



History  
in an  
hour

# THE KOREAN WAR



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Andrew Mulholland

**The Korean War: History in an Hour**

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## **Mulholland A.**

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Love history? Know your stuff with History in an Hour. Bringing together the military might of the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the United Nations States, the Korean War raged for three years from 1950 to 1953. Not only the result of a carving of Korean territories following the Pacific conflicts of the Second World War, it was also a battle of ideologies as General MacArthur's American military forces occupied the southern half and Stalin's Soviet forces supported the northern half. Initiated by infantry movements and air raids, the region gradually became mired in a static trench war by July 1951, and would continue to cost both sides in both morale and human lives. The Korean War: History in an Hour is the concise story to one of the most bitter and enduring conflicts of the post-war era.

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***THE KOREAN WAR***  
**History in an Hour**  
**Andrew Mulholland**



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## *Introduction*

It is one of the most militarized stretches of land in the world. The 38th Parallel: de facto border between the two Koreas, still technically at war some sixty years after the armistice was signed. Tense soldiers peer through binoculars across no man's land, crouched in concrete bunkers shrouded in barbed wire. Artillery batteries are permanently zeroed in, ready to fire. One side has nuclear weapons, and in 2013 declared that it was no longer bound by the 1953 agreement. Korea remains a powder keg.

The war that was fought up the length of this rugged Asian peninsula between June 1950 and July 1953 was very different from what had gone before. Since the Napoleonic period, warfare had been moving towards the extreme of 'total war'. States would mobilize every resource at their disposal in an all-out effort to bring an enemy to his knees. The Second World War represented the epitome of this trend. Yet Korea was a messy, complicated, deeply political conflict. The simple certainties of unconditional surrender which had applied earlier were absent here. This was a more 'limited war' – generals on both sides were constrained not just by resources and the challenges of strategy, but by their political leaders, who walked a tightrope between local objectives and triggering a Third – and 'total' – World War. Perhaps for these reasons, it was a war which, in many parts of the world, quickly receded from the public memory. For the West, there did not seem to be a victory to celebrate. It had been a humiliating, drawn-out and expensive affair. There are very few war films about the Korean War and it is not a period given much attention in school curricula. Even academic coverage has been light compared to the Second World War or Vietnam. In China it is still portrayed as a 'victory' and for the people of Korea its sacrifices remain very real. In the West, however, it quickly became known as 'The Forgotten War'.

Yet this was a pivotal event in world history. For the first time, the United Nations met naked aggression with robust military force. Seventeen member states sent troops to the defence of South Korea. Ultimately, despite the twists and turns of the conflict, the tragedies and the controversies, they won. The fact remains that the United Nations stopped an unprovoked attack on one state by another and ejected the attackers by force of arms.

Millions fought in the Korean War, at least 3 million were killed and most of them were civilians. Russian pilots flew combat missions against US aircraft – the only direct acts of war ever between the two emerging super-powers. Chinese troops intervened on a massive scale. President Dwight D. Eisenhower threatened China with nuclear attack. This was no sideshow. At times, the world was on the brink.

Its repercussions are with us to this day. Not just in the continuing security scares in Korea, but in subsequent events such as the Vietnam War, the evolution of the United Nations, the emergence of post-war Japan and the development of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), to name just a few.

This, in an hour, is the Korean War.

## Background

### **Geography**

The Korean peninsula has been described as a ‘natural state’, geographically self-contained and with a culture entirely different to that of its neighbours. It is roughly 400 miles north to south, and 120 miles across at its narrowest. It is mostly rugged terrain, with the Taebaek mountain chain running down its centre making east–west communications difficult. The northern border with Manchuria (part of China) is defined by two rivers, the Yalu to the west and the Tumen to the east. The Primorsky Krai region of eastern Russia shares a thirty-mile border with Korea’s northeast corner as well. The important Russian port of Vladivostok is some 100 miles further to the northeast. Japan lies only 100 miles off the southeast coast. These three powerful neighbours have jockeyed for influence in the region for hundreds of years. To a degree, Korea has been caught in the middle of this rivalry.

The climate may best be described as hostile. The summers are hot and dry, the winters terribly cold. Between the two, spring rains can turn much of the landscape to mud.

