

INTERPRETING THE CAUSES OF THE KOREAN WAR

GRADES: 9–12

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SUBJECT: World History, United States History

TIME REQUIRED: Three to four class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand the importance of using primary source documents to analyze historical events.
2. To understand the political and military events leading up to the Korean War.
3. To interpret opposing views concerning the origins of the Korean War.
4. For students to accurately present, in class discussion, one interpretation of the Korean War causes historiography.
5. Follow all established class rules pertaining to discussions and seminar activities.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Internet access
- Classroom text
- Maps of Asia
- Library access
- Primary source documents from the Cairo Conference and Potsdam Conference
- Secondary source readings:
 - Ems, Harry. “Koreans who fought for the Japanese: In *Documents of Korean Communism*, edited by Dae-suk Suh, 53-59. Princeton University Press, 1970.
 - Cumings, Bruce. *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, pp. 159 and 448. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.
- Handout 1: Brief Description of Korean History (attached)
- Handout 2: Six Interpretive Strategies in Recent Korean Historiography by Harry Ems (attached)

PROCEDURE:

1. Ask the students what prior knowledge they possess concerning Korean history, culture and current events.
2. Introduce the students to Korean history by having the students read Handout 1. Have the students focus on the portion of the text pertaining to the causes for the Korean War.
4. Assign students the task of interpreting the causes of the Korean War. For this assignment students are to: 1) analyze the primary source documents, secondary source readings and text materials to understand the events leading up to the Korean War; (2) demonstrate an understanding of the causes of the Korean War by preparing an argument (choosing one of Harry Ems’ “Six Interpretive Strategies in Recent Korean Historiography”) that most closely reflects their interpretation of the causes for the

Korean War; and (3) hand in a written copy of their argument and a list of readings which support their argument.

5. Allow the students two class periods to research and read the assigned materials (text, handouts and primary source documents). Allow two following class periods for seminar discussion of the topic.

EVALUATION:

Students will be assessed on their (1) oral participation during class seminar (the rubric used for evaluation will follow traditional class procedures) and (2) written summation with resource materials listed.

ENRICHMENT:

Students may write a follow up essay discussing (1) the benefits of using more than the text, such as secondary and primary source readings, to understand historical events and/or (2) textbook bias.

RESOURCES:

Kim, Myon-sop. *Divisions, its Solidification, and the Korean War*. Seoul: Han'gilsa, 1989.

Choi, Jang-jip and Chong, Hae-gu. *Haebang chonhusa ui insik, IV*. Seoul: Han'gilsa, 1989.

Bruce Cumings. *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 1*. Princeton University Press, 1981.

Merrill, John R. *Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989.

Oberdorfer, Don. *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*. Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley, 1999.

HANDOUT 1: BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF KOREAN HISTORY

Korea, located on the Korean Peninsula in Northeast Asia, has been divided into two countries since 1948: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea). The following article discusses the history of Korea up until its division.

The earliest known Korean state was Old Chosŏn, in what is now northwestern Korea and northeastern China. Old Chosŏn was conquered by the Han Chinese in 108 BCE. The Chinese set up military outposts in Korea that spread Chinese culture and civilization. The first of the three main Korean kingdoms to come into contact with the Chinese was Koguryo, which emerged in the first century BCE in the northern part of the Peninsula. Paekche in the southwest and Silla in the southeast, which emerged in the third and the fourth centuries CE, respectively, had contact with China as well.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, foreign powers attempted to increase their influence on Korea. These attempts were rejected by Koreans, who believed the Confucian society they had achieved required little or nothing from countries other than China. Christianity, quietly introduced from China in 1784, was slowly and covertly propagated by underground French Roman Catholic missionaries. The Korean government, however, attempted to stop the spread of Christianity because it was not compatible with Confucianism. In 1864 the *taewŏn'gun* (grand prince), father of the boy-king Kojong, seized power, outlawed Christianity and sought to curb foreign contact. He subsequently faced attacks from France (in 1866) and the United States (in 1871), both of which were attempting to establish trade relations with Korea. These attacks were repulsed. The *taewŏn'gun* also tried to strengthen the Korean state by stamping out government corruption. The political fallout from these reforms, however, resulted in his downfall in 1873.

In 1876 the Japanese forced Korea to establish diplomatic relations in order to facilitate trade between the countries, thus weakening Korea's traditional ties to China. China then sought to balance Japan's new influence by promoting Korean ties with Western countries, as embodied in the Korea–U.S. treaty of 1882. During the next decade Korea made many efforts to reform its government and modernize its economy, but these efforts were frustrated by the continued influence of foreign powers. In 1895 Japan defeated China in the Sino–Japanese War, and ten years later Japan beat Russia in the Russo–Japanese War. These victories cemented Japan's power in Korea, leading to the formal Japanese annexation of Korea and the end of the Chosŏn kingdom in 1910.

Japanese domination of Korea formally began with the Protectorate Treaty (1905), forced on Korea after the Russo–Japanese War. Under this treaty, Japan assumed control of Korea's foreign relations and ultimately its police and military, currency and banking, communications and all other vital functions. These changes were tenaciously resisted by the Koreans. In 1910 Japan formally annexed Korea when it realized Korea would not accept nominal sovereignty. From 1910 to 1919 Japan solidified its rule by purging nationalists, gaining control of Korea's land distribution system and enforcing rigid administrative changes. These measures, along with the general demand for national self-determination following World War I, led millions of Koreans to take to the streets in nonviolent demonstrations for independence on March 1, 1919.

