

The Korean war began on June 25, 1950, when some 75,000 soldiers from the North Korean People's Army poured across the 38th parallel, the boundary between the Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the north and the pro-Western Republic of Korea to the south. This invasion was the first military action of the Cold War. By July, American troops had entered the war on South Korea's behalf. As far as American officials were concerned, it was a war against the forces of international communism itself. After some early back-and-forth across the 38th parallel, the fighting stalled and casualties mounted with nothing to show for them. Meanwhile, American officials worked anxiously to fashion some sort of armistice with the North Koreans. The alternative, they feared, would be a wider war with Russia and China—or even, as some warned, World War III. Finally, in July 1953, the Korean War came to an end. In all, some 5 million soldiers and civilians lost their lives in what many in the U.S. refer to as “the Forgotten War” for the lack of attention it received compared to more well-known conflicts like World War I and II and the Vietnam War. The Korean peninsula is still divided today.

### **North vs. South Korea**

The peninsula had landed in America's lap almost by accident. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Korea had been a part of the Japanese empire, and after World War II it fell to the Americans and the Soviets to decide what should be done with their enemy's imperial possessions. In August 1945, two young aides at the State Department divided the Korean peninsula in half along the 38th parallel. The Russians occupied the area north of the line and the United States occupied the area to its south. By the end of the decade, two new states had formed on the peninsula. In the south, the anti-communist dictator Syngman Rhee (1875-1965) enjoyed the reluctant support of the American government; in the north, the communist dictator

Kim Il Sung (1912-1994) enjoyed the slightly more enthusiastic support of the Soviets. Neither dictator was content to remain on his side of the 38th parallel, however, and border skirmishes were common. Nearly 10,000 North and South Korean soldiers were killed in battle before the war even began.

### **The Korean War and the Cold War**

Even so, the North Korean invasion came as an alarming surprise to American officials. As far as they were concerned, this was not simply a border dispute between two unstable dictatorships on



the other side of the globe. Instead, many feared it was the first step in a communist campaign to take over the world. For this reason, nonintervention was not considered an option by many top decision makers. (In fact, in April 1950, a National Security Council report known as NSC-68 had recommended that the United States use military force to “contain” communist expansionism anywhere it seemed to be occurring, “regardless of the intrinsic strategic or economic value of the lands in question.”) The fight on the Korean peninsula was a symbol of the global struggle between east and west, good and evil, in the Cold War. As the North Korean army pushed into Seoul, the South Korean capital, the United States readied its troops for a war against communism itself.