In 1950, transport links were primitive, with very few roads or railways and only two major ports. These were at Pusan on the southeast tip and Incheon, serving the capital city of Seoul, midway up the west coast. They would become crucial during the war.



*The Taebaek Mountains (Image by G43)*

## Culture

The Korean language, food and mindset are unlike those of China or Japan. Such distinctions took shape through geographical isolation. From pre-history, the peninsula was relatively self-contained. Linguistically, for instance, Korean is generally accepted to be a unique language, completely unrelated to those of its neighbours. Most scholars regard the overlap with Japanese as a later phenomenon brought about through contact. Although food is based on rice, vegetables and fish, the cooking styles are not those of northern China. The same is true of religion (with a strong Shamanistic tradition), architecture, music and dance.

Once Korea's history became dominated by neighbouring states, however, this cultural purity began to be diluted and cross-pollinated. For example, spoken Korean (and its precursor dialects) was first transposed into the Chinese Hanja script. The culture, therefore, reflects the geography and supports the idea of Korea as a 'natural state'. For these reasons, despite a difficult history and continuing division, this is a region with a strong national identity, maintained in the face of frequent conquest.



*Korean end-roof tile from 5th or 6th century (Image by pressapochista)*

## A History of Conflict

Korea was repeatedly invaded by China from about 200 BC. In 1219 it was the turn of the Mongols, with Genghis Khan leading the first of four large incursions by these fierce nomadic warriors. By the sixteenth century, Japan had emerged as a powerful regional player and it too sought the conquest of the peninsula. The result was devastation, widespread slaughter, economic and agricultural collapse. Little surprise, then, that by the early nineteenth century, Korea had become something of a hermit nation, anxious to minimize contact with outside cultures.

Under the Joseon dynasty this policy worked for a time, with a period of relative tranquillity and prosperity. Chinese suzerainty was formally acknowledged, but without onerous conditions. The growing imperial ambitions of Japan and Russia, however, combined with their superior technology and large armed forces, would shortly undermine this wish to be left alone.

In 1876 the Joseons signed an overtly exploitative treaty with Japan, granting her significant trading rights. Six years later, in what for a time proved a shrewd piece of diplomacy, Korea signed a treaty with the United States. Brokered by China, this deal helped to offset the influence of the Japanese, who were already basing troops in Korea. Tensions were high, as China and Japan controlled different factions within the weak Korean government. In 1885, both China and Japan agreed to withdraw all of their forces from the peninsula. Yet when in 1894 the Korean emperor requested Chinese assistance in putting down a rebellion, Japan used this as a pretext to send an expeditionary force of her own. This resulted in the First Sino-Japanese War.

Within nine months China had capitulated and Japan's influence in Korea became even stronger. Now though, she found she had another major power competing for influence in the region: Russia. As early as 1896 at the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II, the Japanese had proposed the formal division of Korea, into zones of Russian and Japanese 'influence'. Foreshadowing things to come, a dividing line was suggested along the 38th Parallel. The Russians were interested in the area for strategic reasons. They had no warm water port on the Pacific Ocean. The large Russian naval base at Vladivostok froze during the winter. Port Arthur in Chinese Manchuria was different – it remained open. It was an excellent natural harbour and fortress and, indeed, had been briefly seized by Japan. Direct military threats from Britain and France had eventually forced her to return it to China.

The Korean peninsula lies between Vladivostok and Port Arthur. The Russians leased Port Arthur from China in 1898 and built a railway connecting it to Harbin in China and thence Vladivostok, running along the northern border of Korea. The components were in place for increasing rivalry with Japan.

After years of fruitless negotiation, Japan attacked Russia in 1904 and inflicted a devastating defeat on the Tsar's armies and fleet. She now emerged as the dominant military power in the region. A corollary of that was the eventual full colonization of Korea. It was the USA, also an emerging power during this period, that oversaw the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth which facilitated this. In exchange, President Theodore Roosevelt is alleged to have secured tacit Japanese acceptance of US dominance in the Philippines. Article Two of the treaty explicitly recognized that Japan had 'paramount political, military and economical interests' in Korea. That same year, the Japanese forced Korea to accept a 'Protectorate Treaty', followed in 1911 by the 'Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty'. These were not signed by the Korean emperor, but their dubious legal standing did not prevent Japan from taking complete control.

