



Decolonization and the Cold War through an Asian Lens

In this video, Steve Lee explains how the Cold War and decolonization played out in Asia. The video pays particular attention to anti-colonial and Cold War conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. The roots of both conflicts lay in the colonial era, and in both conflicts, the United States and Soviet Union supported different sides. The video examines several important anti-colonial leaders in both places and lays out the complex Cold War politics of both conflicts.



00:01

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The civil and international wars in Korea and Vietnam were tied to two key trends in the international system after 1945. The first was decolonization, the transformation of colonies into independent states. The second was the Cold War, a global rivalry for spheres of influence between the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies.

*Vietnam, Nguyen Dynasty:
1803-1945;
Korea, Choson Dynasty:
1392-1910;
China, Qing Dynasty:
1644-1911*

Vietnam and Korea had existed for centuries as independent dynasties closely related to Chinese history and Confucian culture. In the era of 19th-century global empire, two dynasties—the Nguyen in Vietnam and the Choson in Korea—were linked with the Qing Dynasty in China.

01:01

*Colonialism and the Roots
of Conflict*

*Portraits of Kim Il Sung
(1912-1994) and Ho Chi
Minh (1880-1969)*

Those ties were undone by two wars that France and Japan fought against the Qing Dynasty at the end of the century. Ultimately, France colonized Vietnam after 1858 and divided the territory into three sections, and Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910. The roots of the fighting on the Korean peninsula from 1948 to 1953, and in Vietnam from 1945 to 1975, lay in this colonial era. The First World War and the 1917 Russian Revolution both caused nationalist anti-colonial sentiment to grow faster. In the 1920s, two major figures of the Vietnamese and Korean revolutions, Ho Chi Minh and Kim Il Sung, joined communist parties.

01:59

*Photo of a celebration
of President Woodrow
Wilson; a banner states
"Vive Wilson"*

Ho traveled widely. In 1919, at the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the First World War, he petitioned American President Woodrow Wilson for Vietnamese independence. Ho was also a founding member of the French Communist Party in 1920. Kim, meanwhile, moved from Korea to China's Northeast, near the Korean border. He joined a Chinese student communist organization in 1929. In the 1930s, as a member of a Chinese communist guerrilla army, Kim fought Japan's empire in both China and Korea. In their respective countries, Ho and Kim faced anti-communist authoritarian leaders who fought for national independence against communism.

02:48

*Syngman Rhee (1875-
1965)*

*Ngo Dinh Diem (1901-
1963)*

Syngman Rhee, a Korean Christian and South Korea's first president, turned to the United States for help when he wanted to end Japan's colonial rule in Korea. Like Ho Chi Minh, he drew inspiration from Woodrow Wilson's ideas about national self-determination. Ngo Dinh Diem was a Vietnamese Catholic politician. Starting in 1950, he asked the United States to support an anti-communist Southern Vietnamese state. Both Rhee and Diem were bitter anti-communists, but like the communists Ho and Kim, they were fierce opponents of colonialism. Also like Ho and Kim, they asked for outside help to end colonialism and to establish independence. This is how the colonial era both united and divided those who sought independence for their nations, and laid the groundwork for the wars that would come later in Korea and Vietnam.

03:51

*Democratic Republic of
Vietnam, or DRV, was
later called North Vietnam*

The end of the Second World War opened immediate opportunities for nationalists and communists in Korea and Vietnam. On September 2, 1945, Ho declared Vietnamese independence and created a new state called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. French officials, however, still wanted Vietnam under their control. In November 1946, tensions between French and Vietnamese officials escalated into violence in the port city of Haiphong. Full-scale war began in the next month with

fighting over control of Hanoi.

04:31

Photo of Mao Zedong (1893-1976), Chairman of the Communist Party of China

This conflict—the First Indochina War—lasted from 1946 to 1954. This anti-colonial struggle was a war of decolonization. It was also an example of how the Cold War led to mass violence throughout the global south. The establishment of the communist People’s Republic of China in October 1949 was particularly important for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Their officials were glad to have recognition from the Chinese, who also provided military aid, training for Vietnamese activists, to make them more effective revolutionaries.

05:16

Photo of Bao Dai, the last Nguyen emperor, who reigned from 1926-1945

Meanwhile, French administrators supported anti-communist nationalists in Vietnam in 1946, fueling the civil war. Colonial officials loved to show off the last emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty as a symbol of anti-communist nationalism, but his association with French imperialism significantly weakened the appeal. The United States, a Cold War ally of France, helped pay for this colonial war. French leaders ordered 200,000 soldiers to Indochina, including colonial recruits from France’s empire in Africa. By 1954, France had also raised an army of almost 170,000 Vietnamese soldiers. These efforts were insufficient, however, as the army of the Democratic Republic defeated French Union soldiers in May 1954.

