

70 years since the end of the Korean War

Part Two

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This is the second part 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 One is available here.

From the outset, the US occupation forces had had to crush the resistance of the Korean working class and peasantry. Workers' anger exploded in the second half of 1946, beginning with a general strike of some 8,000 railway workers on September 23 in Busan that spread throughout the country involving as many as 251,000 workers. Rising inflation and food prices as well as unemployment drove the discontent.

Opposition to the US occupation also drove workers' anger. On October 1 in the city of Daegu, a demonstrator was killed by police, sparking mass protests and workers' and peasants' attacks on the symbols of their oppression: policemen, landlords, and government officials, many of whom had collaborated with the Japanese. The uprising lasted until mid-November before it was violently suppressed by the US military, the Korean police, which was a de facto South Korean military force, and right-wing terrorist organizations.

Hostility to the US occupation and the right-wing regime it had established, riddled with former Japanese collaborators, spurred on further popular uprisings. One of the largest took place on Jeju Island where people demonstrated against US plans for holding separate elections in 1948. A military campaign to suppress the island took place from April 3, 1948 to May 1949. Estimates vary as to the exact number, but tens of thousands were killed. Many others were arrested and tortured, all with the support of the US military government.

In total, an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Koreans opposed to the US occupation and establishment of a separate state were murdered before the Korean War even began. Historians estimate that an additional 200,000 people, accused of being left-wing, were murdered in the early days of the war.

The deeply unpopular Rhee regime, under siege from the working class and peasantry in the South, claimed to be the legitimate government of all Korea and was braying for war with the North. Throughout the summer and fall of 1949 numerous clashes took place along the border, nearly all of which were initiated by the South. Fighting continued into 1950.

Rhee also expanded the military in preparation for war. Notably, he brought in numerous Korean officers who had served as collaborators in Japan's Kwantung Army, many of whom had been responsible for attacks on Korean independence fighters.

US claims that North Korea military intervention into South Korea in June 1950 was unprovoked is quite simply a lie, and an absurd one.

Truman "loses" China and rollback

The brutality of the US occupation went hand-in-hand with Washington's concern about losing its dominant position in Asia. That fear was greatly compounded by the Chinese Revolution, which was a massive blow against US imperialism and reverberated throughout Asia.

In 1949, civil war between the forces of the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek reached its final critical stage, when the pro-American KMT regime disintegrated and Chiang fled to Taiwan. It was not an insurrection by the working class, like the October Revolution, but a military victory that culminated in the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949.

The Truman administration's "loss of China" would play a significant role in the decision to move from a policy of containment to rollback and together with its allies invade Korea in 1950. It had previously withdrawn troops in June 1949, following the Soviet Union's withdrawal in December 1948.

Truman came under significant attack in Washington. William Knowland, a Republican senator from California and strong supporter of Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Nationalists denounced Truman, claiming his administration was "aiding, abetting and giving support to the spread of communism in Asia" for failing to take more action against the CCP^[1]

Truman's government responded by finalizing in April 1950 National Security Council Paper-68 (NSC 68), which called for a massive build-up of the US military in preparation for war with the Soviet Union. It specifically made rollback the order of the day and the use of the military to overthrow Soviet-aligned governments, stating that "it is clear that a substantial and rapid building up of strength in the free world is necessary to support a firm policy intended to check and to roll back the Kremlin's drive for world domination."^[2]

The war erupts

When full-scale fighting erupted in Korea on June 25, 1950, the complete lack of support for Rhee's regime in the South quickly became evident. The North Korean army swept south, overwhelming and pushing the South Korean military towards the southeastern corner of the peninsula.

The US exploited the war it had stoked over the preceding five years as the rationale to invade under the cover of UN Security Council resolutions. Washington's goal was the destruction of North Korea as the prelude to an invasion of China with the intent of crushing the revolution there.

At the same time, the Soviet Union was withdrawing its support from North Korea, content to allow the US to take the entire peninsula. In fact,

in the weeks before the war began, Stalin told North Korean leader Kim Il-sung, then seeking Moscow's support in a war to unify Korea, "If you get kicked in the teeth. I shall not lift a finger."^[3]

During UN Security Council voting on deploying military forces to Korea, the Soviet Union, which could have vetoed the resolutions, was absent. The pretext was a Soviet boycott in protest against the seating of the Republic of China—the regime established on Taiwan by the defeated forces of the Kuomintang—rather than the People's Republic of China in the Security Council.

The US invaded at Incheon on September 15, 1950 and changed the direction of the war. On October 7, American forces pushed the North Korean military back across the 38th parallel and then moved toward the Yalu River, which ran along the northern border, with a clear threat to invade China. Knowing that the People's Republic of China, less than a year old, was under mortal threat, the CCP was able to mobilize popular support for the People's Volunteer Army which entered Korea to defend the North.

US and Chinese forces met at the Battle of Lake Changjin (known by its Japanese name Chosin Reservoir), which raged from November 27 to December 13, 1950. The result was a huge defeat for the US military, which was pushed back to the port city of Hungnam in North Korea and forced to evacuate by sea. The defeat seriously disrupted US plans not only in Korea but for the entire strategy of rollback. Sections of the US establishment called for nuclear war in response.

