6

Korean Tragedy

The war in Korea and its effects were perhaps the biggest calamities of the Cold War. They devastated a country and enchained a people. Their direct consequences are with us today and will last long into the future. And, worst of all, this was an entirely avoidable war, created by the intensity of ideological conflict among Koreans and a Cold War framework that enabled Superpower interventions. The Korean War symbolized the Cold War conflict at its most frightening. Extreme, barbaric, and seemingly inexhaustible, it reduced Korea to a wasteland and made people all over the world wonder if their country might be next for such a disaster. It therefore intensified and militarized the Cold War on a global scale.

The origins of the Korean War linked the late nineteenth century collapse of Chinese power in east Asia with the rise of Cold War ideological conflict. The fall of the Qing Empire, with which Korea had long been associated, opened the way for Japanese imperialist expansion across the region. The first country to be taken over was Korea, after China lost the 1894–95 war against Japan. By 1910 Korea was fully annexed to Japan, as an integral part of its empire. The Japanese administration did its best to stamp out Korean identity. The royal palace in Seoul was demolished and Japanese became the medium of instruction for all higher education. Tokyo even tried to force Koreans to wear Japanese dress and assimilate in social codes and family life. But at the same time, just like in the European empires that the Japanese admired and feared in equal amounts, there was widespread segregation of colonizers and colonized. Most Koreans understood that they could never become full members of the Japanese Empire, even if they had wanted to.

From the beginning, the occupation of Korea gave rise to nationalist resistance. For many young Koreans, the real insult of the Japanese takeover was that it came just as they were formulating their own views of their country's future. Some of them went into exile, and the nationalisms they conceived there were intense and uncompromising, as ideal views of one's own country formed abroad often are. Korean nationalists wedded themselves not only to defeating Japan and liberating their country but also to building a future, unified Korea that was modern, centralized, powerful, and virtuous. Korea, they believed, could not only produce its own liberation but would stand as an example for other downtrodden peoples.

Throughout World War I and its aftermath, Korean nationalists argued that the principles of national self-determination should also extend to Asians. But with Japan being on the winning side in the war, their calls stood little chance of being accepted. The exiled Korean nationalists who traveled to Paris for the 1919 Peace Conference were bitterly disappointed. Not only did they fail to get foreign recognition, but Japan seemed to have the support of the United States and Britain for its Korean policies. With Japan

joining in the attempts at isolating the new Soviet state, neither Washington nor London wanted to risk a falling-out with Tokyo over Korea. In Korea the disappointment led to rebellion, which was put down by the Japanese with great loss of Korean life.

One of the Korean nationalists who was shattered by the failed campaign for Korean nationhood in Paris was Syngman Rhee. Born in 1875, Rhee had spent six years in prison for nationalist activities. He then moved to the United States, where he was the first Korean to get a US PhD (from Princeton in 1910). Rhee was a tireless editor and publisher of nationalist texts during his long exile in the United States. At the core of all of them was the need to get US support for the just Korean cause. Appealing to Woodrow Wilson in 1919, Rhee had called out: "You have already championed the cause of the oppressed and held out your helping hand to the weak of the earth's races. Your nation is the Hope of Mankind, so we come to you."[1] Twenty years later Rhee had still not given up hope of US support. Right before Pearl Harbor he published a book predicting that Japan would attack the United States and that the best hope for a US victory would be an alliance with nationalists on the Asian mainland, including (prominently) in Korea.

Rhee envisioned Korea as a modern country that embraced its Confucian past. The president of the Republic of Korea in exile, as he now styled himself, wanted a Korea invigorated by US technology and management methods, but within the constraints of traditional virtues. As much as he hated the Japanese, he despised Korean radicals who wanted a socialist country after liberation. They were nothing but stooges of the Russians, Rhee thought. Just like some Koreans had joined up with the Japanese, others had ended up in bed with the Soviets. To Rhee they were defectors who had to return to true Korean nationalism, which—with US assistance—would build a new nation under his leadership.

To Rhee's increasing desperation, his campaigns in the United States during World War II did not make much more progress than those during the war twenty years before. The Americans concentrated on the war effort and on the alliance with China, with little time for Rhee and his associates, who did not seem able to deliver anything of vital interest for winning the war. The State Department considered Rhee a nuisance. But he kept in touch with US intelligence, which believed that Rhee's anti-Communism might make him useful as soon as the war was over. By 1945, Rhee's attention had already shifted from the Japanese to the Soviets. "The only possibility," he told his US friends, "of avoiding the ultimate conflict between the United States and the Soviet Republics is to build up all the democratic, not communistic, elements wherever possible now."[2]

Syngman Rhee was right about who his competitors for allegiance in postwar Korea would be. Ever since 1919, Korean Communism had developed, against the odds, as the alternative to the Korean nationalism that Rhee represented. Like elsewhere in Asia, the Russian Revolution had been an inspiration for many Koreans, with its promise of modernity, equality, and respect for national rights. The first Communist groups were set up among Koreans in Siberia in 1918, and by the early 1920s the movement had spread to Korea itself as part of the underground resistance. A Korean Communist Party was organized in Seoul in 1925 but quickly became a focus-point for the Japanese police, and hundreds of party activists were arrested. The repression led to increased factional infighting, which, in the late 1920s and '30s, got entangled in Stalin's murderous purges in the Soviet Union. Korean Communism was to have no easy future.

