Seventh Grade Lesson
Korean War
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SS7H3 Analyze continuity and change in Southern and Eastern Asia.
e. Explain the reasons for foreign involvement in Korea and Vietnam in terms of containment of communism.

Background Information

The historical origin of the Korean War goes back to the early 1900s, when Japan colonized Korea for 35 years. Koreans suffered from Japanese colonization and fought for liberation. Many Koreans joined the independence movement to build a free country based on communism, whereas other Koreans favored a capitalist country. When Japan finally withdrew from Korea in 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union, the winners of World War II, denied Koreans' desire and ability to determine their own governance. Instead, they split Korea and occupied them in the name of trusteeship. The United States occupied the southern part of Korea, whereas the Soviet Union occupied northern Korea. By 1948, the two divided Koreas created their own states.

Both the communist North Korea and the capitalist South Korea aimed to reunite Korea under their own ideological systems. They began intermittent military clashes at the border, which eventually turned into a full-scale war in 1950, when North Korea launched an invasion against South Korea. Upon the outbreak, the United States called for the United Nations to intervene and bolster South Korea, whereas China later joined North Korea to fight against the U.S.-led UN forces. After three years of bloody fighting, an armistice was signed in 1953 by the United Nations Command (representing U.S., South Korean, and allied forces), North Korea, and China—though South Korea itself refused to sign.The fighting ceased, but a formal peace treaty was never signed. Hence, the Korean War has not officially ended, and Korea is still divided today.

Thus, the Korean War started as an inter-Korean struggle over different responses to liberation from Japanese colonialism, but was soon transformed by foreign powers, including the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, into the global Cold War.

Countries deeply involved in the war have their own stories to tell. The dominant narrative in the United States, for example, defines the war as a U.S. benevolent intervention to save Koreans from communist North Korea and to stop the spread of communism. The master narrative in South Korea has framed the war as a national tragedy and has depicted the United States as a benevolent savior. In North Korea, the official narrative defines the war as a criminal aggression by the United States and its puppet regime in South Korea. Meanwhile, China has labeled the war as China's glorious victory in defending China and North Korea from the aggression of the imperialist United States.

Historians have long challenged such black-and-white nationalist accounts by explaining multiple complicated casualties and responsibilities of the war. That is, the Korean War originated in multiple causes, with blame enough to go around for everyone, including the United States, who divided Korea and then re-established the colonial government machinery in South Korea by reemploying Korean officers who had previously served the Japanese colonizers.

Testimonies from war survivors also challenge the dominant narratives in these countries. Some of these stories reveal that the United States was not a pure liberator but, rather, an occupier who since 1945 had oppressed Koreans' desire to build an independent country out of its colonial legacy. Counterstories also revealed U.S. atrocities during the war. In the 1950 No Gun Ri massacre, for example, U.S. troops machine gunned hundreds of South Korean civilians. The United States also dropped 635,000 tons of bombs along with 32,557 tons of napalm, which obliterated cities, towns, and homes in Korea and caused countless civilian deaths.

Such mass killing, destruction, and suffering, as well as the U.S. implication in the suffering, are difficult knowledge in the United States. These are difficult not only because they are traumatic content but also because they refute the dominant narrative of the Korean War as a benevolent U.S. mission, and U.S. wars in general as moral, just, honorable, inevitable, and necessary.

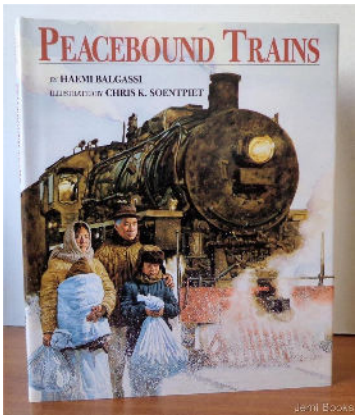
Instructional Suggestions

One way to provide more honest and fuller information of the Korean war is to use children's literature and primary sources from multiple perspectives. Below are recommended picture books.



When Spring Comes to the DMZ by Uk-Bae Lee tells a story of a young boy in South Korea who accompanies his grandfather on his visits to the DMZ every season. The DMZ (Korea's demilitarized zone) is a strip of land between the border of South Korea and North Korea. Along the DMZ, the North and South Korean militaries stand against each other, and civilians cannot cross the border freely. Inside the DMZ, however, an untouched haven for wildlife has flourished, and animals and plants cross the border freely. The boy in the book describes this beautiful wildlife thriving inside DMZ in juxtaposition to the soldiers conducting seasonal military practice on both sides of the border. The little boy also describes his grandfather's sorrows and desire for a united Korea so that he can finally meet his long-lost family and friends in North Korea.

