

History of Korea - Part Ten

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The first president of the Republic of Korea was Syngman Rhee. Rhee was born into an upper class family during the Joseon dynasty. He had both the classic Confucian education and attended a Methodist high school where he converted to Christianity. He was a young man with leadership potential. He became the leader of several civic and literary clubs in school. By the time he graduated, Japan had established a pro Japanese government in Seoul. Rhee joined the resistance and was jailed for his activities. Upon release he migrated to the United States. There he took up the Korean cause. He came to think it was the United States that had the best chance to liberate Korea from Japanese control. He actively worked and made many contacts in the Korean diaspora community. He also lobbied and met with many American politicians including two Presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, concerning the plight of Korea. He raised funds for the cause and kept the wolf from the door through several literary and educational ventures.

He briefly returned to Korea to assess the situation and returned to live in Hawaii. He was elected to be president of the Korean government in exile in Shanghai. In response to the failed March 1st

Independence movement various resistance leaders formed the Provisional Korean government in Shanghai China. Although still in America, Rhee was elected and served as president for about six years. This government in exile served as Korea's voice and the vehicle of the aspirations of Korea to gain independence from Japan. Over the long term of more than twenty years it had to move, duck, and hide many times to avoid the Japanese military police. Eventually the various leaders took different stands and made different alliances that drove them apart.

Kim Ku was allied with right wing Chang Kia-Shek, the elected premier, Yi Dong-nyeon, began to accept help from Soviet agents operating in Manchuria and moved to the left. Rhee was firmly in favor of American sponsorship. Rhee was impeached and pushed out by 1925 and the PKG limped along without gaining much momentum. At the end of the war, after the surrender of the Japanese, the leadership, including Rhee, returned to Korea establishing their own parties and competing for power. Rhee with his English language skills and pro American outlook was looked upon favorably by the American military government. Hell, he even had a Caucasian wife. He was a shoo in to be elected first President by the new National Assembly. Maybe it was his long years in exile but as president he didn't seem to have his hand on the pulse of the people, or have much going for his leadership other than his connections with the military government.

Meanwhile, up north, Kim IL Sung, the Soviet handpicked anti-Japanese guerrilla leader and founder of the People's Republic of Korea was firmly established in office. The Soviets seemed to think they had found their ideal puppet but Kim had other ideas. Marxist Leninism was well and good in the beginning but Kim had his own Korean born ideology called Juche, meaning self-reliance, and began to exert his self-reliance. Kim's deepest desire was to unite the Korean peninsula under his rule. Without the help of China and the Soviet Union, it was only a dream. When the Chinese civil war ended in 1949 with the victory going to Mao Zedong, there was renewed hope for Kim. Mao's greatest ambition was to become the number one dictator of the whole world. Communism was his vehicle, the Soviet Union was his sponsor but Stalin was his obstacle.

While lobbying the Soviet Union for the weapons and material to build up the Chinese People's Army, Mao also was looking for ways to supplement Stalin as the number one Communist dictator in the world. Kim also needed Soviet help. Between 1945 and 1948 The Soviets Union pumped money, technology, and expertise into North Korea hoping to counter American influence in the South. In the spring of 1949, Kim needed a firm commitment from Stalin for his aggressive military plans. He traveled by train through Siberia to Moscow to secure that commitment. Stalin had his own issues concerning the United States and world hegemony, he had to act very carefully. As they say, 'a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse.'

Kim asked and Stalin didn't say no. In fact he said he would talk to Mao about some support. Kim returned to Korea ready to take his best shot.

The communist problem was not unique to North Korea. The antigovernment and Yang ban sentiment was widespread in the country and those who returned from Manchuria and China had been exposed to Marxist Leninist ideology. Communist strategies served to radicalize individuals and communities. Under Syngman Rhee the conservatives were in power and it was decided to implement a scorched earth policy against leftist, communists, and traitors. On Jeju Island, a disturbance between police and the civilian population erupted into violence with the police shooting into a crowd killing six people. In response a general strike was mounted. The Workers Party of South Korea, a communist party, stepped in to support the strike. This party initiated an armed rebellion against police stations with the intent to stimulate a violent response by the authorities and to protest the upcoming national elections and the American military government supporting them. Police presence was bolstered by sending elements of a right wing youth group to Jeju who often beat up and abused civilians.

By October 1948, Syngman Rhee signed an order to root out all communists and traitors on Jeju. In the ensuing months, tens of thousands of thatched-roof houses went up in smoke, following the order to burn everything more than 5 kilometers from the coastline. Paramilitaries poured onto the island on Rhee's orders, slaughtering the villagers indiscriminately and carrying out mass executions on promontories, from which bodies plunged into the sea and washed away. As many as 15,000 to 30,000 were massacred. When the killing slowed down, many more were arrested and sent to serve prison sentences on the mainland. Many of these prisoners were lost due to the outbreak of the 1950 war. The indiscriminate massacre of civilians to root out communists and their sympathizers was bad policy but not uncommon. One might understand the motivation but the application was akin to Nazi Germany surrounding a village, taking the people, men women, and children out and shooting them, can never be justified.

On June 25, 1950 all the preparations were complete and Kim IL Sung launched his divisions and tanks supported by artillery across the border. Taken totally by surprise the South Koreans fell back and the North took Seoul in three days. The United States and most of the world suspected the Soviet Union and China were behind this aggression. It was decided that this would be an ideal test for the United Nations Security Council. The security council permanent membership was made up of the victors of WW2, the United States, Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and maybe China. The dispute was who to seat as the representative of China, the new People's Republic of China or Taiwan under the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek. When the security council met to consider the aggression in Korea, the Soviet Union was boycotting proceedings in protest of the People's Republic of China not being seated. Each of the permanent members of the security council had a veto vote and so the Soviet Union could block any action by the council that opposed its worldview. The Soviet Union's absence made the way clear for the council to condemn the aggression and dispatch a joint military force under the command of the United States to render aid to South Korea.

