

The Korean War: Summary

By Craig Lockard, with permission from the author to add comments and changes by Grace Chee:

According to Jerry Bentley, the Korean war was the globalization of the cold war. In 1950, North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea, but they were then pushed back north by the United States and South Korea (with United Nations support). The intervention of China in support of North Korea pushed the forces south and produced a military stalemate, preserving the border between North and South Korea at the 38th parallel.

Korean Independence and War

The Korean War (1950–1953) was rooted in Korean nationalism, which simmered, despite fierce repression, during a half century of harsh Japanese colonial rule (from 1910 until the end of World War II). While introducing some economic modernization, Japan arrested or executed Korean nationalists, conscripted Korean women to serve Japanese soldiers, relocated thousands of Korean workers to Japan, and manipulated divisions within Korean society. Christians constituted one influential group that grew in numbers; by the 1940s a fifth of Koreans were Catholics or Protestants. Another group gravitated toward communism, some escaping to the USSR to form a revolutionary movement. Most Koreans followed Buddhism and Confucianism. Although Christians, communists, and traditionalists all hated Japanese rule and worked underground to oppose it, they could not cooperate with each other, and no unified nationalist movement emerged.

Japan's crushing defeat in 1945 meant Korea's political liberation and a chance to reclaim independence, free of foreign interference. But the United States quickly occupied the peninsula's southern half and the Soviet Union the north, bisecting Korea and making it a Cold War hostage. As the USSR and United States imposed rival governments, unification quickly became impossible. With Soviet help, communists led by the Kim Il-Sung (KIM ill-sung) (1912–1994) established North Korea. A clever strategist, Kim built a brutal communist system, eliminated his opponents, and reorganized rural society. But the impatient Kim disastrously overestimated the south's revolutionary potential and misjudged Americans' determination to stop spreading Soviet influence. The United States helped create and then supported a South Korean state headed by Rhee Syngman (REE SING-man)(1865–1965). An autocratic, politically conservative Christian from a powerful landlord family, Rhee had lived in exile in the United States for over two decades. Unpopular with the non-Christian majority, Rhee imprisoned or eliminated his opponents, sparking a leftist rebellion supported by many factory workers and peasants that American troops helped crush. Although less repressive than North Korea, Rhee's military dictatorship held some thirty thousand political prisoners.

The Korean War was created from the mixing of revolution and nationalism into a Cold War–driven stew. Historians still debate the origins of this conflict, which helped shape East Asian politics for over half a century. Both states, threatening to reunify Korea with military force, initiated border skirmishes. In this highly charged context, North Korea, with Soviet and Chinese approval, invaded the South in 1950. The Western-dominated United Nations authorized a U.S.-led military intervention to support South Korea, turning the Korean crisis into a Cold War confrontation in which Americans committed the most troops, war materials, and funding. U.S. president Harry Truman secretly planned to strike North Korea with atomic weapons if the USSR entered the war. But while the Soviets gave military supplies and advice, they sent no combat troops.

United Nations troops, aided by U.S. air power, quickly pushed the North Koreans back across the north-south border. But the United Nations move into North Korea and push toward China's border sparked a massive Chinese intervention that drove back United Nations troops and turned a likely

victory into bitter stalemate. U.S. leaders had underestimated the Chinese people's willingness to fight and their military capabilities. When the war ended in 1953 with peace talks, the north-south boundary, remaining roughly where it was before the war, was now a heavily fortified zone. The war killed 400,000 Korean troops and 1 to 2 million civilians, some 400,000 Chinese, and 43,000 United Nations forces, 90 percent of them American, while generating millions of refugees who wandered the countryside, seeking food and shelter. Both Koreas were left in economic shambles.

The Two Koreas

South Korea's postwar rise was nearly as dramatic as Japan's. Closely allied to the United States, South Korean governments ranged from highly repressive military dictatorships from the 1950s through 1987, to moderate semidemocracies in the later 1980s, and then to liberal democracies with free elections since the early 1990s. All regimes aimed at economic development. The dictator Park Chung Hee (1917–1979) argued in 1970, “My chief concern was economic revolution. One must eat and breathe before concerning himself with politics, social affairs, and culture.” Prohibited from forming unions, many South Koreans experienced brutal working conditions, especially miners and teenage girls recruited into factory work. Americans protected South Korean military dictatorships, permanently stationing troops and supplying generous economic and military aid. Six decades after the war, some forty thousand U.S. troops remained in South Korea.

South Korea enjoyed enormous economic growth, investing in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Russia while exporting automobiles and electronic products. By the 1990s South Korea had become the first non-Western nation since Japan to join the ranks of advanced industrial nations, and it later became a member of the G-20 grouping of industrial powers and a high-technology model. Having acquired living standards they could only dream of two decades earlier, with nearly universal literacy, South Koreans now enjoy the world's highest rate of high-speed internet access: some 75 percent of households are wired, far more than in North America and Europe. Both boys and girls receive free education through age twelve; the adult literacy rate is 98 percent. South Korean women have benefited from new job options in the professions and business. With more women in the work force and self-supporting, marriage rates declined and average births per woman fell dramatically, from 6 in 1990 to 1.6 in 2005, worrying leaders. In response in 2010 some national and local governments began sponsoring dating parties to promote courtship.

