



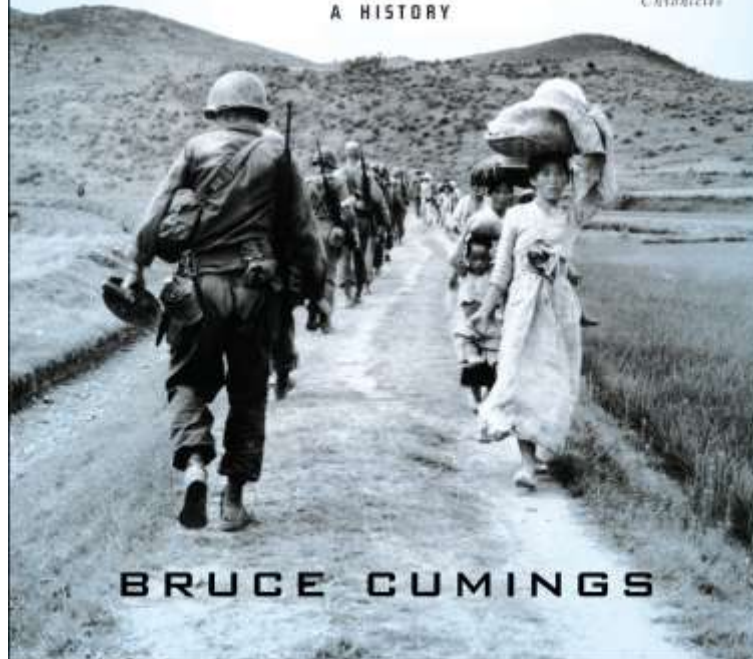
## THE KOREAN WAR (1950-1953)

Another interpretation...

"A powerful revisionist history . . . a sobering corrective." —*The New York Times*

# THE KOREAN WAR

A HISTORY



BRUCE CUMINGS



**The origins of the Korean War: a civil war** born out of the Japanese colonization (1910-1945)

**A point of view NOT** popular in the U.S.



The **official** (American) **version**: the Korean War began when **Stalin** gave the green light to the massive invasion of South Korea by **Kim Il-sung** (25 June 1950)



1990s: **partial access** to declassified Soviet archives  
The American version validated







## South Korean historiography based on:

1. **Research** on the postwar “People’s committees” of liberation (1945-1946)
2. Popular uprisings in Southern Korea (fall of 1946)
3. The **Yeosu rebellion** against the pro-American South Korean government (1948)
4. Massacres perpetrated by South Korean security forces