A Korean Comintern agent, sent clandestinely to Korea to report on the situation there in the late 1920s, found large numbers of youth ready to join the Communists. "They regard the USSR and Comintern as their saviors from Japanese imperialism," he reported. Unfortunately they had "only superficial familiarity with Marxism," being mainly "former students and intellectuals who came from the ranks of the bourgeois independence movement." Their activities suffered from "theoretical chaos and long term mostly unprincipled factional strife."[3] In 1928 the Comintern closed down the Korean Communist Party,

believing it was better to educate Korean cadres in Moscow and send them back later to set up a proper Communist movement. But during the purges of the late 1930s all top Korean Communists in Moscow were arrested and shot, accused of being Japanese spies. In 1937 almost two hundred thousand Soviet Koreans living in the USSR's Pacific regions were forcibly deported to central Asia. Stalin's fear of a fifth column in Soviet Asia was more important than his dedication to revolution in Korea.

Among the Korean Communists who survived the double whammy of Japanese and Stalinist oppression was a small number that had joined the Chinese Communist underground in neighboring Manchuria. One of them was Kim Il-sung, a young Korean from a Presbyterian family who had settled in Manchuria in 1920, when Kim was eight years old. Kim joined his first Marxist group at seventeen, and was jailed several times for his activities. At nineteen, he became a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and soon after was fighting against the Japanese with a small band of guerillas. Five years later he was already a bit of a mythical hero among Koreans in China, largely because the guerrilla group he now commanded had been able to survive Japanese operations against it. But slowly the Japanese were catching up, and in 1940 Kim and his surviving comrades slipped across the border to the Soviet Union. When Germany attacked there the following year, Kim volunteered for the Red Army. He returned to Korea in 1945 as a Soviet officer, proudly displaying the Order of the Red Banner, usually given for extraordinary heroism in combat.

The Korea to which Kim returned was a country in flux. At the Cairo Conference two years earlier the Allied powers had jointly agreed to restore Korean independence after the war was over. When the USSR attacked Japan, at the last minute, Washington and Moscow had agreed to zones of occupation on the peninsula, divided by the thirty-eighth parallel: the Soviets to the north and the Americans to the south. The dividing line was simply supposed to be a wartime arrangement to facilitate the Japanese capitulation. Nobody in 1945 believed that the division would be permanent, least of all the Koreans themselves.

In both zones the liberators turned to people known to them to help organize administration and supplies. Even though the Americans often found him unreliable and irksome, Syngman Rhee was a choice that was hard to avoid in the US zone. He had plenty of nationalist legitimacy and an organization that could operate on the ground. Rhee did become the central political figure in the south with US aid, but even so, political clashes with his American sponsors intensified. Rhee wanted international recognition for his government, based on a movement he called the National Society for the Rapid Realization of Korean Independence. Washington was still hoping, at least up to mid-1947, that an agreement with Moscow would pave the way for reunification and national elections.

In the Soviet zone there was nobody with Rhee's Korean or international stature. Instead, the Soviets turned to the thirty-three-year-old Kim Il-sung, primarily because they believed that he would be fully subservient to Soviet interests. But they also chose him because of his proven leadership skills and because he had none of the political drawbacks of the more established Korean Communists, who had either been part of 1920s factionalism or joined in the 1930s Soviet purges. Kim showed both his loyalty and his acumen during his first few months in power—though he also made it clear that he and his Communist colleagues aspired to the leadership of all of Korea, not just a part.

Up to the end of 1947 Soviets and Americans both continued toying with proposals for Korean self-governance under an international trusteeship as a way to avoid a conflict between the two powers over control of the peninsula. It is likely that Stalin did not fully give up on such an approach until the end of 1948. What cemented the division of Korea was the stubborn unwillingness of Rhee and Kim to agree to any plan that did not help reunify Korea under their own rule, along with the intensification of the Cold War elsewhere in the late 1940s. When the United States gave in to pressure from Rhee and other anti-

Communists to allow separate elections in the south in May 1948, the die was cast. Rhee had already started persecuting Communists, trade unionists, and other Leftists. His victory in the elections was almost a foregone conclusion.

The change in US thinking about Korea was not just a passive reflection of the global Cold War. It was influenced by strategic concerns about the position of the Korean peninsula with regard to both China and Japan. In China the tide of the civil war was turning against the American ally Chiang Kai-shek, and the CCP began aiming for national power through conquest. In Japan the United States needed to create a regime capable of defeating the domestic Left and form a lasting alliance with Washington. In both cases Korea was crucial. A presence there would preserve a US foothold on the mainland in case China fell to the Communists, and help the United States defend Japan. It would also, over time, make the Japanese government more self-confident by securing its strategic position. Having a leadership in southern Korea linked to the United States therefore became more and more significant for both US military and civilian planners in the late 1940s.

