

## **The Korean War - Civil War or International Conflict?**

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### **ABOUT THIS LESSON**

Why did the Korean War break out? What were the underlying causes of the brutal war just 5 years after the deadliest war in recent memory? From the American perspective, the Korean war was the first hot battle of the Cold War tension between the Communist Soviet Union and the Democratic United States. However, were Premier Stalin (leader of the USSR) or American President Truman were looking for open warfare again so soon after World War II? Could this war, instead have been a civil war between the Koreans themselves? Was this a civil war that overflowed into an international conflict that pulled in the major powers of the world: China, USSR, USA and the United Nations?

This lesson will examine the role of Korean politics in the origin of the Korean War versus the role of world powers. Students will analyze the causes of the war and the events that led up to the outbreak to determine if the war was originally a civil war or was it an extension of the Cold War tensions between the US and the USSR.

### **GRADE LEVEL**

6-8

### **CLASSROOM TIME**

2-4 60 Minute Class

### **RESOURCES**

Causes of the Korean War Historical Overview Reading- One per student  
Timeline of Events- One per student  
Major Players in the Korean War Chart- One per student  
Korean War as either a Civil War or International Conflict Chart- One per student

### **BACKGROUND**

This lesson focuses on the events and people which led to the Korean War 1950-1953. The students will examine multiple perspectives on the causes of the war.

### **OBJECTIVES**

Students will:  
Analyze the events, people and political groups behind the outbreak of the Korean War.  
Students will pick a point of view and collect evidence to support their theory.  
Students will defend their point of view to the class in a debate or roundtable discussion.

### **STANDARDS**

Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for Social Studies

SS.Hist1.a.m Use multiple perspectives to analyze and explain the causes of issues or events within and across time periods, events, or cultures.

## LESSON

### 1. Opening Activity

Students will watch an introductory video about the Korean War by the History Channel: The Korean War: 5 Things to Know | History

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1wFrXKanC0>

Students will write down one question they have about the war before we begin and share with the class.

### 2. Causes of the Korean War Historical Overview Reading

Students will read the article “Causes of the Korean War Historical Overview Reading” either alone or with a partner. As they read they need to fill in the charts: Major Players in the Korean War Chart and the Korean War as either a Civil War or International Conflict Chart. They will include evidence from the reading to support each side of the argument.

Next students will examine the Timeline of Events sheet. They will highlight events in different colors based on whether the event supports the hypothesis that the war was initially a civil war or the war was an international affair.

At this point, the teacher might want to bring the class together to generate some big ideas to support each side.

Students can also extend their research online with the websites at the top of their chart.

### 3. Pick a side- Debate

Students will now be divided into two groups. One group will take the position that the Korean War is a result of an internal crisis and was really a civil war. The other group will take the position that the Korean War was always an international event orchestrated by outside groups (USSR, China and USA).

Students will create a poster with their main points of support for their side.

Then students will engage in either a debate or a round table discussion about their point of view and the evidence they have to support their perspective.

## POST LESSON ACTIVITIES

### ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Students can write a POV essay with evidence from the text to support their ideas about the origin of the Korean War. Now that students have researched, collected evidence, and presented their point of view they will go back and re-evaluate their ideas. They will then write a 5 paragraph essay supporting their ideas. They do not have to pick the side they were required to debate. Students are free to choose either side for the final essay.

Another option is to have students create a One-Pager about the 2 sides of the war: Civil War and International Conflict. A One-Pager is a mini poster which emphasizes images, key vocabulary and key concepts from the period.

