

The Korean War

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It was the first war we could not win. At no other time since World War II have two superpowers met in battle.

Now Max Hastings, preeminent military historian takes us back to the bloody bitter struggle to restore South Korean independence after the Communist invasion of June 1950. Using personal accounts from interviews with more than 200 vets-including the Chinese-Hastings follows real officers and soldiers through the battles. He brilliantly captures the Cold War crisis at home-the strategies and politics of Truman, Acheson, Marshall, MacArthur, Ridgway, and Bradley-and shows what we should have learned in the war that was the prelude to Vietnam.

Max Hastings is the author of *Overlord and Bomber Command* and the coauthor of *Battle for the Falklands*. Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, he lives in London, England. Chapter 1

ORIGINS OF A TRAGEDY

Seldom in the course of history has a nation been so rapidly propelled from obscurity to a central place in the world's affairs as Korea. The first significant contact between "The Land of the Morning Calm" and the West took place one morning in September 1945 when an advance party of the American Army, in full battle gear, landed at the western harbor of Inchon, to be met by a delegation of Japanese officials in top hats and tailcoats. This was the inauguration of Operation "Black List Forty," the United States' occupation of South Korea.

These first American officers found the city of Inchon, fearful and uncertain of its future, shuttered and closed. After a hunt through the streets, glimpsing occasional faces peering curiously at their liberators from windows and corners, they came upon a solitary Chinese restaurant bearing the sign "Welcome U.S." Then, from the moment the Americans boarded the train for Seoul, they met uninhibited rejoicing. A little crowd of Koreans waving gleeful flags stood by the tracks in every village they passed. At Seoul railway station, the group had planned to take a truck to their objective, the city post office. Instead, on their arrival, they decided to walk. To their bewilderment, they found themselves at the center of a vast throng of cheering, milling, exultant Koreans, cramming the streets and sidewalks, hanging from buildings, standing on carts. The Americans were at a loss. They had arrived without any conception of what the end of the Japanese war meant to the people of this obscure peninsula.

Throughout its history until the end of the nineteenth century, Korea was an overwhelmingly rural society which sought successfully to maintain its isolation from the outside world. Ruled since 1392 by the Yi Dynasty, it suffered two major invasions from Japan in the sixteenth century. When the Japanese departed, Korea returned to its harsh traditional existence, frozen in winter and baked in summer, its ruling families feuding among each other from generation to generation. By the Confucian convention that regarded foreign policy as an extension of family relations, Korea admitted an historic loyalty to China, "the elder brother nation." Until 1876 her near neighbor Japan was regarded as a friendly equal. But early that January, in an early surge of the expansionism that was to dominate Japanese history for the next seventy years, Tokyo dispatched a military

expedition to Korea "to establish a treaty of friendship and commerce." On February 26, after a brief and ineffectual resistance, the Koreans signed. They granted the Japanese open ports, their citizens extraterritorial rights.

The embittered Koreans sought advice from their other neighbors about the best means of undoing this humiliating surrender. The Chinese advised that they should come to an arrangement with one of the Western powers "in order to check the poison with an antidote." They suggested the Americans, who had shown no signs of possessing territorial ambitions on the Asian mainland. On May 22, 1882, Korea signed a treaty of "amity and commerce" with the United States. In the words of a leading American historian of the period, this "set Korea adrift on an ocean of intrigue which it was quite helpless to control." The infuriated Japanese now engaged themselves increasingly closely in Korea's internal power struggles. The British took an interest, for they were eager to maintain China's standing as Korea's "elder brother" to counter Russian influence in the Far East. By 1893, Korea had signed a succession of trade treaties with every major European power. The Japanese were perfectly clear about their objective. Their Foreign Minister declared openly that Korea "should be made a part of the Japanese map." Tokyo hesitated only about how to achieve this without a confrontation with one or another great power.

The Chinese solved the problem. Peking's increasingly heavy-handed meddling in Korea's affairs, asserting claims to some measure of authority over Seoul, provoked a wave of anti-Chinese feeling and a corresponding surge of enthusiasm for the Japanese, who could now claim popular support from at least a faction within Korea. In 1894, Japan seized her opportunity and landed an army in Korea to force the issue. The government in Seoul, confused and panicky, asked Peking to send its own troops to help suppress a rebellion. The Japanese responded by dispatching a contingent of marines direct to the capital. The Korean government, by now hopelessly out of its depth, begged that all the foreign troops should depart. But the Japanese scented victory. They reinforced their army.