Stalin was less focused on Korea up to 1949, mainly because he struggled to reconceptualize the Soviet role in China as the CCP, to his great surprise, turned the civil war to its advantage. Potentially having China within the Communist camp was a prospect it took some time getting used to, for the Soviet *vozhd* as for everyone else. Stalin distrusted the Chinese Communist leaders in spite of their open devotion to him and to the USSR. But he was of course alert to the enormous strategic opportunities a Communist regime in China would offer. His policy of providing assistance to the CCP in the final stage of its takeover also incorporated Korea. Having Soviet-controlled northern Korea as a rear base area for CCP forces fighting in Manchuria was of crucial importance to Communist success there. The Soviets also helped organize Korean volunteers to fight for the CCP.

Syngman Rhee declared the Republic of Korea (ROK) in Seoul after the May 1948 elections. Kim Il-sung followed up by declaring a new state from his northern capital Pyongyang in September. Making it a "People's Republic" was not enough for Kim; he named it the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), in line with the slogans used at the time. The new governments got the blessing of their respective Superpower sponsors. Ironically, Stalin and Truman seem at the time to have believed that the creation of separate states made war less likely. In any case, both Soviet and US troops were withdrawn from the Korean peninsula soon after the new regimes were set up.

As they solidified their governments, the Korean regimes made preparations for confronting each other. In the north, the Communists under Soviet guidance restored much of the industrial capacity that the Japanese has concentrated there. They also carried out a land reform plan that took land away from landlords, most of whom had worked closely with the Japanese, and put it in the hands of those who farmed it. The land reform secured support for the regime among peasants, and improved food supplies across North Korea. But it also contributed, with other Communist political campaigns, to hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to the south.

In South Korea, Rhee continued the crackdown on his enemies, who now extended to many liberal political leaders who had no sympathy with Communism. He crushed a Communist-led rebellion in the southern Jeju Island with great loss of life. ROK troops executed not just suspected guerrillas but their families and in some cases whole villages. The guerrillas, mostly locals who could draw on a sense of separate identity on the island, fought on for more than a year before the rebellion was over. Elsewhere in South Korea strikes were broken up and independent organizations outlawed under the National Traitor Act.

Beginning in late 1948 tension increased along the thirty-eighth parallel. Both sides had plans for attacking across the dividing line, and almost constant skirmishes contributed to a state of alarm in Seoul

and Pyongyang. What held Rhee and Kim back was that their Superpower patrons would not support their plans for reunifying the country by force. The Americans saw themselves well served by the status quo. The Soviets focused on China. Kim Il-sung made at least two, possibly three, concrete proposals to Stalin for an attack on South Korea before June 1950. In turning down one of them, in September 1949, the Moscow great master told Kim that "it is impossible to acknowledge that a military attack on the south is now completely prepared for and therefore from the military point of view it is not allowed":

> We, of course, agree with you that the people are waiting for the unification of the country.… However, until now very little has been done to raise the broad masses of South Korea to an active struggle, to develop the partisan movement in all of South Korea, to create there liberated regions and to organize forces for a general uprising.… Moreover, it is necessary to consider that if military actions begin at the initiative of the North and acquire a prolonged character, then this can give to the Americans cause for every kind of interference in Korean affairs.[4]

Kim was of course unhappy, but could not act without the Soviets. Then, after the CCP victory in China, Stalin slowly began to change his mind. According to Soviet documents, there were at least five reasons why this happened. The success of the Chinese Communists altered the strategic picture. It also showed that the Americans were reluctant to intervene on the Asian mainland. In addition, Stalin was increasingly annoyed by the lack of success he had against the United States in Europe; the Berlin Blockade fiasco showed that in full. Based on reports he had been receiving from his main representative in Pyongyang, Terentii Shtykov, who had headed the Soviet occupation of Korea and became the first ambassador to the DPRK, the balance of forces between north and south was now in favor of the Communists. And according to Stalin's experience with US patterns of action in Europe, this would not always be the case. Finally, Korea was a perfect test case for the "internationalism" of the new CCP regime in China. If they went along with a green light to Kim Il-sung for an attack, then they would have proven themselves revolutionaries in practice, not just in theory.

Stalin's eagerness to let the Chinese prove their mettle was stimulated by his knowledge that Mao was not keen on a war in Korea. The Chinese leader had told the Soviets so several times. If Mao had a foreign priority in Asia, it was to help the Viet Minh win decisive victories over the French in Indochina. Korea, in Mao's mind, could wait. The Chinese needed time to rebuild their own country and their own forces, and Korea was too close for comfort to the richest areas of Manchuria and, for that matter, to the Chinese capital, Beijing. So when Stalin accepted the need for urgent reunification of Korea by force, during Kim Il-sung's visit to Moscow in April 1950, the Boss also instructed Kim to travel immediately to Beijing to get Mao's blessing for the undertaking. It was a typical Stalin kind of test, reminiscent of the impossible choice he had given Tito in Yugoslavia two years earlier: If Mao said yes, he would sign on to an offensive on his own borders over which he had little say. And if he said no, he would have proven himself to be less of an international revolutionary leader than Chinese propaganda indicated.