Japanese rule in Korea was brutal and totalitarian. In essence, the ambition was to eradicate the Korean culture and supplant it with Japan's own, extending to language, the legal system and religion. The animosities which this regime was to engender would last way beyond the Second World War. Between 1941 and 1945, Japan ruthlessly exploited its colony for raw materials as well as men and women, forced to serve as soldiers and prostitutes for the Imperial Japanese Army. As the war drew

to a close and Japan's imminent defeat became inevitable, the Allied powers turned to consider the break-up of her empire.

## After the Second World War: Two Koreas Emerge

As the Second World War drew to a close, the Allies turned their attention to the future status of those areas which had been under Axis control. Between 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Korea would be divided into two. By 1950 there was a Russian-dominated Communist North Korea and a US-dominated quasi-democratic South Korea.

It was the Americans who proposed the division of the peninsula into two, along the 38th Parallel. North of this line would become a Russian-controlled zone, with the Americans occupying the south. There is nothing particularly special about the 38th Parallel, other than it being an internationally recognized line on the map. It happens to run across the waist of Korea and the Americans noticed that if it were used in this way, the southern zone would include the capital city of Seoul, and both of the country's major ports.

Such a slicing up of the map by the great powers was commonplace at the time. Little real account was taken of the interests or aspirations of the local inhabitants. From an American perspective this was a bold proposal, in that the Russians were likely to emerge as the more powerful player in the region. Russia had undertaken to attack Japan within three months of the defeat of Nazi Germany. The obvious means of doing this would be to invade Japanese-occupied Manchuria, including Port Arthur and the Chinese border with Korea. They could then move south into Korea. This is what transpired. Other allied forces in Asia (chiefly American and British) were thinly spread. It would be months before any kind of garrison could be sent to the south of Korea.

Despite the obvious weakness of the American position, the Russians accepted the 38th Parallel proposal at the Potsdam conference. Their chief focus was on Europe and they may have imagined that in due course, the whole of Korea would fall to them.

Therefore, as two Koreas began to emerge from the dust of the Second World War, they did so against the backdrop of the nascent Cold War. With considerable justification, Churchill described an 'Iron Curtain' falling across Europe. In Eastern Europe, democratic sensibilities were ignored and brutal Communist regimes imposed at the behest of Moscow. In 1948 the Russians had come close to provoking a Third World War by blockading West Berlin. The Chinese Civil War had reached its climax in 1949, with the establishment of Mao Zedong's government in Beijing and the rump of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists confined to the island of Taiwan (Formosa).

In American public life and within President Harry S. Truman's Administration, there was a tendency to view such developments as a monolithic and malevolent conspiracy, driven by Moscow. There was a widely held view, for example, that the West had 'lost China' through a lack of political and military resolve. This may seem an over-simplification to the modern reader. Yet given the appeasement which had allowed fascism to gain such a grip on Europe, it was understandable. Communism did seem to be on the march, and it was trampling human rights and democracy underfoot. Sentiments in Western Europe, even among governments with socialist agendas, were not so different from the US point of view.

For all of these tensions, the Russians stuck to their side of the deal when occupying northern Korea in 1945. Although weeks ahead of the Americans, their forces remained north of the 38th. There was a notional commitment from both parties to seek a solution for the entire peninsula, thereby creating a united Korea. However, in both the Russian and American zones, it was not long before each party was pursuing policies designed to preclude the opposing ideology from taking hold.

In the North between 1945 and 1950, the Russians built a totalitarian Communist regime under Kim Il Sung, formally declaring the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. The measures introduced included land reform and a semblance of worker control; corruption was largely eliminated. These were popular policies. It would, therefore, be wrong to suggest that the new regime was devoid of support. Kim had fought the Japanese in Manchuria during the 1930s and then spent

five years studying in the Soviet Union, before returning to his country of origin in 1945. Although he was never simply a Soviet puppet, by 1945 Kim was much closer to Stalin's regime than he was Mao's. Kim was still only 38 when the Korean War broke out.

