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by Przemysław Wipler, Dom Wydawniczy ELIPSA 2025

Mark E. Caprio*

Connecting the End of the Pacific War with the Beginnings of the Korean War, 1945-1950

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Abstract

The end of the Pacific War concluded the fighting between the Axis and Allied powers but set the stage for a second war, the Korean War, just five years later. Some scholars have written on the fighting on the Korean Peninsula that started soon after the Japanese surrendered and the U.S. took over occupation duties for them. The Peninsula had been divided between two allies of the former war, and they quickly turned into enemies well before the fighting broke out in June 1950 as an all-out war; indeed, certain signs show that some considered them adversaries even before Germany's surrender in May 1945. This paper questions how the dating of wars is considered, arguing that more often than not this duration is determined by the victors who calculate the first attack against them as the start, and the moment a cease-fire is proclaimed as the end, of a war. Yet, wars generally do not end that neatly; they begin before the "first shot" and continue for some time after the belligerent states stop fighting. While this discussion focuses on the events of the Korean War, which is generally dated from 1950 to 1953 as an example, a similar discussion can be made for other wars, as well.

Keywords

Korean War, Pacific War, continuity, war's definition

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Introduction

When does a war begin? When does it end? Dates are set, engraved onto monuments, entered into school history books, and occasionally celebrated as fact. However, more often than not, wars start when one party assesses them to have started (usually the victor) and continue until they have been declared over (again, usually the victor). Does the belligerence not start before the first shot has been fired to initiate the fighting? Does it not continue after the two sides have laid down their arms? Often victors and vanquished set conflicting dates to determine a war's ending and starting dates. Generally, the dates are determined to coincide with a national narrative, to fit into a state's explanation regarding the war and how it decides to tell its national story. And because of this, their war stories do not match the reality of the matter. This paper attempts to address how we date wars by linking the ending of one war, the Pacific War (generally dated as occurring from 1941 to 1945), with the Korean War (generally dated as occurring from 1950 to 1953). It will try to establish the end of the war as when peace has been restored and the origins of war as when peace has been broken. The Pacific War and the Korean War fit into this model as the terms of the former led to the beginning of the latter. They mark nearly a decade of war in Northeast Asia.¹

While this argument can perhaps be made for most, if not all, wars, this discussion will limit itself to two wars: the Pacific War and the Korean War.² Already valid arguments have been made to suggest that the origins of the Korean War date back to the mid-1940s if not earlier.³ Others have contested (unsuccessfully I believe) this view, arguing that the war began suddenly with North Korean armies invading South Korea in late June 1950, which soon brought the United States, the UN Command of multinational states, and finally the Chinese into the war that was backed by the Soviet Union to make it an international war.⁴ Yet, Bruce Cumings' argument, particularly in his earlier volume, has shown how the war evolved from nearly the earliest days following Japan's surrender in mid-August 1945, from peasant rebellions to guerrilla fighting in the south (U.S.-occupied zone) to border fighting along the North-South Korean divide in 1949 to all-out war in June 1950 once the two Korean states in the north and south had been organized.⁵

Whether the fighting, which primarily consisted of left-wing versus right-wing battles, should be considered war and a part of the Korean War is the question. If it is, then how do we define the battles that have periodically erupted between North and South Korea since a ceasefire armistice was signed in July 1953? Is a peace treaty (discussed but never signed) required to end a war? As one

1. This argument can be extended by adding the fighting in Vietnam which began with the French being reinstated as colonial ruler in its former colony at the close of the Pacific War. Fighting there lasted until the United States armies left in 1975. This history can be extended prior to 1941 if the Japanese intrusions into Manchuria and China from even before 1931 are included, thus totaling close to a half century.

2. For a summary of the arguments revolving around the origins of the Korean War, see: M.E. Caprio, *Narratives of the Origins of the Korean War: A Review of Seven Decades*, "Asia Maior", 2022, Vol. 33, pp. 479–503.

