China’s Entry into the Korean War:
A Turning Point in History

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Paper
America entered the Korean War in 1950 as part of a United Nations “police action” to help South Korea after being invaded by communist North Korea. After four months of hard fighting, the North Korean army had been pushed all the way up to its northern border and was close to being defeated. The leader of the United Nations forces, General MacArthur, sent a message to President Truman, saying that operations were going as planned and America could start withdrawing its troops in one week. Many American soldiers thought they would be home by Christmas. By the end of November however, United Nations forces were in a full retreat from the Chinese army. Instead of ending quickly, the Korean War lasted three more years. Tensions between North and South Korea continue to this day.

Before the Korean War

By the 1800’s, Korea had been under the control of China for hundreds of years. It was closed off from the rest of the world and was known as “The Hermit Kingdom.” Korea is only 100 miles from Japan and shares borders with China and Russia. All three countries thought Korea was important and wanted to control it for its natural resources and to have a military advantage over the other countries. In 1876, the Japanese military forced Korea to open to foreign trade. After defeating China in the First Sino-Japanese War and Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, Japan made Korea a colony. The Korean people were treated very poorly while

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2 "Douglas MacArthur to Harry S. Truman, with draft letter to MacArthur by George Elsey, October 30, 1950."
3 Mills, Randy K. "Honoring Those Who Paid The Price" Forgotten Voices From The Korean War. 114-116
4 Salter, Christopher L. South Korea. 58-64
under the control of the Japanese. Some Koreans became friends with Chinese Communists hoping that the Japanese would someday be defeated.  

During World War II, Allied powers had not put much thought into what to do with Japanese-occupied Korea after the war ended. In 1943, at the Cairo Conference, China’s Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek convinced President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, to support Korean independence. Chiang Kai-shek was afraid that the Soviet Union would try to make Korea communist. The Allied leaders declared in a document called the Cairo Communiqué that “mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, [we] are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent.”

At the Yalta conference in 1945, President Roosevelt told Soviet leader Joseph Stalin that Korea would need to be led by the great powers of America, Great Britain, Russia, and China until Korean people were able to control the country by themselves. His plan was for Korea to become a democratic country. However, Stalin wanted Korea to be quickly handed over to the Korean people because he thought they would then form a communist government.

As World War II allies, the United States and Soviet Union had an agreement that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan after Germany was defeated. Two days after the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and sent its army into Korea. Americans thought that when Japan surrendered, they could occupy all of Korea before the Soviets had a chance to move in. However, the closest American troops were 600 miles away. The Soviets stopped at the 38th parallel when a last minute

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6 Sandler, Stanley. The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished.
8 Matray, James L. Korea Divided: The38th Parallel and the Demilitarized Zone 55, 78-79
agreement was made with the United States to divide Korea into two zones of occupation and merge them at a later time.

The Soviet Union set up a communist government in the north, which appointed Kim-Il-Sung as the leader on October 3, 1945. They gave the North Koreans tanks, weapons and arms to protect themselves. The United States did not want to stay involved in Korea and put the south under the control of the United Nations, which sent a commission to Korea to hold elections. The north refused to participate because the south had more people. On August 15, 1948, the South Korean government was established and was called the Republic of Korea (ROK). Each government wanted to merge Korea into a single country under their control as almost all Koreans were against the idea of a divided country. The United States did not give heavy weapons to South Korea because it was afraid that they would be used to attack the north and start a worldwide war with the Soviet Union.9

Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin did not want North Korea to attack South Korea because he thought the United States would get involved. In May 1949, the North Korean leader Kim-Il-Sung asked the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong to back his invasion plans. After the communists won the Chinese Civil war Mao agreed to provide Chinese troops if needed. When the United States withdrew its troops from South Korea in June 1949 and the communists won the Chinese mainland in October 1949, Stalin gave his approval for an attack on South Korea.10


The Invasion of South Korea

On June 25, 1950, about 75,000 North Korean troops invaded the south. Almost one-third had fought in China during the Chinese civil war and were very experienced in combat. While the South Koreans had almost twice as many soldiers, the north had much better weapons. The United States asked the United Nations Security Council to help drive the North Koreans out of South Korea. The Soviet Union could have vetoed any Security Council resolution but were boycotting the council because they wanted the communist Chinese to be represented at the United Nations instead of the Nationalist Chinese. A Security Council resolution was passed that called for a ceasefire and for North Korean troops to return to their side of the 38th parallel. It also called for all members of the United Nations to give assistance. President Truman ordered the United States Air Force and Navy to help the South Koreans. By the end of June, half of the South Korean troops were killed, captured, or missing; the United States decided it needed to send ground forces. While fifteen other countries gave assistance, Americans made up nearly ninety percent of the forces. The United States led the United Nations forces with General Douglass MacArthur as the commander. The North Koreans had pushed all the way to a small corner of South Korea around the port city of Pusan before their advance was stopped.