Economic growth also fostered political change. Democracy movements, begun in the 1960s, often faced government repression. One dissident wrote that “bullets, nightsticks, and fists are not the only forms of violence. A nation with no expression of dissent is a nation in ruins.” In 1980 the dictatorship brutally crushed an uprising in a southern province. When some five hundred demonstrators demanded an end to martial law, paratroopers slaughtered the protesters and local people. Hundreds of thousands of enraged citizens drove the troops out of the city, only to face a much larger force that killed over two thousand people. Eventually, political tensions diminished. Governments fostered more liberalization, tolerated a freer press, and made overtures toward former Soviet and Chinese enemies. By the early 1990s, as the middle class and organized labor grew, democracy flowered, though sometimes it was sullied by political corruption. South Koreans are proud of their freedom, their bustling cities, and their popular culture's influence in both China and Japan.

But while the country and its 50 million people (one-quarter of them Christians) have clearly outshined repressive North Korea, problems have arisen. Many rural people and unskilled workers did not share in the prosperity, while factories expected long hours from poorly paid workers. Frustrated at their prospects, thousands, many of them middle class, emigrated, especially to the United States. The economic slowdown beginning in 1997, and then the 2008–2009 global economic crisis, which cost

many jobs, also spurred discontent. By 2011 business had largely rebounded, although it was a largely jobless recovery. Another problem is that while many South Koreans have welcomed U.S. bases, others consider them an affront to nationalism. Koreans yearn for reunification and an end to the peninsular cold war. After years of hostility, and owing partly to South Korean efforts to improve relations, North and South Korea finally achieved a wary peaceful coexistence. A dialogue known as the “sunshine policy,” begun in 1998, fostered limited cross-border trade and some South Korean visits to family members in North Korea not seen since the early 1950s. Televised images of South Koreans tearfully embracing aging parents or siblings mesmerized the nation. Then in 2000 South Korean president Kim Dae-jung (1925–2009), a liberal reformer and former dissident, visited North Korea, an event unthinkable a decade earlier. Yet national reconciliation still remains a dream; South Koreans worry about North Korea's military capabilities and its quest to build nuclear weapons. Tensions increased after 2009, with a more conservative South Korean president skeptical of negotiations over these issues.

North Korea's leaders chose a completely different path from South Korea. The Korean War devastated the country, though North Korea quickly recovered with Soviet and Chinese aid. From 1948 until his death in 1994, Kim Il-Sung created a personality cult around himself as the “Great Leader.” North Koreans were taught that they owed everything—jobs, goods, schooling, food, military security—to Kim. To ensure loyalty and deflect blame for failures, Kim purged many communist officials and jailed or executed thousands of dissidents. Kim mixed Stalinist economic planning and central direction, emphasizing heavy industry and weapons, with Maoist self-reliance. Hence, North Koreans did not enjoy the rising living standards of South Koreans, who live about ten years longer. Although North Korea contained most of Korea's factories and mines, built during Japanese colonial times, the huge military establishment drained resources to deter enemies and intimidate South Korea.

Like nineteenth-century Korea's Confucian kings, North Korea stressed group loyalty, ultranationalism, and independence from foreign influence. A small political and military elite, isolated from peasants' and workers' bleak lives, enjoyed comfortable apartments and sufficient food, controlling people through regimentation and restriction of information. To monitor activities and thoughts, the government required everyone to register at a public security office and urged people to spy on their families and neighbors. To prevent contrary views, radios received only the government station. Political prisoners and people caught fleeing to China or South Korea faced long terms in harsh concentration camps or execution. The economy declined rapidly, thanks to poor management, commodity shortages, and rigid policies. Satellite photos of the Korean peninsula at night revealed the stark differences in electrical power between brilliantly lit South Korea and completely dark North Korea. Even the capital city's lights were mostly turned off by 9 P.M. U.S. diplomatic and economic pressure isolated the regime, making North Korea totally reliant economically on the Soviet bloc; when it collapsed in 1989, Russia and China then demanded that North Korea pay cash for oil and other imports.

North Korea's problems increased after Kim Jong-Il (chong-ill) (b. 1942), known as the “Dear Leader,” succeeded his deceased father in 1995. When the nation faced mass starvation, South Korea, Japan, and the United States, anxious to discourage desperate military action, sent food aid. Many people still died or were malnourished, and thousands fled to China seeking food and work. Yet the regime avoided collapse, even after inexperienced Kim Jong-Un, a virtual unknown thought to be around twenty-five years old, became leader after his father's death in 2011, continuing the family dynasty. Thanks to isolation and tight information control, few North Koreans traveled abroad, studied foreign languages, met foreigners, or encountered foreign publications, films, and music. Meanwhile, a small dissident movement, risking harsh reprisals, smuggled in food from China and videotapes, books, and music from South Korea. Estimates of political prisoners, held in brutal conditions, range from 80,000-200,000.

North Korea worried both regional and world leaders, with its military force twice as large as South Korea's and capable of building nuclear weapons. But with both Koreas possessing lethal military forces, South Korea boasting twice the population, and U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea, all-out war became less likely, encouraging the search for common ground. Economic disasters, especially food shortages, sometimes softened North Korea's position; after 1998 South Korea actively sought better relations to reduce the threat from its dangerous northern neighbor and its unpredictable leaders. Indeed, isolated by its bellicose policies, North Korea relies mostly on trade with China and South Korea. North Korea's neighbors and the United States sought diplomatic ways to eliminate the possibility of a conventional war or a nuclear confrontation, but by 2008 tensions returned; often disapproving the regime's unpredictable behavior and bellicose rhetoric but fearing North Korean collapse, China remains the only major ally. North Korea has continued testing nuclear weapons and missiles, unsettling the region.

SOURCE: Craig A. Lockard, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), Chapter 27.