Remembering a war notoriously referred to as one that is “unknown” or “forgotten” carries with it a hefty burden to restore honor to the lives lost and affected by such devastating violence. However, as this war erupted during a volatile and uncertain climate of postcolonial liberation from Japan and escalating Cold War tensions—a time when local and international parties violently clashed over differing political ideologies, motivations, and expectations—its telling is fraught with both complexity and controversy. Restricted or unopened archives, changing memories, and still politically sensitive debates exacerbate attempts to accurately comprehend this moment. There is no one history of the Korean War. Thus, this chapter not only provides a historical overview of general events and significant themes, but also a conscious recognition of how this history has been and continues to be told. In this way, the Korean War’s place in history becomes more than just a historical episode, but one that provides a lasting lesson on how history, politics, and scholarship intersect.

**Historiography**

A general review of Korean War historiography, specifically Western and East Asian scholarship, not only reflects academic trends across various disciplines and areas of study (e.g. critical shifts in postcolonial and postmodern studies), but also changing political climates in both the United States and East Asia that often influenced the kinds of narratives and tones that emerged. South Korean-language studies on the Korean War, for example, were largely unformed during the 1950s and 1960s due to the chaos of war, dictatorships, censorship, and postwar reconstruction. What little was produced by Koreans remained, over the course of decades, consistent with the official view of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Government that the war was an unprovoked aggression coordinated by the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. Many scholars were not only inhibited by the state, which fostered and propagated conservative viewpoints and an overwhelmingly anti-communist culture, but also by the mere fact that they were witnesses to the brutality of the war and were weary of lenient considerations of North Korean intentions (C.B. Kim 1996: 158).

It was the 1970s that produced a significant shift among Korean War scholarship produced in South Korea. Largely due to new funding initiatives and partnerships between the United
States and the Republic of Korea (e.g. via the Ford Foundation, the 1961 Fulbright-Hays Act, etc.), some students were able to study abroad in the United States and Europe (Cumings 1999: 180). These scholars gained exposure to critical and progressive viewpoints like world-systems analysis and Marxism, which were restricted under Korea’s authoritarian regimes. However, many of these students, as Kim Chull Baum has found in his study of Korean War historiography, were scholars of international politics and tended to remain somewhat conservative in their understanding of the war by insisting that responsibility for the devastation remained at the feet of foreign powers. It was not until Korean historians began to take up the mantle with the release of US and British military and state documents, along with captured North Korean documents, during the 1970s and 1980s that critical analyses began to emerge that considered the war as an internal conflict exacerbated by imperialist policies (C.B. Kim 1996: 158).

For example, Kim Hak-joon’s *Korean Affairs and International Politics* (1975) was not only the first Korean-language study to use military archival documents, but it was also the first to explore controversial issues surrounding the Korean War, despite heavy censorship under the Chun regime. In his later work on the history of the Korean War (1989), Kim more freely reveals that there was a split in the North Korean leadership regarding whether to continue the fight beyond 1951. Pak Myung-lim (1996) examined captured North Korean documents alongside South Korean documents to provide a closer study of the internal conditions that led to the pursuit of unification by force, adding complexity to our understanding of the decision-making process to go to war. After South Korea’s democratization in the late 1980s, historical study of the Korean War has grown more diverse and more inclusive of what were once regarded as radical viewpoints.

By the 1990s, the release of Chinese and Russian documents, partly aided by normalized relations between Seoul and Moscow and Seoul and Beijing, began to lend support to the traditionalist view that the war was an international conflict and instigated by North Korea. Much like the debate among English-language scholars, an exploration of which follows, the debate amongst Korean scholars has taken a similar turn based on the availability of archival documents from all sides and changing political climates. Attempting to bridge the gap, much of today’s scholarship seeks to explore the Korean War as a combination of domestic and international factors both in its origins and outcome. In addition, current Korean-language scholarship has now begun to incorporate interdisciplinary studies to examine the sociological, psychological, and cultural impact of the war (C.B. Kim 1996: 164–165).

English-language studies published in the 1950s and 1960s suffered from their own lack of access to declassified documents and the vociferous tide of anti-communist sentiments that swept across the country. As a result, early works exhibited an almost formulaic depiction of the Korean War as a United Nations “police action” against an unprovoked 25 June 1950 North Korean invasion designed by the Soviet Union. This toed the Truman administration’s containment policy line, originally suggested by George F. Kennan in his “Long Telegram” (1947), arguing intervention as a necessary action for collective security against communist aggression, a view presented before the American public and the world.¹ Meanwhile, Soviet and North Korean officials cast the United States and South Korea as solely responsible for instigating hostilities with the aim to ignite a civil war, invoking a defensive response from their side. Thus, as historian Steven Hugh Lee writes, “The issue [regarding the origins of the Korean War] was drawn into the vortex of superpower attempts to justify their respective positions in their international rivalry” (Lee 2001: 6). It was regarded as a proxy war between international superpowers.

