

The Korean War Teacher Pages

Overview

This activity is designed to reinforce and expand students' prior knowledge of the Korean War. Students examine the military actions of the North Korean, Chinese, South Korean, UN, and U.S. forces during the war. They come to understand that military action consisted of a series of offensives and counteroffensives and that the effort ended in a stalemate with a shaky armistice that neither unified the country nor brought it peace.

Time Required

30–50 minutes

National History Standards

Historical Thinking Standard 1: Chronological Thinking

Historical Thinking Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

United States Era 9, Standard 2: How the Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics

National Geography Standards

Standard 1: How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective

Standard 3: How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface

Enduring Understanding

Three years of attacks and counterattacks in the Korean War eventually resulted in a military stalemate and political division of Korea.

Essential Question

What military actions took place during the Korean War, and what effect did they have on the eventual outcome of the war?

Procedure

Note: The following directions are written for a whole-class activity. If you wish, you may instead use the student handout and have students work individually or in small groups on the activity.

1. Ask students what they remember about the Korean War. When did it occur? What countries were involved? Who won?
2. Read the “Historical Context” section to the class to set the stage for the activity. Make sure students understand the words and terms in bold.
3. Using a whiteboard, projector, or another display device, show the class the digital map titled “The Korean War,” but with all layers turned off.
4. Distribute the outline version of the map to students. Ask them to (either individually or in small group) do the following on their outline map, as best as they can remember.
 - a. Ask students to describe the invasion that started the Korean War. Ask them to draw the path of the invasion forces on their outline maps, and draw a line at the farthest point of the invasion.
 - b. Next, direct students’ attention to the map on the left, labeled “June–November 1950.” Turn on the “North Korean attack forces” layer and the “Farthest advance, Sept. 1950” layer to show students the first military actions of the Korean War. Have students check their maps for accuracy, and make any necessary corrections.
 - c. Now, ask students about the counterattack to repel the North Korean forces. What countries or organizations were involved? Ask students to draw this counterattack on their maps in a different color, to show how far the UN forces pushed the North Koreans back.
 - d. Next, turn on the “UN offensive” layer and the “Farthest advance, Nov. 1950” layer. Explain to students that the combined UN forces pushed the North Korean army back up towards the Chinese border. Have students check their maps for accuracy, and make any necessary corrections.
 - e. Now, ask students to observe the location of the farthest advance by UN forces into North Korea. Show students the two points where these forces got close to or crossed the North Korea–China border. Ask students how the Chinese reacted to the UN forces being so close to their border.
 - f. Direct students’ attention to the map on the right, titled “November 1950–July 1953” and turn on the “Chinese and North Korean Offensive” layer and the “Line of advance, Jan. 1951” layer to show the Chinese/North Korean counteroffensive. Have students draw these invasion lines on their maps in the same color they used for the first invasion of North Korean troops. Also, have them draw a line showing the farthest advance of these troops.
 - g. Next, ask students what action U.S. forces took to counter this surge by the Chinese and North Korean armies. Ask them to draw this movement on their map in the same color they used for the UN counteroffensive.
 - h. Turn on the “Final U.S. offensive” layer. Explain to students that at this point in the war, U.S forces took command and they pushed the Chinese and North Korean armies back up to the middle of the country. Have students check their maps for accuracy and make any necessary corrections.
 - i. Remind students that the war ended in an armistice at the 38th parallel. Have students draw in the approximate path of the armistice line.
 - j. Next, turn on the “Armistice line” layer. Have students check their maps for accuracy and make any necessary corrections.

Historical Context

The events that led to the Korean War began with the Japanese defeat in World War II. At the **Yalta Conference**, held before the end of the war, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to occupy the northern and southern halves of the Korean peninsula with the idea that free elections would eventually take place and the country would be unified. In the years that followed, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States **deteriorated**, and the two sides grew to deeply mistrust one another. The Soviet Union remained in countries it occupied after the war, establishing communist **buffer zones**. The Soviets blocked **unification** elections in North Korea, knowing that over two-thirds of Korea's population lived in the South, which was controlled by the Americans. The Koreans in the north grew frustrated with the lack of progress and began a plan of their own using military tactics to reunify their country. After three years of war, the conflict ended in a **stalemate** and a shaky **armistice** that neither unified the country nor brought it peace.

Assessment

Explain to the class that the information on the map can be displayed in different ways. Then, have students create color-coded timelines that put the information from the map into chronological order.

Extensions

1. Have students annotate their timelines to show details about the events and the countries involved.
2. Have students look into some of the controversies surrounding the Korean War, such the fact that it was a “police action” rather than a formally declared war; why it was the first major military action by the United Nations; the question of whether the initial invasion was Soviet-supported or was simply North Koreans acting on their own; President Truman’s “containment policy” response; the command of General Douglas MacArthur and his subsequent firing by President Truman; and the shaky armistice that still exists today.