General Douglas MacArthur, then leading the US forces, requested the discretion to drop atomic bombs as he saw fit. He would later state that he had intended to drop "between 30 and 50 atomic bombs... strung across the neck of Manchuria" while landing Chinese Nationalist troops on the Chinese mainland.^[4]

These were not simply the ravings of a madman. The Truman administration considered the use of atomic weapons on both North Korea and China on a number of occasions during the war, reportedly coming closest to actually doing so in April 1951. Unassembled bombs were transported to Okinawa, with Truman approving the transfer of the bombs from presidential to military control on April 6; but in the event an attack did not take place.

Washington, however, did not want to risk a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, which had successfully tested its own atomic bomb in August 1949. While Stalin had essentially withdrawn support from the North before the war, he was shocked by the intensity of the US invasion of Korea. He provided aid and weaponry to the North Korean and Chinese militaries to ensure the US would not topple China, seen as an important buffer between the US in Asia and the Soviet Union. This included contributions in the form of fighter jets and pilots.

US and South Korean atrocities

While atomic bombs were not dropped, atrocities by the US and South Korean forces were commonplace. Men, women, and children—prisoners of war and civilians alike—were often forced to dig their own graves before being shot. Many of these killings were committed by South Korean troops with US forces looking on, content to allow their ally to do the dirty work of terrorizing the population.

Exact figures on the number of those murdered are not known as they were covered up by Washington and Seoul and by subsequent South Korean governments. However, many massacres have come to light. In one example, South Korean soldiers murdered 7,000 political prisoners at Daejeon between July 4–6, 1950. In another relatively more well-known massacre, US soldiers murdered as many as 400 refugees that same month

at No Gun Ri (Nogeun-ri), near Daejeon.

Many of these atrocities were recorded by journalists, whose coverage of the war generated international outrage and exposed US lies about the conflict. In January 1951, Washington responded by placing American journalists under the jurisdiction of the military, which blocked and censored any unfavorable coverage.

The response of the Trotskyist movement

From the outset of the war, the Trotskyist movement opposed the war and demanded the immediate withdrawal of US and allied troops from Korea. James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US, wrote an impassioned open letter to the Truman administration and Congress in July 1950, in which he denounced them as "a pack of scoundrels" and "traitors to the human race." Cannon continued:

The American intervention in Korea is a brutal imperialist invasion, no different from the French war on Indo-China or the Dutch assault on Indonesia. American boys are being sent 10,000 miles away to kill and be killed, not in order to liberate the Korean people, but to conquer and subjugate them. It is outrageous. It is monstrous.

The whole of the Korean people—save for the few bought-and-paid-for agents of the Rhee puppet regime—are fighting the imperialist invaders. That is why the press dispatches from Korea complain more and more about 'infiltration' tactics, increasing activities of 'guerrillas,' the 'fluid' fighting front, the 'sullenness' and 'unreliability' of the 'natives'...

The explosion in Korea on June 25, as events have proved, expressed the profound desire of the Koreans themselves to unify their country, to rid themselves of foreign domination and to win their complete national independence. It is true that the Kremlin seeks to take advantage of this struggle for its own reactionary ends and would sell it tomorrow if it could get another deal with Washington. But the struggle itself has the overwhelming and wholehearted support of the Korean people. It is part of the mighty uprising of the hundreds of millions of colonial people throughout Asia against western imperialism. This is the real truth, the real issue. The colonial slaves don't want to be slaves any longer.^[5]

At the same time, the Korean War provided a graphic exposure of Max Shachtman and those who broke from the SWP and the Trotskyist movement in 1940 claiming that the Soviet Union was no longer a workers' state and consequently refused to defend what remained of the gains of the Russian Revolution from imperialism. Leon Trotsky along with the SWP leadership established in the course of the political struggle in 1939–40 said that those who declared the Soviet Union to be state capitalism were adapting themselves to imperialism.

A decade later Shachtman and his Workers' Party openly backed the US-led invasion of Korea, declaring it to be the defense of "democracy" against Stalinist totalitarianism, and penning "socialist" pamphlets for the US military to drop on North Korean and Chinese positions calling for them to surrender.

Truce talks

Following the US retreat from the North, the war would rage on for two and a half more years, with the frontlines largely contained around the 38th parallel. Initiated by the Soviet representative to the UN Adam Malik, truce talks began at Panmunjeom on July 10, 1951. Some historians have argued that the war could have ended that year, but the US had a vested interest in keeping the conflict going. Under conditions of the McCarthyite witch hunt in the US, the war served a definite purpose, justifying the attacks of anti-communists on political opposition to capitalism and repression of workers' movements whether at home or abroad.

