

The Korean War

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On 25 June 1950, Communist troops from North Korea crossed the 38th parallel, which since 1945 had been the military demarcation line between the North of the country (under Soviet influence) and the South (under US influence). The confrontations along the border and the invasion of the South of the peninsula would mark the beginning of the Korean War. The United States, determined to support the authorities in the South, were able to take advantage of a moment when the Soviet delegate was temporarily absent from a United Nations Security Council meeting to commit the United Nations (UN) to defending South Korea. They called on the UN to apply the principle of collective security and to vote for sanctions against North Korea. In June 1950, US air and naval forces landed on the peninsula. Sixteen countries, including the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, were involved in the creation of an international force under US command. North Korea, on the other hand, enjoyed the diplomatic support of the Soviet Union and military aid from Communist China.

Although his forces had been able to drive the North Korean troops back to the Chinese border, US General Douglas MacArthur was confronted by a massive counter-attack led by Chinese reinforcements from the beginning of 1951. He therefore put to the US President, Harry Truman, a proposal to bomb Communist China, resorting to atomic weapons if need be. The situation became truly dramatic — a new world conflict seemed imminent. But Truman refused to use the atomic bomb and the war continued, despite constant diplomatic efforts to broker a ceasefire. An armistice was finally signed in July 1953 in the climate of international détente brought about by the death of Stalin four months earlier. However, as the United States continued to offer substantial economic aid to South Korea, whilst the Soviet Union supported North Korea, the reunification of the country would clearly be impossible for some time to come.

There is little doubt that the Cold War reached its apogee during this conflict. Indeed, it led to an obsessive fear of Communism in the United States and also had an effect on Western Europe, which felt increasingly weak compared with the two Great Powers on the international stage.