

LESSON 7

South Koreans in the Vietnam War

Between 1964 and 1972, more than 50,000 South Koreans fought in the Vietnam War, aiding South Vietnam and the U.S. against communist guerrillas and North Vietnam.

Why did South Koreans fight in Vietnam? What were the effects of South Korea's presence in Vietnam?

LINKAGE WITH CURRICULUM

- *World History
- *History
- *Vietnam War

Purpose of Lesson and Overview

Through out this lesson, students will be able to:

- identify why various countries supported the U.S. policy in Vietnam;
- explain President Lyndon Johnson's "many flags" policy;
- assess South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War from the points of view of key participants.

This lesson is best conducted in the context of the study of the Vietnam War.

MATERIALS

- *Textbook
- *Section on Vietnam
- *Handout Accompanying
This Lesson

Content Focus

The United States was already involved in supporting South Vietnam against communist North Vietnam when Lyndon B. Johnson became president in 1964. The French, who had colonized Vietnam in the 1800's, had been defeated and forced out of Vietnam. The negotiations surrounding their departure left Vietnam divided into communist North Vietnam and non communist South Vietnam. Like Korea, the two Vietnams were supposed to be reunited after elections. Like Korea, they remained divided with the Soviet Union backing the communist north and the U.S. backing the noncommunist south.

As the U.S. became more militarily involved in the fighting in Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson wanted to form a coalition of countries to support South Vietnam as the United Nations had done in the Korean War. Johnson gained support from Australia and New Zealand, who were concerned about the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Under this "many flags" policy, Johnson put pressure on other nations the U.S. had aided in the past to support it in Vietnam. The U.S. had liberated the Philippines from Japan in World War II, had sent aid to protect Thailand from neighboring communist North Vietnam and had led U.N. forces in South Korea. None of these countries, however, were economically well-developed. Each offered support U.S. policies in Vietnam in exchange for U.S. economic aid.

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The Lesson: Why did the South Koreans Fight?

OPENING

Note: Students should have prior knowledge of the Vietnam War before undertaking this lesson.

CONDUCTING THE INVESTIGATION

1. Using a world map, have students locate Korea and Vietnam. Ask: “Why in the mid-1960’s, still recovering from the Korean War, would South Koreans travel over 2,000 miles to fight in the Vietnam War? Where can we find data to answer this question?” Have students identify sources for investigation, such as their textbooks, Internet, library sources and attached handouts.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

2. Have students conduct research to answer the questions below. You may wish to have students working individually or in teams select questions to investigate. The questions can serve as the framework for a class discussion after students have completed their research.

a) Why did South Koreans participate in the Vietnam War?

b) Some historians have accused the U.S. of buying South Korean troops as the British bought Hessians during the American Revolution. What is your opinion? Be sure to cite data to support your perspective.

c) Before the U.S. entered World War II, it benefited economically from orders for weapons and other goods from the warring European countries. During the Korean War, Japan benefited economically by supplying materials to UN forces. What economic effects might the Vietnam War have had on the South Korean economy?

d) How might the DMZ in Korea have become a “hot spot” as wars were fought elsewhere in Asia?

e) In the 1960’s, the South Korean leader, President Park, said that sending troops to aid the U.S. would repay a “debt of honor.” What did he mean by that?

ASSESSMENT EXTENSION

3. Ask students: “How has your knowledge of Korea and Vietnam changed after conducting the investigation? If you were the author of a new world history textbook, what would the section on the Vietnam War include? Outline this section and write as many paragraphs as possible. To extend the idea that history appears differently to different people and that there can be more than one interpretation of the same event, you may wish to read and compare novels of the Vietnam War written by American writers to those written by South Korean authors. For example, compare James Webb’s *Fields of Fire* to Ahn Junghyo’s *White Badge*.”

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Handout I

Allied Troops in The Vietnam War

	KOREA	THAILAND	AUSTRALIA	PHILIPPINES	NEW ZEALAND
1964	150*	-	200	17	30
1965	20,620	16	1,557	72	119
1966	44,566	244	4,525	2,061	155
1967	47,829	2,205	6,818	2,020	534
1968	50,003	6,005	7,661	1,576	516
1969	48,869	11,568	7,672	189	552
1970	48,537	11,586	6,763	77	441
1971	45,700	6,000	2,000	50	100
1972	36,790	40	130	50	50

(Source: Robert M. Blackburn. *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags"*. Jefferson : McFarland & Co., 1994: 158)

* Total number of military personnel in Vietnam during each year.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. How did South Korea's military contribution compare to that of other countries?
2. Which years saw the largest number of South Korean forces in Vietnam? What happened in Vietnam during those years? How did South Korea's involvement in Vietnam over time compare to that of other allies?
3. Of the allied countries, the figures for those killed in action are:
 - Republic of Korea (South Korea) 4,407
 - Australia and New Zealand 475
 - Thailand 350
 - Philippines 9

What do these figures suggest about the amount of fighting seen by South Korean troops in Vietnam?