While fighting continued in Pusan, General MacArthur decided to attack the port city of Inchon. If the Americans were to capture Inchon, they could cut off the North Korean supply lines to the south. The Chinese had studied General McArthur’s strategy in World War II and warned the North Koreans that the Americans were going to attack Inchon. Even when warned

12 "Truman Orders U.S. Air, Navy Units To Fight In Aid Of Korea; U.N. Council Supports Him; Our Fliers In Action; Fleet Guards Formosa." New York Times on the Web
the city would come under attack, the North Koreans were not ready when the Americans shot their big guns from battleships onto the city. The North Korean troops never stood a chance as the United States Marines took over the beach and captured the city. The Americans’ next move was to take over the capital city of Seoul.

When Seoul was taken over, the supply line to North Korean troops was cut off. At this point, North Korean troops retreated back across the 38th parallel. The Chinese government sent warnings to the United Nations declaring that if foreign troops crossed the 38th parallel, they would intervene in the war. The United Nations forces ignored the warnings and crossed the 38th parallel. On October 7, 1950 Mao Zedong told Stalin that China wanted to intervene and asked for military supplies. Stalin was afraid of a large war between the United States and the Soviet Union. He asked Mao not attack the Americans but the Chinese decided to join the war anyway. Once the Chinese decided to enter the war, Stalin decided to help them.15

The Chinese Invasion

When the United Nations forces crossed the 38th parallel, the North Koreans were made to retreat up to the Yalu River, which is between North Korea and China. The Chinese army crossed the Yalu River into North Korea to help the North Koreans, moving only at night without radios or lights. United Nations forces did not suspect that the Chinese were in Korea at all.16 South Korean troops at the front of the United Nations lines were attacked by Chinese troops but the United Nations commanders did not think it was a full scale Chinese attack. On

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November 24, 1950, the United States eighth army cautiously advanced forward in a line. It was mountainous and was becoming very cold in this region. The Chinese troops hid in mountains and mines as the Americans passed them by. On November 28, 1950, the Chinese army came out of hiding and attacked, surrounding the Americans from all directions. The trapped Americans escaped through the Chinese lines with many injured or dead, retreating towards the south.

In January of 1951, the Chinese took over the Capital city of Seoul and then pushed the United Nations forces below the 38th parallel. Rains stopped the Chinese from getting supplies to their troops so they began moving their troops back to the north. On January 25th, United Nations troops moved north and took back Inchon and Seoul. In March of 1951, the Americans pushed the Chinese out of South Korea.

On April 11, 1952, General MacArthur was fired by President Truman for talking publicly about the war. MacArthur wanted to broaden the war by bombing China, blockading its coast, and helping the Nationalist Chinese attack the mainland. President Truman wanted to limit the war in Korea and move towards a peace settlement. General Ridgway was appointed the new United Nations commander and General James Van Fleet was made the field commander in Korea. When he became commander, General Van Fleet ordered more ammunition instead of extra men to fight. Meanwhile, the Chinese in North Korea started preparing for a second big attack on South Korea. When the Americans moved up to an area in North Korea called the Iron Triangle, the Chinese attacked. Americans shot thousands of rounds of heavy artillery to stop the Chinese from advancing further south. The Chinese troops ended

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17 Appleman, Roy. Escaping The Trap: The US Army X Corps in Northeast Korea. 3 - 7
up running out of ammunition and retreated. In June, the United Nations started around the clock air strikes. At this time, peace talks started but the two sides could not reach an agreement. The war lasted two more years with intense fighting and periods of rest. The same hills were fought over many times with neither side gaining an advantage.

The Korean War Ends

In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower was a candidate to be the next President. In a campaign speech he said, “I shall go to Korea” and promised to end the war. Once elected, he let the Chinese know that he would expand the war into China to obtain a peace agreement. After the death of Stalin, the Chinese and new Soviet leaders wanted to end the war and changed their demands. An armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953 that stopped the fighting without a victory for either side. As part of the armistice, each side backed up two kilometers from where the fighting stopped and the space in between was made into a demilitarized zone. It is 160 miles long and divides Korea close to the 38th parallel near where the war started. Large numbers of troops have been stationed on each side of the demilitarized zone since the end of the war. The United States also keeps 28,500 soldiers in South Korea.

The Legacy of the Korean War

Both North and South Korea were in ruins at the end of the war. The United States gave economic and military aid to South Korea. While both the Soviet Union and China gave aid to


21 Harrison, JR. , William K. . "Transcript of Armistice Agreement for the Restoration of the south Korean state
North Korea, relations between the Soviets and Chinese were damaged. The Soviets forced the Chinese pay $1.2 billion for the weapons they gave them during the war when the Chinese thought the Soviets should share the costs. Disputes continued, leading to a split between the two that lasted until 1989. Since the 1960’s, South Korea’s economy has grown very fast and is now ranked 15th in the world. It is a democratic country with elected leaders. In turn, North Korea’s economy is one of the worst in the world; about 40% of its people suffer from malnutrition. North Korea’s government is a dictatorship with leadership passing from father to son.