3. For example, this argument can be found in two volumes authored by Bruce Cumings in his: B. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950*, Princeton University Press 1990; B. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947*, Princeton University Press 1981.

4. Perhaps the primary backer of this version on the war is: W. Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*, Princeton University Press 2002.

5. B. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and...*, op. cit.

has never emerged, the Korean War being technically not over is a claim that surfaces occasionally. Before continuing with our discussion, it is necessary to explore the different ways in which war as a concept is defined.

Defining War

What is War? Many books have been written with “war” in the title, but few, including the 5th-century B.C.E. classic by Sun Tzu titled *The Art of War*, where he concentrates on how a war is to be fought rather than defining war, adequately address the question of what war is. Yet, we use the term as if we have a definite definition of what it is. A common definition often includes the following: “war” is “an armed conflict between two or more countries, or groups.”⁶ Indeed, one common element found in many definitions of war is the necessity of its being a conflict between sovereign states. Yet, recently its definition has exceeded this one central requirement: we say a war on hunger, a war on terrorism, and a war on drugs. Others add numbers to their definition: its duration or the number of casualties battles produce, although many disagree on how long or how many are necessary in these cases. Maybe the closest that we have come to a definition is found in a nineteenth-century volume titled in English *On War* by the Prussian officer Carl von Clausewitz, who famously wrote that “war is nothing more than the continuation of policy with other means.”

Since then a few others have tried to offer an explanation for war. The British scholar Andrew Clapham of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, looks at war in legal terms:

“... politicians, prosecutors, novelists, journalists, and terrorists may all invoke the concept of war to achieve their aims. Talking about war can be used to get people to rally around to face a common enemy, to justify exceptional measures that would not be acceptable in peacetime, and to claim powers to kill and capture enemies while destroying or capturing their property. ‘This is war’ can be a statement of fact; it also reflects a state of mind.”⁷

In his words, “war” is not determined objectively by the number of deaths, or its longevity, but by semantics, as a way to rally a people to combat a perceived enemy, be it a nation or even an idea. It is, as Clapham projects, a “state of mind.” In this regard, a head of state is free to determine when he, or she, feels the time is ripe to attack, and thus initiate battle, as well as (if the tide is on the nation’s side), to end the fighting, thus determining the dates that will define the war.

6. This definition is from the Cambridge dictionary, see: the entry “war”, Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/war>, (access 14.05.2025). Similar definition is also found in the Oxford, Britanica, and other dictionaries. *The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law* authored by Francoise Bouchet-Saulnier, published by Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) adds that war is a war “phenomenon of organized collective violence.” See: F. Bouchet-Saulnier, *The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law*, edited and translated by L. Brav, C. Olivier, Rowman & Littlefield 2007, p. 471.

7. A. Clapham, *War*, Oxford University Press 2021, p. 1.

Clapham goes on to argue that regardless we should all know when we are in a state of war even if the “line between a war and some other sort of violence has been blurred and disputed for centuries.” He uses insurance payoffs as an example of whether a person is entitled to compensation for belligerent destruction or death: As war was not declared until after the fact, there is ambiguity as to whether a state is in an existing state of war from the day it is attacked.⁸ He goes on to explain how different legal codes of countries define war in terms of whether recognized nations have engaged in the belligerent action and the nature of that belligerent action. He states that “[e]ach national jurisdiction will most likely determine the meaning of war in the context of its own legal traditions and constitutional order, including the national arrangements for declaring war.”⁹

Chris Hedges, a reporter who has had more than his share of war involvement, writes that “[w]ar is a force that gives us meaning.” He also writes of war as “myth.” It is “manufactured...born out of the collapse of civil societies, perpetuated by fear, greed, and paranoia, and [it is] run by gangsters, who rise up from the bottom of their own societies and terrorize all, including those they purport to protect.”¹⁰ He describes in his “Introduction” how war for some lasts beyond cease-fires or peace treaties, beyond when the fighting has ended and the soldiers have returned from the battlefield.¹¹ Indeed, a serious problem among Vietnam veterans in the United States is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the recurring flashbacks of the war, mental illnesses, and the like that they experience long after they have returned home.

