Introduction

Click the right arrow to learn about the Korean War.

Post World War II
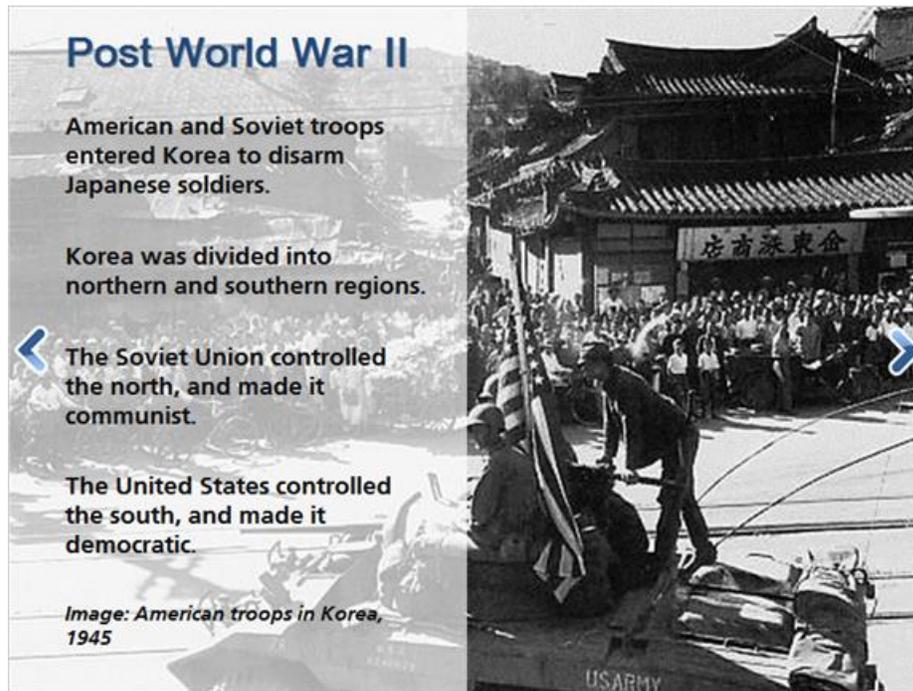
Post World War II

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Korea was divided into northern and southern regions.

The Soviet Union controlled the north, and made it communist.

The United States controlled the south, and made it democratic.

Image: American troops in Korea, 1945

At the end of World War II, American and Soviet troops entered Korea to disarm Japanese soldiers. The two countries divided Korea into northern and southern sections along the thirty-eighth parallel, in a similar fashion to how Germany had been divided into eastern and western regions. The Soviet Union controlled the north, and established a communist government. The United States controlled the south, and established a more democratic government.
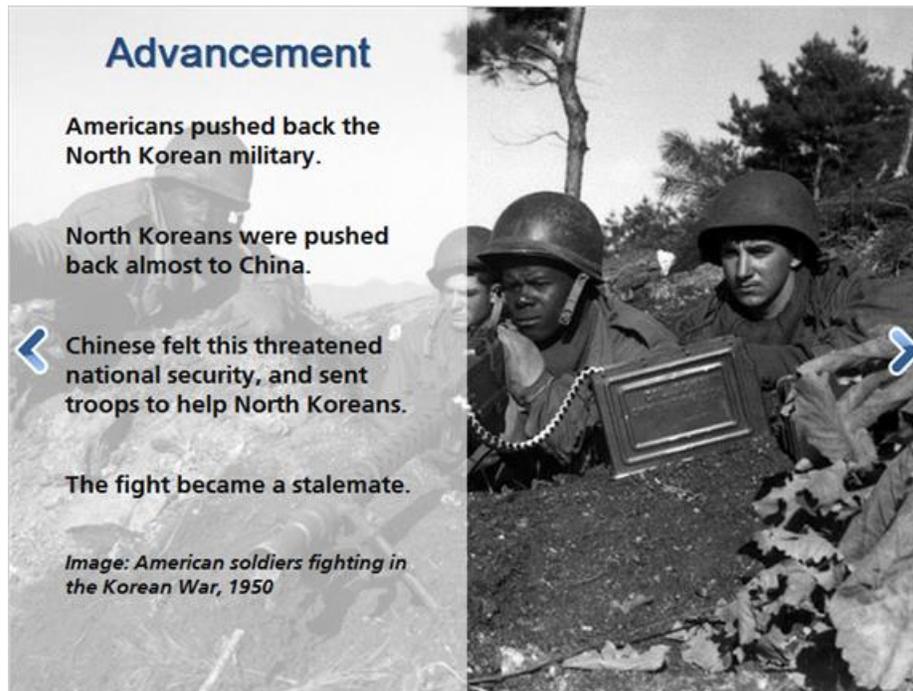
Regional Clashes

Image: General MacArthur in Korea, 1950

Both the United States and the Soviet Union claimed they were the only government for the entire Korean peninsula. This resulted in several clashes along the border of the two countries. On June 25, 1950, North Korean troops invaded South Korea. Since North Koreans were well equipped with military aid from the Soviet Union, they experienced some initial success. This invasion directly challenged President Truman's containment policy, so he ordered military troops under General Douglas MacArthur to leave their post in Japan and help defend South Korea. Truman also requested that the United Nations support these efforts.

Advancement

Image: American soldiers fighting in the Korean War, 1950

American troops arrived just in time to start pushing back the North Korean military. Before long, the U.S. had pushed the North Koreans back to the thirty-eighth parallel, and then continued pushing back into North Korea. Eventually, the United States and United Nations troops almost fully conquered the North Korean military, and crept further near the Chinese border. Communist China felt this threatened its national security, and responded by sending its own troops to help fight with the North Koreans. Americans were then pushed back to the thirty-eighth parallel, where fighting reached a stalemate.

Ending the War

Image: Hundreds of thousands of South Korean refugees fleeing south after North Korean troops invaded, mid-1950

After the Chinese entered the battle, the Korean War looked like it could become a global conflict. President Truman did not want the war to escalate further; he wanted to focus on containing communism. Truman's successor, President Dwight Eisenhower, ran a campaign on ending the Korean War. In November 1951, negotiations began to end the Korean War. By July 1953, the countries signed an armistice, and South Korea remained free from communist occupation.

Just over thirty-six thousand Americans died in the Korean War, and more than one million people died on all sides. The Korean War demonstrated that the United States was serious about containing communism, even in Asia.