no orders from anyone.

The attack harmed American coordination on the peninsula. But even worse, it went to MacArthur's head. Once he landed on Inchon, he had an almost unobstructed ride to Seoul. The North Koreans who had been cut off from their logistics ran back to the North. Only one fourth of them made it past Seoul – just about 25,000 other soldiers surrendered in mass numbers. The UN took 135,000 prisoners.

MacArthur knew that the supply bases for the North Korean troops were in China. He also knew that the North Koreans could not fight that well. So he told Truman and others that the Chinese were not a threat. This was in denial of many reports that the Chinese were massing and would enter the war if they felt they or their ally was threatened.

MacArthur crossed the 38th parallel and headed up to the Yalu. He had been warned by Truman and others to proceed cautiously. However, he bombed the dams and other facilities in Manchuria. This made the Chinese feel that they were being threatened.

Unknown to the Chinese, but known to Truman and the Pentagon, MacArthur proposed that the Americans use nuclear weapons against the Chinese bases on the Yalu. This was one reason that Truman later forced MacArthur's resignation. The other reason was that MacArthur was taping the phones of the foreign embassies in Korea (our allies), and was making secret preparations for offensive strategy.

This was the moment that could have ended the war. Stop at the 38th parallel, calm down the Chinese, and bring a democratic government to the South.

By November 30th, the American troops were at the Chosin Reservoir just south of the Chinese border. They seemed to be prepared to expand the war further. This area was rocky, and a very hostile environment. Over 100,000 Chinese troops surged from the North down into South Korea. The Chinese took over the Western side of the Korean peninsula, and let Kim's troops take over the Eastern side. With massive troop maneuvers, they chased the Americans into retreat through the mountains, the ravines, the shattered and destroyed remnants of Seoul, and the blistered landscape of Southern Korea. Just five months before, the Americans and South Koreans had been routed. This time, it was even more crushing. The American defeat resulted in the longest retreat of any American military in history. Thousands of Americans were killed in battle or by the cold and snow in the mountains. Temperatures plunged to minus 30 degrees. The Americans blew up the cities in their path so the Chinese could not find shelter. Neither could the Korean civilians.

On the January 4, 1951, the Communists seized Seoul. They fought at night and communicated with each other with cymbals and bells. It was a frightening experience for those who lugged through it.

The Chinese, like the North Koreans, had run past their logistic line. They had to stop south of Seoul and recuperate and re-fit. They were also volunteers. They did not have military experience, but were not as trained as the Western fighters. For two months, the armies gained and retreated. On March 14th, the UN forces expelled North Korea and Chinese troops from Seoul. This was the fourth time in one year that the city changed hands. Its population of 1.5 million had been reduced to 200,000. Most were in dire poverty and illness.

On April 11, 1951, MacArthur was removed from command by Truman for insubordination. This resulted in a political firestorm in D.C. Supporters of the General wanted him to run for President. He even spoke to a joint session of Congress. His bitterness infected the feeling about the war – it was not fought properly.

The new Commander, General Ridgeway, encountered fierce Chinese resistance. In April, over 700,000 Chinese troops nearly pushed the Americans to the South again. The UN command had become more knowledgeable about Korea. They counterattacked successfully and fought back just north of the 38th parallel. And there they were stopped. This resulted in a stalemate until the Armistice of 1953. The Chinese had no air power and limited arsenals – mainly hand guns, grenades and small caliber rifles.

Realizing that any move toward the North would be jeopardized by the addition of more Chinese troops in mass wave attacks, the Americans established the capacity to use nuclear weapons.

President Eisenhower went to Korea on November 29, 1952 to discuss an end to the conflict. Working diplomatically, he finally organized a cease-fire. He had secretly prepared to use nuclear weapons if fighting broke out again. The new lines were in the proximity of the 38th parallel. Thus this became the line between the two countries. After great loss of life, the Korean Peninsula had returned to the same geographical area of division that it had begun with in 1945. All the killing seemed for nothing. Up until today, there is still no peace treaty, just a very shaky armistice.

Crimes Against Civilians

Under Syngman Rhee, the United States supported the murder of tens of thousands of civilians. Torture was a common occurrence.

