

Still Present Pasts

Korean Americans and the "Forgotten War"



a multimedia exhibit about legacies of war

Exhibit Study Guide

Students' Edition



잊혀진 전쟁 살아있는 기억

by Wol-san Liem

STILL PRESENT PASTS: Korean Americans and the “Forgotten War”
A Multimedia Exhibit – www.stillpresentpasts.org

STUDENT STUDY GUIDE

Activity 1 – Key Terms: Historical and Social

INTRODUCTION: To create a shared understanding of history we need to have a common frame of reference. Every historical event involves its own set of vocabulary words. We have to be clear about the meaning of these terms when we read or use them in order to maximize our understanding of historical moments. Exploring definitions of the words listed below will help you better understand the history of the Korean War and the art pieces you will see at Still Present Pasts.

History Terms

history
Forgotten War
38th Parallel
Cold War
“hot” war
napalm
separated families
political economy

Social Terms

trauma
social trauma
silences
immigrants/immigrant families/immigrant communities
community
community divisions/wounds
family divisions/wounds
personal divisions/wounds

ACTIVITY 2: History Text

Goals:

1. To think about how “history” is made and told, what is included and what is left out.
2. To gain background knowledge about the Korean War and the way its history has been recorded and told.
3. To think about the meaning of the Korean War for the Korean American community.
4. To think about the meaning of war and conflict for all people.

HISTORY IS...REMEMBERING THE PAST?...FORGETTING THE PAST?**Korea, the Forgotten War**

“...(E)asy acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress...is still with us. One reason these atrocities are still with us is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts, as radioactive wastes are buried in containers in the earth. We have learned to give them exactly the same proportion of attention that teachers and writers often give them in the most respectable of classrooms and textbooks.” (Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present*. Revised and Updated Edition. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers), 1995, p. 9.

How have we forgotten?

The Korean War has often been called “the forgotten war” because most Americans know very little about it, even those who were adults during the war years. The Korean War is also barely mentioned in most elementary, high school, and college history books. Educational texts, if they do not gloss over the war entirely, generally make only brief mention of this conflict often describing it as a the successful containment of communism by the United States and the United Nations resulting in freedom for South Koreans. These brief accounts omit a great deal about this painful episode, which ushered in the Cold War era, and the enormous significance it has had, and still has, for Korean, American and world history.

What have we forgotten?

According to most official accounts, the Korean War began on June 25, 1950 according. On that date, the North Korean People’s Army crossed the 38th Parallel that had divided North from South Korea since 1945. This border, hastily proposed by the United States, was initially meant to be a temporary demarcation line marking the territories where the Soviet Union (north) and the United States (south) were responsible for demobilizing Japanese military forces at the end of World War II. The 38th Parallel, however, quickly became a permanent scar on the Korean Peninsula, remaining to this day as the political boundary between the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

Explanations for the outbreak of the Korean War are highly contentious. For South Korea and the United States, the North Korean incursion on June 25 was a surprise attack with the objective of reunifying the country under communist leadership, by force. According to North Korean account, however, the “surprise attack” was a response to incursions northward by the south, which they claim were supported by the United States seeking to instigate war. Scholars may never be able to completely account for the outbreak of war until a permanent and lasting peace is achieved between North Korea and the United States, and between North and South Korea.

The United States quickly committed air and ground troops to Korea along with token forces from 16 other nations. Urged by the United States, the United Nations served as the sanctioning body for their (you had “allied forces,” but that sounds like allied forces from WWII, which would included Soviet Union) involvement in the conflict, which the UN called a police action. With U.S. and UN entry into the war, what might have remained a civil conflict became the first “hot” war of the Cold War era.

The Korean War was an air war, a guerrilla war, and almost became a nuclear war. The United States used bombing raids to a devastating advantage, wiping out entire villages, towns and cities in both North and South Korea. More tons of bombs were dropped on Korea during the war than on all of Europe during the Second World War. More napalm was used in Korea than during the Vietnam War. Government archives hold documents from August 1950 in which US military officers ask, “to have the following towns obliterated” by the Air Force, listing the towns by name. These same documents show the response a few weeks later: “fired eleven villages.”