In the South, US General John Hodge headed a somewhat inept military administration which relied on former Japanese collaborators – notably their brutal police force – and repressed any left-leaning political activists. At the same time, Syngman Rhee became the Americans' favoured contender for political leadership. Rhee had spent much of his life in exile in the United States. He was a highly educated Christian, with decades of experience in Korea's volatile political history. This included imprisonment by the Japanese and advising at the Treaty of Portsmouth negotiations in 1905. By 1945 he was already 70 years old. Virulently anti-Communist, Rhee was elected the first President of South Korea in July 1948.

While Rhee and Kim manoeuvred themselves into power between 1945 and 1948, there were parallel efforts by the USA, Russia and the United Nations to reach some kind of agreement which would unify the country. The Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in December 1945 had agreed to establish a joint US-USSR Commission for the government of Korea. Largely ineffectual, the Commission at least served to prevent open conflict between the Americans and Russians in Korea. In the South, Rhee's 'Democratic Council' opposed the Commission's timetable for independence and provoked riots and strikes. Eventually the Americans took the Korean problem back to the UN General Assembly, which called for elections across Korea. The Russians rejected this proposal and the two elections which brought Rhee to power in the summer of 1948 were confined to the US zone. In May, Rhee's party secured control of the National Assembly. In July, he won a personal mandate when elected directly to the South Korean presidency. These were followed by one party 'elections' in the North later that year.

By 1949, both the USA and Russia had withdrawn their military forces from the peninsula. Korea was split into two hostile mini-states, each beholden to its super-power. The rhetoric between them was heated, with claim and counterclaim. Rhee and Kim were Nationalists – both sought dominance over the whole of Korea. Neither recognized the legitimacy of the other. Border incidents and guerilla attacks in the South became commonplace. The scene was set for war.

## The North Invades

### **June 1950: The Surprise Attack**

The Korean War began just before dawn, on Sunday, 25 June 1950. Taken completely by surprise, and outclassed in every respect, South Korean forces were pushed rapidly back. Within days, however, the United Nations had intervened on behalf of the South. The first UN ground troops, an American unit, would meet the North Koreans on 5 July.

The war began early that Sunday when, four or five miles north of the 38th Parallel, Russian-built Katyusha rocket batteries lit up the sky with a blistering barrage. T34 tanks rolled forwards, accompanied by swarms of North Korean infantry.

It was immediately clear that this was a well-planned, full-scale invasion. The South Koreans had no tanks or heavy artillery, and but a handful of obsolescent aircraft. Their infantry formations were under strength, with divisional organization only notional. Arrayed against them were ten fully equipped North Korean divisions trained in the Soviet tactical doctrine. Thousands of the North Korean troops were combat veterans, recently returned from fighting under Mao's command during the Chinese Civil War.

They were supported by independent tank battalions and a small but capable tactical air force. In these early clashes, there really was no contest. In most cases the South Korean units disintegrated, clogging roads that were already swarming with refugees. A series of North Korean columns raced towards Seoul, down the centre of the country and along the eastern coast as well.

To General Douglas MacArthur, woken with the news only hours after the first North Korean assault, this seemed an obvious Russian move designed to test Western resolve. MacArthur headed the American Far Eastern Command, with his headquarters in Tokyo. Until now, his preoccupation since the end of the Second World War had been the rebuilding of Japan, of which he was in effect emperor. The North Korean attack would quickly change those priorities. When President Truman was told the news on what was still Saturday evening back in the USA, his instincts told him the same thing: this was a Russian gambit.

From the opening hours of the Korean War, therefore, the American attitude was to look for a conspiracy emanating from Moscow. This strategic stance would colour much of the policy towards the Korean situation over the next three years. Millions of words have since been written on the role played by Russia and, indeed, China in the North Korean attack. Given the secrecy of those regimes, and notwithstanding the volume of information made available since the collapse of the Soviet Union, historians remain divided as to the extent of Russian or Chinese culpability.