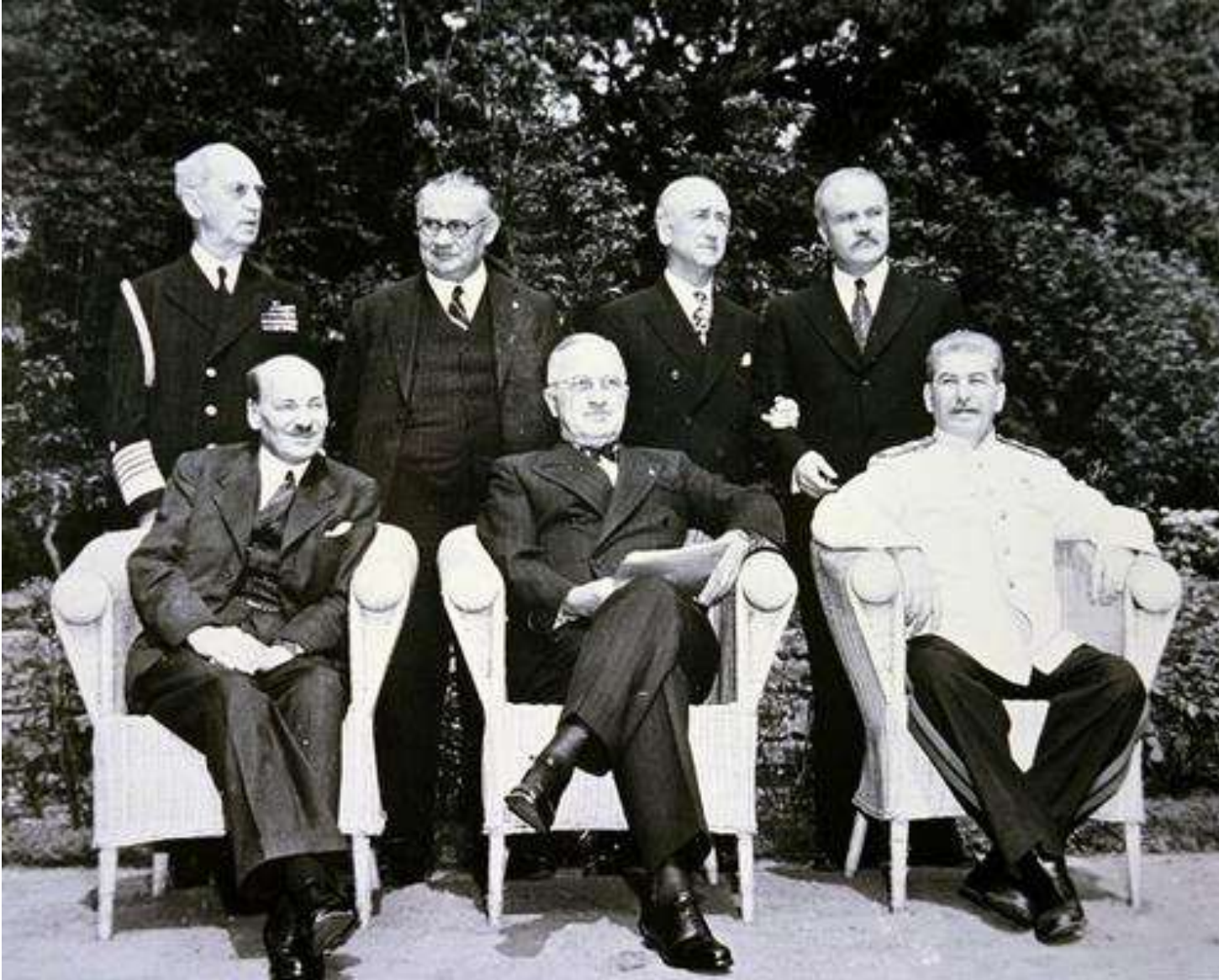
The **United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK)**: the official ruling body of the southern half of the Korean Peninsula (1945-1948)

**Direct control** over police forces in the South after 1948

Causes of Korean conflict reassessed: **a civil war with roots in the 1930s**

Korean War made inevitable by a crucial decision at the **Potsdam Conference: the partition of Korea at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel**





The **Potsdam Conference** (July 17-August 2, 1945): an important **milestone** in the history of the Cold War (and Korea)

The division of Korea along the 38th parallel north was drafted **during** the Potsdam Conference



Lieutenant General John E. Hull, chief of the Operations Division







**The Korean War** began in 1931: the Japanese occupation of Manchuria

**Manchuria** renamed Manchukuo (1 March 1932)

**Fierce resistance** to Japanese occupation – Guerilla operations led by the Chinese Communist Party (90% of the fighters were Koreans)

A minority of Koreans willing to collaborate with the Japanese





**Kim Il-sung:** a leader of anti-Japanese guerilla groups

Fighting the Japanese in Manchuria and Northern Korea

**Kim Sôgwôn:** Korean superior officer in the Japanese army – Commander of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in 1949



24 June 1950: veteran Korean industrialist/adviser to the **Korean Economic Mission** and notorious **collaborator** of imperial Japan (**Pak Hung-sik**) gave an interview to *The Oriental Economist*

Korea and Japan “are destined to go hand in hand...”



The U.S. **occupation** of Korea  
**8 September 1945**: the landing of U.S. troops  
**No knowledge** of Korea's history, culture & populations



**Sense of superiority** among U.S. troops/racial slurs  
Growing resentment: Korea not among the vanquished

U.S. soldiers eager to go home





## General John Reed Hodge (U.S. military governor in Korea)

2 key missions:

1. **To disarm** Japanese forces in Korea & send them back to Japan
2. **To administer** the U.S. zone of occupation





**600 000** Japanese within  
the U.S. occupation zone

320 000 in the Soviet  
zone

A majority of soldiers

Civil servants and  
**technicians** in charge of  
key sectors of the Korean  
economy

The **priority**: to eradicate  
quickly all Japanese  
influence



Landing ship tanks  
(transport ships)

Short distance  
separating Korea and  
Japan

Most Japanese  
nationals sent back to  
Japan within 2 months





To bring back to Korea **1.5 million**  
Koreans transferred (often by  
force) to Japan

Only 233 Koreans chose the  
Soviet zone!