06:09

Photo of the international conference in Geneva

An international conference in Geneva soon agreed to partition the country temporarily. The plan was to hold a vote on the unification of the divided territory within three years. The vote never came, and the end of the French empire in Indochina enabled increasing American involvement in the conflict.

06:34

The Korean War

Animated map shows the split between North Korea (occupied by Soviets) and South Korea (occupied by Americans)

Like their Vietnamese counterparts, Korean nationalists and leftists celebrated the end of the Second World War by creating a new state, the Korean People’s Republic. As in Vietnam, anti-communists at home, as well as foreign powers, contested the new state. After the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, American officials recommended the division of the Korean peninsula into two separate zones, one occupied by Soviets and the other by Americans. The Soviet Union agreed, but neither of these big powers consulted Koreans about the future of their country. There was also an important difference between Korea and Vietnam. In Korea, after the Japanese were defeated in 1945, decolonization from Japanese rule was immediate and rapid. In Vietnam, France attempted to reimpose their rule, and Vietnam responded by fighting a long anti-colonial war.

07:38

On the other hand, Koreans now had to contend with two new superpowers on the peninsula, the United States and the Soviet Union, each an empire in its own right. Korea’s decolonization became entangled with the new imperial rivalry commonly referred to as the Cold War. In this conflict, American officials often supported anti-communist leaders, while the Soviet Union and China embraced revolutionary goals.

08:10

A young girl holds a baby on her back in front of a tank

By 1948, American and Soviet state-building projects had created rival North and South Korean regimes. Soon after, there were serious border clashes between North and South Korea. The Soviets backed a North Korean offensive starting in June 1950. The United States, incorrectly believing the North Koreans to be puppets of the Soviets, and now wanting to confront the global power of the Soviet Union, gathered together allies in the United Nations and sent military forces

*Images of violence and
destruction at the Korean
Peninsula*

08:50

*Photo of American soldiers
drinking*

to the Korean Peninsula. This significantly increased the violence and scale of the conflict.

Another major escalation occurred when Chinese volunteer soldiers joined the North Koreans in the autumn of 1950. The war created millions of refugees, as both sides repeatedly moved up and down the peninsula over 1950 and 1951. Negotiations to end the fighting started in the summer of 1951, but stalled when negotiators could not agree where to send prisoners of war after the fighting stopped. Two years later, American policymakers were planning to use nuclear weapons against the communist powers. Before that could happen, the United States, China, and North Korea signed an armistice, an agreement to end the fighting. By then, North Korean towns and cities had been destroyed by the U.S. Air Force and up to three million Koreans had been killed.

09:48

The war in Korea acted as a kind of model for American policy in Vietnam: American generals directed the war and maintained strategic control over the South Korean military. With help from the United States, South Korea had established one of the largest armies in the world by 1953.

10:11

The Vietnam War

*A war ship fires from the
water*

In Vietnam, meanwhile, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam extended support to communists in South Vietnam in 1959. Fearing communist expansion, the Americans sought to impose authority over Vietnam. But Diem, who was now president, viewed the initiative as a return to colonialism, and rejected the proposal of a so-called partnership. The Vietnam War, like the Korean conflict, was brutal. The communist North Vietnamese state dealt harshly with its critics and imposed severe censorship on society. Meanwhile, in South Vietnam, by 1963, almost nine million people were forced out of their villages to prevent them from falling under communist influence.

11:00

*Photo of the Tet Offensive,
1968, shows people killed
in the street; a 1969 photo
of US soldiers in the water
in Hue, Vietnam*

That year, the United States supported a military coup that assassinated Diem. From then on, the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam each increased their military commitment to the war. By the late 1960s, there were about 550,000 U.S. soldiers in the field, but the communists also mobilized hundreds of thousands of their own troops, bringing the battlefield to a stalemate. American officials soon decided to change U.S. policies toward Vietnam and Asia, and to withdraw U.S. troops from the region. Discussions to end the fighting began in Paris in 1968. An accord in 1973 led to the removal of American troops by 1975. A final offensive by Northern armies that year defeated South Vietnam and united the country under communist rule.

11:58

The conflicts over Vietnam and Korea were complicated. They were linked to decolonization and the Cold War, yes, but they were also both wars of reunification. The Vietnam War ended in 1975, and the United States and Vietnam normalized their relationship 20 years later. By contrast, none of the combatants in Korea have yet signed a peace treaty, and the Korean War continues to this day.

But the violence of these Asian wars highlighted the inability of all sides to view their actions in light of the shock and tragedy that war inflicted on their populations. It is up to the current generation of policymakers to reject the suffering of war and to establish powerful foundations of peace.