Some things are indisputable. The North Korean Army had been supplied with large amounts of Soviet military hardware, making it a much stronger force than its southern counterpart. Crucially, the armour meant that this was an army capable of offensive operations – unlike Rhee's. Soviet instructors had been seconded to North Korean units since 1948. Kim was close to the Russians, having spent several years there. He had visited Moscow and Beijing earlier in 1950. It is stretching credulity to imagine that the possibility of invasion was not mentioned. Chinese railways would be needed to maintain the North Korean logistical effort, and, in particular, any resupply from Russia. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine that either China or Russia was entirely in the dark prior to the North Korean assault.

That is some way from asserting, however, that the attack was ordered by Moscow, Beijing, or both. Perhaps the most that can be said is that while it is possible that Kim initiated the attack under direct instructions from Moscow, it is more likely that Stalin's headquarters at the Kremlin was simply content that it should go ahead.

Russia and/or China may have been willing to take a gamble with Korea at this level – to offer support without full-scale involvement. The Truman Administration was after all emitting confusing

political signals during these critical months of the Cold War. Although secretly resolved to confront Communist aggression robustly, a speech by Secretary of State Dean Acheson in January 1950 seemed to concede that Korea was not a vital American interest.

Yet China was in no position to entertain war with the United States. Mao had only recently secured power in Beijing and was much more interested in finishing the war against Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan than he was in new adventures to the north. Chiang's KMT (Kuomintang) Nationalist forces were now confined to this large island and Mao hoped to invade it. This would eliminate final opposition to Communist rule in China, putting a definitive end to the Civil War there.

Although Moscow had exploded an atomic device in 1949, it was in no position to risk a nuclear confrontation which, in 1950, it would have lost. But if the United States was ambivalent about Rhee's regime in South Korea, then why not let their ally Kim Il Sung see what he could achieve?

This kind of speculation must have been academic to the South Korean troops thrown into the line across the 38th Parallel in June 1950. Such was their routing, that of the 100,000 men notionally under arms on 25 June, about 80 per cent were unaccounted for after the first week. Rhee himself fled the capital with his key ministers on the 27th. By the 29th, the city had fallen. The bridge across the Han river was choked with refugees as families fled Kim's troops. South Korean Army vehicles barged through in their panic. The elderly or infirm were run over, some falling into the water. Children lost their parents – sometimes for ever.



*South Korean refugees flee the invasion in 1950 (Image by US Defense Department)*

The North Korean drive was organized into four fighting columns. Two of them converged on Seoul, one cleared the Ongjin peninsula to the extreme west, and one pushed down the east coast, supported by a small-scale amphibious assault. After the fall of the capital, these were consolidated into two – an eastern and a western thrust.

About thirty miles south of Seoul lies the small town of Osan, spanning the main route south. On the morning of 5 July 1950, elements of the North Korean 4th division advanced towards the town from the north. As they did so they came under fire from infantry and artillery. After a sharp

firefight, during which the defenders attempted to knock out several tanks using antiquated bazookas, the attacking North Koreans enveloped the position and the defence collapsed. The poorly disciplined troops scattered, many of them falling prisoner to the advancing Communists, others making their way south in dribs and drabs. Before too long, it dawned on the North Korean commanders that the battalion they had steamrolled consisted of American troops.

They were members of 'Task Force Smith': infantry of the US Army. Smith's five hundred or so troops had not acquitted themselves particularly well. This is perhaps understandable when one considers that they were under-equipped and poorly trained. The first foreign troops to arrive in the Korean theatre, they had been in the country for only four days, hurriedly moved north and put into the first blocking position available. MacArthur's Far Eastern Command, of which they formed a part, was in poor shape. Starved of men and equipment, they were accustomed to the soft life of garrison duty in Japan. In contrast, Task Force Smith had been outnumbered and outfought by a competent opponent with excellent equipment, training and motivation. If this was to be representative of the American response, then the North Koreans had little to worry about.

Fortunately for South Korea, Task Force Smith represented a lot more than MacArthur's run-down garrison troops. Already, US Air Force planes were beginning to make their presence felt in the skies above the battlefield. The 7th Fleet had orders to cordon off Taiwan, as well as support operations in Korea. In less than two weeks, the Korean War had spiralled beyond Kim Il Sung's hopes of a swift and decisive local war.