I.F. Stone’s original 1952 publication, *The Hidden History of the Korean War*, was the earliest monograph to gather available documents and reports to swim against this current in its consideration of internal/domestic factors in the origins of the war and its critique of the US
government’s handling of the United Nations. It was, of course, met with disdain and was pushed into the shadows until the release of declassified government documents in the 1970s gave credence to some of his findings. In the meantime, orthodox works like those by David Rees (Korea: The Limited War [1964]) remained authoritative sources. However, as information became more available, scholars began to explore other dimensions of the war. The release of The Foreign Relations of the United States 1950 in 1976 enabled William Stueck, for example, to explore shifts in American policies towards China as a result of the war in his own 1981 book The Road to Confrontation. James Matray’s The Reluctant Crusade (1985) examined US State Department records to trace shifts in American foreign policy from restraint to global intervention in Korea, while also acknowledging that the origins of the conflict perhaps bore deeper than 1950.

Growing disillusionment in the mid- to late 1960s with the Vietnam War, along with mounting unease with the relationship between US academia and the government that had developed out of state-funded “area” and “national character studies” during World War II, led to the emergence of a new crop of Western scholars willing to critically explore US policies in East Asia. This signified an important shift in Korean War historiography. Rather than 25 June 1950 marking the beginning of the Korean War, scholars—many of whom had developed sympathies towards their countries of study from their experiences as Fulbright Scholars and Peace Corps volunteers, something Vincente Rafael refers to as “sentimental imperialism”—began to more closely study the colonial and post-liberation history of Korea to reveal more multidimensional factors (Rafael 1999: 1214). Their work exhibited a break from orthodox scholarship in the United States that framed Korean history in terms of a linear development that justified US intervention in the language of assistance. Furthermore, exploration of military documents began to shed light on some of the more brutal tactics used by the US military against North Korean targets, as explored by English diplomatic and military historian Callum MacDonald in his Korea: The War Before Vietnam (1986). Australian historian Gavan McCormack’s Cold War, Hot War (1983) also raised questions regarding whether the US Air Force (USAF) might have used biological weapons against the North Koreans, in addition to positing that the South had instigated the war.

Drawing extensively from newly declassified documents released during the 1970s, Bruce Cumings’ two-volume work (1981, 1990), as noted by many scholars of Korean studies (e.g. Lee 2001, Yuh 2010), boldly critiqued the pervading Cold War narrative of the origins of the Korean War, arguing instead that the US military occupation and foreign policy had in fact obfuscated a domestic revolution that had roots long before liberation and might have been in the Korean people’s best interests. Cumings’ publications challenged, and continue to chafe against, orthodox and conservative viewpoints that still contend that North Korea’s invasion of the South was a product of Soviet and Chinese machinations or that the war was largely an international conflict. At the same time, his work profoundly resonated with many Korean and American researchers by inaugurating critical scholarship into Korean studies while still mildly supporting “internal development” positions through his recognition of Korea’s inherent dynamism through the rise of peasant resistance and nationalism during the precolonial period (Shin 2003: 168). Cumings’ critique of American military occupation, in particular, was powerful among Korean students suffering under the rule of the US-supported Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan dictatorships, whereby the oppressive National Security Laws gave the regimes carte blanche to indefinitely detain and torture students for expressing leftist sympathy or criticism against the ROK government or the United States.

Although arguments over the domestic versus international origins of the war have dominated debates within Korean War scholarship, the increased availability, albeit still limited, of Chinese and Russian documents beginning in the 1990s has provided researchers with new opportunities
to better assess the complexities of the war. Evidence from US, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Russian materials, most comprehensively brought together by Wada Haruki’s recently translated *The Korean War: An International History* (2013), which examines in great detail the war as a regional conflict, demonstrates that the decision to invade South Korea on that fateful June day was indeed a result of close coordination between North Korea and the Soviet Union. However, unlike the one-dimensional Cold War assessments of Soviet domination over decisions to launch an offensive across the 38th parallel, top-secret correspondences between North Korean and Soviet officials reveal that North Korean leaders were in fact active campaigners for invasion over a more reluctant Stalin. This level of agency paralleled what we have long known about South Korea’s President Syngman Rhee’s own aggressive campaign to launch a military campaign to reunite the peninsula.

The final act was also achieved in close coordination with the Chinese, demonstrating a growing Sino-North Korean partnership. This complements Chen Jian’s findings in his *China’s Road to the Korean War* (1994), which examines China’s post-revolutionary internal political development and its impact on the decision to enter the war as a vanguard against Western imperialism in Asia. In balance with the colonial, post-liberation, and domestic circumstances of both Koreas, alongside the emerging Cold War climate of contending superpowers, including China’s ascendance, we can now better appreciate the multidimensional, or what Lee regards as the “symbiotic,” relationship between civil and international factors that not only led to the Korean War, but also impacted how it was carried out (Lee 2001: 7).