To administer the U.S. occupation zone: a more complex task

A military government in charge of civilian affairs

**To restart the Korean economy** (lack of qualified technicians – 80% Japanese until 1945 & civil servants)

Hyperinflation + mass unemployment (1.5 million Korean worked for Japanese companies)

To set up a **Korean administration** (to oversee the armed forces and police)



Korea in 1945-1946: a very **tense** situation  
The **communist threat**





General John Reed Hodge (U.S. military  
governor in Korea)

War « *declared* » to Communist Party in the  
South (December 1945)

A wide definition of what “communist” meant:  
leftists, anti-colonial opponents...

Colonel Cecil Nist (U.S. military intelligence):  
mission to find “*several hundreds conservatives*”  
to lead postwar Korea (most had **collaborated**  
with the Japanese)





Syngman Rhee: a  
Korean **anti-communist**  
patriot well known of  
the Americans

(Intense lobbying while  
in exile in the U.S.)

Secret meeting with  
General MacArthur  
(October 1945)

A 5-year **trusteeship** to guide Korea to its independence?

Growing resentment and anti-American sentiments in the South

The U.S.: to withdraw its troops from Korea as quickly as possible

The **Moscow Conference**: no to a trusteeship (December 1945)







This 1947 file photo shows American and Soviet representatives attending a meeting of the U.S.-Soviet Union Joint Commission in Seoul. / Korea Times file

A U.S.-Soviet **Joint Commission** to help the formation of a Korean provisional government

No results: the Commission suspended after 6 weeks

9 February 1946: the “election” of a **Provisional People’s Committee of North Korea** under the leadership of Kim Il-sung

**Agrarian reform** in the North (80% of farmers had to rent their land under Japanese rule)

**No agrarian reform in the South: 3% owned 60% of the land**  
**Japan: spectacular land reform helped stop the spread of Communism**





The left-wing **People's Committees** in the South

**Grassroots organizations** dedicated to undoing the system of privilege and oppression implemented by the Japanese

**Intense political struggle** pitting the People's Committees against Syngman Rhee and the Conservatives

Spontaneous **uprisings** against Syngman Rhee's regime



## The interruption of the Joint Commission (May 1946): American support to Syngman Rhee

Syngman Rhee determined to crush all resistance



**Cheju island** declared enemy zone  
Many residents forcibly relocated  
Widespread torture & massacres



**American advisors** with South Korean units engaged in repression

An American advisor helped organized the defeat of the uprising in the port city of Yosu

South Korean National Police: “brutal bastards”  
“worse than the Japanese”

By the spring of 1950, Rhee had imposed his will on the southern provinces at the cost of some 100,000 dead



# COLD WAR

■ EASTERN BLOC  
■ WESTERN BLOC  
□ IRON CURTAIN



Spring 1947: the “Iron Curtain” in Europe

Deteriorating U.S.-Soviet relations

Joint Commission reinstated but no results

The end of U.S.-Soviet bilateral relations over Korea

**17 September 1947:** Korea’s independence & reunification brought to the **United Nations**

U.S. proposal: the creation of a **temporary commission** to help prepare & observe elections in Korea (both zones)



U.S. proposal voted by the UN – Soviet Union refused to cooperate  
(NO access to Soviet occupation zone)





**Elections** held in U.S. occupation zone (May 1948) – Widespread violence and intimidation

12 June: a Constitution for South Korea

20 July: Syngman Rhee elected president of the Republic of Korea (ROK)

ROK officially proclaimed on 15 August 1948



The end of the U.S. military government in Korea

**Transfer of powers** to the government of South Korea

End of 1948: 8 000 U.S. soldiers left in Korea

1949: U.S. military aid = 500 military advisors (Korean Military Advisory Group)





Meanwhile in the  
North...