But the massive protest was quickly and violently suppressed. Japan tightened its control over Korea and reacted quickly to suppress other nationalist activity. As the Japanese imperial government became more militaristic throughout the 1930s and 1940s, it imposed measures designed to assimilate the Korean population, including outlawing the Korean language and even Korean family names. Korea was liberated from the Japanese by the Allied victory that ended World War II in 1945.

Shortly before the end of the war in the Pacific in 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) agreed to divide Korea at the 38th parallel for the purpose of accepting the surrender of Japanese troops. Both powers, however, used their presence to create separate, friendly governments. The USSR suppressed the moderate nationalists in the north and supported Kim Il Sung, a Communist who had led anti-Japanese guerrillas in Manchuria, as the leader of a new North Korean state. In the south, leftists were opposed by various groups of right-wing nationalists. Unable to find a congenial moderate who could bring these forces together, the United States ended up suppressing the left and promoting Syngman Rhee, a nationalist who had opposed the Japanese and lived in exile in the United States, as the leader of a new South Korean state.

HANDOUT 2: SIX INTERPRETATIVE STRATEGIES IN RECENT SOUTH KOREAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

By

Harry Ems

1. Official Historiography

Soviet ambitions were responsible for the division of Korea and the Korean War. Soviet policies at the end of WWII were shaped by the country's particularly Russian desire to possess ice-free ports and the imperative to project Communist power across the globe. Acting as a puppet for Soviet expansionist policies, Kim Il Sung and the Korean Worker's Party rejected proposals that would have created a unified government (in 1946 and 1947) and, again at the instigation of Stalin, launched an attack against South Korea in 1950. According to President Truman, the Korean War represented "the first step in a general Communist plan to pass from subversion to armed invasion and war in the general scheme of world conquest."

2. Korea as Victim of International Rivalry

In the initial decision to divide Korea, responsibility was shared equally by the U.S. and the USSR. The initial agreement had less to do with military convenience and more to do with establishing a *modus vivendi*. At the time of liberation from colonial rule, Korean society had its class conflicts and political differences, but the division of Korea and the Korean War was imposed from the outside. With the collapse of the Japanese empire and the occupation of Korea by Soviet and American forces, a minority on the extreme left and the extreme right could successfully push for the creation of separate states as a way to grab political power for themselves. In essence, the Korean people were engulfed in a maelstrom created by the U.S. and USSR. Although Kim Il Sung did start the Korean War, he could only have done so with Stalin's approval.

3. First Revisionist position: Emphasis on Korean Politics

Though not ignoring the geopolitical position of Korea and the impact of the U.S.–Soviet rivalry on Korean politics, this revisionist position emphasizes the development of the Korean national liberation movement during colonial rule, the political resuscitation of former Japanese collaborators under the U.S. military government in the South, and the subsequent exacerbation of conflict between the left and right, as causes of Korean division.

South Korean historians identified with this revisionist–nationalist position charge that, by treating the Korean War and everything that led up to it as having been determined by deepening conflict between the U.S. and the USSR, the proponents of other views effectively erase Koreans from Korean history (and free from blame those Koreans who should be held responsible for Korea's division). Those who subscribe to this revisionist position hold that the conflict between the Korean left and the right constituted the driving force in Korea's post-liberation politics.

4. Second Revisionist Position: Interaction Between International and Domestic Forces

The book which most influenced proponents of this interpretation was Bruce Cummings' *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 1*. Cumings locates the sources for the Korean War in the revolutionary/counter-revolutionary struggles of the inter-war years (1945-50); struggles which had their roots in the particular relationship between state and civil society that had existed in colonial Korea. The revolutionary actors of the inter-war years were trying to overturn (in spite of the U.S. military government) the repressive effects of Japanese colonial rule, such as the perpetuation of Korea's traditional landed class, the exacerbation of repressive, feudal relations in the countryside, and the subordination and integration of Korean economy into a regional bloc organized around a revived Japan.

This view sees the U.S. decision to occupy and establish a military government in southern Korea as an expression of imperialist ambition and a part of its strategy to create internationally integrated structures that it could lead. Proponents of this perspective view the record of the U.S. military government's intervention in Korean politics, starting from its refusal to recognize the Korean People's Republic in 1945, to its successful effort to establish, under U.N. auspices, a separate state of South Korea in 1948, through an anti-imperialist lens. This view also sees the Korean War as a civil war rather than a war of national liberation.

5. North Korean Historiography

According to North Korean historiography, the primary contradiction in the inter-war years (as well as during and after the Korean War) was not between the left and right, but between the Korean nationalist movement and U.S. imperialism. This view holds that U.S.-controlled areas of southern Korea colonized by America just as they had been colonized by Japan. In northern Korea, on the other hand, the armed partisans led by Kim Il Sung had had the necessary experience to lead anti-feudal, anti-imperialistic struggles after liberation and it was natural that the commanders of the Red Army would have given Kim Il Sung their support.

6. Post-Revisionist Position

Most forcefully argued by Pak Myong-lim, this position argues that the fault for the Korean War rests squarely with Kim Il Sung. War was not inevitable, and therefore Kim Il Sung's actions are criminal and unforgivable. In terms of political autonomy from the occupation forces, a comparison of North Korea and South Korea before the Korean War shows that Syngman Rhee was actually more independent of the U.S. Kim Il Sung exercised less political autonomy with the Soviet Union. In terms of purging collaborators, however, North Korea had been more thorough. As for economic policies, especially land reform policies, those implemented in South Korea were much more beneficial to tenant farmers. In terms of democratic rights, South Korea had a better record than North Korea. Finally, the leadership of North Korea was most responsible for the division of Korea in the first place, as leaders in the North moved more quickly to set up separate state structures after 1945 than did their counterparts in the South.