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Handout 2

U.S. Aid to South Korea During the Vietnam War

In the list below, U.S. Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown details the aid package the U.S. offered South Korea in March 1966 for its support in the Vietnam War:

1. Provide for the complete equipping of three South Korean army divisions and expedite the modernization of seventeen other army divisions and one marine division.
2. Provide all equipment and financing for the additional forces to be deployed by the government of the Republic of Korea to the Republic of Vietnam.
3. Equip and provide the training and financing for a total replacement of comparable units in South Korea organized to take the place of the additional forces deployed in South Vietnam.
4. Contribute to filling all the requirements determined to be necessary for the improvement of Korean anti-infiltration capability.
5. Provide the necessary equipment to expand the South Korean production capabilities for increased ammunition production within Korean national boundaries.
6. Provide communications facilities in South Vietnam for the exclusive use of the Koreans which would be capable of maintaining communication between the Korean government and its forces in South Vietnam.
7. Provide the Republic of Korea all of the net additional costs incurred for the deployment of additional Korean forces in South Vietnam as well as for the mobilization and maintenance in Korea of one reserve army division, one brigade and their support units.
8. Suspend the Mutual Assistance Program for as long as there were substantial Korean forces in Vietnam; and also, procure in Korea, for the use of Korean forces, the items of supplies so suspended in 1966 and 1967.
9. Procure supplies, services and equipment to Korea insofar as practicable and also direct selected types of procurement for United States and Republic of Vietnam forces in South Korea in cases in which South Korea has the production capability.
10. Procure in Korea as much as Korea can provide in time and at a reasonable price any goods purchased by AID (Agency for International Development) for use in its projects for rural construction, logistics, pacification, relief and so forth, in the Republic of Vietnam.
11. Provide, to the extent permitted by the Republic of Vietnam, expanded opportunities for Korean contractors to participate in the various construction projects undertaken by the United States government or by the

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United States contractors in the Republic of Vietnam and other services, including employment of skilled Korean civilians in the Republic of Vietnam.

12. Expand American technical assistance to the Republic of Korea in the general field of export promotion.
13. Provide, in addition to the \$150 million AID loans already committed, additional AID loans as needed to support the economic development of the Republic of Korea.
14. Provide Korea with \$15 million worth of program loans in 1966 to be used for the support of Korean exports to Vietnam and other development needs.

(Source: Robert M. Blackburn. *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags."* Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 1994: 56-57)

POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. What military troop expenses did the U.S. offer to cover in Vietnam? In Korea?
2. Which of the measures in Brown's list would benefit the South Korean industry?
3. Which measures would increase employment of Korean civilians?
4. Which measures might aid to South Korea more generally? How?
5. Some historians view this list as a generous aid package to an ally that was putting its soldier's lives at risk. Others have seen it as a form of bribery to get "hired guns" from South Korea. Based on your research about South Korea's role in the Vietnam War, how would you view Brown's letter and U.S. aid to Korea?

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Handout 3

From Vietnam to the DMZ

As South Koreans headed to Vietnam, there were fears in South Korea that tensions would rise along the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) near the 38th parallel in Korea. The Korean War had ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty. If South Korea sent two of its best divisions, the Tiger and the White Horse, to Vietnam, North Korea might decide to launch an attack on South Korea. From 1953 to October 1966, trouble had continued with casualties on both sides of the DMZ.

As the war in Vietnam escalated, clashes along Korea's DMZ increased. In 1966, 300 hostile acts occurred in which 15 soldiers were killed and 65 were wounded. During the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam, North Korea launched other attacks. Just as the American Embassy had been attacked in Saigon, communist North Koreans attacked the American Embassy and the Blue House (the ROK President's residence) in Seoul. The USS *Pueblo* was seized and communists staged other raids throughout South Korea. In April 1969, North Korea shot down a U.S. aircraft, killing its 31-man crew. After 1969, the attacks diminished. The *Pueblo* crew, which was held captive for a time, was eventually released.

(Source: Vandon E. Jenerette. *The Forgotten DMZ*," *Military Review*. Vol. LXVIII: May 1988, 35: 32-43.)

POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. Why might the communist leader of North Korea Kim Il-sung, order attacks on South Korea during the Tet offensive in Vietnam?
2. Why might some South Koreans have felt that their troops recalled to Korea?
3. The United States extended the tours of duty of its troops in the DMZ and reinforced some units. Some American soldiers who expected to go to Vietnam instead were sent to South Korea. Do you think South Korea was in great danger at this time? Why?