**25 August:** the  
“election” of a  
“national” Supreme  
Popular Assembly  
Clandestine vote  
organized south of the  
38<sup>th</sup> parallel  
572 deputies (360 from  
the South)

9 September 1948: the  
**Democratic People’s  
Republic of Korea**  
proclaimed

Kim Il-sung “elected” Prime minister  
The withdrawal of Soviet occupation forces





Neither South or North Korea did recognize the legitimacy of the other

Syngman Rhee's policy of repression towards "Communist" oppositions: the pretext for war



## Phases of the Korean War





**Phase 1:** North Korean troops (200 000) invade South Korea  
Soviet equipment  
(25 June 1950)



**Unprepared,** the South is unable offer much resistance



**Declassified Soviet  
archives:** Stalin gave the  
green light to Kim Il-sung  
as early as January 1950







28 June: the fall of Seoul





## Phase 2: the U.S. intervention

A UN resolution condemns the “aggression from the North”  
Military assistance to South Korea voted  
The Korean War: the first UN war





**UN forces under the command of General MacArthur**





## Amphibious invasion of Incheon

United States-South Korean forces recaptured Seoul and cut off North Korean supply lines

United Nations forces able to break out of the Pusan Perimeter and push north



Stalin likely underestimated the  
U.S. reaction

**June 1949:** withdrawal of the  
last U.S. troops

**August 1949:** the first Russian  
atomic bomb exploded

**October 1949:** the Communists  
seized power in China (no U.S.  
military reaction)







**Dean Acheson** (Secretary of State)'s speech (12 January 1950):

Continental Asia (including the Korean peninsula)  
**excluded** from U.S. defence perimeter



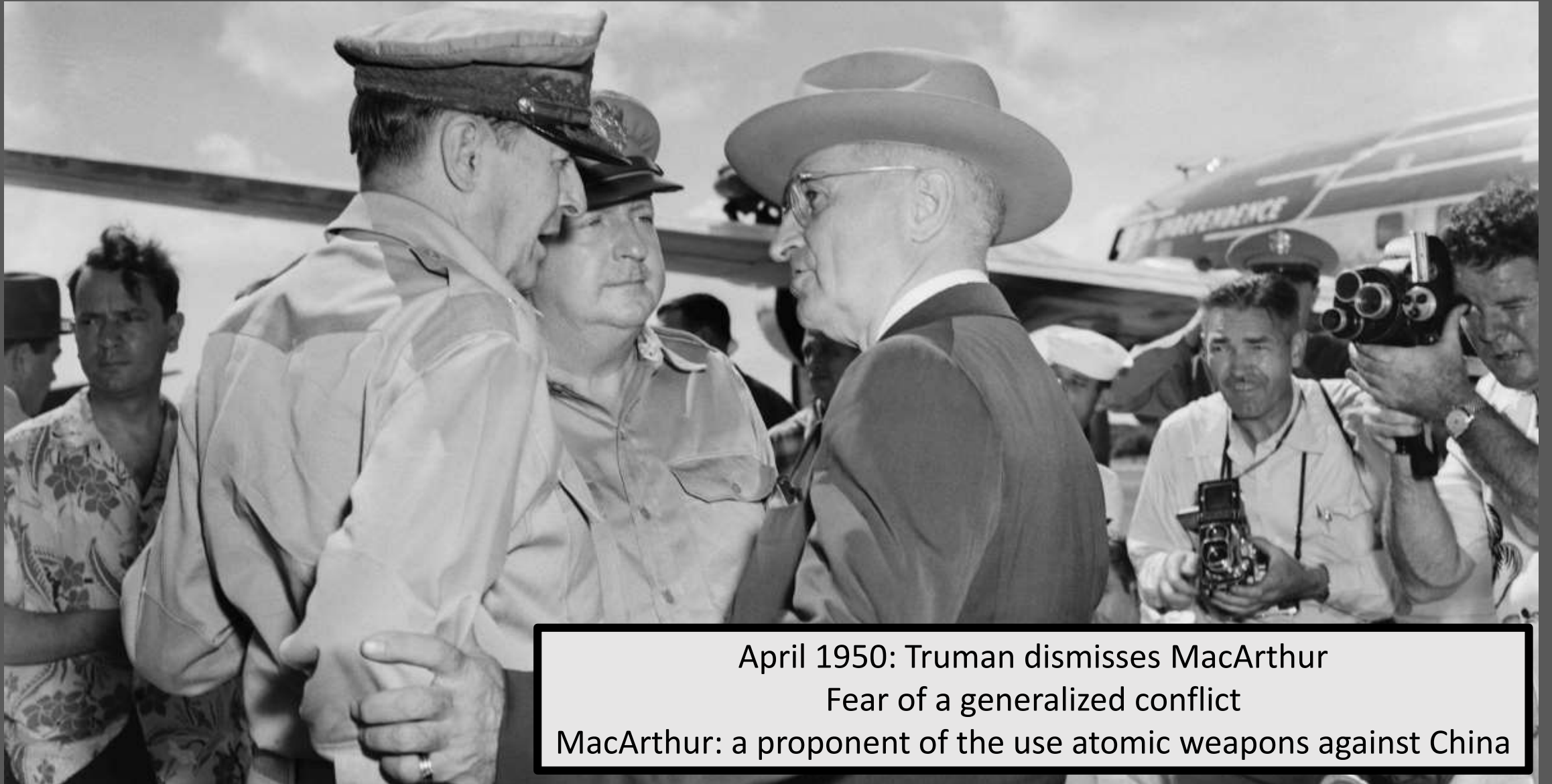
**Phase 3: the Chinese counter-offensive**  
1.7 million Chinese “volunteers” enter North Korea  
(October 1950)