The post-World War II era has redefined our meaning of war to include the world not confronting itself on the battlefield, but engaging in a state of war, a Cold War, in which battle lines are drawn, the two sides arm themselves to the teeth, but they do not engage in actual combat. There are few, if any, deaths or injuries directly related to actual fighting. People, however, have not reached agreement as to what constitutes a bona fide war across the board. Unless we can come up with a unified definition as to what war is and what it is not, it is difficult to determine objectively when a war begins, and when it ends except to resolve our answers to this question to subjective dates that are determined by the state, usually by the victor and occasionally by the vanquished.¹² I will use as examples three scenarios of how the Pacific War ended and how it could have ended in an attempt to link the two battles.

8. Ibidem.

9. Ibidem, p. 9. Indeed, state officials often use other words, such as “incident,” or “inseccion” to hide the fact that they are leading their country into war.

10. C. Hedges, *War if a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, Public Affairs 2002, p. 20.

11. Ibidem.

12. Though the Japanese were totally defeated in the Pacific War, they commemorate August 15 as they day they lost the war, when the emperor said it was over, even though fighting continued after that day, a peace treaty was not signed until September 2, and Japanese forces participated in a variety of post-Pacific War wars throughout its former empire.

The End of the Pacific War: Scenario I

The scenario that was used to end the Pacific War was the U.S. atomic bombing of two cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹³ These two blasts killed hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Japanese, but also many Korean and Chinese factory workers, and even Allied prisoners of war interned in the vicinity. The blasts also created a large number of *hibakusha*, or people injured by the explosions.¹⁴ The result of this history has remained with us up to the present: a divided Korea and a virtually unified Japan.¹⁵

The true purpose of dropping the bombs continues to be debated. Were they used, as Americans are led to believe, to end the war as quickly as possible to save American lives?¹⁶ Or, as others claim, to contain the Soviet advancement into the region? Those making the latter argument say that the Japanese were seeking a way to end the war and had sent surrender notices to neutral countries that were ignored. These peace efforts were genuine and at least should have been given more attention. Those people who argue the former contend that the Japanese who were suing for peace did not have the power to ensure that it would be honored. The Japanese, as they did in Okinawa and on other islands, would fight to the last man.¹⁷ Instead, at the Potsdam Conference, which took place just outside of Berlin in the wake of Germany's surrender, a communique was issued to the Japanese stating that they faced "the utter devastation of the Japanese homeland" if they did not surrender unconditionally (as Germany had done a little over two months previously).¹⁸

The communiqué offered no conditions for its surrender; it made no mention of the atomic bomb that the U.S. had just recently tested in the New Mexico desert; indeed, it offered no indication of what "utter destruction" meant, even though to date it had already destroyed parts of over 60 Japanese cities through aerial bombing. Most importantly to the Japanese, it offered no indication of the fate that the Japanese emperor or the imperial household would face after the war, as some Americans had argued the U.S. should have done to end the war before the bombs were dropped. Would the emperor be put on trial as a war criminal? It appears that if he were to face postwar trials, the Japanese were prepared to fight until the last man was standing.

After the first bomb was dropped over Hiroshima, the Soviet armies entered the Japanese empire through Manchuria and then northern Korea. They advanced quickly down the Korean Peninsula and only stopped at the 38th parallel after the U.S. had proposed it as the line of division between the U.S. and Soviet occupations in the late hours of August 11 and the early hours of the next day.

13. Russian history claims that it was its armies entering the war that forced the Japanese to surrender, rather than the atomic bombs.

14. See Á. Duro's dissertation and recent publications of the *hibakusha* of Hiroshima and Korea. She penned a version of her work in "Japanese Grassroot Efforts to Assist South Korean Hibakusha Gain Treatment and other Benefits," in M. E. Caprio and R. Winstanley-Chesters, eds., *Handbook of Japan-Korea Relations* (London: Routledge, in print).

