

**KOREA**

## Korea: The West and Japan (1860s-1919)

### Imperialism: Western and Japanese

- By the mid-nineteenth century Korea was one of the last Asian holdouts against Western imperialism, which had conquered much of southern Asia and was making inroads on China. Vietnam, which like Korea was a close tributary state to China, had been conquered by the French in the 1860s.
  - Following the successful opening of Japan to trade and diplomacy with the West in 1854 through the "gunboat diplomacy" of Commodore Perry of the US Navy, the British, the French, and the Americans all attempted to open Korea in a similar fashion. Korea, however, refused to comply to Western demands, and engaged in naval skirmishes with the French and the Americans in the 1860s and early 1870s.
  - In the end, the country was forced to open up not by the West, but by Japan itself. The 1876 Treaty of Kanghwa between Japan and Korea, named after the island off the west coast of Korea where it was signed, was a classic "unequal treaty" of the kind Western powers were imposing on Asian countries, including China and Japan, in the nineteenth century. The treaty gave Japan special trading rights and other privileges in Korea that were not reciprocated for Koreans in Japan. The United States and major European countries soon followed with their own treaties of trade and diplomacy with Korea.
  - By the end of the nineteenth century, rivalry over Korea led to war between Japan and China (1894-95) and, ten years later, between Japan and Russia (1904-5). Japan won both wars, and in 1910 Japan annexed Korea as a colony, ending the Choson dynasty after more than 500 years of independent rule.
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# Korea as a Colony of Japan, 1910-1945

## Japanese Colonial Rule (1910-1945)

- Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) was a deeply ambivalent experience for Koreans. On the one hand, Japanese colonialism was often quite harsh. For the first ten years Japan ruled directly through the military, and any Korean dissent was ruthlessly crushed. After a nationwide protest against Japanese colonialism that began on March 1, 1919, Japanese rule relaxed somewhat, allowing a limited degree of freedom of expression for Koreans.
- Despite the often oppressive and heavy-handed rule of the Japanese authorities, many recognizably modern aspects of Korean society emerged or grew considerably during the 35-year period of colonial rule. These included rapid urban growth, the expansion of commerce, and forms of mass culture such as radio and cinema, which became widespread for the first time. Industrial development also took place, partly encouraged by the Japanese colonial state, although primarily for the purposes of enriching Japan and fighting the wars in China and the Pacific rather than to benefit the Koreans themselves. Such uneven and distorted development left a mixed legacy for the peninsula after the colonial period ended.
- By the time of the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Korea was the second-most industrialized nation in Asia after Japan itself.
- But the wartime mobilization of 1937-45 had reintroduced harsh measures to Japanese colonial rule, as Koreans were forced to work in Japanese factories and were sent as soldiers to the front. Tens of thousands of young Korean women were drafted as “Comfort Women” - in effect, sexual slaves - for Japanese soldiers.
- In 1939, Koreans were even pressured by the colonial authorities to change their names to Japanese names, and more than 80 percent of the Koreans complied with the name-change ordinance.

## Liberation, Division, and War

- The Japanese surrender to the Allies on August 15, 1945, which ended World War II, led to a time of great confusion and turmoil in Korea.
  - The country was divided into zones of occupation by the victorious Americans and Soviets, and various individuals and organizations across the political spectrum from Communists to the far Right claimed to speak for an independent Korean government. The Soviets and Americans failed to reach an agreement on a unified Korean government, and in 1948 two separate governments were established, each claiming to be the legitimate government of all Korea: the Republic of Korea in Seoul, in the American zone, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in Pyongyang, in the Soviet zone.
  - On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces invaded the South. The Korean War drew in the Americans in support of South Korea and the Chinese in support of the North.
  - In July 1953, after three years of bloody fighting in which some three million Koreans, one million Chinese, and 54,000 Americans were killed, the Korean War ended in a truce with Korea still divided into two mutually antagonistic states, separated by a heavily fortified “De-Militarized Zone” (DMZ). Korea has remained divided ever since.
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## Contemporary Korea