14 March 1950: the Chinese occupy Seoul  
China's reaction **underestimated** by the U.S.





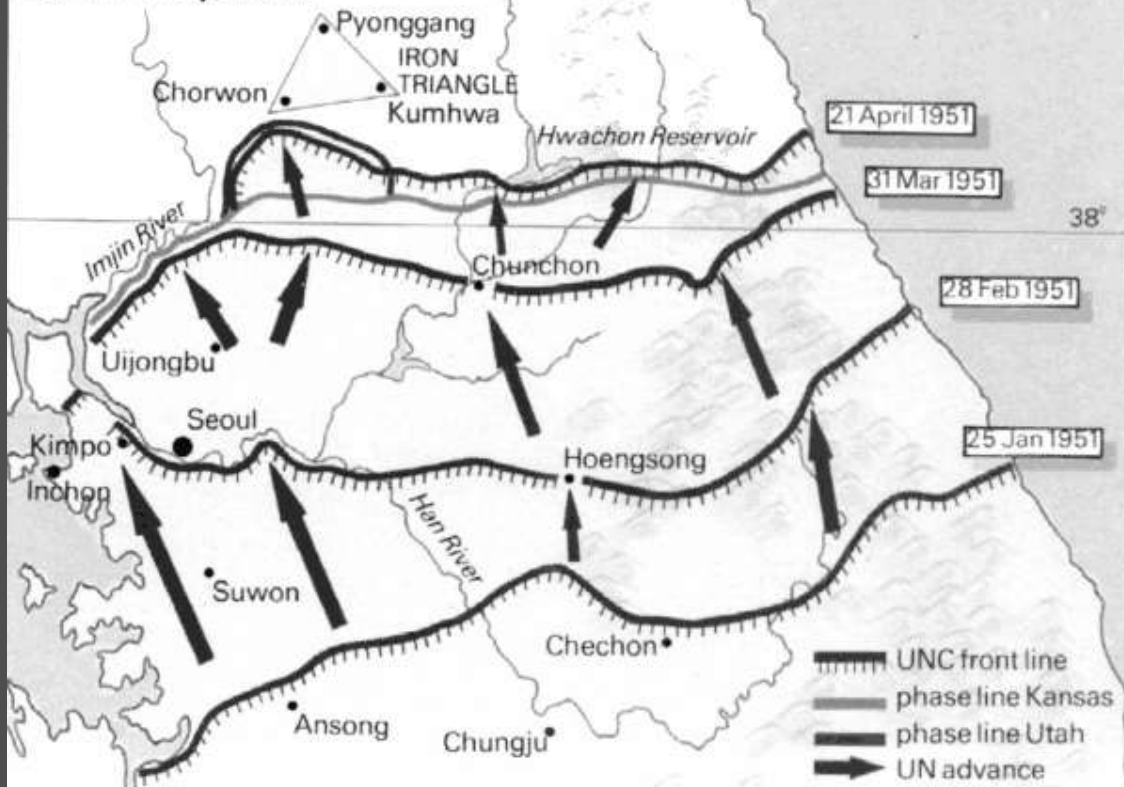


April 1950: Truman dismisses MacArthur  
Fear of a generalized conflict  
MacArthur: a proponent of the use atomic weapons against China

**Phase 4: the UN forces' counter-offensive**  
Front line re-established on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel  
Return *status quo ante* = **negotiations**