## ***Causes of the Korean War Historical Overview***

***Why did the Korean War break out? What were the underlying causes of the brutal war just 5 years after the deadliest war in recent memory? From the American perspective, the Korean war was the first hot battle of the Cold War tension between the Communist Soviet Union and the Democratic United States. However, were Premier Stalin (leader of the USSR) or American President Truman were looking for open warfare again so soon after World War II? Could this war, instead have been a civil war between the Koreans themselves? Was this a civil war that overflowed into an international conflict that pulled in the major powers of the world: China, USSR, USA and the United Nations?***

For over 500 years, the Korean peninsula and the Korean people were united under the reign of the Choson dynasty (1392-1910 CE). Korea during this time period followed Confucian and Buddhist traditions but was distinct in its language, history and culture from its neighbors China and Japan. In the late 1890s, Korea was one of the final countries in Asia to not have made trade treaties with America and Europe. By the early 1900s, the Japanese had started to gain control of regions outside of Japan after a series of wars with China (1894-1895) and Russia (1905) ended in victory for the Japanese. In 1910, Japan annexed the Korean peninsula as a colony of Japan thus ending hundreds of years of Korean self-rule.

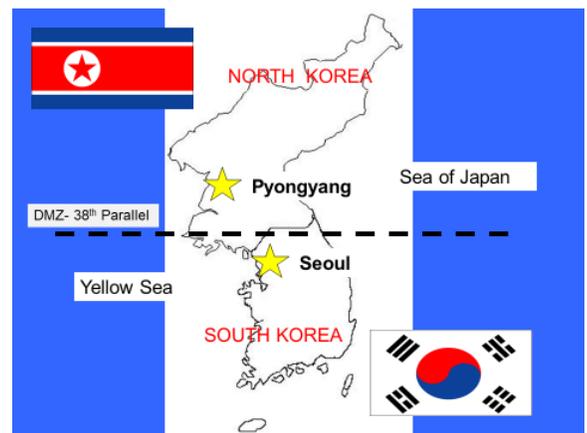
Japanese rule over Korea lasted from 1910 to 1945. During this time Japan enacted many harsh regulations against the Korean people including the prohibition of the Korean language in school and the forced conversion of Korean people last names to Japanese last names. When the Japanese gained control of Korea many Koreans fled to other countries just beyond Japan's reach such as Manchuria. One such family was that of Kim Il Sung. While in exile many of these families were influenced by the Soviet and Chinese Communist party ideas. Many of them saw communism as a way to achieve independence especially with training and support of the Soviet Union. Kim grew up and joined the communist movement. He was later trained under the Soviet military to lead his own troops in World War II against Japan.

Inside Korea, there were also nationalism and independence movements against Japanese rule. Syngman Rhee, the future President of South Korea, was an early activist for Korean independence. Rhee had joined reform and anti-Japanese movements in the 1890s while still under Choson rule. In 1905, after serving time in prison for his role in these movements, Rhee fled to Hawaii and then the United States. He

was well received in the US because he was a Christian, spoke English and was educated at Harvard and Princeton. Despite his credentials he unsuccessfully lobbied for Korean independence from Japan after World War I and but continued to work within the United States on the Korean independence movement until 1945.

Back on the Korean Peninsula, on March 1st, 1919 a million Koreans mourning the death of their former King, marched in the streets demanding independence from Japan. The Japanese responded to this peaceful protest with violence, murder, and mass arrests. This event became known as the March First Movement. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria and began clamping down on Communist Korean groups in the region. The communists in Manchuria then created the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army to fight the Japanese. Kim Il-Sung emerged as a leader in the guerrilla movement.

In 1937, the Second Sino-Japanese War began, and the Korean people were forced to fight in defense of the Japanese against China. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, America joined World War II against Japan. As the war went on, conditions in Korea worsened as Japan used the Korean people to help win the war. In November 1943, at the Cairo Conference, China, Britain and the United States came to the agreement that "in due course Korea shall become free and independent". This gave Korean hope that when the war ended, they would be granted independence. World War II ended in 1945 and Japanese control of Korea was



finally over. When the war ended President Truman of the USA and Joseph Stalin leader of the Soviet Union (USSR) raced to seize the Korean peninsula for post-war reconstruction. Both countries wanted to reshape Korea in their own image. The Soviets were closing in on Korea when the Americans offered a temporary two state solution for the post-war period which divided Korea for the first time in hundreds of years at the 38th parallel. This temporary division soon became permanent.