For the poorly equipped Task Force Smith also represented the initial ground contingent of the UN forces. The Americans were responding to a call to arms from the UN Security Council and had made their troops available on that basis. In the absence of an appointed overall UN commander, MacArthur took on leadership responsibility.

## A United Nations War

At the international level, events moved very quickly following the North Korean attack of 25 June. That same day, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 82, condemning the North Korean onslaught. By the 27th, Resolution 83 had been passed, calling on all member states to provide military assistance to resist the invasion. Truman immediately ordered American air and naval assets into the theatre and that ground troops should be despatched as quickly as possible. Task Force Smith would be the first of these. Meanwhile, American diplomats set about assembling a coalition of nations willing to support this first real test of UN collective security.

The United Nations, a new organization, was keen to demonstrate the strength of its solidarity. It had been established in 1945 at the instigation of the Allied victors of the Second World War. Importantly, its architects were anxious to avoid the perceived weaknesses of the League of Nations, its forerunner. With far fewer members than today (and most broadly supportive of what might be termed an ‘American-led agenda’) there was the strong sense that the United Nations must not be allowed to fail. The catastrophe of the Second World War was fresh in people’s minds. It was felt that had Hitler been challenged earlier, rather than appeased by the League, then much of the suffering could have been avoided. Attitudes to collective security in the face of breaches of international order were a lot more robust than tends to be the case today.

The senior body responsible for global security at the United Nations was the Security Council. Permanent membership included what at the time were still known as the five ‘great powers’ (Britain, France, the USA, Russia and China), each of whom had a veto. The chairmanship rotated, as did the membership of other states. There were ten of these, elected on a regional basis and without veto rights. The Security Council, therefore, had a total of fifteen members, five of them permanent. UN Security Council resolutions were supposed to be mandatory, unlike those of the larger General Assembly, which included all UN member states. In practice, the veto system meant that it was very difficult for the Security Council to take controversial decisions – or, indeed, to reverse them.

In terms of technical process, Russia had boycotted the Security Council. She was not represented at these crucial meetings and, therefore, had no opportunity to veto the proposed resolutions. The reason for the boycott was a dispute about the Security Council’s refusal to officially recognize Mao’s Communist regime in China. Nationalist China, now no more than a mini-state located on the island of Taiwan, continued to hold China’s seat. With some justification, the Russians maintained that the seat should be given to Mao’s Communist regime, as the real government – benign or not – of almost all of modern China. In terms of realpolitik it is hard to exaggerate the blunder that this stance represented for Russia. Had they been present, presumably they would have vetoed the motions and the Korean War might have taken a very different course.

There are those who argue that this is evidence of Russia’s innocence in the matter of the Korean War. The same argument has it that she made a fuss about China in order to strengthen Mao’s dependence on Moscow. Whatever the case may be, Russia was back on the Security Council by August – this time in the chair. For the remainder of the conflict the Council became deadlocked (in the manner that has become increasingly familiar since). This would also mean that Russia could not reverse what was now established Security Council policy: this was to be a UN war.

## The UN Coalition Builds

As MacArthur's American forces struggled to contain the Communist offensive in South Korea, the remaining members of the United Nations considered their positions in response to Resolution 83. During those fateful days of late June and early July, a US diplomatic effort through the United Nations would build a broad coalition, which would finally see military support from sixteen other nations.

Britain immediately sent her Far Eastern Fleet, including two aircraft carriers, to operate in support of the US Navy. Two infantry brigades were eventually to follow. France, already heavily committed in North Africa and Indo-China, sent an infantry battalion. There were also contingents from Turkey, Belgium, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and others. In total, seventeen nations were to contribute combat units of one form or another.

By far the biggest contingent, from the war's very outset, was from the USA. This was perhaps inevitable, given the global situation in 1950. Although the USA had emerged from the Second World War with a booming economy, many nations had not. The 'old' great powers, whatever their aspirations, were not the players they had been only five years earlier. Britain, for example, struggled to find sufficient troops to equip her expeditionary force. At least she was to pay for her own soldiers. In the case of many of the smaller countries, it was so important for the USA – and indeed for the infant United Nations – to demonstrate broad support for the war, that the USA paid a daily rate for each soldier sent.