### The UN counter-attack

25 Jan – 21 April 1951



Spring 1950 – July 1953: **stalemate**



Intense bombardments  
(**strategic bombing**)

89249A10



Pyongyang: so much devastation that bombing was halted(no longer any worthy targets)





Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-18884-0002  
Foto: Höhne, Erich; Pohl, Erich | 10. März 1953

The death of Stalin: a new era of *Détente*  
between the U.S. & the Soviet Union

China too weak to continue the war without the  
support of Moscow

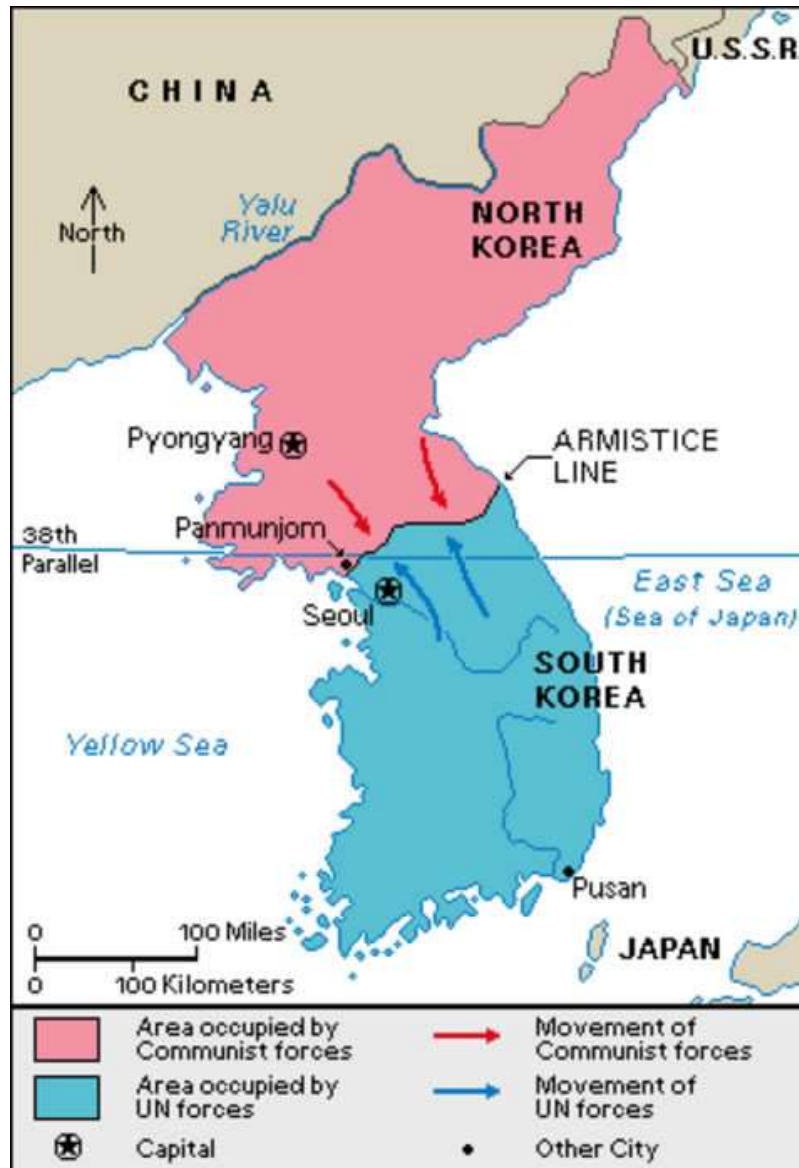
27 July 1953: **armistice**

The U.S. & the Soviet Union acknowledge the existence of **2 Koreas** + a **demilitarized zone (DMZ)**