Peacebound Trains by Haemi Balgassi focuses on what happened *during* the Korean War. Sumi, a Korean American girl, listens to her grandmother's stories about the Korean War. Grandmother and her family lived in South Korea, and one day North Korea invaded her town. Grandmother and her two children (including Sumi's mother) had to leave home and flee further south. Sumi's grandfather, however, decided to remain and fight against communist soldiers. He died during the war. When the fighting ended, Grandmother and her children immigrated to the U.S. and built a new life.



These two picture books complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. *When Spring Comes to the DMZ* highlights the unfinished nature of the Korean War and the continued human suffering. However, this book does not describe the war itself. In contrast, *Peacebound Trains* focuses on what happened *during* the Korean War, vividly describing human suffering caused by the war. However, it does not detail the complex causes of the war, instead simply mentioning that North Korea invaded South Korea. Also, the book only presents the United States in a positive light, illustrating the U.S. as a big brother who helped South Koreans during the war and allowed them to resettle in the U.S.

Therefore, teachers can use these books with their affordances and limitations in mind. They can first introduce *When Spring Comes to the DMZ* as a class and have students learn about the unfinished Korean War and to consider how its legacy affects Korean people today. Then, introduce *Peacebound Trains* and have students identify what happened during the active fighting of the Korean War. Also guide students in assessing how the United States is depicted in the text and illustrations.

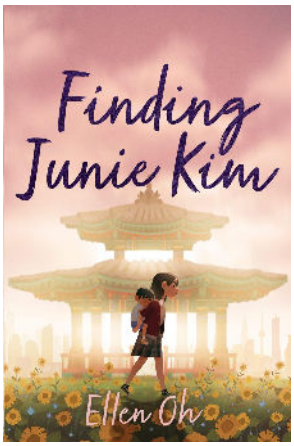
Then ask students if there may be different perspectives on the United States' role in the Korean War. To provide different views on U.S. roles in the war, students can analyze two primary sources. The first source is a propaganda poster produced by the Chinese government during the Korean War (image on the left below). The man in uniform is a caricature of Douglas MacArthur, the commander of the U.S. troops in South Korea. While he commits war crimes in Korea, a U.S. airplane bombs a factory in China. The poster depicts the United States as a violent war aggressor. The second source is a photo of MacArthur being greeted by South Korea President Syngman Rhee during the war (image on the right). This photo was taken by the U.S. military. One interpretation of this photo is that General MacArthur, as a representative of the United States, is a benevolent rescuer of South Korea from the communist attack.





Students can juxtapose the two sources and identify how and why General MacArthur and the United States are depicted in such starkly different ways. Then, ask students to compare and contrast the representation of the United States in the two primary sources with the depictions from *Peacebound Trains*. Challenge students to evaluate each image to draw their own conclusion about the United States' role in the Korean War and to explain their rationales.

For extension, students can expand their understanding of the Korean War by reading *Finding Junie Kim*. Written by Ellen Oh, this novel tells a story of a middle school girl, a third generation Korean American, with focus on identity, family, friendship, and cultural heritage. Her teacher asks students to do an oral history project, and Junie decides to interview her grandparents who shared their experiences of growing up in Korea during the Korean War. Through the project, she gets to learn about diverse and often conflicting experiences, thoughts, and memories of Korean people who lived through the Korean War.



Images Used:

1. Lee, Uk-Bae. When Spring Comes to the DMZ. Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2019.
2. Balgassi, Haemi. Peacebound Trains. New York: Clarion Books, 1996.
3. Xu Ling, "The Chinese people absolutely cannot tolerate the invasion of other countries, and cannot allow Imperialists to wantonly invade its own neighbours without acting," c. 1950, International Institute of Social History https://hdl.handle.net/10622/6A62B06D-F613-4867-BA65-6853AD827F18
4. Douglas MacArthur and Syngman Rhee at Kimpo Air Force Base, National Archives and Records Administration. NARA FILE#: 111-SC-306875
5. Oh, Ellen. Finding Junie Kim. New York: Harper Collins, 2021.