15. The Soviet Union continues to occupy islands off the coast of Hokkaido in northern Japan, and the United States controls numerous swaths of land, primarily on the islands of Okinawa, in the form of military bases.

16. President Harry S. Truman claimed that if the U.S. had been forced to invade Japan from Kyushu (scenario II argument), the death toll of American servicemen would have reached 500,000 and even 1 million.

17. The most persuasive argument made for not dropping the bombs is made by Gar Alperovitz, see: G. Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, Vintage 1996. The counter argument, that the bombs were needed to end the war is made by Robert James Maddox, see: R.J. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*, University of Missouri 2004.

The End of the Pacific War: Scenario II

The Soviets could have continued to advance all the way down to the southern tip of the Peninsula, and perhaps chose to cooperate in order to gain a share of the Japanese occupation. It lost out. Not only did the U.S. refuse to allow the Soviet Union a piece of the operation in northern Hokkaido,¹⁹ but the Soviets also lost their opportunity to occupy more, if not all, of the Peninsula as at least Japan and the U.S. expected them to. Yet, the Korean War battle lines had been drawn by that August 10-11 decision: the conservative U.S. occupying the south and the progressive Soviets the north. Attempts to re-unify the Peninsula by their Joint Commission, which met over sixty times between 1946 and 1947, were unsuccessful. The United Nations was called in by the U.S. but rejected by the Soviet Union.²⁰

Original plans, before the bomb was tested to end the Pacific War, called for an Allied invasion through Japan's southernmost main island – Kyushu – and then, with these forces advancing up the archipelago, also envisioned the Pacific War “ending” in violence. Around April 1945, this was just one way in which the United States and its allies envisioned its ending. Indeed, the U.S. war in the Pacific Ocean had done just this, invading islands. The invasion of Japan's territory, Operation Olympic, was slated to commence on November 1, 1945. Surely the Japanese knew that an invasion was in the works. They even armed the southern Korean island of Cheju in preparation; the Japanese facilities to combat a possible invasion – tunnels and the like – can still be seen to this day. These armies would move up the Japanese archipelago toward the city of Tokyo until the Japanese surrendered unconditionally. Although not officially a part of the Asian war until August 9, we can imagine that Soviet armies would probably have crossed over onto northern Japan (Hokkaido) and perhaps even into western Japan (Niigata) at some point during this invasion, once they had officially entered the war. This would have resulted in an untold number of deaths on both the Japanese and U.S. sides and might surely have left Japan divided in much the same way as the Korean Peninsula remains divided today. Just where the division would have been set would have depended on when the Japanese surrendered. We can also imagine that the Soviet Union would have moved down the Korean Peninsula to occupy its entirety, thus uniting the Peninsula from the end of the Pacific War. The U.S. battling up the Japanese islands would probably have been in no position to occupy even a sliver of Korea, as it in the end intended.²¹

Even a unified Korea would probably not have resulted in a peaceful Peninsula. We can imagine that fighting between different ideological factions would probably have emerged unless the Soviets brought in enough troops to quell disturbances. There would have been the economic turmoil

18. Potsdam Declaration wording taken from Office of the Historian, see: *Potsdam Declaration, Number 1382 Proclamation*, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/d1382>, (access 08.04.2026).

19. After the Japanese surrendered, a Soviet delegation approached U.S. President Harry S. Truman with this request but were refused by the president.

20. The Japanese had first approached Center of left Yō Unhyōng to form a provisional government after the war with the idea that he could use his Soviet contacts to ensure safe passage home. However, they ended their support for him when they understood that the U.S. would occupy the south.

