

War Crimes: US Destruction of North Korea Must Not be Forgotten

The devastation of North Korea by American air power is an ill-remembered chapter of the Korean War

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For a brief moment in the summer of 1945 there was joy in Korea.

Koreans, who had suffered 35 years of of brutal Japanese colonial occupation prior to Tokyo's defeat in World War II, celebrated what they believed was their liberation by victorious US and Soviet forces. Full of hope for a future free of foreign rule, they proudly declared their independence.

That hope was soon dashed. It was announced that the victorious allied powers, the US and the USSR, would be occupying the entire Korean Peninsula. The USSR would take the north, the US the south.

Like so many other imperial endeavors, the division of Korea along the 38th Parallel was an exercise in arbitrariness and utter disregard for the wishes of the people it affected. The people of Korea very quickly realized that they were merely trading one occupying empire for another.

A [survey of Koreans](#) in the summer of 1946 found that 77% preferred socialism or communism while only 14% favored capitalism. However, in the South, the US backed the right-wing dictatorship of **Syngman Rhee**, a conservative Christian and staunch anti-communist who ruled with an iron fist. In the North, the USSR installed former anti-Japanese guerrilla leader and Red Army officer **Kim Il Sung**.

In 1948, the division of Korea was looking increasingly permanent. And politics was turning murderous.

The killing begins

By early 1950 there were more than 100,000 political prisoners in the South. [Summary executions](#) of leftists, both real and imagined, claimed tens of thousands of lives as the South's police-state reign of terror rivaled the outrages of the communist North.

As efforts to negotiate a unified Korean state failed, nascent anti-government insurgencies grew in the South, notably on Jeju Island. They were brutally repressed.

Brief but bloody border skirmishes escalated. Both Rhee and Kim sought unification through invasion.

Seventy years ago today - on June 25, 1950 - Kim went for broke. Northern forces launched an all-out invasion of the South.

Seoul, the South's capital, fell three days later. America's supreme commander in the Far East, Tokyo-based General Douglas MacArthur, was soon convinced that American boots on the ground were the key to repulsing Northern aggression. President Harry S Truman agreed, calling the intervention a "police action."

The US military, strutting with atomic swagger and still puffed up with the pride of World War II victory, expected a short war. Green, flabby GIs, more fit for the pomp and parades of Japanese occupation duty than for the horrors of close combat that awaited them in Korea, imagined they would soon be back to the bars and bordellos of Tokyo.

Reality proved harsh. In the summer of 1950, Northern forces routed both the South's army and the first American units to land. US and Southern forces retreated southward toward the southeastern port of Pusan (today, Busan) along with hundreds of thousands of civilian refugees.

After a titanic struggle around the "Pusan Perimeter" and a masterly amphibious landing at Inchon, North Korean forces were routed by mid-September 1950. In October, US-led forces counter-invaded North Korea. That prompted a Chinese intervention in the winter months. The carnage escalated.

Hell from above

While US ground troops had a mixed performance, one area in which US forces enjoyed near total supremacy was in the air. Overcoming initial reluctance from MacArthur, General George Stratemeyer ordered US bombers to "destroy every means of communications and every installation, factory, city, and village" in North Korea.

[More bombs were dropped](#) on Korea than during the entire World War II Pacific campaign. US carpet bombing of North Korea included napalm, incendiary and fragmentation bombs that killed and maimed by the thousands and left cities, towns, villages and countryside in scorched and shattered ruins.

In the North's capital Pyongyang, [only around 50,000 people](#) out of a prewar population of 500,000 remained in 1953, the year the war fizzled out.

When all the cities, towns and industrial sites were destroyed, US warplanes bombed dams, reservoirs and rice fields, flooding the countryside and destroying the nation's food supply. Only emergency aid from China, the Soviet Union and other socialist nations averted famine.

Fearing Northern troops could infiltrate Southern lines disguised as civilians, fighter pilots bombed and strafed refugees as they fled south. In one of the the most infamous atrocities of the war, [between 163 and 400 men, women and children](#) were gunned down at No Gun Ri in South Korea over three days in July 1950.

Retreating South Korean and US troops also [blew up bridges](#) teeming with refugees, and during their retreat from they North, they burned villages and towns in a "scorched earth" policy to deny the advancing enemy quarters and supplies.

Meanwhile, Rhee's agents were "clearing" rear areas. Perhaps 100,000 South Korean civilians were murdered by their own armed forces, who targeted leftists. US troops were present at [horrific mass slaughters](#) throughout the war.

Most Americans were fed a sanitized version of the conflict, although some of its horrors were celebrated – witness John Ford's propaganda piece [This Is Korea!](#) in which footage of a flamethrower attack is accompanied by actor John Wayne's voiceover: "Fry 'em out! Burn 'em out! Cook 'em!"

General Curtis "Bombs Away" LeMay – who commanded firebombing raids on Japanese cities that killed more civilians than the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – served as strategic air commander during the Korean War.

[He would later acknowledge](#) that "over a period of three years or so, we killed off 20% of the population" of North Korea. That's nearly 1.9 million men, women and children. In comparison, the Nazis had murdered 17% of Poland's pre-World War II population just a few years earlier.

The unfinished war

By the time that North Korean, Chinese and American forces signed a ceasefire agreement on July 27, 1953 – Rhee, furious that the war had ended with the peninsula divided, refused to join – North Korea was utterly ruined. "Everything is destroyed," said US bomber commander General Emmett O'Donnell. "There is nothing standing worthy of the name."

US President Donald Trump [threatened to "totally destroy"](#) North Korea over its nuclear-missile program before improbably "falling in love" with the country's leader Kim Jong Un (the grandson of Kim Il Sung).

US presidential threats, coming as they do from the nation that has killed more foreign civilians than any other over the past 75 years, are not to be taken lightly.

For North Koreans of a certain age, total destruction by the United States isn't an abstract threat. It is a hellish reality that ranks among the most egregious acts of a century that witnessed some of the most appalling barbarity in human history.

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