In the North, most of the population survived by living in caves as a result of unceasing air raids. In the closing weeks of the war, the US even bombed irrigation dams that provided water for 75 percent of the North's food production. In her book *Korea's Grievous War*, historian Su-kyoung Hwang writes, "The air war in Korea capitalized on basic human feelings of fear. American fighter-bombers were routinely engaged in terror bombings on North Korean cities and villages, vowing to inspire almighty fear in the local population."^[6]

In the US, public discontent with war was growing. In January 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower came to office, pledging to end the war. Fighting finally halted with the armistice on July 27, 1953. The United States had carried out a genocidal war against the Korean population, decimating the peninsula. Between 4 million and 5 million people were killed, approximately half of whom were civilians. In total, the US had dropped 635,000 tons of bombs and 32,000 tons of napalm on Korea, making it one of the most heavily bombed countries in history. In contrast, the US dropped about 500,000 tons of bombs throughout the Pacific theater during World War II.

Conclusion

Following the armistice, US imperialism continued to regard South Korea as a critical base of operations not only against North Korea but China and the Soviet Union. It propped up the authoritarian Rhee regime and then for three decades the military dictatorship that seized power in 1961 under Park Chung-hee. The US helped create an industrial base in South Korea for the exploitation of cheap labor and, at the same time, maintained the diplomatic and economic isolation of North Korea.

Amid a growing wave of strikes and protests in the 1980s, the regime carried out limited reforms paving the way for open elections and the legalization of the bourgeois liberal opposition to the dictatorship. For all the claims that South Korea is now a vibrant democracy, the state apparatus of the dictatorship, particularly the military, police and intelligence agencies, steeped in vicious anti-communism, remains largely in place. The right-wing People Power Party (PPP), which backs the current South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, traces its origins to the party of the Park dictatorship.

North Korea remains ever more isolated in the wake of the crisis of Stalinism and turn to capitalist restoration with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the open embrace of pro-market restructuring by the Chinese Communist Party and its counterparts in Indochina. Economic support from the Soviet Union in particular quickly dried up plunging North Korea into deep economic crisis.

Far from abjuring capitalist restoration, the North Korean regime confronting a worsening economic crisis has gone to great lengths to encourage foreign investment, even setting up a string of free trade zones that have largely remained empty. While ultra-cheap North Korean labor is attractive, global corporations including in South Korea are reluctant to

invest in conditions where the US has maintained and strengthened its economic and diplomatic blockade of the country.

Korea remains pivotal to US strategy in Northeast Asia. A divided Korea and the so-called North Korean "threat" provide a useful pretext for maintaining a large American military presence on bases in Japan and South Korea. In the 1990s, the administration of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung pushed his Sunshine policy to open up North Korea to foreign investment and the construction of transport, communication and pipeline routes through the Korean peninsula.

The Sunshine policy was always subject to Washington's conditions. While the Clinton administration tentatively embraced the approach, it insisted that North Korea unilaterally dismantle its nuclear program and facilities, offering in return only vague promises of peace negotiations and an end to decades of isolation. However, the Bush administration on assuming office in 2001 effectively sabotaged the Sunshine policy, pushing North Korea along the path of developing a nuclear arsenal. Washington has responded with crippling economic sanctions that have been maintained and strengthened by presidents Obama, Trump and Biden.

Today, South Korea is on the frontline of a looming war with China, as US imperialism—already at war with Russia in Ukraine—desperately and recklessly attempts to maintain its global hegemony. US bases in South Korea are strategically located for war against both China and Russia. To this day, Washington would take operational control over South Korea's massive military in the event of war.

Furthermore, using the excuse of the North Korean threat, the US has integrated South Korea and Japan into its anti-ballistic missile system in Asia. In South Korea, it has stationed a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery that is an integral component of its strategic planning for nuclear war with China.

Over the past decade, US imperialism has turned North East Asia into a tinderbox, heightening tensions on the Korean peninsula, and inflamed territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. Even as it escalates its war against Russia, the US is deliberately goading China into attacking Taiwan by calling into question the One China policy—the basis of US-China diplomatic relations—that recognizes the island as part of China.

The lessons of the Korean War should not be forgotten. It is a graphic demonstration of the ruthlessness with which US imperialism will pursue its economic and strategic interests with complete disregard for human life and suffering. The US has set the stage for a new world war that already involves Russia and has China in its crosshairs. Such a conflict between nuclear armed powers would make the horrors of the Korean War pale in comparison.

Nuclear Armageddon can and must be stopped by the only social force that is capable of doing so—the international working class on the basis of a socialist program to abolish capitalism and its bankrupt division of the world into rival nation states. That is the political perspective for which the International Committee of the Fourth International alone fights.

Concluded

[1] Quoted in: Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam*, Basic Books 2001, p. 26

[2] United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (National Security Council Paper-68), URL: <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USNSC-68.pdf>.

[3] George Herring, *The American Century and Beyond: U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2015*, Oxford University Press 2017, p. 340.

[4] Quoted in: Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume 2: The Roaring of the Cataract 1947-1950*, Yuksabipyungsa 2002, p. 750.

[5] James P. Cannon, *Cannon to Truman in 1950: US out of Korea*, URL: <https://www.themilitant.com/2013/7/12/771257.html>

[6] Su-kyoung Hwang, *Korea's Grievous War*, University of Pennsylvania Press 2016, p. 139.



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