**Colonial origins**

While responsibility for Korea’s geographic division could be placed at the feet of American military planners in 1945, its political division could be attributed to its colonial experience. As American and European imperial powers focused much of their attention on opening China to global trade during the mid-nineteenth century, Korea remained relatively marginal until Japan’s own imperial aspirations turned towards the tiny peninsular country. This began with the 1876 Kanghwa Treaty, which led to other unequal treaties with the United States, France, etc. Despite resistance from Confucian conservatives, some yangban (literati) and government officials in Korea’s Chosŏn Dynasty (1492–1910) began to seek political, ideological, and material solutions to meet the onslaught of Japanese and Western colonial ambitions. Out of various self-strengthening approaches emerged early forms of modern Korean nationalism (Eckert et al. 1990: 201–214). Alas, in spite of such efforts, Korea became Japan’s colony in 1910.

Over nearly four decades of colonial rule, underground and exiled nationalist groups fervently sought independence through various means. Kim Il-sung and Syngman Rhee shared a common history as fighters for Korean independence with deep and long-lasting contempt for Korea’s colonial subjugation. Their experiences and divergent ideologies during this formative period greatly impacted their respective leadership approaches of a later divided Korea.

Rhee, a descendant of a modest family of aristocratic lineage, was educated in both the traditional Confucian system and, later, at an American Christian school. He developed into a conservative political activist who joined the reform movement of the Independence Club in the mid-1890s that sought to adopt Western approaches to modernize the Chosŏn state. After falling out of favor with the king, he spent several years in prison before leaving for Hawaii and the US mainland, where he received his doctorate from Princeton University. There, he began to aggressively campaign for a Korean-American partnership by appealing to US officials and the American public for Korean independence (Oliver 1954: 1–114).
At the close of World War I, the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan convened in Paris as the principal powers in charge of formulating a plan for peace. In his “Fourteen Points” speech at the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, President Woodrow Wilson insisted upon the fundamental importance of preserving and defending liberty through a union of nations. His fourteenth point spoke to the principle of “self-determination” in his appeal for “mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity,” even for “small states,” emboldening Koreans like Rhee.3

In Korea, on 1 March 1919, over one million Koreans participated in a nonviolent, popular protest called the “March 1st Movement,” or Samil Undong, that lasted for several weeks against Japanese colonial occupation. They were met with brutal repression. Despite American missionary pleas for international sympathy for the tens of thousands of civilian victims, no Western nations stepped forward to intervene (Eckert et al. 1990: 276–279). As one of many exiled nationalists responding to this crisis, Rhee helped form the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) in Shanghai for which he temporarily served as President. In September, the New York Times published an article citing his proclamation for Korea’s independence from Japan titled “‘President’ Rhee Renounces Japanese Sovereignty and Asks for Recognition.” In it, he stated, “We accept and agree to the American principles of democracy and self-government enunciated by President Wilson during the Great War, the principles of a liberated mankind, of equal justice for all nations alike, be they weak or strong, and of the derivation of their just powers by governments from the consent of the governed.”4 However, despite such declarations that were rooted in the language of Wilson’s own speeches, those principal powers in Paris did little to respond to Korea’s pleas. After relinquishing the KPG presidency to Kim Ku, an advocate for organized violence against the empire, Rhee focused on his diplomatic efforts and became widely recognized in Korea as a Christian, anti-communist, conservative defender for Korean independence despite continued ambivalence, indifference, or, in some cases, irritation amongst American officials (Oliver 1954: 142–144).

For other Korean independence fighters, continued rebuffs by Western nations convinced them of the weakness of diplomatic approaches. The 1917 Russian Revolution inspired many to look to guerrilla warfare and Marxist revolution as an alternative. While communist movements within Korea experienced brutal suppression by the colonial police, others were able to gain footholds in Siberia, China, and elsewhere, reflecting a scattered Korean diaspora during the colonial period. Many of these exiled nationalists served in the Soviet Army and the Chinese Communist Party during the 1920s through the 1950s. Among these participants, Kim Il-sung ascended as a junior revolutionary who joined the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army and led raids against Japanese officials and Korean collaborators in Manchuria. He later served with the Soviet Army and returned to Pyongyang (P’yŏngyang) after the US bombing of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 (Lee 2001: 14–16).

It was the attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the United States into the maelstrom of World War II and squarely into Japan’s colonial territory and into Korea. And, it was during this subsequent decade that Korea’s geographic division took root. It began in November 1943 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in Cairo to outline their plan to defeat Japan. In their December radio release, the Allied leaders expressed their sympathies for the “enslavement of the people of Korea,” but asserted that self-rule would come “in due course.”5 This reflected Roosevelt’s gradualist vision of a new liberal world order of reconfigured economic and political relationships that would replace the old colonial economy and, ultimately, achieve American hegemony. In his private letters, Roosevelt reflected on the future of former colonies like Korea, French Indochina, British India, and the Dutch East Indies: “there are many minor children among the peoples of the
world who need trustees, [especially] the brown people of the East” (as cited in Hunt 1987: 162). Only under a paternalistic policy of trusteeship could these “many minor children” achieve a level of preparedness for self-rule.