21. Even after Japan had surrendered there is indication that the U.S. did not expect the Soviets to honor the decision it had made to separate occupation duties at the 38th parallel, but they did. Maochun Yu notes the degree of panic that the U.S. faced after Japan surrendered in having to gain a presence uncertain areas to beat the Soviets from entering these areas beforehand. He quotes an urgent OSS cable regarding this in: M. Yu, *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War*, Naval Institute Press 1996, pp. 231–232.

that resulted from the severance of Korea from the Japanese empire and from the millions of Koreans who would have been flowing into their homeland from Manchuria (estimated as over one million) and Japan (estimated as over two million). However, the number of deaths and the amount of destruction would most likely not have reached levels that Korea experienced during the Korean War that broke out after Japan's surrender in August 1945. With the Soviets controlling the entire Korean Peninsula, the Korean left would have assumed a much more prominent position in southern Korea.²² The degree to which it would have militarized might well have been determined by the extent to which the U.S. militarized Japan.

Did the Koreans have a prominent replacement for the ultra-conservative Syngman Rhee, who began over a decade of authoritarian rule over the Korean Peninsula when the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) emerged in 1948? Yŏ Unhyŏng (also known by his Chinese name, Lyuh Woon-hyung) was a candidate. He is described as a left-of-center Korean who had ties with both Japanese and Soviet personnel. In 1919 he was invited to Japan to talk with Japanese officials, both military and otherwise. In a visit often seen as an appeasement gesture following the Korean March First anti-Japanese movement in Korea, he reportedly warned the Japanese strongly that their days of colonial subjugation would soon end and that Korea should be given its independence immediately. In the 1930s he served as a newspaper editor and was later jailed by the Japanese for refusing to cooperate with them. When the Japanese were ready to surrender, believing that the Soviets would control the entire Peninsula in the postwar years, they requested that he form a provisional government, perhaps as a way to use his Soviet connections to ensure the colonial government's safe repatriation. He conditionally accepted after the Japanese promised to free political prisoners and refrain from interfering in his work. He formed People's Committees throughout the nation to undertake local politics and tried to form an eclectic central government to handle politics at the national level. The Japanese, however, withdrew their support of him upon learning that it would be the U.S. that occupied the South. The arriving U.S. occupation forces never threw their support behind him, though they did nominally recognize him as the leftwing representative of a number of committees they formed. Yŏ survived a total of eleven assassination attempts before the twelfth attempt succeeded in killing him on July 19, 1947.²³

Instead, the ultraconservative Syngman Rhee became the first South Korean president in August 1948. According to Bruce Cumings, the South under him initiated a number of "border incursions" in 1949 that lasted days, if not weeks, when it occupied North Korean territory. Rhee professed

22. During the U.S. occupation the left was virtually erased from Korean society due to the U.S. re-employing many of the conservative rightwing Korean police force who served during the Japanese colonial period, primarily for their ability to hunt down leftist. We also might imagine that many peasant revolts that broke out, often resulting from rightwing harassment of the left, would not have occurred. As well, the Koreans who assumed government power in the new Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) would not have emerged at this time. See reports on the post-colonial police in: F. Hoffmann, M.E. Caprio, eds., *Witness to Korea, 1945-47: The Unfolding of an Authoritarian Regime*, Academia Publishers 2026.

23. See the platform of Yŏ's Korean Independence League (*Chosŏn kŏnguk tongmaeng*), see: B. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and...*, op. cit., p. 79. For Yŏ's activities over this time see: Yi K., *Yŏ Unhyŏng P'yŏngjŏn*, Silchŏn 2010, pp. 343-390.

a number of times the idea of his forming a South Korean government and, by his actions mainly, unifying the entire Peninsula by force.²⁴ Did the threat of South Korea initiating a war to unify the Peninsula encourage Kim Il Sung of North Korea to request military help from Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union later that year?

Unlike scenario I, the possibility of the Pacific War ending in this manner would perhaps have resulted in a unified Korean Peninsula and a divided Japanese archipelago. Though we might anticipate that Korea's post-Pacific War history would have been far from peaceful, the Korean people probably would not have experienced the trauma and destruction left by the Korean War, which to a certain degree remain with them to this day, in their homeland. How a Soviet-led Peninsula would have unfolded is difficult to anticipate given the history of postwar communism and its demise in the 1990s.