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Handout 4

Koreans in Vietnam War Literature

After the Vietnam war, some South Koreans who served there found that they, like American veterans, were overlooked for their service to their country. They began to write of their experiences, even though the government at the time discouraged criticism of its Vietnam policy. Ahn Junghyo, a Vietnam veteran and author of the novel White Badge, has been highly praised. In the excerpt below, the main character describes his last battle before going home:

From WHITE BADGE :

Finally, the combat was completely over. I was slowly consumed with an insurmountable grief over the soldiers who had been taken away by death in the past month. I was angry about the panic and fear we had to suffer, while being stalked and I grieved over Sergeant Han Taesam's death. Burying the soldiers who had died in this last angry battle, I thought about the endless days we had spent to roam this mountain.

When we finished burying them, the platoon leader gathered us by the stream for a roll call. I did not think the roll call was necessary, for he could see at one glance who were the final survivors. There were only seven of us, including the lieutenant. Besides, we had to leave there as soon as possible because at least five Vietcong had escaped and the reinforced enemy might be on their way to pursue us, at this very moment. It had taken almost two hours to bury all the dead and we were running short of time to safely get out of this gorge before the enemy returned, but the platoon leader wanted to have the roll call anyway. Then I realized why he insisted on it. He wanted to call the names of all the soldiers, one by one, for the last time, to remember everyone who had been in this green hell with him.

The lieutenant began to call the names. And he began to cry. The soldiers cried with him.

(Source: Ahn Junghyo. White Badge. New York: Soho Press, 1989: p. 272-73)

POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. In the passage from Ahn's book, why does the lieutenant call the roll even though militarily his command should be moving out?
2. Both American and Korean veterans of Vietnam faced terrible experiences in the war. In what ways do you think their experiences might have been similar or different? (For example, which might be more familiar communist governments, more concerned about pay, or more accustomed to the command system?)
3. Review South Korea's political history from the 1960's to the 1980's. Why were U.S. veteran accounts published soon after the Vietnam War, whereas Korean accounts of their experiences have only been published since the 1980's?

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Handout 5

Interview with a Korean Veteran of the Vietnam War

The following are excerpts from an interview with Lee Chung-sop, a Korean veteran of the Vietnam War. The interview, held in Andong, Korea, in February 1996 reflects one person's view of the war.

The first thing I want to say about the Vietnam War is that I was proud to be in it. Although my parents were very Confucian and didn't want me to be a soldier in combat, I wanted to go for many reasons. One of the major reasons I went is to fight the communists. I had a clear sense that I wanted to keep freedom and because others had helped Korea fight communism, I should go and do the same for someone else. Of course, I was young and there were other reasons as well. The other main reason was for adventure, to widen my view of life. And I did find adventure and much more.

Some people went for other reasons. In the Korean army, most of the high ranking officers had to graduate from the elite military school. So, if you were a person just drafted or an officer in the ROTC units, it was hard to move up in the ranks. But if you went to Vietnam and served well, your chances for promotion were much better. Also, at that time, if you served in Korea in the army, the pay was about \$2 a month, while in Vietnam it was \$67.

Oh, we all knew that the United States government was paying \$120 a month for our service and that the difference between \$120 and \$67 was going to the Korean government. But we were still getting paid better by serving in Vietnam and we knew that the government needed the money for special projects. We veterans believe that the Seoul to Pusan highway and many other projects were paid for by our service and we are proud of it.

I served in Vietnam in the Quartermaster Corps of the Headquarters Unit. My job was to make sure the troops of the White Horse Regiment were well supplied. This meant that I sometimes had to helicopter supplies out to the troops and saw combat in the field. The hardest part was bringing back the bodies of our men. We had mourning ceremonies twice a month when the bodies were cremated and the ashes sent home to the families. While we were in Vietnam, our unit helped to build a Buddhist Temple for the population and for prayers to be said for our troops.

We were very impressed with the landscape of Vietnam – the climate was so good and the fields so rich agriculturally. It is a beautiful country. But I did think that the South Vietnamese army could have been stronger and that is why the war was lost.

I know that Korean troops had a reputation for being very good fighters and tough on the enemy. Part of the toughness came from some of the first troops to come, the Dragon unit, whose casualties were treated terribly by the enemy. There were booby traps, poisoned streams, all sorts of guerrilla tactics and we Koreans retaliated. But Vietnamese casualties were well treated in our hospitals.

As far as I know, there is not a separate memorial in Korea for the Korean men who died in the Vietnam War,*

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and some disabled veterans are struggling on very small pensions. So, perhaps, we might be more recognized. But I think that most of the veterans feel as I do, proud to have done what their country asked.

*Vietnam veterans are recognized in the War Memorial in Seoul, which covers other events in Korean military history.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. What are the motives Lee Chung-sop mentions for going to Vietnam? What is his view of his service in Vietnam?
2. Does Lee Chung-sop support the idea that Korean troops were “mercenaries” hired by the United States? Explain your answer.
3. How would you compare Lee Chung-sop’s view of the Vietnam War to that of American filmmakers whose views of the war you have seen on television or in movies?

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Location of Korean Troops in Vietnam