In Korea, the people themselves were not happy about the division. They wanted a united Korea however there was not a consensus on how to unite Korea. Two major political models of thought started to emerge. On one hand there was support for the communist model being proposed by Kim Il-Sung and backed by the Soviets. Many liked the ideas presented by the communist model because they began with a redistribution of land from the former elites to the peasant farmers. On the other hand, there was the American backed Syngman Rhee. Rhee had returned to Seoul after years of living in the United States to head a new Korean Nationalist government.

Both Kim and Rhee used oppressive and violent measures to gain control in Korea. They often killed people who spoke out against their new power. In February of 1946 the Representative Democratic Council was established in the Korean capital of Seoul and was headed by Syngman Rhee. Around the same time the Interim People's Committee was established in North Korea and led by Kim Il Sung. Both the North and South began to consolidate their power with the eventual goal of reunifying the peninsula under their rule.

While Rhee was backed by the Americans as a symbol of anti-communist government, he really showed strong dictator-like tendencies and relied heavily on Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese during occupation. He utilized these people despite the fact that Koreans hated Japanese occupation because the collaborators had already established power in the country. Rhee needed contacts now that he was back in Korea for the first time in decades. Rhee was elected president of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in July 1948 by members of the National Assembly. South Korea however was deeply divided by boycotts, violence and terrorist attacks from anti-Rhee communist forces. The 1948 elections were supposed to be held in both the North and South, but Kim Il-Sung refused to allow UN supervisors entry into North Korea.

Between 1949-1950 guerrilla war style armed violence broke out along the border. Rhee built up his ROK army forces to defend the border and to maintain control within South Korea. Kim responded with forces of his own. The Korean People's Army (KPA) was swelling to about 200,000 soldiers by 1950. Kim pressured both Soviet Premier Stalin and the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (Mao) to support an invasion of South Korea to unify the peninsula under communist rule. By July 1950 Kim Il-Sung was building up an army on the 38th parallel and preparing to invade. At this point he had received the blessing to proceed for the invasion from Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin. On July 25th, the KPA invaded the South. President Truman sent forces to South Korea to aid Rhee and the ROK Army. This surprised Stalin and his communist supporters because they were led to believe that the US was no longer very interested in Korea after a speech given by the American Secretary of State Dean Acheson. The speech seemed to downplay Korea's significance in the region. America however was afraid that Soviet communism would spread throughout Asia. The Soviets were already controlling half of Europe and China had become a Communist nation too. The US did not want to lose their foothold on the continent to Communist forces.

<http://peacehistory-usfp.org/korean-war/>

[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main\\_pop/kpct/kp\\_koreaimperialism.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_koreaimperialism.htm)

Lee, Steven Hugh. *The Korean War*. Longman, 2001.

Millett, Allan Reed. *Their War for Korea: American, Asian, and European Combatants and Civilians, 1945-1953*. Brassey's, 2002.

# LEADERS



The leader and Prime Minister of North Korea was Kim Il-sung.



The United States Army and United Nations forces were lead by General Douglas MacArthur.



The President of South Korea was Syngman Rhee.



Dwight D. Eisenhower was president by the end of the war.

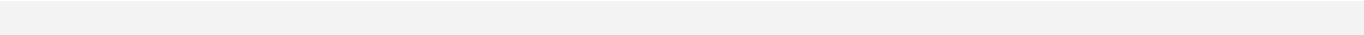


Mao Zedong  
Chairman of the Communist Party of China



Joseph Stalin  
Premier of the Soviet Union  
Leader of the Communist Party of the USSR

The US President at the start of the war was Harry Truman.



**THE RED MENACE  
IS REAL!**



Anti-communist propaganda was directed at both external and internal "threats"

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Highlight/Underline events that support the idea that the Korean War was initially a Civil War in yellow. Highlight/underline events that support the idea that the Korean War was initially an international conflict in blue. Highlight/underline events that fit with both narratives in red.