The Scenario Left Undone: The Peace Option

Was there a peaceful way to end the Pacific War? This is hard to argue, as not many entertained it as an option. The Pacific War began in some minds violently – with a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor – and had to end violently as well. Yet, those arguing that the Japanese were ready to surrender suggest this possibility in their arguments.²⁵ We can imagine that Japan, and most likely Korea, would have had to endure postwar occupation jointly by the Allied forces: the U.S., Great Britain, China, and possibly the Soviet Union, if it had entered the Pacific War before Japan surrendered.²⁶ Of course, there are no guarantees that the Japanese would have chosen peace over continuing the war, but what could the U.S. have done before dropping the atomic bombs that might have encouraged them to do so? Here is a short list of possible actions that could have been taken:²⁷

1. Inform the Japanese that it had atomic bombs. This could have been made public by providing a still picture – there was no motion picture – of the Trinity atomic bomb test of July 16 and/or a mention of this in the Potsdam Declaration. Instead, simply inserting the words “utter destruction” was probably insufficient. More than 60 Japanese cities had already faced destruction of varying degrees, and the Japanese had not surrendered. Did they understand what was in store for them from these words?

2. Inform the Japanese that the Soviet Union was prepared to enter the war. From at least mid-1943, the Soviets had told the U.S. that they would enter the Asian war within three months

24. B. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: The Roaring....*, op. cit.

25. See: G. Alperovitz, *The Decision to....*, op. cit.

26. There were several scenarios that called for this in the last months of the war. See, for example: *Korea: Occupation and Military Government: Composition of Forces*, Foreign Relations United States 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, and the Far East, March 29, 1944, pp. 1226–1228.

27. The following were part of an ABC television news documentary hosted by Peter Jennings titled “Hiroshima: Why We Dropped the Bomb” in 1995 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the bomb's dropping.

after the conclusion of the European war when Germany surrendered. V-E Day was on May 11, and by their calculation, Soviet armies would go to war against Japan by August 11. They invaded Manchuria on August 9 in the evening. Their decision to go to war no doubt was hastened by a few days after the Hiroshima bombing on August 6.

3. Inform the Japanese more clearly as to what “unconditional surrender” meant. Did it mean the end of the Japanese nation? Would the people be enslaved? Recent books authored by Japanese writers have suggested that even earlier, with Japan’s defeat in Okinawa, the country could not sustain the battles, much less if it now had to war against the Soviets as well.²⁸

4. Inform the Japanese people as to the fate of their emperor. Would he be put on trial as a war criminal? Officials in the U.S. warned that the Japanese would continue fighting if this point was not clarified. Indeed, around August 10, after the Nagasaki bombing, the Japanese sought clarification on this point before they agreed to end the fighting. A vague statement by the U.S. as to the emperor’s fate being in the hands of the Japanese people was enough to convince the Japanese to lay down their weapons.

As mentioned above, there were no assurances that any or all of the above would have proven successful in ending the war. But they were never tried. If the stated aim of the atomic bombs was to save American lives, would ending the war without using them have accomplished that, as well as prevented hundreds of thousands of Japanese deaths and casualties? As history stands, the U.S. is the only country to actually use atomic weapons on a people. It violated one of the enduring principles of just war theory: separating combatants from non-combatants.²⁹ It also unleashed a domino-like sequence in which other states have acquired the weapon, and although constraining the Soviet Union for a short time from detonating a nuclear device, from 1949 the earlier U.S. use of the bomb ushered in a nuclear arms race that resulted in both sides having the capacity to destroy the world multiple times over.

Japan agreed to cease fighting in a publicly recorded radio broadcast by the emperor on August 15, the day they determined would still signify the end of the war. This, however, was not the end of the war for the Korean people or the Japanese presence on the Korean Peninsula. Even as the war raged, U.S. postwar planners considered whether Japan should control the Korean Peninsula after the

28. See: A. Kōketsu, *Nippon Kōfuku*, Nihon hyōronsha 2013.

29. In 1960 the Japanese held a secret court case that found the U.S. guilty of human rights violation by dropping the bomb. See: H. Yamagata, *Genbaku saiban: Americano taizai wo sabaita Mibuchi Yoshiko*, Mainichi Sonzu 2024.

