

The Korean War 1950 - 1953

The background to the Korean War

- During WW2 (1939 – 1945) the Korean peninsula had been occupied by Japan. However, following its defeat at the end of WW2 in 1945, Japan was forced to withdraw leaving Korea as a free country.
- In the years after WW2 the Cold War began as the world split between the communist East (lead by Russia) and the Capitalist West lead by the USA.
- Both sides wanted to control Korea and the decision was made to split it in two along the 38th parallel. North Korea would be communist led by Kim Il Sung. South Korea accepted capitalist ideas and was led by Syngman Rhee.
- This arrangement did not last long. In 1950 there was a communist revolution in China to the north. At the same time, the USA came up with the 'Truman Doctrine' which committed it to fight communism wherever in the world it emerged.
- Communist China began to support North Korea, and capitalist USA supported the South. The stage was set for war.



1950 The start of the Korean War

- Arguments along the border on the 38th parallel had been building since 1945.
- In 1950 the leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung, persuaded communist Russia and China to supply him with weapons to defend himself.
- At the same time Syngman Rhee the leader of South Korea boasted that he was capable of attacking the north if he needed to.
- In June 1950, North Korea struck first and launched a fullscale invasion of the south with 75,000 soldiers.
- The North quickly forced the South into a full-scale retreat towards the Pusan peninsula, where they became surrounded.
- The United Nations (UN) was a new organisation set up after WW2 to prevent any future wars. The UN had many countries as members, and they would commit to send soldiers as part of a UN army to stop wars breaking out.
- In 1950 South Korea asked the UN for help. The UN replied by saying that the invasion by the North was illegal and that the UN would respond.



The UN campaign in Korea

- A UN army known as the United Nations Command (UNC) was assembled to defend South Korea.
- The UNC consisted mainly of soldiers from South Vietnam and the USA, however many other countries including the UK, France, Australia and Canada also took part.
- An American general Douglas MacArthur was put in control of the UNC.
- MacArthur came up with a bold plan to save South Korea. He decided to make a risky landing at Inchon which would cut the North Korean army in half and catch them off guard.
- The Inchon landings were a great success; 150,000 North Korean soldiers were killed and 125,000 captured.
- The North was pushed out of South Korea and the War was back where it had begun.



China fights back

- However, the UNC continued to push north and by November 1950 was getting close to the border with China.
- At this point China felt threatened and joined the War.
- China was not well equipped to fight a modern war, but did get supplies and help from Russia to the north.
- However, China did have an enormous supply of men who were prepared to join its army to defend communism.
- In November 1950 the UNC reached the Yalu River on the border with China. MacArthur and the UNC believed they were close to victory. Some say this made them become complacent.
- At that moment China counter-attacked with a vast army of 300,000 men.
- At this point the UNC generals panicked and MacArthur even argued that nuclear weapons should be used against North Korea.
- By February 1951 both sides were once again on the 38th parallel where the War had begun.



A war of containment and the sacking of General MacArthur

- The US president by this time was Harry S Truman. Truman was cautious and did not want the Korean War to escalate into WW3.
- Matthew Ridgeway was an American general within the UNC who came up with tactics known as containment. He would make limited attacks on North Korean/Chinese forces to keep them on the defensive, whilst avoiding major battle and major loss of life.
- President Truman supported these tactics, however General MacArthur argued against them and argued in favour of full scale war against China.
- In April 1951 Truman made the controversial decision to sack MacArthur, who did not go quietly and argued against the decision.

1953 – The end of the Korean War

- Various attempts at a ceasefire followed but both sides continued to fight.
- A period followed between 1951 and 1953 where 'SeeSaw' battles would take place. One side would advance and capture enemy territory. Only for the other side to fight back and recapture it again.
- In November 1952, a new American president took over, Dwight Eisenhower. He was a vastly experienced exmilitary commander and wanted to find a way to end the war.
- Another factor continuing the War was the Russian leader Joseph Stalin. He did not want communism to back down so was prepared to keep fighting at all costs. However, things changed when Stalin died in March 1953.
- Things changed again in May 1953 when the USA successfully tested the world first hydrogen bomb (800x more powerful than the first atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945).
- The threat of the atom bomb proved to be the last factor needed to get both sides to agree to end the Korean War.
- On 25th May 1953 a ceasefire was announced and the Korean War was over – back where it began on the 38th parallel.



The Impact of the Korean War

You could be asked about the impact of the Korean War – winners and losers. Here's a table you will have completed in class. Who won and who lost? Were there any winners? It's all a matter of opinion.

The Korean War 1950 – 1953 – Winners and losers		
	Gains	Losses
United Nations	Gained respect by taking prompt action. More effective than the old League of Nations.	About 170,000 UNC soldiers died. Only able to act due to the USSR's absence from the Security Council.
USA	Saved South Korea from Communism. Policy of containing Communism had worked.	33,000 soldiers died. North Korea remained under Communist rule. Defence spending rose from \$12 billion to \$60 billion. Entered into an arms race with the USSR.
USSR	Achieved a close short-term friendship with China. Conflict between China and the USA was to the USSR's advantage.	The spread of Communism in Asia had been halted. Forced into expensive arms and space races with the USA.
China	Proved they were no longer a backwards country. Gained respect from Communist supporters. Saved North Korea from US control. Received financial and military help from the USSR. North Korea acted as a buffer zone.	About 400,000 soldiers died. Failed to win South Korea for Communism. War came with a high economic cost. War led to the USA giving greater support to Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan.
North Korea	Remained a strong military power. Had closer ties with the USSR and China. Had not lost any land.	Around 350,000 soldiers and 1.5 million civilians had died. Massive damage to industry and farming. Failed to get a united Communist Korea. Kim had to execute rivals to keep power. Money was spent on the military and not the economy.
South Korea	Their army had grown much stronger and they could hold their own against North Korea. They received much US economic and military help.	Rhee failed to get a united capitalist Korea. 70,000 soldiers and around 1,000,000 civilians had died. Rhee started to behave more like a dictator. Money was spent on the military and not the economy.