But Mao could not say no. He was a Communist internationalist who believed that it was the CCP's duty to help revolutionaries elsewhere. He also viewed Stalin as the undisputed head of the international Communist movement and could not countenance an open challenge to the vozhd's authority. Most important of all, the Chinese had just reunified their own country by force. How could he refuse the Korean Communist younger brothers the right to do the same?[5] When Kim Il-sung arrived in Beijing in May 1950, Mao still double-checked with Moscow first to ensure that Stalin had indeed given his express go-ahead. Moscow confirmed. "In a conversation with the Korean comrades, Filippov [one of Stalin's

code names] and his friends expressed the opinion that, in light of the changed international situation, they agreed with the proposal of the Koreans to move towards reunification."[6] Mao told Kim that the Koreans had China's support, too. But he warned his guest that foreign imperialist intervention might make his task more difficult than Kim Il-sung assumed.

The preparations for an attack on the south began as soon as Stalin had given his go-ahead. There were still hundreds of Red Army military advisers in Korea, and more arrived in May and June. It was mainly the Soviets who drew up the plans for the offensive, and they based it on their highly mobile campaigns against Germany and Japan at the end of World War II. Large amounts of mobile artillery and tanks were sent from the USSR, with technical staff to prepare and maintain the weapons. Stalin had made it clear to the Koreans that this would be their war, but that the Soviet Union would assist as best it could. Kim assured him that victory would be won within weeks, since hundreds of thousands of Koreans in the south would rise up against the regime there as the northern army crossed the thirty-eighth parallel. The time for the attack was set for late June.

How could the normally cautious and realistic Stalin have sanctioned an attack on an area that he knew Washington regarded as being within its sphere? The main reason was that the aging Soviet leader was increasingly getting caught in his own delusions. The late-1940s' purges of Communists in eastern Europe, the many "plots" discovered against Stalin in the USSR, and the treatment of the Yugoslavs and Chinese all point in the same direction. Though the vozhd may have been somewhat deranged all along—and his constant scheming against his associates and complete disregard for human life certainly indicate that—before, at least, there had been some method to the madness. Stalin's ability to work exceptionally hard, obtain the necessary information, and understand how other people thought had, at least in part, compensated for the intricacies of his mind. But by the late 1940s he had started taking leave of the flawed but careful reasoning that lay behind his earlier decisions. Increasingly he acted on his own whims and regarded himself as being omniscient, at least as far as strategy went. Other reasons, such as mixed signals in Washington about US plans to defend South Korea, the first Soviet nuclear test, and Soviet anger over being stymied in Berlin, probably played a role in the decision. But the Korean War came from Stalin's change of mind. If he had not given the go-ahead to Kim, there would have been no war.

At dawn on 25 June, the North Koreans attacked on a broad front across the thirty-eighth parallel. The plan was to capture Seoul and then to encircle the South Korean army in the central part of the country. Over the first week chaos and confusion reigned on the South Korean side. Seoul fell on the third day of the offensive, and Rhee fled toward the south. The South Koreans lost three-quarters of their fighting troops, mostly through defections. The encirclement plan proved unnecessary because resistance was so light, although about twenty thousand of Rhee's soldiers did manage to flee to the southeastern coast. Both sides committed atrocities as the fighting developed. Rhee's regime massacred Leftists held in their prisons. The North Koreans executed ROK officials as they advanced. US military advisers fought on the side of the South Koreans from the very beginning, and small US reinforcements arrived from Japan during the second week of the war. Still, in late July Kim Il-sung reported to Moscow that he expected the war to last less than a month.

Although the North Koreans held the upper hand militarily, the international reaction to the war already made Kim's prediction unlikely. Across the world the attack was seen as an element in the Cold War and not simply a domestic Korean affair. Given the degree to which the Cold War had become the organizing element in world affairs, such a reaction was not surprising. In Washington, President Truman immediately decided that the war was a case of outright Communist aggression, carried out to further reduce US influence in Asia and to test the will of the United States and its allies on a global scale. He ordered US forces to resist. The president also introduced a resolution at the UN Security Council that

condemned the North Korean attack, determined that it was "a breach of the peace," and ordered an immediate withdrawal. The resolution passed unopposed because the Soviets were boycotting the council on account of the US refusal to seat the People's Republic of China (PRC) there. The following week the Security Council passed a follow-up resolution, which called for all UN members to "furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack." It established a unified UN military command in Korea, to be led by the United States. The UN resolutions were gigantic victories for the Truman Administration. Not only did they give legitimacy to a US offensive in Korea, but they also required other countries to assist in the operation.

In the meantime the Soviets were standing on the sidelines. They claimed that the North Korean "counter-attack" was a response to a US/South Korean plan to invade the north. Even though his diplomats asked him to do so, Stalin refused to send his UN ambassador back to the Security Council to block the second resolution, which the USSR could easily have vetoed. Stalin sent instructions to keep a low profile diplomatically, while waiting for the war to conclude militarily. Even so, it is clear that the Soviet leader was rattled by the swift reaction from Washington. The Soviets kept hoping that the offensive would be over before the Americans would be able to intervene in force. But they, and the Chinese, began to understand that such an outcome was unlikely.