- The Republic of Korea (South Korea) today is a prosperous nation with a per capita annual income of around \$US 10,000, putting it in the middle ranks of developed nations—less affluent than the United States, Japan, or Germany, but on par with Portugal, Spain, and Greece. It is also a developing democracy, having thrown off military rule in the early 1990s and maintaining a representative civilian democratic government.
- The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), although ahead of the South economically until the 1960s or even the early 1970s, has suffered great economic hardship in recent years, and went through a period of severe famine in the mid-1990s. North Korea's government is a single-party state established along Leninist principles borrowed from the Soviet Union, and was under the leadership of Kim Il Sung from its founding in 1945 until Kim's death in 1994. After Kim IL Sung's death, leadership passed to his son Kim Jong IL
- At the end of the Korean War in 1953, both Koreas lay utterly devastated. In addition to the loss of millions of lives, the two Koreas were beset with a ruined economic infrastructure, millions of displaced persons, and hundreds of thousands of war orphans. South Korea in 1953 was one of the poorest countries in the world. Despite a huge amount of economic assistance from the United States, the United Nations, and other Western countries for post-war reconstruction, the South Korean economy did not really begin to pick up again until the early 1960s. In 1961 the civilian government was removed in a coup led by Major General Park Chung Hee, who ruled South Korea until his assassination in 1979.

## Economic and Political Development in the Two Koreas Today

### South Korea

- The Park Chung Hee era saw both extraordinary economic growth and deepening political dictatorship. In the 1970s and 1980s Korea was known as one of the four "Little Dragons" of newly industrialized East Asian countries, which also included Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.
  - After Park's death and a brief period of civilian rule, South Korea was again brought under the control of the military, this time under General Chun Doo Hwan.
  - Despite the continued economic growth and rising international stature of South Korea, culminating in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, protests against Chun's dictatorship grew throughout the 1980s. Chun stepped down in 1987 and was replaced by his close comrade-in-arms, Roh Tae Woo, who was elected president in a closely fought race against two longtime political dissidents, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung.
  - In 1992, Kim Young Sam, who had by then joined Roh Tae Woo's ruling coalition, was elected South Korea's first civilian president since the 1961 military coup.
  - Another presidential election was held in December 1997, amidst a devastating financial crisis that deeply shook the economies of South Korea and several other Asian countries. This time Kim Dae Jung was elected president, his fourth attempt at the presidency since 1971, when he was defeated by Park Chung Hee.
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- Under Kim Dae Jung's presidency the South Korean economy made a substantial recovery from the 1997-98 financial crisis, democratic institutions were further developed, and South Korea pursued a policy of engagement and dialogue with the North.

## **North Korea**

- North Korea also recovered from the destruction of war with a great deal of outside assistance, in the North's case from the Soviet Union, China, and several Eastern European states. The North's economy recovered more quickly than the South's, and in the late 1950s North Korea may have had the fastest economic growth rate in the world.
- In the 1960s North Korean leader Kim Il Sung began advocating a policy of *juche*, or "self-reliance," partly to avoid becoming entangled in the growing conflict between China and the USSR. Although North Korea was not completely isolated and continued to receive some outside aid, it generally pursued a policy of economic self-sufficiency.
- Much like traditional Korea, North Korea tightly restricted travel in and out of Korea and North Koreans' contacts with foreigners. Also like traditional Korea, North Korea's closest ally has been, and remains, China.
- After the East European communist states collapsed and the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1989-90, many observers predicted that North Korea would follow suit. The absorption of East Germany into the German Federal Republic (West Germany) suggested that a similar kind of unification could occur in Korea, with the collapse of North Korea and its absorption into the far more affluent South.
- But such a scenario did not occur, and despite grave economic hardship and the death of North Korea's leader Kim Il Sung, the North Korea regime remained in place into the twenty-first century. Kim Il Sung was replaced as leader by his eldest son Kim Jong Il, a succession that North Korea had been planning for decades.
- How long such an impoverished and isolated regime can last, seemingly so out of touch with the rest of the world, is impossible to predict. But by the turn of the century North Korea showed no noticeable sign of political collapse or even significant change, despite years of profound economic hardship.