Some countries, uneasy about the despatch of actual fighting troops, instead sent medical or other support. A famous example was the Indian parachute field hospital, which actually took part in an American combat jump in March 1951. All support was gratefully received, if only for the message it conveyed about collective security. Those nations which made such a commitment are recorded in Appendix 3. Less welcome were the many promises of support which came to nothing.

There was one important offer of immediate military assistance which Truman rejected. Chiang Kai-shek had suggested the despatch of 30,000 Nationalist Chinese troops from Taiwan. For MacArthur, this was potentially a game-changing proposal, which could have a huge impact on the desperate fighting now underway. Chiang's troops would have quadrupled existing UN ground forces at a stroke. For the President though, this was a double-edged sword. To allow the participation of Nationalist China would be to broaden the conflict and invite Communist Chinese or even Russian intervention. At this time, although Russian equipped, the attackers consisted entirely of North Korean troops. Truman wanted to keep it that way; he did not want a world war. It was an early example of the restraint which was to characterize both sides' conduct of the war.

Within a week then, the Korean War had become a United Nations war. This was testimony to the diplomatic skills of the Truman Administration, the stance taken by Russia at the United Nations, and the often underrated internationalism of those states which chose to spend their blood in defence of another. It was equally clear, though, that the UN project in Korea would be led by the USA. It was the Americans who had led the debates at the Security Council and built the coalition. Of necessity, theirs had been the first foreign troops in theatre; and theirs would be the major contribution throughout the conflict. All of these factors, coupled with the overriding sense of emergency in July 1950 and the sheer practicalities involved, pointed to an American overall commander. The UN Secretary General's proposal of a committee to run the war was swept aside. MacArthur was appointed to command all UN forces by Truman on 7 July and the seeds of some of the United Nations's most contentious problems thereby sown.

In theory, MacArthur had four infantry divisions available to him in Japan. These were understrength units, though, and their tactical competence was highly questionable. Furthermore, he had no means of shipping them en masse to the front, as it would take time to assemble the

naval transport required. There was also the delicate question of identifying who would take over the occupation role they had undertaken in Japan. In this there was little real choice – and the use of Japanese police and security agencies hastened her return to full normality as a sovereign state.

As for the infantry, troops were shipped to Korea as the transport became available, during July and August. Most arrived in battalion strength and were committed wherever the latest crisis might be. General Walton Walker commanded in Korea itself, establishing the American 8th Army – in reality a weak army corps. MacArthur, save for a publicity-based visit lasting less than a day, preferred to exercise command from Tokyo.

At the same time, the US Congress approved a special war budget of \$11b and American Army and Marine divisions began assembling across the USA. For the Marines, in particular, Korea was to become a make-or-break campaign. During the period of disarmament which had preceded the war, their numbers had been cut drastically. The idea that the Marine Corps' role should be confined to small shipboard defence parties had gained currency. Korea might rekindle the concept of the large amphibious operations and expeditionary warfare which the Marines had perfected during the Second World War.

The Korean War was to spur overall rearmament in the USA, as well as in countries such as Britain. There was a sense that the Russians had been found out – proved guilty – and that the West now needed to be on its guard. Above all, the fear was of a sudden Soviet attack in Europe. This notion, that Western Europe lay vulnerable to Russia's tank armies massed on the Elbe, was a key factor in Truman's thinking and an obvious major concern for Britain and France. All of the debate on the UN side about escalation in Korea was coloured by this lurking dread.

## **The United Nations Clings On** **Air and Naval Power**

Strategically, the most important assets for the United Nations during those early weeks were air and naval power. Almost all UN air power was provided by the US Air Force, while naval forces included a sizeable British component. It was in these areas that even in July, the Americans and their allies began to exert considerable military influence. By the end of the month the North Korean Air Force had become an irrelevance, as its piston-engined aircraft were blasted on the ground and in the air by American jets. Kim's air force had experienced no difficulty against the tiny numbers initially fielded by South Korea and, until the arrival of the Americans, provided useful ground support for their advancing columns. But the US Air Force brushed them aside in days.

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