The last years of Korea's national independence took on a Gilbertian absurdity. The nation's leaders, artless in the business of diplomacy and modern power politics, squirmed and floundered in the net that was inexorably closing around them. The Chinese recognized their military inability to confront the Japanese in Korea. Tokyo's grasp on Korea's internal government tightened until, in 1896, the King tried to escape thralldom by taking refuge at the Russian Legation in Seoul. From this sanctuary he issued orders for the execution of all his pro-Japanese ministers. The Japanese temporarily backed down.

In the next seven years Moscow and Tokyo competed for power and concessions in Seoul. The devastating Japanese victory at Tsushima, a few miles off Pusan, decided the outcome. In February 1904 the Japanese moved a large army into Korea. In November of the following year the nation became a Japanese protectorate. In a characteristic exercise of the colonial cynicism of the period, the British accepted Japanese support for their rule in India in exchange for blessing Tokyo's takeover of Korea. Whitehall acknowledged Japan's right "to take such measure of guidance, control, and protection in Corea [sic] as she may deem proper and necessary" to promote her "paramount political, military and economic interests."

Korean independence thus became a dead letter. In the years that followed a steady stream of Japanese officials and immigrants moved into the country. Japanese education, roads, railways, sanitation were introduced. Yet none of these gained the slightest gratitude from the fiercely nationalistic Koreans. Armed resistance grew steadily in the hands of a strange alliance of Confucian scholars, traditional bandits, Christians, and peasants with local grievances against the colonial power. The anti-Japanese guerrilla army rose to a peak of an estimated 70,000 men in 1908. Thereafter, ruthless Japanese repression broke it down. Korea became an armed camp, in which mass executions and wholesale imprisonments were commonplace and all dissent forbidden. On August 22, 1910, the Korean emperor signed away all his rights of sovereignty. The Japanese introduced their own titles of nobility and imposed their own military government. For the next thirty-five years, despite persistent armed resistance from mountain bands of nationalists, many of them Communist, the Japanese maintained their ruthless, detested rule in Korea, which also became an important base for their expansion north into Manchuria in the 1930s.

Yet despite the decline of China into a society of competing warlords, and the preoccupation of Russia with her own revolution, even before the Second World War it was apparent that Korea's geographical position, as the nearest meeting place of three great nations, would make her a permanent focus of tension and competition. The American Tyler Dennett wrote presciently in 1945, months before the Far Eastern war ended:

"Many of the international factors which led to the fall of Korea are either unchanged from what they were half a century ago, or are likely to recur the moment peace is restored to the East. Japan's hunger for power will have been extinguished for a period, but not forever. In another generation probably Japan will again be a very important influence in the Pacific. Meanwhile the Russian interest in the peninsula is likely to remain what it was forty years ago. Quite possibly that factor will be more important than ever before. The Chinese also may be expected to continue their traditional concern in the affairs of that area."

And now, suddenly, the war was over, and the Japanese Empire was in the hands of the broker's men. Koreans found themselves freed from Japanese domination, looking for fulfillment of the promise of the leaders of the Grand Alliance in the 1943 Cairo Declaration -- that Korea should become free and independent "in due course."

The American decision to land troops to play a part in the occupation of Korea was taken only at the very end of the war. The Japanese colony had been excluded from the complex 1943-45 negotiations about occupation zones between the partners of the Grand Alliance. The Americans had always been enamored of the concept of "trusteeship" for Korea, along with Indochina and some other colonial possessions in the Far East. They liked the idea of a period during which a committee of Great Powers -- in this case, China, the U.S., and the U.S.S.R. -- would "prepare and educate" the dependent peoples for self-government and "protect them from exploitation." This concept never found much favor among the British or French, mindful of their own empires. And as the war progressed, concern about the future internal structure of Korea was overtaken by deepening alarm

about the external forces that might determine this. As early as November 1943 a State Department subcommittee expressed fears that when the Soviets entered the Far East war, they might seize the opportunity to include Korea in their sphere of influence: "Korea may appear to offer a tempting opportunity to apply the Soviet conception of the proper treatment of colonial peoples, to strengthen enormously the economic resources of the Soviet Far East, to acquire ice-free ports, and to occupy a dominating strategic position in relation both to China and to Japan....A Soviet occupation of Korea would create an entirely new strategic situation in the Far East, and its repercussions within China and Japan might be far reaching."