## **North-South Relations**

- Korea's division was a product of the cold war, but continued long after the global cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union ended in 1991. In some ways, North-South Korean division has been more complete and hostile than the divisions between East and West Germany, North and South Vietnam, or China and Taiwan. Direct communication, including the exchange of letters and phone calls between ordinary citizens on non-official business, much less travel back and forth, is almost nonexistent. The one exception, introduced in the late 1990s, was the luxury cruise ship line to the Kum Kang Mountains in North Korea, sponsored by the South Korean corporate giant Hyundai, which brought many South Korean tourists for brief visits to the North.
  - As of 2000, communication and travel between the two Koreas had not reached nearly the level of the two Germanies in the 1970s or contemporary Taiwan and mainland China. Nevertheless, there have been several periods of official inter-Korean contact and attempts at reconciliation between the two Koreas.
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- In 1972, the two regimes signed a joint declaration on peace and reconciliation for the first time. Nearly twenty years later, after a series of high-level visits between the two governments, a more extensive agreement on reconciliation, nonaggression, exchange and cooperation was signed in late 1991.
  - In June 2000, the leaders of the two Koreas, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong IL, met in Pyongyang for the first-ever North-South summit meeting since the two states were created in 1948. While the summit meeting raised high hopes for unification between the two Koreas, the summit meeting appeared to be only the first step in a long process of mutual recognition and coexistence.
  - Divided Korea is an anomaly in today's post-cold war world. More than 50 years after the country was occupied by the allied powers, the two Korean states remain bitter rivals and are officially still at war with each other.
  - What began as a temporary expediency to effect the surrender of Japan in Korea at the end of World War II has become an enduring national division. The two Koreas have developed drastically different economic and political systems.
  - Yet both sides insist that their ultimate goal is a unified Korea. The long history of political, cultural, and linguistic unity on the Korean peninsula up to the twentieth century suggests that, at some point in the future, unification is probably inevitable. But as long as both regimes remain in place, the two Koreas will most likely continue to work at a gradual reconciliation, leading toward some form of unification that cannot be foreseen at present.

## **Korea and the World Today**

- Korea, long an important source of cultural and religious creativity and commercial trade in East Asia, has become an important player on the world stage today, especially in the economic realm. With neither the economic stature of Japan nor the military might and population of China, Korea (at least South Korea) is nevertheless a major trading nation and participant in global affairs.
  - Nor is Korea a "small country": with 46 million people, South Korea alone is larger than an average European nation. In land area Korea is about the size of Britain.
  - The combined population of North and South Korea is nearly 70 million, larger than Britain or France.
  - Furthermore, more than five million people of Korean descent live in other countries. The largest overseas Korean communities are in China (two million), the United States (over one million), Japan (700,000) and the states of the former Soviet Union (500,000).
  - In modern times Korea has been at the center of rivalry between regional great powers and between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Korea's current division is a result of that rivalry, but has outlasted the cold war as a problem unique to Korea.
  - The hostility and potential for military conflict between the two heavily armed Korean states is a cause of great concern for the rest of East Asia, as well as for the United States and other countries in the world.
  - Despite their many differences, the two Koreas have both built modern industrial societies on the basis of a common history and cultural heritage.
  - The high value placed on family, social propriety, and education are part of that heritage, closely associated with Korea's Confucian traditions.
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- Whether and in what form the two Koreas may one day be unified remains to be seen, but however the current division is resolved, Korea has long been an important and integral part of East Asian affairs, and is becoming increasingly visible in world affairs as well.
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