

North Korea: How an Asian nation upholds the Cold War

Anyone reading this title might think it sounds like an exaggeration. After all, the Cold War officially ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall—more than three decades ago. Yet, by the end of this article, it will become clear how North Korea has, in many ways, continued to live as if the Cold War never truly ended.



Flag North Korea. Source:

Wikipedia.org

The birth of North Korea

To better understand North Korea, we must go back to the end of the Second World War. In 1945, Korea was liberated from Japanese rule. The Korean Peninsula had been a colony of Japan from 1910 till 1945, and after the war it was divided among the Allied powers, much like Germany. The United States and the Soviet Union played the leading roles in this division.

As with East and West Germany, Korea was split into two occupation zones. The northern half came under the influence of the Soviet Union, led by Joseph Stalin, while the southern half was administered by the United States. The dividing line was drawn along the 38th parallel.

Although the division was originally intended to be temporary, the two regions quickly developed their own political identities. The North adopted a communist system and an explicitly anti-Western stance, particularly toward the United States and Western Europe. The South, by contrast, gradually evolved into a pro-Western state and eventually became a democratic nation.



For many Koreans, these dramatic changes came suddenly. As tensions between North and South continued to escalate, they eventually erupted into a violent conflict: the Korean War.



The divide between North and South Korea after being freed in 1945. Source: wikipedia.org

Korean War

Just a few years after Korea was divided, an armed conflict broke out between the North and the South. Both governments sought to reunify the entire peninsula under their own political system. As a result, the Korean War (1950–1953) became a direct confrontation between communism and capitalism.

North Korea was supported by the Soviet Union and China, while South Korea received military assistance from the United States and the United Nations. What began as a regional conflict quickly escalated into an international one, becoming one of the first major proxy wars of the Cold War.

After three years of intense fighting, an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. Neither side emerged as a clear victor. Although the fighting came to an end, no official peace treaty was ever signed. Technically, this means that the Korean War has never formally ended, and the two Koreas remain at war.

In the years that followed, however, the desire for reunification gradually faded on both sides. The division of the peninsula became increasingly entrenched, and the prospect of a single, unified Korea grew ever more distant.





American troops in attack a North Korean bunker. Source: wikipedia.org

Who was Joseph Stalin?

Now that we know how North Korea came into existence, the next question is: what does it have to do with the Cold War? The Cold War was an ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although the two countries had been allies during the Second World War, they quickly became bitter rivals in its aftermath.

Within the Soviet Union, one man played a pivotal role in shaping the communist system that still influences North Korea today: Joseph Stalin. His political ideology, methods of governance, and highly centralized power structure left a lasting imprint on the North Korean regime.



Young Joseph Stalin. Source: bbc.co.uk

Joseph Stalin, who was born in present-day Georgia, was a prominent Bolshevik—a radical Marxist faction within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. He played a key role in the October Revolution of 1917, the successful uprising that brought an end to Tsarist rule in Russia. Following the revolution, Vladimir Lenin became the country's leader.

Although Lenin was known for his ruthless policies—including the execution of the Romanov family—Stalin is widely regarded as having



been even more brutal. After Lenin's death, Stalin successfully positioned himself as his successor and gradually consolidated absolute power over the Soviet Union.

During the Second World War, Stalin led the Soviet Union and played a decisive role in the defeat of the Axis powers—Germany, Japan, and Italy. However, among the Allied leaders, he was the only one who remained firmly committed to Marxism and communism. After the war, these ideological differences increasingly strained relations between the former allies.

The birth of the Kim dynasty

Now that we understand how Stalin rose to power, it is also important to examine his role in the creation of North Korea. Following Korea's liberation from Japanese rule, the peninsula was divided into two spheres of influence. The northern half came under Soviet control, and Stalin saw this as an ideal opportunity to expand the reach of his communist ideology.

To achieve this, he needed a local leader who could implement and firmly establish that ideology within the new regime. He found that leader in Kim Il-sung, the man who would go on to become the founder of the North Korean state and shape the political system that continues to define the country today.



Kim Il-sung and Stalin at the dinner table together.

Source: wikipedia.org

Kim Il-sung became the first leader of North Korea after being handpicked by Joseph Stalin. A committed communist, he had received military and political training in the Soviet Union, and his ideological



beliefs closely aligned with Stalin's. His experience fighting against the Japanese occupation further strengthened Stalin's confidence in him, ultimately leading to Kim Il-sung's appointment as the leader of the newly established North Korean regime.

de-Stalinization of the West

Let us now fast-forward in time. Joseph Stalin died in 1953, shortly after the end of the Korean War and Kim Il-sung's rise as the leader of North Korea. Following Stalin's death, the Soviet Union entered a period of political uncertainty, during which the darker aspects of his rule became increasingly apparent.

Several decades later, under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union began to distance itself from Stalin's legacy. This period of reform—often associated with *perestroika* and *glasnost*—marked a significant break from the rigid Stalinist system. Political repression was eased, censorship was relaxed, and the Soviet government encouraged greater openness. At the same time, the Eastern European satellite states were given more freedom to determine their own future. Countries such as Bulgaria and Romania eventually broke away from Moscow's sphere of influence and regained their political independence.

These developments marked the end of the Stalinist era and of the ideology that had dominated much of Eastern Europe for decades. The symbolic climax came in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, paving the way for the reunification of East and West Germany and signaling the end of the Cold War.



The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Source: historia.net

Last man standing



The process of de-Stalinization gradually spread across Europe and eventually culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union. It seemed as though the world had turned its back on this form of communism. Almost the entire world, that is. North Korea remained firmly committed to the Kim dynasty. After the death of Kim Il-sung—the leader personally chosen by Stalin—his son, Kim Jong-il, succeeded him.

Today, North Korea is still ruled by a direct descendant of Kim Il-sung: Kim Jong-un. He continues the political system established by his father and grandfather, a regime that, in many respects, bears a striking resemblance to Stalin's Soviet Union. Criticism of the country's leader is virtually unthinkable, contact with South Korea remains extremely limited, severe punishments are commonplace, and propaganda permeates everyday life. Famine, repression, and widespread human rights abuses have remained recurring features of the regime.

Although the division of Korea itself can be seen as one of the last remaining legacies of the Cold War, South Korea has gradually developed its own political and cultural identity, independent of direct American influence. North Korea, however, followed a very different path. It is unique in the modern world: nowhere else has a political system so heavily influenced by Stalinism remained as visible and enduring—albeit reshaped by the distinctly Korean character of the Kim dynasty.

From Japanese colonial rule to liberation and division, from civil war to an isolated dictatorship, North Korea's history illustrates how the legacy of the Soviet Union and the Cold War never entirely disappeared. Instead, in many ways, it has remained frozen in time within the borders of North Korea.



Kim-Jong un, the present leader of North Korea and its third leader since the birth of the country. Source: wikipedia.org



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