9  WAR IN KOREA 1950–3

THE LEAD UP TO WAR

In 1949, the communists took control in China. This was a blow to the USA because Americans had been supporting Chinese Nationalists. It seemed as though the US policy of containing communism had failed in Asia. One year later, attention was focused on China’s neighbour, Korea.

Korea had been ruled by Japan until Japan was defeated in the Second World War in 1945. At Yalta, Britain, the USA and USSR had agreed that Soviet and American troops should occupy Korea when the war ended. The country was divided along the 38th parallel, until a democratic government could be elected to rule the whole country. Soviet troops moved into northern Korea and American troops moved into the southern part.

The UN tried to have elections but the USSR rejected the idea. In August 1948, the Americans set up a republic in the south (the Republic of Korea). Syngman Rhee became its first president. A month later, the Russians set up a communist republic in the north (the Korean People’s Democratic Republic). It was ruled by Kim Il Sung, a Red Army captain. Each claimed to represent the whole of Korea.

The United Nations believed that 18,000 people died on the border during the next two years of ‘peace’. After the USA and USSR withdrew their troops, the two Korean governments continued arguing.

At dawn on 25 June 1950, these arguments led to war when North Korean troops launched a huge surprise attack on the South. The army had been equipped and trained by the USSR. Within three days, it had captured South Korea’s capital, Seoul.

THE UN IS INVOLVED

The Americans acted quickly. President Truman sent supplies to the South Koreans and battleships to wait off the coast. He also asked the UN Security Council to take action. This was the first major test for the United Nations which had been formed only five years earlier. Would it take action?

When the Security Council met to discuss Korea, the USSR’s representative was absent. The USSR had walked out of the UN as a protest because communist China was excluded. The Soviet Union would probably have used its veto to stop UN involvement – but it was not there to do so.

The Security Council passed a resolution, asking North Korea to leave South Korea. The North Koreans ignored this. So, days later, it passed a second resolution. This one asked UN members to send troops to help South Korea.

About 20 of the UN’s 60 members eventually provided men and equipment, but it was mainly an American force. About half of the soldiers were American and the USA provided nearly all of the navy and air force. The force was led by an American, General Douglas MacArthur. He took his orders from the American president, not from the UN.

By August 1950, North Korean troops occupied nearly all of South Korea. In September, American and South Korean troops landed at Inchon, 200 miles behind the North Korean front line. The North Koreans realised they might be surrounded and quickly retreated.

However, the Americans did not stop when they had pushed the North Koreans back to the 38th parallel. General MacArthur, leading the UN troops, invaded North Korea and by October had reached the Yalu River on the Chinese frontier. This worried the Chinese who were afraid that their new communist state would be attacked.
CHINA JOINS IN

Before the war began, a number of countries had recognized the new People’s Republic of China. This meant that they accepted that it was an independent nation. They included Britain. However, the USA refused to recognize communist China, so the Chinese were wary of the Americans.

At first, the Chinese were worried that the USA might use atomic bombs against them. But western spies told Chinese leaders that President Truman would not agree to use them. So when the USA ignored Chinese warnings, the Chinese launched a surprise attack across the Korean border.

The Chinese army numbered 180,000 men, with another 100,000 in reserve: it was too big for the UN force to cope with. Within a fortnight, UN troops were pushed back into South Korea.

The UN force managed to halt the Chinese advance in late January. Two months later, the Chinese were pushed back across the 38th parallel into North Korea. MacArthur wanted to attack China itself. Many Americans wanted President Truman to use atomic bombs against the Chinese but he refused – though he did consider it (see Source A). MacArthur was sacked when he, too, advised the use of atom bombs.

STALEMATE

For nearly a year, the war had seen-saw back and forth across Korea. Now, it settled into a stalemate. The two sides dug trenches and faced each other across the 38th parallel. But the fighting went on. Peace talks were held in Panmunjom, on the border between the two Koreas, but dragged on for two years. While the USA and China argued, the death toll rose.