The 2 Koreas refused Korea's division  
Still officially at war today

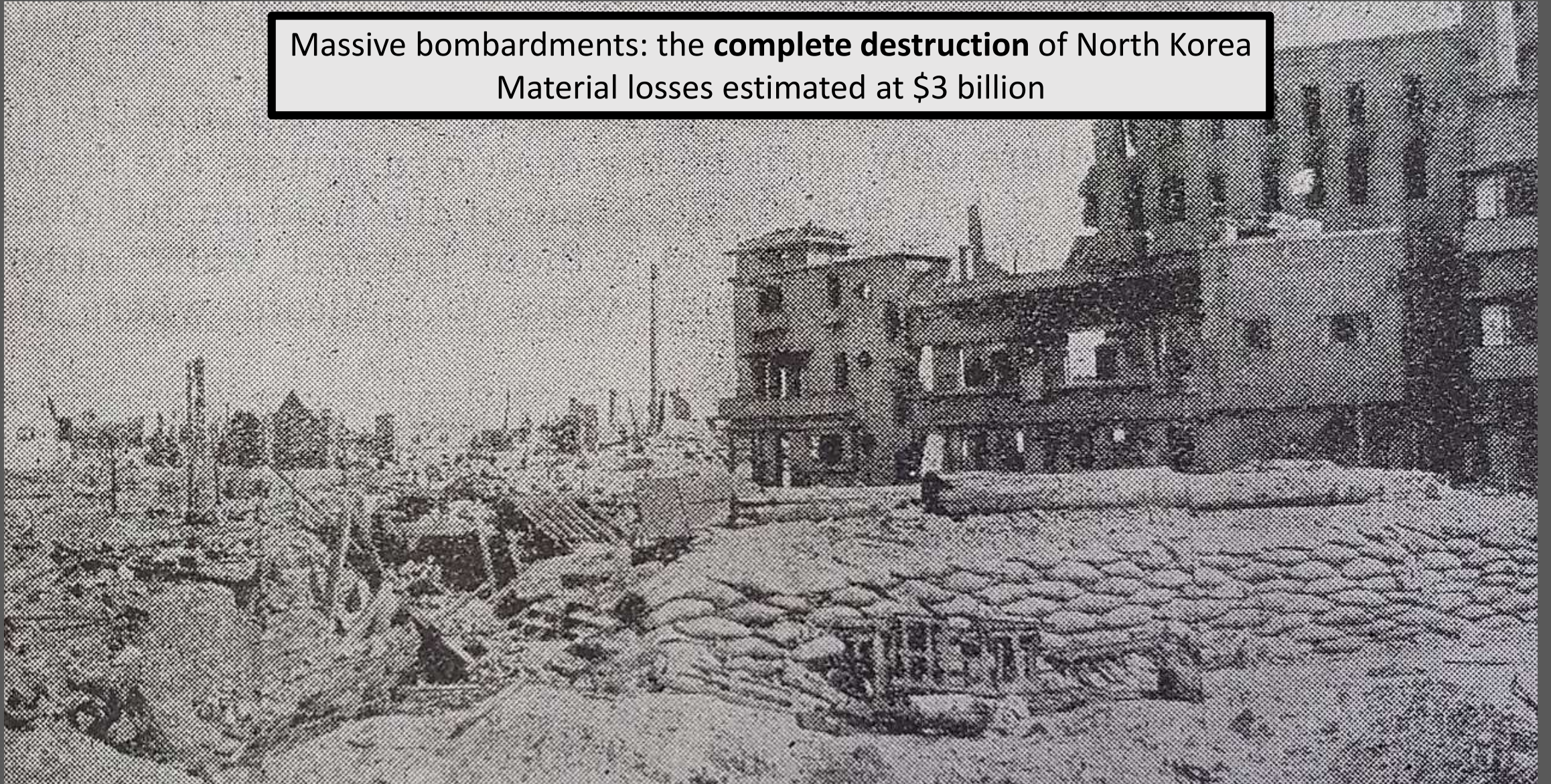
A war for nothing?

70% of Seoul destroyed





Massive bombardments: the **complete destruction** of North Korea  
Material losses estimated at \$3 billion







Agricultural land unsuitable in some areas = famines







Considerable **human  
cost**


800 000 Korean soldiers  
killed

A little less than 800 000  
Chinese "volunteers"

57 000 UN soldiers

2 million civilian victims



3 million refugees



THE WAR BEGAN HERE -  
JUNE 25, 1950

**38TH PARALLEL**

COURTESY

 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION 

Korean War: what **teachings**?

1. The U.S. ready to intervene militarily to defend its interests
2. The U.S. role as leader of the Western world confirmed
3. U.S. military might insufficient to defeat Chinese "volunteers"



**China:** unification process under Communist leadership complete

A common enemy: U.S. imperialism

**Enhanced status** on the global stage

Mao forced to abandon the project of invading **Taiwan**

Taiwan protected by the U.S.



The Korean War: a **civil war** opposing 2 ideologies which began in 1931  
Korea remains deeply **divided** today