Because in spite of their rout of the South Korean army, the North Koreans did not quite succeed in finishing them off. As the remnants arrived in the southeast, they were joined by ever more powerful US forces from Japan. Together they were able to establish a perimeter around the city of Busan and hold it against the northern offensive. The failure to take Busan made alarm bells go off in Beijing. Mao now expected some kind of US counterattack. The Soviets remained more optimistic. As late as mid-August the Red Army general staff reported to Stalin that they expected the war to be over soon. They were wrong. By early September the US and South Korean forces were beginning to break out of the perimeter moving north.

Then, in a daring move that in one stroke undid the North Korean gains, US-led forces carried out a successful amphibious landing at Inchon, close to Seoul, on 15 September. US general Douglas MacArthur, the head of the occupation forces in Japan whom Truman had put in charge of the offensive in Korea, insisted on landing that far north both for political and strategic reasons. He wanted to liberate Seoul, but also to threaten to cut off North Korean troops in the south of the peninsula. MacArthur succeeded more than even he could have imagined. The Inchon landings took Kim Il-sung's forces by surprise. They then prioritized the defense of Seoul over protecting the strategic corridors farther south. Seoul fell after a week's hard fighting. By then Kim's forces in the south were all but detached from their supply lines northward. Under pressure both from the west and the south, and as well as from intensifying US air strikes, Communist troops in South Korea started to buckle. By 1 October they fled for the thirty-eighth parallel, with only a few units able to conduct an orderly retreat. Close to one hundred thousand surrendered.

MacArthur, who had been given extensive control over how to fight the war, now called for a full and unconditional North Korean capitulation. With authorization from Washington, US and allied forces crossed into North Korea on 7 October. In Moscow, Stalin was furious and accused the North Koreans of incompetence and his own military advisers of criminal negligence. But he was still not willing to intervene to help Kim. Instead he sent a message to Mao on 1 October where Stalin, as often on receiving bad news, claimed to be on vacation and not fully au courant with events. But he had learned that "the situation of our Korean friends is getting desperate." "I think that if in the current situation you consider it possible to send troops to assist the Koreans, then you should move at least five-six divisions toward the 38th parallel at once," the Boss opined.[7]

Mao knew, of course, that Kim was in bad straits. He also knew that his countrymen were tired of war and that an intervention in Korea against US forces would be a risky undertaking, putting it mildly. Still, the Chinese leader was in an ebullient mood. He had just won a great civil war and, although he had to fight for it, he had got the recognition from the Moscow master that he craved. Crucially, he also believed that revolutionary China would most likely have to fight a war against the United States at some point anyway. The imperialists hated and feared the Chinese revolution, Mao thought. He just could not believe that the United States, as the head of the imperialist camp, would let a country as important as China leave their zone without a fight.

The Chinese leadership had been preparing for a possible intervention in Korea since well before the North Korean attack happened. As soon as he knew there would be war, Mao had moved forces from the south up to Manchuria, and he had placed some of his best commanders there. Still, there were many other military priorities for the new state. The war in Korea had made some of them more difficult, such as the immediate takeover of Taiwan, where Chiang Kai-shek's rump government had taken refuge. Mao was not surprised when he learned that the United States had moved naval vessels into the Taiwan Straits to protect Chiang shortly after the outbreak of the war in Korea. After all, Mao regarded the war as part of a global confrontation between Communism and its opponents, just as Truman did. But he was concerned that China would have to prioritize its commitments and aid Kim ahead of other tasks closer to his heart: taking over Taiwan, aiding the Communists in Vietnam, or more fully integrating Tibet or Xinjiang into the PRC.

The CCP leadership met in emergency sessions from 2 to 5 October 1950 to decide on the Chinese intervention. Mao was clear from the very beginning that he wanted Chinese forces to move into North Korea. Stalin had requested it. The Chinese Communists owed the Koreans a debt of gratitude from the civil war. Mao himself had promised Kim assistance if needed. And, in general, Mao believed China should not be afraid of war. It was better to fight now than to wait until the Americans were at China's borders. Mao's whole life had been about war. The chances of him waiting this one out were very low.

But as North Korean resistance broke against the US counter-attack, others in the CCP Politburo had second thoughts. At the first meeting on 2 October there was considerable reluctance at Mao sending the telegram he had prepared welcoming Stalin's request. After further discussion, Mao had to change course, informing the Moscow boss that "we now consider that such actions may entail extremely serious consequences," and therefore declined the request for an immediate intervention.[8] Mao Zedong may have been the leader of the Chinese revolution, but in the Politburo, he was still only the first among equals. This would change soon. Evidence suggests that Mao already the next morning regretted having given in to the Politburo majority, and convened an extended meeting of Central Committee members to discuss further. He also brought in Marshal Peng Dehuai, whom he had already chosen to head the Chinese expeditionary force, to argue in favor of intervention. Armed with yet another and more urgent request from Stalin to intervene, on 5 October Mao was able to get the Politburo to overturn its previous decision and agree to send up to nine divisions to fight in Korea.