THE END OF THE WAR

In November 1952, General Eisenhower was elected as the new US President after promising to end the Korean War. He also threatened to bomb the Chinese with America’s new hydrogen bomb. Then, in March 1953, Stalin died and the USSR stopped supplying weapons to the Chinese.

Soon afterwards, the Chinese agreed to talk and an armistice was signed at Panmunjom on 27 July 1953. The two sides agreed to fix the border close to the 38th parallel, where it had been before the war.

THE WAR’S RESULTS

It was a costly war. As many as four million people may have died. They included 54,000 Americans and about 7000 from the British Commonwealth. Whole areas of Korea had been destroyed; they included millions of homes.

The war led to an increase in the arms race. The USA developed a hydrogen bomb in 1952, a year later, the USSR tested one. In the 1960s, the Chinese developed both atomic and hydrogen bombs.

The war had been a testing-ground for other weapons. US troops used flamethrowers to destroy underground in which enemy troops could hide. US planes dropped napalm: it burns trees and bushes easily; it also sticks to human beings and burns their flesh. Both these weapons would be used again in the Vietnam War.

It was an important war for the United Nations. The League of Nations had failed to stop aggression.

Source: This Soviet cartoon accords Trygve Lie, the UN Secretary-General, of allowing UN troops to use germ warfare in Korea (1952).

But the UN failed to bring democracy to Korea. Kim ruled the North as a dictator until his death in 1994. Syngman Rhee was forced out of office in 1960 after complaints about government corruption. Neither North nor South has had a good record on human rights.

Above all, the UN failed to unite Korea. The border remains on the 38th parallel and all efforts to unite the country have failed. Both North and South still claim the right to rule the whole of Korea.

WAS WW III A REAL RISK?

It had been a very dangerous war indeed. During the war, the USSR had an airforce division based in northern China and support troops in North Korea. These included radar units and anti-aircraft guns. They were all used to fight American troops.

From 1951–3, American and Soviet planes fought each other over Korea. Soviet pilots wore Chinese uniforms and put Chinese symbols on their planes. In effect, Stalin had ordered Soviet troops to fight American ones. American leaders knew what was happening but kept it secret. If the American people had learned about it, they would have wanted a direct attack on the USSR.

The USA and Britain were both worried that the USSR might try to get the western powers elsewhere. Western leaders believed that there was a greater risk of a world war because of Korea. The war convinced the West that Stalin would do anything to expand Soviet power.

They had good reason to be concerned. Stalin had greater control over the war than western intelligence claimed at the time. At one point, Stalin even considered whether to use Soviet troops to attack UN troops in Korea (see Source B). The Chinese were in agreement (see Source C).

Question

Which was more responsible as a reason for the development of the Cold War in the years 1945–53?

- The Soviet take-over of Eastern Europe
- The Korean War, 1950–3

You must refer to both reasons when explaining your answer. (10 marks)

Explain the causes, course and results of the Korean War. Write a few sentences under the following headings:

- The lead up to the Korean War
- The role of the UN
- Chinese intervention
- Consequences of the war.

Source A

President Truman considered a direct attack on the USSR. He wrote the following in his diary in January 1952.

It seems to me that the proper approach now would be an ultimatum [to] Moscow. This means all-out war. Every manufacturing plant in China and the Soviet Union will be eliminated. This is the final chance for the Soviet government to decide whether it wishes to survive or not.

Source B

Stalin considered war with the USA. He sent this telegram to Mao Zedong in October 1950.

Should we fear this? I think not, because together we shall be stronger than America, England and the other capitalists in Germany. They do not represent a serious military power. If war is inevitable, then let it be now.

Source C

Mao Zedong replied in October 1950.

I am very happy that in your reply the joint struggle of the USSR and China against the Americans is discussed. Undoubtedly, if we are to fight, then we should fight now.