

A History of the Korean War

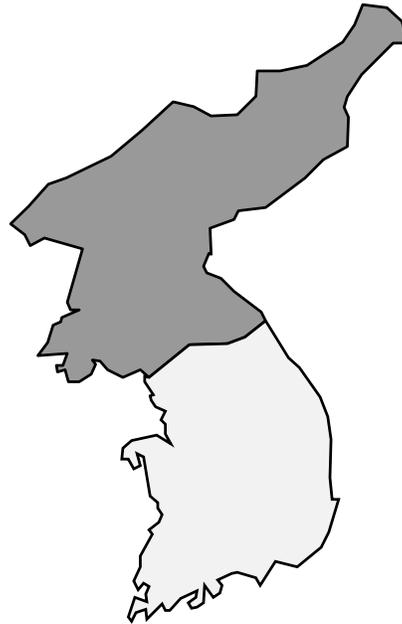
On this page you will find a brief overview of the Korean War. Expand your knowledge of the events preceding and following the war by exploring further any of the research topics at the bottom of the page.

Background Times were prosperous after world War II, yet there was a lingering hint of fear in the air. Many people believed the United States was filled with communists. Indeed, some communist spies were discovered here, the Rosenberg case being the most infamous example.

There was also the question of the atomic bomb. The U.S. discovered it was no longer alone in this area when Russia tested an atomic bomb soon after the war. China was another threat. Before World War II a civil war had broken out in that country with two groups fighting for control. During World War II they joined forces to fight their common enemy, Japan, but once the war ended they went back to fighting each other, with the communists eventually winning.

War Events At the end of World War II, Korea was divided in two at latitude 38 degrees north (also known as the 38th parallel) with the intention of bringing the two together. Promised free elections were never allowed, and in 1950 Kim Il Sung, the leader of North Korea, sent his powerful army into South Korea. The United Nations responded quickly, imposing military sanctions. The U.S. and 19 other nations committed troops to this “police action.” Despite initial heavy losses, the combined UN forces finally began to win. Then the situation changed when General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of UN troops in Korea, disobeyed orders to stay in South Korea. Going beyond the 38th parallel into North Korea brought communist China’s well-trained and well-equipped army into the war. When the fighting finally ended in 1953, no one was truly victorious. The 38th parallel dividing line remained intact.

Home Front Back on the home front, the American people worried that communism would take over the United States and dominate the world. Senator Joseph McCarthy spearheaded a communist hunt fueled by these fears throughout the U.S. His television appearances infected the nation with an anti-communist hysteria that ruined numerous lives from politicians to actors and writers.



Research Topics

Choose one of the following topics to research further. Share your findings with a partner. Explain what the UN and U.S. proved by waging the Korean War.

- Tell how the war might have been different if MacArthur had not invaded North Korea.
- Describe President Truman’s policy of containment.
- Detail how the Korean War led to the failure of Democrats to win the 1952 election.