Stalin was well informed about the decision-making process in Beijing. In his message to Mao of 5 October, he had echoed Mao's own attitude, saying that "if war cannot be avoided, then let it come now, not several years hence when Japanese militarism will have recovered and become an ally of the United States."[9] Stalin also promised full Soviet support for a Chinese intervention. Having made Soviet aid part of his argument to his colleagues, Mao sent Premier Zhou Enlai to Stalin's dacha on the Black Sea to negotiate the details directly with the Boss. Stalin was still concerned that too visible a Soviet participation would draw the USSR directly into the war. In spite of his earlier promises to Mao, he would not commit much air support until well after the Chinese intervention had taken place. The Chinese

hesitated. Stalin told Kim on 12 October that since the Chinese would not send troops, the DPRK leaders and their remaining forces should evacuate Korea and retreat northward. The following day Mao, again overruling his Politburo colleagues, made the final decision to intervene.

While Stalin and Mao prevaricated, the UN military advance continued. South Korean forces had entered the north on 1 October, and US troops followed them on 9 October. Pyongyang fell to the UN on 19 October. The Chinese had signaled to the United States on 3 October that they would intervene if American troops crossed into North Korea, but Washington paid no heed. Truman's and MacArthur's aim was to force the North Koreans to surrender. The PRC forces, constituted as the People's Volunteer Army, entered Korea the same day as the North Korean capital fell, with about two hundred thousand men. US intelligence knew they were there, but had no idea about their numbers. The Chinese first turned on the South Korean forces along the border and destroyed them. Then, on 1 November, they attacked the US First Cavalry Division near Unsan. The Americans seem to have been wholly unprepared. More than one thousand US soldiers were killed. Mao was surprised about the outcome, and ordered the Chinese troops to wait for reinforcements before proceeding. This led General MacArthur to his biggest miscalculation of the war, ordering an offensive against the Chinese troops whom he still believed were few in number.

The result was a complete disaster for the UN forces. The Chinese counterattack not only destroyed the offensive, with heavy losses on both sides, but it also gradually forced a UN retreat. In December the UN was entirely pushed out of North Korea. On 4 January 1951 Seoul fell to the Communist forces for a second time. General MacArthur argued, increasingly publicly, that the United States had to take the war to China. In Washington, the Joint Chiefs of Staff began discussing using nuclear weapons to end the war. Truman hesitated. He worried about the Korean War drawing crucial US military resources from Europe, which in the president's mind was far more important for the Cold War. He also worried about MacArthur challenging his authority as commander in chief. When a letter from MacArthur to the Republican leader in the House of Representatives criticizing the Administration was read out on the House floor, Truman had had enough. On 11 April he fired the garrulous general. Truman, in usual style, explained later that "I fired him because he wouldn't respect the authority of the President. I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son of a bitch, although he was, but that's not against the law for generals. If it was, half to three-quarters of them would be in jail."[10]

In mid-March, UN forces retook Seoul for the second time, and their forces were able to establish and hold a fragile front line very close to the thirty-eighth parallel. The Chinese tried to dislodge them in April but failed, mainly due to US air superiority. Losses on the Chinese side kept rising. In the spring offensives of 1951 their casualties were sometimes ten times those of the UN forces. Just in two weeks in May/June the Chinese army lost forty-five thousand to sixty thousand men. Chinese units also started to run out of supplies. By June Mao was ready for a cease-fire based on the status quo. But Stalin demurred. "A drawn out war," the Soviet leader argued unscrupulously, "gives the possibility to the Chinese troops to study contemporary warfare on the field of battle and… shakes up the Truman regime in America and harms the military prestige of the Anglo-American troops."[11] Mao did not want to seem more eager for compromise than the Boss. Syngman Rhee, now again operating out of the ruins of his capital, enjoined the UN not to settle before his people were fully liberated. There was to be no easy peace in Korea.

When the Chinese attacked US troops in the fall of 1950 people everywhere thought that they were heading fast toward World War III. A fifteen-year-old in Connecticut wrote to President Truman at the outbreak of the war to tell him how she could not sleep when she heard planes passing overhead, "afraid any minute we all would be killed."[12] Countless others, in North America, Europe, and Asia, must have felt the same way. The US Administration hoped they could keep the war contained. Truman realized that he had to strike a balance between using Korea to get public support in the United States for a global

containment policy and increased military expenditure, while avoiding a full-fledged war scare. Always given to hyperbole, Truman at first struck that balance badly. In an address to the American people in December, the president claimed that "our homes, our Nation, all the things we believe in, are in great danger": "This danger has been created by the rulers of the Soviet Union.… In June, the forces of communist imperialism broke out into open warfare in Korea.… Then, in November, the communists threw their Chinese armies into the battle against the free nation. By this act, they have shown that they are now willing to push the world to the brink of a general war to get what they want. This is the real meaning of the events that have been taking place in Korea. This is why we are in such grave danger."[13]

With an ever-larger number of Americans believing that global war might break out very soon, the anti-Communist excesses that had started in the 1940s went into overdrive at home. Senator McCarthy and his supporters, such as the freshman senator from California, Richard Nixon, attacked the Administration for being soft on Communism within the United States. The government responded by having loyalty boards investigate millions of employees. They were asked what civic groups they belonged to, what reading habits they had, and whether they knew any Communists. Thousands of journalists, artists, and ordinary workers were blacklisted and prevented from getting jobs because they refused to join in the frenzy. Teachers and other public employees—in one state even postal workers and grave diggers—were required to swear oaths of loyalty to the Constitution.