During the war itself, all civilians were suspect. American troops considered all civilians as hostile and were instructed to neutralize them. The mass killings of civilians was kept secret for many decades. The most famous slaughter was a railroad bridge called No Gun RI. Here, many women and children and some males in civilian clothing were running away from the conflict. They were shot down as they came through the tunnel under the bridge. Some were strafed by American planes. South Koreans also blew up bridges that were crowded with fleeing civilians.

Civilians were conscripted by both the South Koreans and North Koreans. There are estimates of 400,000 South Korean citizens being forced into slave labor by the North Korean army, of which about 250,000 died.

There are autobiographical stories in the south that claim that peasant Korean women were kidnapped from their homes to serve as comfort women or sexual slaves to the southern troops. In addition, the Americans ran prostitute centers or camps for the troops. This was true during the war, but it was more organized after the war.

POW's were mistreated by both sides. But one British investigator claimed that the POW's in American camps were treated worse than the POW's held by the Chinese. The North Koreans had their own POW camps. They were not as well run as the Chinese. North Koreans did commit atrocities against American POW's. Several thousand Americans died in North Korean POW camps.

One of the major issues at the end of the war was the future of the POW's under American control. They had been put on an island. The POW's had rebelled, resulting in

the death of many. The Chinese insisted that they be repatriated. The camps were run by the nationalist military from Taiwan. They were known to tattoo the Chinese POW's with incriminating remarks about communism. They were not able to return to China without receiving abuse. Many went to Taiwan where they became forced hostages of the nationalist Chinese army. They were often used for secret military actions or criminal acts.

One must include the horrors of brainwashing. The POW's were kept in re-education camps by the Chinese. In the first instance of its kind, several dozen Americans refused to return to the United States. They decided to live in North Korea. Some married and had families while other became low-level bureaucrats. Only a few were later repatriated. One returned to his home in southern Minnesota, changed his name, and moved to Utah to live in seclusion. The brainwashing led to many novels and movies, the most important of which was "The Manchurian Candidate."

In Korea, the novels and movies by Ahn Jyung-Hyo reflected the criticism of America's support for Syngman Rhee and its anti-communist strategy. Ahn's criticism was so stinging that the embassy tried to censor the movie. The book was written in English and was only published after the end of martial law and authoritarian rule in Korea.

After 1953, why was the war forgotten? First of all, it was not called "a war." It was officially "a police action." This terminology dictated the framework of the response to the chaos of civil and international violence on the Korean peninsula.

- 1.) The armistice resulted in a stalemate at the 38th parallel. All that destruction just for a return to 1945.
- 2.) The peace conference in Geneva in July of 1954 resulted in a hostile failure to agree on the conditions for peace. There was no finality to the war. Over 50,000 American troops remained on the peninsula. There were continuing military incursions, killings, sabotage, propaganda warfare, and paranoia. On several occasions the north invaded the area of Panmounjon. In one famous case, the North Korean soldiers axed to death an American soldier who was cutting branches of a tree that crossed over the border. In other cases, elaborate tunnels were discovered that could have brought in thousands of troops and armored vehicles across the border within a few hours for a secret attack on Seoul.
- 3.) In American foreign policy, Korea was not the central concern during the Cold War. The focus was on Europe—on NATO, on rebuilding the European economy, on creating anti-Communist governments, labor unions, and foreign policy in European capitals. East Asia was not a nuclear threat but the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies were. In addition, Eastern Europe had a military capacity in terms of its manpower and arms that was superior to America's. Another concern was in Latin America—Cuba under Castro threatened American foreign policy, and with the introduction of missiles he threatened U.S. Security.
- 4.) At Geneva in 1954, Vietnam was divided into two countries. The French were driven out. A vacuum occurred. America, under Eisenhower's warning of the domino theory, placed American advisors and later soldiers in Vietnam. This commitment to Vietnam soon pushed Korea into the background. However,