Without China’s entry into the war, Korea would have been united as one country under democratic rule. Instead, North Korea has threatened South Korea since the end of the war. In 2006, North Korea tested a nuclear bomb and has now become a nuclear threat. Recently, North Korea has declared the armistice agreement invalid and threatened to launch a preemptive nuclear strike on the United States. Meanwhile, China publically states that it wants North Korea to be calm and restrained. China’s decision to attack was a major turning point in history and continues to affect the world today.

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25 Park, Madison. "North Korea declares 1953 armistice invalid." CNN
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Crutchfield, Robert. "Interview." Message to Todd Conn. 12 May 2013. E-mail.

Corporal Robert Crutchfield served in the United States Army. In 1948, he was sent to Korea straight from boot camp. He was in an I and R (Intelligence and Reconnaissance) group which had to verify troop movements and took prisoners to interrogate. He ended up losing his left arm in this war. This interview was interesting and did verify much of the information obtained from other sources.


Truman, Harry S. "Address by President Truman About Policy in the Far East, 1951." PBS:
In this speech, President Truman talks about communist aggression and preventing a World War by keeping the war in Korea. He also talks about the firing of General MacArthur for wanting to extend the war into China.


President Harry S. Truman called the Korean conflict a police action and not a war in this news conference. The president did not give many details.
Secondary Sources


This book talked about the Chinese attacking and gave important dates. The author Roy Appleman graduated from Ohio State University, magna cum laude. He received a Master’s degree in history from Columbia University. He was a Colonel in the United States army and served during the Korean War as a combat historian.


Information that the United States did not want to give weapons to the South Koreans is explained in this journal. The author, Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at Cato institute and was a Policy analyst for President Reagan. He has been published in Foreign Policy, New York Times and others.


This book talks about America sending forces to help South Korea after being invaded by North Korea. The author, Bruce Cummings is the chair of the history department at the University of Chicago and specializes in modern Korean history.


The article shows how Americans did not expect the Chinese to attack in support of North Korea. The Americans were more concerned about the Soviet Union. This source also contained a link to a memo written to President Truman by the CIA director, Walter Smith. The author is an award winning correspondent for the National Public Radio specializing in international news.

This book tells why the Chinese got into the Korean War. The author, Edwin Hoyt is an American writer who specializes in military history.


This documentary contained information on how General Ridgway was appointed the new United Nations commander and General James Van Fleet was made the field commander in Korea. The two new Generals had different plans to attack.


This article explains what president Truman did when North Korea invaded. The author, Anthony Leviero was a lieutenant Colonel in the United States army. As a reporter, he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1952.


At the end of World War 2, the Soviet and American armies moved into Korea dividing it at the 38th parallel. The Americans were surprised when the Soviets moved into Korea because they thought they could move in before the Soviets. The author, James Matray is a professor of history at California State University Chico.


This book contained letters of soldiers who were fighting in the Korean War. Some of the soldiers thought that they would be home by Christmas. The author, Randy K. Mills is a noted author and historian.

North Korea’s economy is explained in this document. The author, Dick K. Nanto is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Brigham Young University.


This article explains that North Korea tested a nuclear bomb and became a nuclear threat.


This article explains that North Korea declared the Armistice agreement invalid. It also says that North Korea has threatened the United States with nuclear attack.


This is an article from the New York Times which talks about how the Armistice Agreement was signed, stopping the war. Neither side won the war. The Armistice was signed by the United States, North Korea, and China. It stopped the war, but it was not a peace treaty.


The author of this article works for the CIA. It talks about Mao Zedong’s meeting with Stalin and his decision to invade Korea.

This book describes the history of Korea before World War 2. China had captured Korea and cut it off from the rest of the world. Korea became known as “The Hermit Kingdom.”


This source gave information about the Cairo Conference. Chiang-Kai-shek convinced the Allied powers support Korean independence from the Japanese. The author, Stanley Sandler is a historian for the United States Army Special Operations Command.


This article explains why the Soviets boycotted the United Nations Security Councils. The Soviets could have stopped the United Nations from sending troops to Korea because the Soviets have veto power over any Security Council resolution.


This book gives a description of the entire Korean War. The author, Conrad Stein got his stories off of marines that fought in the Korean War. The author has also written more than 80 historical books.


The website contains information on why America feared attacking China because they thought it would start World War 3. The website is maintained by Wheeling Jesuit University.

This article talks about translated Soviet documents. Kim-Il-Sung asked Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong for help in attacking South Korea. The author, Kathryn Weathersby is a Senior Associate with The Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center.


This article explains how China and the Soviet Union wanted to end the Korean War after Joseph Stalin died. This source used translated soviet documents.


This book talked about what General MacArthur thought when the Chinese attacked. The author, Stanley Weintraub was a professor at Penn State University. He served as a First Lieutenant in the United States Army during the Korean War.


This book talks about the relationship between the Koreans and the Chinese before the Korean War. It also gave information about the damaged relationship between China and the Soviet Union after the war. The author, Richard Whelan was a noted historian, scholar, and photographer.


This news article explained that North Korea threatened to invade the South if South Korean activists dropped anti-North Korean pamphlets on their side of the border. It also says that South Korea is trying to get longer ranged missiles. The author, Fayen Wong is a WSBT reporter. WSBT is a local news station.