After Roosevelt’s death on 12 April 1945, American officials continued to pursue modified versions of his trusteeship idea. A few days before the *Enola Gay* was to drop “Little Boy” on Japan, Colonels Dean Rusk and Charles H. Bonesteel selected the 38th parallel to demarcate Soviet and American zones in Korea. In US policy formulations, Korea would factor as a key component to containing communism and reviving Japan’s industrial economy. Shortly thereafter, Korean leaders began to prepare for self-government. People’s committees also sprang up in rural areas with aims to dismantle the colonial apparatus, including rounding up individuals who served in the colonial police and landowners who preyed on vulnerable Koreans and profited from collaboration with the Japanese. Predictably, American officials disapproved of such efforts, viewing them as radical leftist extensions of Soviet influence (Cumings 1997: 185–187). Ignorant to key historical factors, like the centuries-long impact of class divisions between landed, educated elites and a large peasant population that regarded wealthy landowners as having continually benefited from the colonial period and with the Americans (e.g. brothers Kim Sŏng-su and Kim Yŏn-su, Song Chin-u, etc., who established the Korean Democratic Party [Eckert 1991: 30–32]), American officials failed to recognize that “the political fault line was not right versus left, but patriot versus collaborator” (Cumings 1997: 198).

As American and Korean conservative leadership worked together to suppress local efforts to purge colonial vestiges, eruptions of violence began to mount throughout the peninsula. This rending apart of the country, between left and right factions, peasants and proprietors, resistant fighters and collaborators (though the lines were not always so clear or divisive), is powerfully portrayed in Im Kwon-t’aek’s dramatic film entitled *Taebaek Sanmaek* (1994). By 1948, partisan and guerrilla fighters in southeast Kyŏngsang and the agriculturally rich, and traditionally rebellious, southwest Chŏlla provinces turned their vitriol against the repressive Korean National Police (KNP) and the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA), a majority of which was made up of Koreans who had served the colonial machinery. The two most infamous events were the bloody 1948 Yŏsu and Cheju Rebellions (Cumings 1997: 217–224). In that same year, the Republic of Korea was proclaimed on 15 August with Syngman Rhee as president.

Meanwhile, Koreans in the north had a different trusteeship experience (we know this from North Korean documents captured by US military forces during the Korean War). After liberation, People’s Committees appeared throughout northern Korea with the approval of the Soviets. During the trusteeship period, Soviets worked rather loosely with communists and nationalists, as compared to American–directed efforts to build a centralized administration in South Korea. Out of an emerging coalition of leaders, Kim Il-sung began to maneuver into a position of leadership, surpassing communists who had cut their teeth surviving in Korea during the colonial period and those who had worked with the Soviets or Chinese abroad. By February 1946, a central administration was in the works and land reform measures began, which included purging state institutions of “reactionary” Koreans and those who served the colonial apparatus (Cumings 1981: 414).

By late summer, the North Korean Workers’ Party (NKWP) overshadowed other political groups, and economic planning began along the lines of the Soviet model. At this juncture, Kim and his allies successfully removed a majority of political threats, including Christians and nationalists, through social, economic, and political alienation and exclusion. Meanwhile, they encouraged people with peasant backgrounds to join the NKWP. Self-criticism sessions were routinized and surveillance was in full force. By the end of 1946, the press was under tight
control and all non-leftist opposition was eliminated (Cumings 1997: 226–235). On 9 September 1948, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) was formed and Kim Il-sung was named its premier.

Storm rising

Although the early Sunday morning of 25 June 1950 has been seared in American memories as the start date of the conflict in Korea, it was rather a coalescence of rising tensions and skirmishes between two competing factions that had been taking place for some time along the 38th parallel. By the summer of 1949, both North and South Korean leaders saw war as the only means to unification. In May, fights along the border began to escalate between North and South Korean forces. As early as June, heavy fighting on the Ongjin Peninsula alerted American intelligence officials of the possibility that a civil war could break out at any moment and by either side. While both sides were guilty of igniting violent confrontations, both were also hoping that the other would be the first to commit a full breach so as to force their respective reluctant large-power holders to come to their aid.

The compulsion to reunite a country that had never been divided in its thousands-year history, nor ever should have been, was considerably strong on both sides. But, neither was in a position to launch a war. For Rhee, despite his persistent efforts to convince his American advisors of the imperative to invade the North and unite the country under the ROK flag, he failed to rally the necessary support and approval as the US government began to draw down its troop presence. Ambassador John J. Muccio, explicitly warned President Rhee that the United States would not provide any military support should the South engage in provocative actions, even threatening to withdraw economic aid (at the time, around $100 million per year) (Lowe 1997: 71).

Kim Il-sung faced his own difficulties obtaining guarantees of Soviet support (Weathersby 1993: 28). The summer of 1949 was also too early; tens of thousands of his troops were still in Manchuria assisting Mao’s People’s Liberation Army against Chiang’s Kuomintang (KMT) troops since 1947. This move would prove to be a savvy one. By lending his support, Kim not only secured an “I-O-U” from Mao that would come into play in the next couple of years, he also gained battle-seasoned troops. After a period of relative quiet brought on by Korea’s harsh winter, war came, and with Stalin’s tacit approval, it came at the hands of Kim Il-sung in June 1950 (Cumings 1997: 239). While evidence shows that Stalin’s reluctant approval for Kim to invade was accompanied by equally ambivalent material support, for which payment was expected, Mao was making preparations to make good on his promise to return Kim’s favor with troops (Wada 2014: 20).

