

70 years since the end of the Korean War

Part One

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This is the first of a two-part article marking the signing of the armistice that ended fighting in the three-year Korean War and entrenched the Cold War division of the Korean peninsula. Part Two is available here.

Seventy years have passed since the end of hostilities on the Korean peninsula when an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953 at Panmunjeom, which sits on the heavily militarized border between North and South Korea. The truce left Korea divided by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a four-kilometer-wide strip of land that stretches across the peninsula. This is the ongoing consequence of a conflict that exploded at the beginning of the Cold War, following the artificial division of Korea by US imperialism along the 38th parallel at the end of World War II.

The United States instigated the war to reassert its domination in Asia, particularly after the huge blow it suffered as a consequence of the 1949 Chinese Revolution. No peace treaty has ever been signed, leaving the peninsula in a formal state of war. To this day, the US maintains a diplomatic and economic blockade of North Korea, as well as a military alliance with South Korea signed on October 1, 1953. The alliance has only been strengthened in the past decade as Washington accelerated its war preparations against China which it regards as the chief threat to its global dominance. South Korea currently hosts dozens of US bases and approximately 28,500 troops.

Deep historic scars remain in Korea. The two Koreas were devastated with mass casualties and economic ruin. An estimated 2.5 million civilians were killed in the conflict itself. The North and South lost approximately 520,000 and 415,004 soldiers respectively. Another 900,000 Chinese troops were killed along with 36,940 Americans. Thousands more soldiers from US allies involved in the war also lost their lives. In Korea, millions of family members were separated from one another by the artificial division of the peninsula. Many are still unable to have any contact.

Outside of Korea, little is known about the war and far less is understood about its origins, with historian Bruce Cumings describing it as both “a forgotten war and a never-known war.”^[1] What prevails is the propaganda promoted by US imperialism to justify the barbarism of its first major neo-colonial intervention after World War II. In this narrative, North Korea invaded South Korea in an unprovoked attack on June 25, 1950. The US and its allies led a war sanctified by the United Nations to defend the democratic South against the aggression of the totalitarian North.

In reality, these claims are nothing more than gross distortions and outright lies. The commencement of full-scale hostilities was the end result of a process set in motion by US imperialism when it unilaterally divided Korea in 1945 and then installed a regime in the south that lacked any significant popular support and could only rule through repression.

What were the Korean War’s origins?

Strategically located in Northeast Asia between Japan, Russia and China, Korea has long been the focus of imperialist machinations. Korea came under the sole influence of Japan following its defeat of Tsarist Russia in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. In 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea and maintained its brutal colonial rule over the peninsula for 35 years until Japan’s surrender in World War II on August 15, 1945.

The division of Korea and subsequent eruption of the Korean War can only be understood within the broad context of the crisis and instability wracking global capitalism in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The international conflict, which in the Far East had begun with the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, had left behind unprecedented death and destruction in Europe and Asia. The acute economic and social crisis was fueling a groundswell of opposition in the international working class that had been through two world wars and the Great Depression. The major imperialist powers confronted anti-colonial rebellions that were developing throughout Asia.

The ability of the US, which emerged from the war as the dominant imperialist power, to restabilize world capitalism depended on two factors: its own overwhelming economic strength and the betrayals by the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy of post-war revolutionary movements.

Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin subordinated the international working class to an alliance of so-called democratic powers. In the wartime conferences with the US and British leaders at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam about post-war arrangements, he cynically bartered the fate of whole countries and their working classes in return for a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

Throughout Western Europe, the Stalinist communist parties were instructed to subordinate the opposition of the working class to the establishment of bourgeois parliamentary democracy—socialist revolution was off the agenda. In France and Italy in particular, the Stalinists played the key role in disarming the partisans and reviving the political fortunes of discredited bourgeois parties. Stalinist leaders entered into postwar capitalist governments as ministers who were central in suppressing strikes and protests.