In Europe, too, the Korean War intensified the Cold War. Western European leaders worried that Korea was just a Soviet test case. France's Charles de Gaulle wondered whether "these local actions were tests… to prepare for the 'great shock' of a final push through Europe. Of course, Europe is the central, pivotal region to complete the unification of the Eurasian sphere under Soviet domination, with the loss of freedom as a consequence."[14] The French Communists, for their part, followed the Soviet line: "Clear Provocation of War from the Puppets of Washington in Korea," screamed the headline of their newspaper *L'Humanité* the day after the North Korean attack. "The People's Army strikes back victoriously against the aggression of South Korean troops!"

But the conflict had other effects as well. Fears of nuclear warfare spread. In some western European countries radicals were blacklisted from work just like in the United States, although levels of persecution in western Europe never got close to what Communist regimes had imposed in the east. The South Korean cause itself never had much resonance in western Europe, and Soviet and Communist propaganda, saying that the war was a US attack on an innocent people, did have some effect. Most people simply wanted the conflict to end before it spread to their part of the world.

In Japan, close to Korea and with its history of colonialism there, the reaction to the war was one of both fear and opportunity. Most Japanese were afraid that the war would spread to their islands, through a Soviet nuclear attack or a Chinese invasion. There were significant antiwar protests. Japan, after all, was the only country in the world that had already suffered a nuclear attack. But among political leaders and businessmen there was also a sense of opportunity. They knew that the war would make the United States more dependent on Japanese support, and that Japanese industry was in a better position than anyone else to supply the US armies in Korea. Japan did experience a significant economic upturn during the war. Even more importantly, the war ended the US occupation and made Japan a valued ally of the United States. Syngman Rhee and other South Korean leaders hated the thought, but the fact was that their regime could not have been rescued without Japanese assistance.

In the Third World no country or movement did much to support the US cause. India insisted, from the very beginning, on an end to the war and a withdrawal to the thirty-eighth parallel. Others were even more critical. Comments and editorials in the Middle East and statements by African liberation movements asked not unreasonable questions about US policy. Why had the United States intervened

immediately against North Korea, when it did little to throw France out of Algeria or end apartheid in South Africa? The first major apartheid law, the Population Registration Act, was signed the same week as the Korean War broke out. And yet South African forces participated on the UN side in Korea. Though it was not known at the time, it was aircraft from the South African fighter squadron that killed Mao Zedong's son Mao Anying, who served as an officer in Korea, in November 1950.

For the Truman Administration it mattered more that it had succeeded in putting together an international coalition than who served in it. Because of the unprecedented UN mandate, sixteen countries sent troops to Korea. The biggest contingents came from Britain, Turkey, the Philippines, and Thailand. France, Greece, and the Low Countries also sent troops, as did some countries of the British Commonwealth (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). Still, almost 90 percent of the UN troops in Korea were American. Even more importantly, all UN troops fought under US command.

But while the war in Korea may have helped America's international alliances, it probably did even more to facilitate Sino-Soviet cooperation. After the Chinese intervention took place, the Soviets stepped up their assistance, supplying much of the materiel the Chinese and North Korean forces needed. The Soviets also sent more military advisers and, crucially, more airplanes and anti-aircraft artillery. From April 1951 Stalin allowed Soviet pilots to fly combat missions, as long as they stayed within North Korean airspace. Around eight hundred Soviet pilots flew in Korea, mostly in MiG-15 fighter jets, which were the most advanced Soviet aircraft available. During the war both the level of cooperation and the mutual confidence of the Chinese and the Soviet side increased substantially, in spite of occasional disagreements over tactics among the three allies.

The Korean War also had a profound influence on China domestically. In 1950, the Chinese had longed for peace after almost twenty years of war. There was substantial dissatisfaction with having to send young men to war again, this time abroad. Even some soldiers demurred. They asked themselves why they had to be marched from southern China all the way up to Korea to fight in a foreign war, just after victory had been achieved at home. As casualties rose, some even harder questions were asked. A Chinese captain at the battle of Chosin Reservoir remembered "when we moved up the hill just twelve days ago… two hundred young men were running and jumping, full of energy and heroic dreams."