As the American historian Bruce Cumings has aptly pointed out, "What created 'an entirely new strategic situation in the Far East' was not that Russia was interested in Korea -- it had been for decades -- but that the United States was interested." Yet by the time of the Potsdam Conference of July 1945, the United States military was overwhelmingly preoccupied with the perceived difficulties of mounting an invasion of mainland Japan. They regarded the Japanese armies still deployed in Korea and Manchuria as a tough nut for the Red Army to crack and were only too happy to leave the problem, and the expected casualties, to the Russians. The Pentagon had anyway adopted a consistent view that Korea was of no long-term strategic interest to the United States.

Yet three weeks later the American perception of Korea had altered dramatically. The explosion of the two atomic bombs on Japan on August 6 and 9 brought Japan to the brink of surrender. The Red Army was sweeping through Manchuria without meeting important resistance. Suddenly, Washington's view of both the desirability and feasibility of denying at least a substantial part of Korea to the Soviets was transformed. Late on the night of August 10, 1945, barely twenty-four hours after the dropping of the Nagasaki bomb, the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee reached a hasty, unilateral decision that the United States should participate in the occupation of Korea. The two officers drafting orders for the committee pored over their small-scale wall map of the Far East and observed that the 38th Parallel ran broadly across the middle of the country. South of this line lay the capital, the best of the agriculture and light industry, and more than half the population. Some members of the committee -- including Dean Rusk, a future Secretary of State -- pointed out that if the Russians chose to reject this proposal, the Red Army sweeping south through Manchuria could overrun all Korea before the first GI could be landed at Inchon. In these weeks, when the first uncertain skirmishes of the Cold War were being fought, the sudden American proposal for the divided occupation of Korea represented an important test of Soviet intentions in the Far East.

To the relief of the committee in Washington, the Russians readily accepted the 38th Parallel as the limit of their advance. Almost a month before the first Americans could be landed in South Korea, the Red Army reached the new divide -- and halted there. It is worth remarking that, if Moscow had declined the American plan and occupied all Korea, it is unlikely that the Americans could or would have forced a major diplomatic issue. To neither side, at this period, did the peninsula seem to possess any inherent value, except as a testing ground of mutual intentions. The struggle for political control of China herself was beginning in earnest. Beside the fates and boundaries of great nations that were now

being decided, Korea counted for little. Stalin was content to settle for half. At no time in the five years that followed did the Russians show any desire to stake Moscow's power and prestige upon a direct contest with the Americans for the extension of Soviet influence south of the Parallel.

Thus it was, late in August 1945, that the unhappy men of the U.S. XXIV Corps -- some veterans of months of desperate fighting in the Pacific, others green replacements fresh from training camps -- found themselves under orders to embark not for home, as they so desperately wished, but for unknown Korea. They were given little information to guide their behavior once they got there. Their commander, General John R. Hodge, received only a confusing succession of signals at his headquarters on Okinawa. On August 14, General Stilwell told him that the occupation could be considered "semifriendly" -- in other words, that he need regard as hostile only a small minority of collaborators. At the end of the month the Supreme Commander, General MacArthur himself, decreed that the Koreans should be treated as "liberated people." From Washington the Secretary of State for War and the Navy Coordinating Committee dispatched a hasty directive to Okinawa ordering Hodge to "create a government in harmony with U.S. policies." But what were U.S. policies toward Korea? Since the State Department knew little more about the country than that its Nationalists hungered for unity and independence, they had little to tell Hodge. As a straightforward military man, the general determined to approach the problem in a straightforward, no-nonsense fashion. On September 4 he briefed his own officers to regard Korea as "an enemy of the United States," subject to the terms of the Japanese surrender. On September 8, when the American occupation convoy was still twenty miles out from Inchon in the Yellow Sea, its ships encountered three neatly dressed figures in a small boat who presented themselves to the general as representatives of "the Korean government." Hodge sent them packing. He did likewise with every other Korean he met on his arrival who laid claim to a political mandate. The XXIV Corps' intention was to seize and maintain control of the country. The U.S. Army, understandably, wished to avoid precipitate entanglement with any of the scores of competing local political factions who already, in those first days, were struggling to build a power base amid the ruin of the Japanese empire.

The fourteen-strong advance party who were the first Americans to reach Seoul were fascinated and bemused by what they found: a city of horse-drawn carts, with only the occasional charcoal-powered motor vehi...

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