Fighting erupted on the Ongjin Peninsula; both sides claimed one provoked the other in the early morning hours of 25 June 1950. By 5 a.m., it had moved eastward across the 38th parallel. The North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) dealt a heavy and concerted blow against the Republic of Korea Army and advanced, for the first time, towards Seoul, the South’s capital city (Lee 2001: 44). The NKPA, consisting of many veterans of anti-colonial struggles against the Japanese and volunteers who backed the communists against the KMT in China, met comparatively little resistance against the greener ROK forces.

US Secretary of State Dean Acheson heard about the fighting while at his Maryland country house on Saturday; President Truman was at home in Missouri. Acheson and Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk decided to bring the Korea question before the United Nations, a more amenable body than the US Congress. They also planned to argue for increased military aid to the Republic of Korea, American air support for evacuation, and orders to move the Seventh
Fleet into the Taiwan Straits to stave off any possible acts of aggression between the communist Chinese and the nationalist government that had fled to Taiwan. Truman declared US actions in Korea a “police action,” thereby avoiding a formal declaration of war that would require legislation by Congress (Edwards 1998: 3).

The United Nations passed “Resolution 84” on 27 June recommending that “the members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security to the area.” In the absence of the Soviet Union’s representative Jacob Malik at the Security Council, in protest of the UN’s refusal to admit China as a member, the UN approved military action in Korea. By the night of 28 June, Seoul had fallen and South Korean forces were in disarray, an event witnessed by famous political cartoonist Kim Song-hwan, or “Gobau,” during his adolescence and recorded in vivid pen and watercolors (Salmon 2009: 1–13). Many Korean refugees fled ahead of the NKPA’s march into Seoul, while others welcomed their arrival. After a week in Seoul, likely waiting for supplies from the rear, the NKPA continued its southward move and rooted out “reactionaries” on the way. Local guerrilla forces, which had led campaigns against the KNP and US military before being shut down in years prior, emerged out of hiding to help reorganize the countryside. Focused on the redistribution of rice stocks and land, the return of people’s committees speaks strongly to the anti-feudal and anti-colonial roots of this conflict (Cumings 1990: 666–690).

Interestingly, even surrender leaflets aimed at enemy forces produced by both the North Koreans and the Americans speak to the multifaceted nature of the conflict. For North Korean-produced leaflets, South Korea is depicted as returning to colonial dependency as a puppet of Japan and the United States; for American-produced leaflets, North Korea is drawn as a political stooge of China and the Soviet Union (Chae 2010: 34). Chŏng Yong-uk, Professor of Korean History at Seoul National University, argues North Korea’s depiction of a subordinate South Korea speaks more to the question of legitimacy and which of the two governments rightfully represented the new, postcolonial Korean nation: the anti-colonial struggle being a constitutive force in the establishment of the North Korean state (2004: 217–226). For example, one NK leaflet caption reads: “The American invaders and the weak Rhee Syngman are dragging the Korean people’s Japanese enemies back to our homeland and are rushing to make our people into American slaves. If the spilled ancestral blood in the war against them is precious, then rise up against the American invaders and the Rhee Syngman traitorous gang” (as cited in Chae 2010: 69). For the American-produced leaflets, however, Chŏng identifies how the US government insisted on the ideological and global dimensions of the war, with North Korean soldiers serving as fodder for Soviet and Chinese aims. Even the divergent leaflet themes underscore the dualism of the Korean conflict as one that was both domestic and international.

As the People’s Army continued to press against ROK and UN troops, American intelligence personnel discovered more than met the eye with regards to the makeup of enemy forces. Early reports found that enemy soldiers were slipping through the front lines as civilians to gain a forward position behind ROK and US troops. The Counter Intelligence Corps reported seeing “[h]undreds of North Korean soldiers [. . .] wearing civilian clothing and mingling with refugees.” Although the NKPA recruited willing South Koreans into their units as they swept south, losses incurred by contact with US and ROK forces also resulted in forcible conscription of civilians. According to a Seoul Sinmun report, the NKPA “increased indiscriminate forced recruiting of all youth” to fill their dwindling armies. As a result of the military’s inability to distinguish enemy troops from civilians, men, women, and children alike were swept into POW camps. Growing fear of disguised North Korean combat troops also led to horrific policy decisions for indiscriminate strafing of populations by air, leaving thousands of innocents dead.
One particularly dreadful case took place at No Gun Ri, as accounted in Charles Hanley et al.’s *The Bridge at No Gun Ri* (2001).

By the end of July, the North Koreans had pushed the ROK and UN forces to the southeast corner of the peninsula forming the Pusan Perimeter (delineated by P’ohang to the north, Chinju-Masan to the south, and Taegu in the center). In late August, the fighting along the Nakdong River reached its climax as the NKPA tried to break through the Pusan Perimeter to finish the war. However, by September, the NKPA felt the strains of weak supply lines, dwindling forces, and growing American and ROK resistance and was unable to penetrate further.