General Douglas MacArthur was in Tokyo as the Supreme Commander of the Allied powers in Asia. This made him the go to guy to command the United Nations forces in Korea. More than sixteen nations responded to the call of the security council to send manpower to the aid of Korea. Some sent military troops. Some sent medical forces and some sent materials. The United States sent the lion's share of them all. The young Americans who came to Korea were not always the most educated or well behaved. They, typical of the young away from home and community, sometimes caused trouble, drank too much, fought too much, and I'm sorry to say committed crimes against the Korean people. But these were a minority. Most went there and did their duty as soldiers, trained to standard, and were always ready to fight - tonight. They are my heroes and I salute them.

In the South's darkest hour, the United States came to the aid of the small nation under attack. It is always said that it was the United Nations and troops from 16 nations that came to Korea's rescue and of course that is true. But it was the United States who did the heavy lifting in terms of resources, manpower, and blood.

About ten years ago my wife and I went to the city of Busan and visited the UN cemetery. There we found marble walls set up with the names of those who died defending the country. In alphabetical order, each of the sixteen nations had the names of their people who died carved into the surface. I looked at the walls of names and was immediately struck. Some nations had ten or twenty names, some only one or two. The United Kingdom had several thousand inscriptions. Then we came to our country. There was not space on part of a wall or even one wall to hold the names. There were seven walls to hold the names of more than 38,000 Americans who died between 1950 and 1953. The names seemed to go on forever.

On that day we spent three hours there and touched each and every name. I cried and cried and I thought this is the pride of my country. These names represent the treasure of my country. Most of them didn't even know where Korea was when they answered the call to arms and yet they came here and these names are of the ones who never went home.

Because of the surprise of the unprovoked attack from the North, the summer of 1950 was bleak. The South Korean forces were decimated, and the nearest American troops were garrison troops stationed in Japan. The allied forces were defeated again and again and were pushed into a perimeter surrounding Busan. In the meantime, the war-weary people of America mobilized to fight again in Asia. In California, the first Marine Division was reformed around a cadre of the surviving heroes of Guadalcanal, Peleliu, and Okinawa. By late summer, the division set sail for Busan. Their first duty was to bolster the defense of Busan. By September 1950, the UN held only a toehold around Busan on the Korean peninsula. MacArthur and his staff conceived a bold plan. The First Marine Division embarked once again for the port city of Incheon. The city was on the western side and halfway up the peninsula. It was ripe for an amphibious invasion. The US Navy and the First Marine Division were just the boys to pull it off. After weeks of planning and arguing, Early on the morning of September 15, 1950 The Navy steamed into the harbor and landed the Marines on Green beach.

By nightfall they had landed the rest of the division on Red and Blue beaches. In one day, they navigated the extreme treacherous tidal approaches, climbed the sea walls, and dispatched the North Korean defenders. On the second day, they mounted out and began fighting for the capital city of Seoul. It was a brilliantly conceived of and executed strategy. In two weeks they had seized the city of Seoul, cut the North Korean forces in half, disrupted the supply lines to the North Korean army in the South, and relieved the besieged city of Busan. Within weeks the entire North Korean army was in full retreat with the Marines, the US Army, and the Republic of Korea Army in hot pursuit. The Eighth army went up the west coast capturing the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, and the X Corps consisting of the First Marine Division, elements of the ROK army and troops from the UK headed up the east coast. By mid-October the X Corps had seized the city of Hungnam and the fertilizer factories where Moon Sun Myung was serving a death sentence. He was liberated and returned to the newly liberated Pyongyang to gather his flock. The X Corps pushed further up towards the North Korea China border. The troops passed the scuttlebutt, 'home for Christmas.'

Lake Chongjin was located in the far north approximately 40 miles from the border with China. After landing at Wonsan on October 26th and securing the city by the 28th, the Marines were ordered to march through the Tae Baek mountains to capture the Chongjin lake area. To the Marines it was the Chosin Reservoir, the name taken from Japanese maps still in use. Around the 27th of October, Mao committed the People's Volunteer Army to the fight. The PVA consisted mostly of former soldiers in Chiang Kai-shek's defeated nationalist army. 120,000 strong, at first they secretly entered North Korea. They were ordered by Mao to destroy the X Corps. On November 27th, they surrounded the 30,000 men of X Corps including the 25,000 men of the first Marine Division.

The weather was bitter cold, the worst winter in 100 years, and the snow was piling up. The Chinese demanded either the surrender of the X Corps or it would be annihilated. The world press proclaimed the imminent destruction of the heroes of Guadalcanal, Peleliu, and Okinawa. General Holland 'Howling Mad' Smith, Commander of the First Marine Division ordered his men not to surrender but to advance in a different direction. Spearheaded by the First Marine Division, X CORPS began the march down the long road to the coastal city of Hungnam. For 13 days, the Marines battled waves of Chinese troops. Every morning they woke up, broke the ice off of their coffee cups and started down the road, behind intense artillery fire and air strikes, advancing yard by yard. Along the way they put out platoon sized flank security. They fought off waves of screaming Chinese piling up the dead bodies to use as fighting positions. The Marines with the help of the bitter cold weather destroyed more than 20 Chinese divisions. The Marines walked out, carrying all their wounded, 70% of their dead, and 70% of their heavy equipment. The breakout from the Chosin Reservoir is said to be one of the greatest feats of American arms in history. The X CORPS was loaded on ships at Hungnam and was transported to Busan to rejoin the fight.