### **Timeline of Events:**

**1392-** Choson Dynasty Begins.

**1875-** Syngman Rhee is born.

**1876-** Korea's signs its first modern treaty with Japan setting up unequal trade agreements.

**1879-** Joseph Stalin is born.

**1884-** Harry Truman is born.

**1894-95-** 1st Sino-Japanese war between China and Japan ends with a victory for Japan.

**1896-98-** The Korean Independence Club is formed and works to modernize Korea politics.

**1902-** Anglo-Japanese Alliance formed between Japan and the USA.

**1905-** Russo-Japan War between Russia and Japan ends with a victor for Japan.

**1910-** Korea becomes a Japanese colonial after America refuses to intervene. The Choson dynasty ends.

**1912-** Kim Il Sung is born.

**1914-1918-** World War I

**1919-** March First Movement sparks national protests in Korea against Japanese rule.

**1920s-** Kim Il-Sung family flees Japanese rule in Korea. They move to Manchuria.

**1929-1930-** Kim Il-Sung jailed for communist activity in Manchuria.

**1931-** Japan invades Manchuria and sparks a push in Japan for regional dominance of Asia.

**1931-** Kim Il-Sung joins the Communist Party of China

**1937-1945-** Second Sino-Japanese War (Eventually is incorporated into the larger conflicts of World War II)

**1940s-** Kim Il-Sung is trained by the Soviet Red Army and fights for them in WWII.

**1941-** Pearl Harbor-US enters the war in the Pacific.

**1943-** Cairo Declaration- Korea to receive independence "in due course"

## 1945-

*August-* WWII ends Soviets and Americans divide Korea at the 38th parallel for a “temporary” period of post-war rebuilding

*September-* Korean People’s Republic created

## 1946-

*February-* Representative Democratic Council established in Korean capital of Seoul is headed by Syngman Rhee while Interim People’s Committee is established in North Korea and led by Kim Il Sung.

*July-* North Korean Workers’ Party established

## 1948-

*February-* North Korean People’s Army (KPA) created

*May-* South Koreans elect Syngman Rhee as President.

*September-* Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) established in North Korea.

*October-* Yosu Rebellion (anti-government feelings towards Syngman Rhee’s regime)

## 1949-

*March-* Kim Il-Sung goes to Soviet capital and meets Premier Stalin.

*October-* People’s Republic of China established.

## 1950-

*12 January-* American Secretary of State Dean Acheson gives speech at Press Club down playing Korea’s significance in the region.

*April-* Kim Il-Sung gets Soviet approval to move forward with recapturing South Korea

*12 April-* President Truman receives draft of NSC 68 encouraging the US to contain the Soviet threat by increasing weapon development.

*May-* Kim Il- Sung gets support of Communist China and their leader Mao.

*25 June-* North Korea invaded South Korea in a surprise attack.

*30 June-* President Truman orders US troops stationed in Japan to report to South Korea.

*30 September-* ROK (South Korean) troops invade the North by crossing the 38th parallel.

*7 October-* US troops invade the North by crossing the 38th parallel.

*26 November-* Chinese troops engage in battle in defense of North Korea.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kim-Il-Sung>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim\\_Il-sung](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Il-sung)

Lee, Steven Hugh. *The Korean War*. Longman, 2001.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Major Players in the Korean War Chart

Who were the major players on each side of the conflict? List the countries and individuals who supported each group. Include any relevant information such as when they joined the conflict and why.

**Republic of Korea (South Korea)**

**Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

In the boxes below, write evidence to support the origin of the Korean War as either a Civil War or International Conflict. Begin with the text provided. When you are finished you may also go to the following websites to help you find more information.

[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main\\_pop/kpct/kp\\_koreaimperialism.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_koreaimperialism.htm)

<http://peacehistory-usfp.org/korean-war/>

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Korean-War>

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bomb-korean-war/>

Evidence to Support a Civil War origin	Evidence to Support an International Conflict origin