In Asia, Stalinist parties were instrumental in assisting the return of the colonial powers in country after country and the stabilization of bourgeois rule. In Japan, amid a massive growth of the trade unions and industrial action, the Communist Party portrayed the American occupation as the conveyor of the democratic revolution and assisted in suppressing strikes.

Having restabilized capitalism in Western Europe, US imperialism, determined to halt any growth of Soviet influence, went on the offensive. In March 1947, US President Harry Truman announced his policy of “containment” when he told Congress that the US had to support “free peoples” who were resisting “armed minorities” and “outside pressures.” The Truman doctrine, which marked the onset of the protracted Cold War, became the pretext for US-sponsored coups, military interventions and backing for dictatorships around the world—all in the name of “democracy.”

Prelude to Korea's occupation

In March 1943, Washington first raised the issue of so-called “trusteeship”—a euphemism for colonial rule—for countries like Korea, claiming it was necessary to “educate” Koreans in self-government. Even though it had agreed to independence for Korea “in due course,” Washington, well aware that an independent Korea could orient to the Soviet Union, sought and got verbal agreement from Stalin in May 1945 for a trusteeship in Korea.

However, with the successful testing of the atomic bomb in July 1945, Washington drastically altered its initial plans to ensure American predominance in post-war Asia. In the words of Bruce Cumings, the US strategy became to “abjure diplomacy, draw the Pacific War to a quick close, and exclude the Soviets from significant participation in postwar East Asian affairs.”^[2]

Initially, the US had been willing to allow Moscow some influence in Manchuria and Korea in exchange for the Soviet Union breaking the non-aggression pact it had signed with Japan in 1941 and entering the war in the Pacific, which it did on August 8. Washington believed that the elite Japanese Kwantung Army occupying Korea and Manchuria would inflict a heavy cost on the Red Army, one that the US military would not have to pay.

The following day, the US dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, just three days after the August 6 bombing of Hiroshima, inflicting vast death and destruction on the civilian populations. US imperialism justified these monstrous war crimes as necessary to save the lives of American soldiers in an invasion, even though Tokyo was already indicating its willingness to surrender. The real purpose was to threaten the Soviet Union and to demonstrate to the world that the US would dictate terms for the postwar settlement.

Washington had not calculated, however, that Japan's Kwantung Army would rapidly collapse, raising its fear that the Soviet Red Army would seize the whole of the Korean peninsula. On August 9, the day after the declaration of war on Japan, the Soviet military commenced operations in Korea and within days had control of a number of Korean cities and towns.

Preoccupied with the imminent surrender of Japan throughout Asia, the US scrambled for a response. Washington's war planners made the unilateral decision during meetings throughout August 10 and 11 to divide Korea into separate occupation zones at the 38th parallel. Just as he had horse-traded with US imperialism in Europe, Stalin accepted the division without a murmur of opposition.

US brushes aside the Korean People's Republic

A month later, the US military, led by General John Hodge, arrived in Korea on September 8, 1945 to establish its occupation, formally known as the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK).

However, the outgoing Japanese colonial government had already handed off administrative functions to Yeo Un-hyeong. With a collection of both left- and right-wing bourgeois nationalists, Yeo had established the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence and then the Korean People's Republic (KPR) on September 6. Around the country, People's Committees were set up to carry out the functions of local government.

Only the most right-wing sections of the Korean bourgeoisie oriented themselves towards the US military. This included the Korean Democratic Party (KDP), which was founded on September 16, 1945. The KDP was filled with wealthy businessmen and large landlords who supported US plans for “trusteeship” in Korea as a means of protecting their property interests and their lives from reprisals.

Many of these conservatives, even those who had been involved in the independence movement at an earlier period, had been Japanese collaborators who would go on to form the basis of the South Korean government. One such collaborator was Kim Seong-su, who founded the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper and who would go on to serve under Syngman Rhee as South Korea's vice-president from 1951 to 1952 during the Korean War.