**Turning tides**

It was not until General Douglas MacArthur’s famed Inchon (Inch’ŏn) landing on 15 September 1950 that the tides turned, so to speak.\(^\text{10}\) It was a massive amphibious counterattack against North Korean forces that brought with it a large number of captured enemy soldiers. In just one month, prisoner-of-war counts increased from several dozen to over 100,000 (Chae 2010: 2–3). They quickly gained control of Inchon and cut North Korean supply lines. Meanwhile the U.S. Eighth Army and ROK forces broke out of the Pusan Perimeter and chased the retreating enemy north. On 27 September, after Washington had consulted with its allies regarding war aims, MacArthur, commander of the UN forces, received permission to pursue the enemy into North Korea as long as he did not cross into Manchuria and there were no signs that the Chinese and Soviets would intervene. After retaking Seoul and handing it back to Rhee on 29 September, ROK forces crossed the 38th parallel on 1 October and pursued the US military’s new strategy of “rollback,” forgoing the original goals of containment toward a UN-sponsored goal of unification (Lee 2001: 47–50).

By early to mid-October, ROK troops penetrated twenty-five miles north of the parallel. They reported no resistance and believed that they had the People’s Army on the run. What American commanders did not realize was that the NKPA’s withdrawal was also a strategic one; they hid in tunnels, mountains, and within villages above the 38th parallel as UN and ROK troops thinned out across the territory in their march north, becoming increasingly vulnerable to attacks from the rear. This was a conventional and guerrilla war, reflecting Kim Il-sung’s “hit and run” training developed against the Japanese during the colonial period (Cumings 1990: 729–733).

As ROK and US troops charged north, rightist groups and the KNP began their work in villages in the rear. Focused on the political reorganization of northern villages, they systematically rooted out communists and collaborators, and they punished family members associated with “red sympathizers.” Reports of mass executions by the South were rampant, underscoring the brutality of a war that was civil and international in nature (Cumings 1997: 281–282).

Early American intelligence reports showed no firm indication that the Chinese would intervene, with MacArthur giving Truman his assurances during their 15 October Wake Island meeting (Foot 1985: 78–80). However, recent evidence shows that Mao, owing much to Kim’s assistance during the Chinese civil war, had already made preparations to send “volunteers” (called Chinese Communist Forces [CCF] by the Americans or Chinese People’s Volunteers [CPV] by the Chinese) to assist North Korea should their campaign falter (Lowe 1997: 219). On 3 October, the Chinese premier warned the United States that if they crossed the 38th parallel, Chinese forces would be compelled to enter the war. When MacArthur pressed his troops across the parallel, Mao informed Stalin that he would begin preparations for intervention by providing, in total, 200,000 troops (Lee 2001: 51). The Soviet Union prepared to provide limited cover in aircrafts disguised with Chinese markers along the south Manchurian border.
On 26 October, the Korean Military Advisory Group, a US military unit charged with the logistical support of ROK troops, reported that Sino-North Korean troops were counterattacking UN units along the frontlines at Unsan, just below the Yalu River (Wada 2014: 144). This marked China’s first intervention. By this time, UN forces were pinned down and fell into disarray as Chinese and North Korean troops began to attack from the front and the rear. On 14 November, MacArthur launched a general offensive to trap NKPA forces and, for a few days, appeared to have succeeded until the enemy began to retaliate on 25 November and China launched the second phase with its 200–300,000 “volunteers.” North Korean guerrillas also began enveloping UN troops from behind in coordination with the North Koreans People’s Army, trapping them at the Chosin Reservoir. On 6 December, communist forces regained Pyongyang and by the end of the month, Seoul was at risk of falling, again (Lowe 1997: 235).

Although the Chinese intervention was not the first time American military planners considered using the atomic bombs during the Korean conflict (MacArthur first suggested it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in July 1950), it did bring them close to resolute action. Reintroducing the idea, MacArthur wanted to create a cordon sanitaire along the border between Manchuria and North Korea by dropping 30 to 50 bombs. Truman also began to hint at the potential use of atomic bombs in order to avoid the possibility of a third World War. In the end, with no indication of further Soviet involvement or advancement by Chinese troops beyond the parallel, Truman set aside his plans (Cumings 1997: 288–292).

General Matthew B. Ridgway, who assumed command of the Eighth Army in December 1950, launched an aggressive campaign called “Operation Thunderbolt,” which involved heavy bombing campaigns against the Chinese and North Koreans. After fighting back China’s third intervention, he retook Seoul and established the “Kansas Line.” This brought the fighting back to the area just north of the 38th parallel. After MacArthur was dismissed on 11 April 1951 due to continued insubordination, Ridgway took over command of UN forces and stabilized fighting. Recognizing a possible ceasefire opportunity, George Kennan and Jacob Malik met at the end of May and agreed to begin discussions on how to end the conflict (Edwards 1998: 6).