> Tonight there were only six of them. Tired and wounded, they moved slowly down the hill. Covered by dust and blood, their faces and arms were black like charcoals. Their uniforms were ragged, shabby, and torn at the elbows. They looked like ghosts walking in the dark.… My lieutenants, sergeants, and privates had followed me from China all the way to Korea. [Most] could never go back to their homes and see their families. They were only nineteen or twenty years old, and dropped their last blood on this foreign land.[15]

In Korea the destruction was immense. Most parts of the country had been consumed by war at least twice during the campaigns. All the cities were in ruins. About half the population were refugees. Most production had been destroyed and there was widespread hunger throughout the war. Those who tried to hang on in the cities faced a grim fate when war rolled back in. In the second battle for Seoul, "the artillery duels were taking a terrific toll of Korean civilians," according to news reports. "All day and all night women, little children and old men were being brought by pushcart, oxen or litter into the regimental command post in the pathetic hope that the frantically busy doctors could pause long enough to tend to them."[16]

Even though armistice talks started in the summer of 1951, the war itself rolled on for two more

dreadful years, without any meaningful military gains being made by either side. Neither the UN forces nor the Chinese and North Korean commanders were willing to gamble on a large-scale offensive that might yield little or nothing at all. But the armistice talks were also going nowhere. One sticking point was how to handle the prisoner of war issue. The Chinese and North Koreans insisted on repatriation of all prisoners, even those who did not want to return. The Americans maintained that they would repatriate only those who wanted to go back. Meanwhile, the prisoner of war camps in the south developed into veritable battlegrounds of their own, where Communist groups fought anti-Communist wardens put in place by the Americans and the South Koreans. In one of them,

> In early 1952, the brigade leader, Li Da'an, wanted to tattoo every prisoner in Compound 72 with an anti-Communist slogan.… He ordered the prisoner guards to beat those who refused the tattoo. … One prisoner, however, Lin Xuepu, continued to refuse.… Li Da'an finally dragged Lin up to the stage.… "Do you want it or not?" Bleeding and barely able to stand up, Lin, a nineteen year old college freshman, replied with a loud "No!" Li Da'an responded by cutting off one of Lin's arms with his big dagger. Lin screamed but still shook his head when Li repeated the question. Humiliated and angry, Li followed by stabbing Lin with his dagger. After Lin finally collapsed, Li opened Lin's chest and pulled out his heart. Holding the bleeding but still beating heart, Li yelled to all the prisoners in the field: "Whoever dares to refuse the tattoo will be like him!"[17]

Neither Rhee nor Kim wanted an armistice. They still insisted that all of the country had to be "liberated." And, crucially, Stalin had no interest in letting the war end. The more the Americans were bogged down in Asia, the better it was for his positions in Europe.

Already by early 1951 the war was getting increasingly unpopular in the United States, with two-thirds of Americans believing that the United States should pull out of Korea altogether.[18] The news media increasingly asked hard questions about the purpose of the war. Calling Korea "a miserable country to die in," in January 1953 one reporter let his readers know that where he was, "three of our men got it last night." One of them had "graduated from a small southwestern college last August. Korea in October. Dead in January.… They were killed near a bend in the Imjin River between two hills we've named Chink Baldie and Pork Chop."[19] In less than four days in mid-February 1951, the United States had more than 1,300 battle casualties.

The state of the war contributed to Harry Truman's decision not to run again for president in 1952. General Dwight Eisenhower, who ran on the Republican ticket, promised an early end to the war, through tough measures if necessary. But he had no recipe for how to do so. When he won the election, Eisenhower mixed threats (including about considering the use of nuclear weapons) with blandishments (putting pressure on the South Koreans to accept a cease-fire). Right after his inauguration, Eisenhower agreed to an exchange of wounded prisoners without any preconditions. He also signaled an interest in comprehensive Indian proposals for a cease-fire.

Then, on 5 March, the news came that changed everything. Stalin had died. On 1 March the dictator had, as often before, had a late meal with cronies at one of his dachas outside of Moscow. The next day there was no sound from his apartment. Under strict orders never to enter uninvited, the guards did not dare open the door until about 10:00 p.m. They found Stalin laying on the floor. He had had a massive stroke, which immediately incapacitated him. As his successors tried to pull things together, while warily keeping an eye on each other, the one matter on which they did agree was to end the Korean War. They regarded its continuation as dangerous and unnecessary, and hoped its end would signal to the United

States an intent to lessen tensions.

The Communist leaders who inherited Stalin's Soviet Union were right that the Korean War had grown increasingly dangerous, even after the front lines stopped shifting. One of the most significant effects the war had on the Cold War was to militarize the conflict on a global scale. The US defense budget more than doubled, with only part of that increase going to fight the war in Korea. NATO, which up to the summer of 1950 had been mainly a political organization, now started becoming an integrated military force. US military assistance to Britain and France intensified, as did US determination to re-arm West Germany. Nuclear weapons programs were put into high gear. Perhaps most important was the perception, promoted by the Eisenhower Administration, that US commitment to protect associates abroad had to be total. The Cold War was a zero-sum game. Any further reasoning invited enemy attack.

The Korean armistice was signed almost exactly three years after the war broke out. The Communist powers accepted most of the proposals that had been holding up negotiations before. It had been a useless and terrible war for everyone involved. Worse, though, were the consequences for Korea itself. The country was devastated. Three and a half million Koreans had died or been wounded in the war. Ten million were dependent on food aid. Just in the south, there were at least one hundred thousand orphans without any known living relatives.[20] Those Koreans who could return to their towns and villages saw death and despair everywhere. Their foreign allies attempted to ameliorate the situation, in return for integrating "their" Korea into their respective alliance systems. But for the Koreans themselves the war was a national catastrophe, leaving scars that have not yet healed and miseries that have not yet gone away.