30. Hugh Borton remembered his surprise upon learning the support, albeit by a minority within the committee, for Japan’s retention of the Peninsula even after its surrender. This opinion was not limited to committee members. This issue was apparently solved at Cairo when the three participating Allied leaders agreed that, upon defeat, Japan would forfeit its imperial possessions, including Korea. (See: H. Borton, *American Presurrender Planning for Postwar Japan*, Occasional Papers of The East Asian Institute, Columbia University 1967, pp. 5–6, 8). Yet, the idea of Japan retaining these territories did not die. As late as May 1945 former president Herbert Hoover suggested as much when he recommended to Secretary of War Henry Stimson that, since the Soviet Union will probably occupy the Korean Peninsula “might it be better that Japan retain Korea and Formosa?” See: *Letter from Herbert Hoover to Henry Louis Stimson*, Henry Lewis Stimson Papers, May 15, 1945, reel 112, New Haven, Yale University Library.

war.³⁰ On the evening of August 18, three days after the emperor's speech, the Japanese in Seoul held a party where they traded air force songs and drank beer together with U.S. military officials who had flown into Korea to check on Allied prisoners incarcerated there.³¹ From September 1, the Japanese in Seoul began to exchange radiograms with the American occupation army, still in Okinawa, where the commanding officer, John R. Hodge, instructed the Japanese to maintain order on the Peninsula until the Americans arrived one week later.³² Even after the Americans arrived, the Japanese penned over 350 memorandums to instruct the new occupiers on various aspects of the Peninsula.³³ General Douglas MacArthur, who headed both occupations from his headquarters in Tokyo, issued on September 2 his Proclamation No. 1 to the Korean people, in which he instructed that "all governmental, public and honorary functionaries and employees, as well as all officials and employees, paid or voluntary, of all public utilities and services, including public welfare and public health, and all other persons engaged in essential services, shall continue to perform their usual functions and duties..."³⁴ This initially included Japanese top officials but later was amended to exclude them. It did rehire Koreans who had served in the Japanese colonial police force. After the Korean War broke out, the U.S. considered the help they received from the Japanese as "instrumental" to their waging war on the Peninsula. These are just some of the ways the Japanese influenced primarily southern Korea's post Pacific War history.³⁵

The Korean War

If we believe arguments made by Bruce Cumings two and a half decades after the Japanese laid down their arms to end the fighting in 1945, this action not only ended antagonistic activity between the U.S. and Japan but ignited confusion between certain Korean leftist factions and U.S. occupation forces determined to squelch their resistance. It also pitted two allies, now turned antagonists – the Soviet Union and the U.S. on either side of the 38th parallel of the Korean Peninsula, against each other, differences that grew deeper even after they united to attempt to reunify the Peninsula in the Joint Commission. Their major point of disagreement, in addition to their ideological differences, was how to determine the Korean "democratic parties and organizations" with which to negotiate to eventually form a unified government in Korea.³⁶ Their failure stemmed from the disagreement over which parties and organizations to include. Their failure only deepened the separation between the two sides, and by 1949, the North and South had formed distinct and separate states. Thus, at the time of the June 1950 start of all-out fighting between the two, there were only a handful of advisers from either side remaining.

31. The U.S. party was supposed to leave on August 16, but reports of Japanese attacks on the Sea of Japan side of the islands forced them to postpone their travels. When they did arrive, they were told that the Japanese army their did not recognize their country's surrender as they had yet to receive word on that from Tokyo. See: M.E. Caprio, *Willis Bird, the OSS, and the Korean Provisional Government: U.S.-Korean Ties During the Pacific War*, "Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society", 2022, Vol. 96, pp. 94–118.

