



What Americans Need to Know about the Korean War

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If asked where North or South Korea are located, most Americans would not be able to point to either of them on a map — though, asking people about their favorite Korean pop (K-pop) star might be a different story. If asked how and why Korea was divided, and whether the United States played a role in the process, most Americans would likely respond with more blank stares. This is not to imply that Americans are unintelligent. Rather, my research on the enduring impact of the U.S. presence on the Korean Peninsula indicates that it is no accident that most Americans do not know this troubled history. For good reason, the Korean War is often dubbed the “Forgotten War.”

Unsurprisingly, the United States has avoided broadcasting its complicated history with the Koreans. Most superpowers tend to avoid rehashing stories about their relationships with colonies, satellites, and strategic allies — relationships often created in the first place by interventions justified by a complex mix of humanitarian, political, and self-interested economic rationales. The United States has the superpower privilege of silence and the ability to paper over wars it did not win, including the Korean War. To see this gap in historical knowledge, one need only open a standard U.S. history textbook and note how few lines are spent on U.S. involvement in Korea. But to promote a more peaceful world today, it is time for Americans to look back and attempt to understand the decisions that led to current violence, wars, and fragmentation — to really see Korea, not just where it is but where it came from.

The United States In Korea

The United States played an important role in the creation of the divided peninsula and the sixty-five-year conflict between North and South Korea, yet because of its privileged position as a superpower, its contributions receive little attention — even as the horror shows play out on television highlighting Kim Jong Un’s emaciated people and ballistic tests and President Trump’s refusal to lift sanctions. Despite story after story about North and South Korea, little reporting covers the U.S. (and Soviet) architecture that divided one Korea into two and prompted an actual war there during the global Cold War.

What did prompt the division of the Korean peninsula into two countries? The answer takes us back to World War II. When Japan surrendered after the United States dropped the world’s first atomic bombs (on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), the U.S. military occupied not just Japan, but also Japan’s occupied colony, Korea. During its occupation, the United States gained the reverent moniker, “liberator of Korea” and trusteeship possession of the southern peninsula. The United States allowed the then-Soviet Union to take control of the North.

As the end of World War II gave way to the lead up to the Cold War, the United States was fixated on southern Korea as venue for expanding capitalism and staving off Communist influences from the Soviet Union and, later, China. Given its historic victory over Japan and Nazi Germany, the United States also saw Korea as an important stronghold for extending its military dominance in Asia. As with many wartime accords, the United States and Soviet Union did not know much about the territory of the less powerful Korea. In their ignorance, the two powers hastily drew a line across the 38th parallel to demarcate what would soon become “North Korea — the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” from “South Korea — the Republic of Korea.” To this day, this scribble on a map remains the most militarized zone in the world and the source of much heart-rending pain for Korean families and friends who are separated by the hastily drawn line.

Both the Soviet Union and the United States knew that dividing the peninsula into a communist North and capitalist South could mean conflict and war. Neither would have had sustained such strong military presences in their respective territories had they not foreseen the possibility of conflict. Indeed, the next act in the Cold War occurred in 1950 when the Soviet-backed North Korean army poured across the 38th parallel in an attempt to overtake South Korea and turn it red. Soon after that, the United States intervened to bolster

South Korea, as did the Chinese to fight with the North. After three years of a bloody and frustrating war, the United States, Soviet Union, China, and North and South Korea signed an armistice to halt the fighting — but they never signed a formal treaty; to this day, the Korean War remains suspended, not formally concluded.

News Coverage, U.S. History Curricula, and Foreign Policy

Although most current news stories focus on the inscrutable, isolated regime of Kim Jong Un's North Korea and debate who deserves credit for the tentative 2018 peace accord between Kim Jong-un and South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, it is important to remind Americans that the United States co-created "North Korea-South Korea" in the first place. Along with other global powers, the United States has been centrally involved in maintaining the division by way of war and a large presence of tens of thousands of deployed U.S. soldiers.

A better understanding of history could raise the question of whether the United States, or the Soviet Union, or China, had to occupy the Korean peninsula at all. Did they have to go to war with regimes unlike their own? Asking these questions pulls back the curtain of U.S. history, if only slightly. The new peace accord between North and South Korea — and the ongoing debate about whether it has any teeth — might not have been needed if, for the last seventy-four years, the United States and other superpowers had left the Korean Peninsula alone.

To be sure, communism or capitalism might have still have spread and clashed in other ways, leading to Cold War tensions, if not violence. All nation-states practice inequality and foster injustice, not just the United States. And perhaps despots like Kim Jong Un and other authoritarians would still have come to power and sent Korean citizens running for bomb shelters.

But better prospects for peace still require that everyone involved in present conflicts imagine something better than what actually happened. World leaders need to care about peace not just for average citizens, but also for those who died (and might still die) fighting in wars on all sides. If peace is truly sought in the Koreas and beyond, then the curtain must be pulled back. Historians, researchers, and decision makers at all levels must make visible those in the past and present who have worked the levers of division and war. Such leaders must be refused the privilege of invisibility when the history gets ugly. Historical understandings can only guide us toward a better future if past actors are not allowed to hide their responsibility for promoting today's conflicts — for once, they must step out from behind the curtain.