Stalemate and politics of choice

The armistice negotiations originally commenced in Kaesong on 10 July 1951, much to the chagrin of both Kim and Rhee, who wanted to continue their respective campaigns to unite the country by force. However, the talks halted when the communist side charged the UN Command with violating the neutral zone. In October, the talks were moved to Panmunjom (P’annunjon) with a new demarcation line. After settling a majority of the agenda items within the first few months, the final question of prisoner of war repatriation, originally thought to be straightforward, posed the greatest obstacle. After sixteen months of negotiations, when the US side first put forward its contentious proposal of “voluntary repatriation” in January 1952, representatives finally resolved the matter on 8 June 1953 and signed the ceasefire agreement on 27 July 1953 (Foot 1990: xiii–xv).

In original discussions regarding the treatment of POWs during the 1949 Geneva Convention, the US delegation disregarded exceptions to the “automatic repatriation” rule when the Austrian delegation first introduced possible conditions for it. As the Under Secretary of State at the time, Dean Acheson recalled Soviet concerns about whether “a prisoner of war might not be able to express himself with complete freedom when he was in captivity” (as cited in Foot 1990: 88). As a result, the final language in Article 118 dictated that the repatriation of all captured soldiers take place “without delay after the cessation of active hostilities.” However, the
realization that approximately 40,000 captured POWs were South Koreans impressed into the North Korean Army raised immediate doubts for the United States as to whether it was prudent to proceed with automatic repatriation of all POWs under UN custody (Foot 1990: 103).

In the most basic sense, this problem points to the overarching reality of the Korean War that is often pushed out of our minds when studying it from the perspective of how US foreign policies emerged during the beginning of the Cold War—that it was also a civil war. In a nation divided as part of post-World War II reordering, many Koreans confronted, for the first time, the harrowing and defining question of whether their futures lay in the North or the South. In this uncertainty, many were caught on the wrong side of that artificial latitudinal line and found themselves in the hands of the US military as captured enemy soldiers. American officials, reminded of the horrors that millions of Soviet soldiers faced when they were automatically repatriated at the close of World War II and working under the assumption that North Korea and China were communist puppet regimes under the stranglehold of the Soviet Union, began to regard automatic repatriation as a probable death sentence for many of the prisoners in its custody. In addition, as psychological warfare emerged as another means to subvert the legitimacy of communists, the prospect of using voluntary repatriation in the propaganda war seemed convincingly more promising. On 2 January 1952, the United States presented the position of “voluntary repatriation” to the negotiators at Panmunjom (Chae 2010: 241).

According to Rosemary Foot’s account of the armistice negotiations in A Substitute for Victory (1990), an important diplomatic history of American strategies that had to balance political and military objectives at the negotiating table, the army’s chief of psychological warfare General Robert McClure advocated voluntary repatriation as an ideological opportunity to position the United States in a humanitarian posture vis-à-vis the communists (Foot 1990: 87). Gradually convinced of the ideological benefits, Dean Acheson contended that a forced return of prisoners “would be repugnant in our most fundamental moral and humanitarian principles of the importance of the individual, and would seriously jeopardize the psychological warfare position of the United States in its opposition to Communist tyranny” (as cited in Foot 1990: 91). It was a new moment of how the rights of foreign prisoners of war were to be negotiated during wartime, at a time when the principles of human rights were just beginning to gain currency in a postcolonial world. The communists immediately rejected this idea as a clear violation of the 1949 Geneva Convention. The American side argued that its humanitarian concerns for the welfare of the individual remained in line with the spirit of the Convention. Though neither side was an official signer, both sides insisted that they were compelled by its intentions.

Meanwhile, inside the UN-run POW camps, emerging power struggles, basic in their initial nature, succumbed to more ideologically driven parties, particularly after NKPA agents and southern Anti-Communist Youth League members infiltrated the camps (Chae 2010: 131). Reports of violent clashes between groups of supposedly “pro-” and “anti-” communist factions (although most prisoners were less ideologically driven than motivated by diverse personal circumstances that reflected the chaos of a nation abruptly split in two), as well as between prisoners and ROK and US Army guards, grew. Coupled with the intensifying political contest at Panmunjom (P’anmunjŏm) and rising prisoner protests regarding voluntary repatriation policies enacted in the camps, the dam burst when communist prisoners captured the camp commander, Brigadier General Francis T. Dodd. In response, combat units armed with tanks, flamethrowers, machine guns, concussion grenades, and tear gas faced rock-throwing, Molotov cocktail-hurling, barbed-wire-swinging prisoners. During the seven-month crackdown, 577 prisoners of war were killed (Chae 2010: 261).

In the 16 December 1952 issue of the New York Times, the communists, again, submitted to the world stage their protests against voluntary repatriation as attempting to manipulate
prisoners into refusing repatriation. In the article, Chinese representatives argued against the American insistence for voluntary repatriation “because it recognizes the ‘desire’ of the prisoners of war to ‘refuse repatriation,’ a ‘desire’ created by the United States side.” Through education and screening programs designed to orient prisoners towards the benefits of one political system (liberal democratic societies) over another (socialist and communist societies), in conjunction with growing violence in the camps, the notion of a “free choice” was a fallacy.14

The communists were not without contradiction or malefaction in their own treatment of UN and ROK prisoners of war. Just as many North Korean captives were tortured or executed by ROK soldiers upon capture, South Korean prisoners were also vulnerable to vengeful forms of cruelty by their enemy counterparts. Many UN prisoners were found dead, some executed with hands bound, others due to starvation or illness, along treacherous “death marches” to POW camps beyond the frontlines. Both sides were guilty of atrocities. For those UN soldiers that made it alive to the permanent camps established along the Yalu River, they gradually met improved conditions as the Chinese communists took responsibility for their care (see Carlson 2002).