32. M.E. Caprio, *The Hodge-Kozuki Correspondence and Japan's Postwar Revival in "Liberated" Korea*, "Korean Studies", 2025, Vol. 49, pp. 334–363.

33. B. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and...*, op. cit., p. 140.

34. *Proclamation No. 1 by General of the Army Douglas MacArthur*, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v06/d776>, (access 08.04.2026).

35. Many studies have illustrated how the Japanese helped the U.S. side in the Korean War. They are summarized in: M.E. Caprio, *The Hidden Belligerent: Japan's Role in the Korean War*, "Korevedenie [Koreanology]", 2023, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 61–75.

36. This goal was laid out by Soviet, U.S., and British participants in the Moscow

Between 1945 and 1950, violence broke out in both halves between different factions, more of which could be seen in the south. From the onset of peasant rebellions came larger and greater incidents that involved the South Korean government attempting to rid an area of leftist activity. One of the largest took place on the southernmost island of Cheju beginning in April 1948. Families of the victims are still receiving monetary compensation from the South Korean government. Similar incidents took place in several locations in the south. When the two states were formed, border disputes erupted along the 38th parallel. A full-fledged war could very likely have broken out on these occasions, but it did not. This was perhaps because it was not until late 1949 that the Soviet Union agreed to supply North Korea with weapons, and the U.S. never agreed to arm South Korea. However, Bruce Cumings' chapter on these border wars concludes that it was South Korea who instigated these attacks along the border and gained the most from them. Was this in North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's mind as he sought Joseph Stalin's assistance in providing military hardware at this time?

The Korean Peninsula finally exploded in all-out war from late June 1950 as both sides amassed troops along the 38th parallel. But leftists and rightists, and then the left North and the right South, had been battling for five years prior to this time. It remains a question as to whether their activity constituted a bona fide war up to June 1950, as well as whether the skirmishes that have broken out over the decades that followed the ceasefire of July 1953 constitute a continuation of the Korean War. As we lack a clear objective definition of what war is, it is difficult to answer these questions. It is clear, though, that the Japanese decision to end the Pacific War did not bring peace to the region for the Korean people but prolonged the belligerency in Northeast Asia, as well as elsewhere, which contributed to the situation on the Korean Peninsula that we face today.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the origins of the Korean War can be found in decisions made at the end of the Pacific War in August 1945. Divisions can also be found forming during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), when the Japanese began to hunt down leftists on the Peninsula. Answers to this depend on when one considers the origins of the Pacific War to have ended, and when the Korean War began. I have argued here that wars begin before two belligerent sides begin to shoot at each other, when peaceful means to resolve differences are no longer available.

By this definition of war, the Korean War originated when the U.S. instructed two colonels to divide the Korean Peninsula into two zones, the U.S. assuming occupational control of the South

Conference of Foreign Ministers who met in December 1945 to resolve the Korean question as well as other World War II-related problems. I deal with the first year of this history in: M.E. Caprio, *Preparing to Fail: Growing North-South Divisions During the Period of Recess in the Joint Commission Meetings*, "European Journal of Korean Studies", 2023, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 23-50.

and the Soviet Union assuming control of the North, and when two Koreas were formed and reunification efforts proved unsuccessful. This decision was made after more than sixty Japanese cities had been subjected to aerial bombing and two atomic bombs had been dropped on Japanese cities (scenario 1). It notes that, without the atomic bombs, the Japanese archipelago would have faced a land war that was planned to commence on November 1, 1945. This would have led to Soviet armies crossing onto Japanese territory and perhaps resulted in Japan being divided and the Korean Peninsula united under Soviet rule (scenario 2). Yet, peaceful means to end the Pacific War, (scenario 3), were never tried. Here I outline a number of possible measures that may have been used. Of course, there is no guarantee that they would have proven successful, that they would have encouraged the Japanese to lay down their arms. We will never know. But if they had proven successful, the results would have saved hundreds of thousands of lives and perhaps resulted in a unified Korean Peninsula, a non-nuclear North Korea, and a more peaceful Northeast Asian region.

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