The US had no standing or support among the Korean working class and peasantry and instead set about attempting to create a regime out of nothing. USAMGIK integrated the KDP into its operations, terrified that the KPR would spark opposition to the occupation. USAMGIK subsequently banned workers' strikes on December 8 and outlawed the KPR along with the People's Committees on December 12.

To deal with public opposition, the US retained the bulk of the Korean officers who had served in the Japanese colonial police force that had been instrumental in brutally suppressing any opposition to its colonial rule. They served the same role in supporting the US occupation.

At the same time, Washington was reliant on the Soviet Union to rubber stamp its machinations in Korea. The US was particularly concerned that the end of the repressive Japanese regime would lead to a growth in the Korean Communist Party (KCP), just as the end of the war in other countries had led to an upsurge of popular support for socialism.

The role of Stalinism

As had been the case in Japan, the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and its supporters in Korea responded to the division of Korea by lauding US imperialism. They claimed that the US military occupation was carrying out a bourgeois democratic revolution, supposedly a necessary first step before a socialist revolution in the distant future. This two-stage theory of revolution justifying support for so-called progressive bourgeois forces has always ended in disaster for the working class.

The two-stage theory was the negation of the lessons of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Its principal leaders, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, had both insisted that the so-called liberal bourgeoisie in Russia was organically incapable of carrying out essential democratic tasks. In this Theory of Permanent Revolution, which theoretically guided the Russian Revolution, Trotsky demonstrated that, in countries of a belated capitalist development like Korea, those tasks fell to the working class concentrated in the cities. Even though Korea, like Russia, was a largely agrarian country, its young proletariat, in fighting against colonial oppression, could mobilize the peasant masses and come to power. In doing so, it would be compelled to make deep inroads into capitalist private ownership and to turn to the international working class as part of the fight for world socialist revolution.

In Korea, the two-stage theory took a particularly grotesque form. To preserve relations with the US, the Soviet Union relied not on promotion of a non-existent progressive wing of the Korean capitalist class but claimed that imperialism itself was carrying out a bourgeois democratic revolution.

Under the influence of Moscow, the South Pyongan Province Committee of the Korean Communist Party, for example, stated on October 6, 1945: “Due to the lack of clear general understanding of

international problems, the party has committed errors arising from a sectarian tendency, and has treated the historically progressive characteristics of the American and British allies ambiguously.”^[3]

It continued: “Our Korea succeeded in its bloodless revolution by the driving force of the Soviet Union and by the contributions of Great Britain and the United States, and the revolution is now in the process of final completion.”^[4]

The claim that US imperialism was completing the bourgeois revolution in Korea was a complete fraud. But the Soviet regime relied on this lie to strangle the class struggle in Korea, hoping the US would allow it to have a voice within a unified Korea. Above all else, the Soviet regime was terrified that working-class uprisings in other countries would spark political opposition at home in the Soviet Union.

In its accommodation to the US, Moscow sought to muzzle the KCP, which had widespread influence, acquired through years of struggle against Japanese colonialism. Historian Suh Dae-sook remarked that the KCP had “succeeded in wresting control of the Korean revolution from the Nationalists; they planted a deep core of Communist influence among the Korean people, particularly the students, youth groups, laborers, and peasants. Their fortitude and, at times, obstinate determination to succeed had a profound influence on Korean intellectuals and writers.”^[5]

The establishment of separate regimes in North and South Korea

The US, British and Soviet foreign ministers met in Moscow from December 16–27, 1945 to discuss postwar issues, including Korea. Any independence for Korea was pushed aside, as the Soviet foreign minister agreed to the US demand for the establishment of a trusteeship.

The Moscow conference called for joint control by the Soviet and US militaries in North and South Korea respectively, and the formation of a provisional government of a unified Korea through a Joint Commission. Then, after such a government was formed, a four-power “trusteeship” that consisted of the US, the UK, the Soviet Union, and Nationalist China, would be established.