The Chinese and North Koreans jointly handled approximately 13,000 prisoners, a substantially lower number compared to the 160,000 prisoners (at its highest) managed by the Americans. Drawing from their experience during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese embarked on programs to educate UN captives in communist ideology. Contrary to sensationalist depictions of UN prisoners being “brainwashed” and reprogrammed through Pavlovian conditioning, as dramatized in John Frankenheimer’s iconic film “The Manchurian Candidate” (1962), communist educators utilized films, literature, lectures, discussions, and criticism sessions to persuade prisoners of the benefits of communism.15 Those who participated in the programs did so for various reasons, namely due to: 1) genuine interest in communism; 2) boredom; or 3) they wanted to better their situation in the camps. Black soldiers, who had been integrated into the US Army for the first time, reflecting important shifts in US domestic race relations, were especially targeted by communist educators to reflect upon the inequities perpetrated by capitalist societies, as depicted in Hubert Bailey’s autobiography Black Boy, What Are You Fighting For? (1966). Interestingly, the infamous twenty-one American POWs who refused to return to the United States, which included three African-Americans, ignited a national crisis regarding the duties of American servicemen captured by enemy forces (see Pasley 1955), as well as cultural debates regarding diminished American masculinity (see Carruthers 2009). This led to the formation of the 1955 U.S. Military Code of Conduct, famously tested during the Vietnam War by captured Navy pilots like Everett Alvarez, Jr. and John McCain.

Conclusion
As a so-called “limited war,” both sides violently engaged one another along the front lines without any clear strategies for victory; meanwhile, the political battles continued at Panmunjom and on the world stage. During the nearly two years of negotiations and stalemate over the issue of voluntary repatriation, tens of thousands of soldiers were killed on the front lines, and civilian causalities numbered in the millions. It was during these months that the US military launched its most protracted aerial campaigns from bases in Japan and Okinawa, smothering the North with napalm. In spring 1953, the USAF destroyed dams and reservoirs that would not only devastate newly planted rice paddies, but would starve out the northern population in the coming months. In the end, the combat death toll reached approximately 33,000 Americans; 115,000 Chinese; 215,000 North Koreans; 58,000 South Koreans; and one to two million civilians. With Dwight D. Eisenhower as the newly elected American president and the death
of Stalin in March 1953, new UN forces Commander General Mark W. Clark signed the armistice agreement on 27 July 1953. But, the ceasefire was not a peace treaty. While general fighting has been suspended, one visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) or a review of today’s world headlines renders palpable the still-volatile tensions between the Koreas and the parties that fought on either side. Of such a suspension to the Korean War, historian Bruce Cumings sadly reminds us that “the terrible tragedy was that the war solved nothing: only the status quo ante was restored, only an armistice held the peace” (Cumings 1997: 298).

Notes

2 See, Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars.
5 ‘Cairo Communique,’ from the United States Department of State/Foreign Relations of the United States diplomatic papers, The Conferences at Cairo and Tehran, 1943.
6 For an in-depth view into “everyday life” accounts, see Kim 2013.
7 ‘UN Security Council Resolution 84’
8 ‘Monthly Report of Counter Intelligence Corps Activities, 1 October 1950 for Month Reported’.
10 What made the landing possible was a small window of time during which the tides were high enough to accommodate the battleships. During low tide, the water was known to drop as much as 32 feet, revealing a mosaic of darkly carved, almost alien-looking muddy flats that can be seen today from bridges heading towards Seoul in one direction, and Inchon International Airport in the other.
11 Although there was no concrete plan to launch atomic weapons against the Chinese or North Koreans, the US Air Force ran bombing simulations in September and October 1951 under Operation Hudson Harbor, sending bombers into the north to drop empty atomic casings (Cumings 1997).
13 Only a small percentage of prisoners actually grappled with ideological issues. Most wondered about their families, while others were drawn into certain groups due to generational, class, regional, and/or religious affiliations.
15 During the August and September months of 1953, Edgar Schein, a psychologist at MIT and with the US Army’s Operations Research Office, interviewed American repatriates processed at Inchon and on US naval ship General Black. In his article entitled ‘The Chinese indoctrination program for prisoners of war: a study of attempted “brainwashing’ in *Psychiatry* (1956), he confirmed that there was nothing new or menacing to the Chinese techniques. The so-called mental erasure of American soldiers was accomplished through a typical collection of “group discussion, self-criticism, interrogation, rewards and punishments, forced confessions, exposure to propaganda and information control” (as cited in Winn 2000: 7).

References


T’aebaek Sanmaek (Taebaek Mountains) (1994), motion picture, Taehung Pictures, South Korea.