- America did “hire” over 30,000 Korean troops to fight in Vietnam. The General in charge of one division, later with American backing, became a dictatorial President of Korea. This led the Americans to cover up any bad news about Korea or the Korean War.
- 5.) The return of American troops from Korea kept a low posture. They did not have great parades, but they did have the newly passed G.I. Bill, which provided them with schooling, jobs, homes, and health care. Most Americans were just happy to have them back home. The soldiers returned at one of the most prosperous times in American economic history. If one were able-bodied and healthy, one could find a job, be promoted, and make a good income, own a home, and raise a family.
 - 6.) The sense of obligation and perhaps remorse did not become a popular or widespread attitude. The Koreans were too different. Almost no Americans spoke the Korean language. The Japanese rulers tried to eradicate Korean. There was also no Korean-American community in the continental United States. In Hawaii the Korean workers spoke Japanese and were engaged in menial agricultural and industrial tasks. Most American diplomats and even scholars relied on Japanese accounts of Korea or on the American-supported leaders of the Korean Government for their knowledge of Korea. A former ambassador from America to Seoul in the 1980’s refused to meet with Korean students for alleged radicals. He knew Chinese but not Korean.
 - 7.) The only major groups to sympathize with the Koreans were the missionaries and the churches. Korea was a center for Christianity. The northern city of Pyongyang, later the capital of North Korea, was known as the Jerusalem of Asia. Billy Graham’s family was missionaries in Pyongyang. At least one CIA officer for the U.S. had ancestors who were missionaries in Korea. Consequently, the church became one of the most important spokesmen for discussing the conditions in Korea. Among the most important was the tragic situation of tens of thousands of orphans. The church began to push for the adoption of Korean children by Americans. This was contrary to laws in America that were against interracial adoption or marriage of Caucasians with blacks or Asians. The churches got around this somewhat by claiming that these were international adoptions rather than domestic. However, the churches still demanded that the adoptees find families that had the same Christian religious commitments. Many times these children were forced to be converted and found themselves in a family that was very anti-Korean. However, these policies did influence adoption in America. In 1967 the Supreme Court ruled that interracial marriages and adoptions were Constitutional. The resulting rise in the adoption by whites of black children grew rapidly after this ruling. Yet these Korean-adopted children did not educate America about Korea. The children were raised as Americans—not Koreans. Also, almost all of them were adopted as infants so they did not know the language or culture of Korea.
 - 8.) We cannot avoid the discussion of racism. All Koreans were viewed negatively. In the war in Europe, the Germans were divided into the good and almost-innocent Germans and the bad Nazis. In the war with Japan, all Japanese were considered the same. Despite the fact that there were many who were

- internationalists and who were imprisoned for their anti-war ideas, to the Americans they were all war-mongered hordes. The treatment of Korea was similar. The Koreans as a whole had messed up their country, been a pit for American soldiers, and were not to be trusted.
- 9.) This view of Koreans was not just a native response to foreigners. Scholars of Asia mainly studied China or Japan. They carried with them the prejudices of the culture that they lived in and studied. The Japanese and Chinese as a whole despised the Koreans. In America, it was many, many decades before there were full courses on Korean civilization or Korean history. So even those who studied Asia did not obtain a fair vision or comprehension of Korean history.
 - 10.) Monuments and memorials. American memorials of the Korean War rarely represent the Koreans. Some only show the outline of the Korean peninsula. The National Memorial in Washington, D.C., provides a somber vision of infantrymen slogging through the brush with raincoats covering their bodies. There is no drama here, no heroes. Only men on a mission. Some of the statues are hidden in the brush. The visitor cannot see all the soldiers at the same time. Just like war, there is no complete picture. Furthermore, these men are not approachable. We cannot identify with the figures covered in ponchos and struggling to march ahead or retreat back to friendlier areas. There is no symbol of accomplishment, achievement, or resolution. The monument has the feel of a police search in the woods for missing child or mutilated body. Whatever they discover on this mission that mimics the war will not be worth remembering with shouts of joy or cheers of excitement.
 - 11.) The Minnesota Memorial is the most interactive of all the monuments. The outline of the soldier allows on to look at the background—the winter, spring, summer, and fall. Standing behind him, we look through the eyes of the soldier's statue. We are alone. We are about to step in a terrain that is full of violence and loneliness. It is a nightmare from which we awake and try to forget.
 - 12.) The last slide is of the UN Monument: a simple constructions of a teepee-like edifice of which each support represents an ally. There are no faces or people, just rods that are tied together at the top. One could think of a circus carnival tent. The horrors inside are the substance of fear, hate, and violence. They do not enclose a place of life, generativity, pleasure, and fulfillment.
 - 13.) This is why the Korean War is the forgotten war.

We forget because the war was not a war. It was a police action that failed to find a resolution to the original crime.