

Background to the Korean War

The following information is drawn from The History of Korea by Woo-keun Han, trans. By Kyungshik Lee, 1970.

1. Establishment of a Provisional Government and the Korean Communist Party

In the wake of the Great War, the Koreans rose up against the Japanese in the March 1st movement. While the movement was violently suppressed, those who desired to push further for independence met in Shanghai and organized a provisional government there. Among those was Syngman Rhee. They declared that the new government would be a republic with an elected president, legislature, an independent judiciary, and freedoms of speech, press, assembly, religion, and petition. In addition there would be separation of Church and State, a national militia, and protection of the rights of minorities. This Provisional Government established an Officers Training School in 1920 and by 1922 they had organized the various Korean groups in Manchuria under their umbrella. The provisional government moved inland in China as Japan advanced during the Second World War.

Also in 1920 the Korea Communist Party was established in Shanghai. (Other sources say 1925). A member was Kim Il-Sung who became active in fighting the Japanese in Manchuria.

2. The Defeat of Japan and the Division of Korea

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the Provisional Government contacted the Allied governments in the hopes of assuring independence after the war. However, when Russia entered the war against Japan, there was an agreement between the U.S. and Russia that Russian troops would occupy Korea north of the 38th parallel and the U.S. would occupy the country south. The U.S. assumption was that this would be temporary until a Korean government could be formed and national elections conducted. Accordingly, Russian troops held the north and U.S. forces arrived in the south on Sept. 8th with the Japanese forces officially surrendering the next day in Seoul. In the north Russians established a Korean communist government, first led by a Council of People's Commissars and then by Kim Il-Sung. Meanwhile members of the Provisional Government went to the South although they were not recognized by the U.S. as a government.

In October 1945 the Allies declared that Korea would be ruled by a trusteeship for up to 5 years with the government formed under the trusteeship of the U.S., Britain, the USSR and China. This led to regular demonstrations in opposition in Korea. However, on Jan. 2, 1946 the Communists accepted the trusteeship arrangement, dividing the Korean opposition. The Russians and Americans met as planned to form the Trusteeship government but the Russians said that anyone who had participated in anti-trusteeship activities could not be part of the new government. This created an impasse and the conference broke up by May.

In December 1946 The American Military Government established an Interim Legislature and by June the military government was made the Korean Interim Government. Since the U.S. and the USSR could not reach an agreement, the US placed the Korean problem before the UN in Sept. 1947. The proposal accepted by the General Assembly was the creation of a Korean government, withdrawal of American and Russian troops and a United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK) to advise and consent. However, UNCURK, organized in Jan. 1948, was excluded from North Korea. Elections proceeded in the south in May 1948 with a new constitution promulgated in July and Syngman Rhee elected president. The new Republic of Korea was recognized by the UN. In response, the People's Republic of Korea was formed in Sept. 1948.