Washington, however, consciously sabotaged these plans, refusing to allow the Soviet Union any say in the proposed provisional government. The American side in the Joint Commission, which opened on March 20, 1946, made clear that Moscow would have to accept US demands in Korea. If not, the US would carry out its agenda in the south alone. The Commission lasted until mid-May without agreement.

With Moscow now calling for a trusteeship in line with US demands, Washington exclusively backed a group of extreme right-wing Koreans opposed to the Soviet Union which, following the US lead, now claimed to oppose trusteeship. These included the KDP and the so-called National Society for the Rapid Realization of Korean Independence around Syngman Rhee.

Rhee had left Korea in 1910, spending decades in the United States, and did not return until the US military flew him back on October 16, 1945. He had little influence in Korea and was largely an unknown figure. Instead, he had well-placed connections within the US government, particularly the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, while also being a rabid and unhinged anti-communist.

The Soviets were opposed to the inclusion of such right-wing groups and stated that those against the Moscow agreement should not be consulted in the Joint Commission. While the US excluded left-leaning South Koreans from any participation, it then hypocritically accused the Soviet Union of working against the formation of a new provisional government.

At the same time, Stalin took steps to formally dissolve the KCP into a

petty bourgeois organization that he hoped would be more acceptable to Washington. In July 1946, he ordered the party in the north and south of Korea to merge with middle-class and left-wing nationalists, who had participated in the independence movement but explicitly rejected socialism.

The result was the de facto acceptance of the division of Korea with two separate organizations: the Workers’ Parties of North and South Korea, which eventually amalgamated in 1949 to form the current North Korean ruling party, the Workers’ Party of Korea.

With the onset of the Cold War, the US had no intention of making any concessions to the Soviet Union or allowing any pro-Soviet party into a future Korean government. A second round of Joint Commission negotiations opened in May 1947, but with the same lack of agreement.

Before the second round of Joint Commission talks, the US already intended to take the issue to the UN. Behind the façade of unifying Korea, Washington was working explicitly to establish a separate state in the south as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, conscious that the US would be marginalized in a unified, independent Korea.

The United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea subsequently oversaw the May 10, 1948 election of a constituent assembly in the south, which was rigged by the US occupation forces and their right-wing Korean allies. The constituent assembly elected US puppet Syngman Rhee as president on July 20, 1948 and the Republic of Korea was formally established on August 15, 1948.

North Korea responded by holding its own parliamentary elections on August 25, 1948 leading to the creation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea on September 9, 1948. Nominally, the North Korean leader was Kim Du-bong, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly. However, real political power rested with Kim Il-sung who had been installed as premier and was to become chairman of the Workers’ Party the following year.

Kim Il-sung had fought alongside Chinese guerillas in Manchuria against the Japanese in the early 1930s, but neither he nor his followers had ever been members of the KCP, nor had they participated in the Korean Communist movement. In his political outlook, he had been fundamentally a nationalist since his youth.

However, Kim also served as an officer in the Red Army and enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union after it occupied the north. With Moscow’s blessing, he was elevated to leadership positions while eliminating political opponents from within the old KCP. In the wake of the Korean War, he consolidated his unchallenged grip on power and proclaimed the concept of *juche*, or a Korean version of Stalin’s reactionary “socialism in one country.”

He held power until his death in 1994, founding what amounted to a heredity dynasty. He was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-il and then his grandson Kim Jong-un, who now leads the North.

To be continued

[1] Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, Modern Library 2010, p. 63.

[2] Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume 1: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945-1947*, Yuksabipyungsa 2002, p. 120.

[3] *Documents of Korean Communism 1918-1948*, edited by Dae-sook Suh, Princeton University Press 1970, p. 489.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Dae-sook Suh, *The Korean Communist Movement 1918-1948*, Princeton University Press 1967, p. 132.



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