On the ground, North Koreans, South Koreans and Americans rounded up and killed civilians they suspected of supporting the other side. The result was carnage so great that European reporters wrote of walking through cities with populations of 20,000 or more in which every building was bombed to rubble and those inhabitants who had not fled in time simply became casualties. By the end of the war over 3 million Korean civilians had died. So too had 36,940 U.S. military forces, 175,000 South Korean soldiers, 500,000 North Korean soldiers, 1 million Chinese volunteers, and 3,000 UN forces.

The war had profound social consequences for Koreans. Not only did it result in unspeakable numbers of civilian deaths, it also created a huge population upheaval that resulted in orphans, displaced people, and divided families. In all, nearly 10 million Koreans were separated from friends and relatives; fewer than 10,000 of whom have been reunited. The situation is so common that nearly every Korean family is touched in some way by separation, if not directly then through relatives or friends. The war also intensified ideological divisions leading to deep hatreds on each side. In the decades after the war, both north and south engaged in ideological education of their citizenry, deepening anti-communism in the south and anti-capitalism in the north.

The Korean War also deepened the unequal and dependent economic and military relationship between South Korea and the United States. Even today the South Korean military remains dependent on U.S. intelligence, training, and technology and falls under the U.S.-led joint command during times of war. South Korean producers rely heavily on American consumers as their main market and the South Korean economy is highly dependent on American and other foreign capital investment, from which great wealth accrues at the expense of Korean national capitalists and laborers.

The war also had significant consequences for the United States, internationally and domestically. Because American politicians saw it as an escalation of the Cold War struggle against communist domination worldwide, the Korean War elevated American containment objectives in Korea to a global policy. War hysteria won congressional and public support for massive federal investment in military and defense production with spending jumping from \$13.5 billion in 1950 to \$52 billion in 1952. This dramatic increase was funded by higher U.S. taxes and cuts in social service programs, and also resulted in a federal deficit that has continued to grow to this day. The political economy of war production that existed during WWII was reinvigorated, renovated, and strengthened to accommodate the demands of the Korean War in the short run and the Cold War in the long run.

The Korean War era also strengthened American anti-communism domestically. Persecution of suspected communist sympathizers that had been on the wane in the mid-1940s intensified and came to be known as "McCarthyism" in acknowledgement of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the chief anti-communist agitator in the early 1950s. During this period, thousands of Americans lost their jobs, and were forced to appear before loyalty hearings and to testify against friends and family members. Conservative government officials hunted down academics, politicians, entertainers, and other citizens thought to have leftist leanings. Recalling this past period of fear and suspicion, it is little wonder that so few Korean Americans want to talk about their war experiences.

Why have we forgotten?

"The Korean War is called 'the forgotten war' in America, because it is forgotten...By calling the Korean conflict a "forgotten war," we both name it, and we remember it—a paradox: what is it that we are remembering to forget?" Bruce Cumings. *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. II: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1990, p. 767.

In spite of some efforts to recover more of the history of the Korean War, very little is available to help us grasp the enormity of the civilian casualties during this conflict, or the lasting impact of the war on ordinary people. Entirely absent are the actual voices of war survivors and their families, whether North Korean, South Korean, or Korean residents in the United States or other countries.

As scholars such as Bruce Cumings and Howard Zinn have suggested, writing history is about making choices. Authors decide which people, places, and events to highlight, which to make secondary, and which to omit entirely, based on what they believe to be important. They decide whose voices to emphasize, who's to marginalize, and who's to omit entirely. Through conscious choices most American historians write about the Korean War by focusing on the goals, efforts, and achievements of the United States and its emerging dominance in international affairs during this period. They tell the story from the perspectives of America's leaders, men like President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur. These accounts teach us a lot. However, the story of bombings, atrocities, hunger, and poverty that often appear in the recollections of the war survivors are generally omitted. Thus, the experiences and histories of ordinary people are forgotten.

Those who experienced the devastation of this period first hand have vivid memories from their pasts. But, they rarely speak about them with each other, friends, or even family members. Korean Americans, like others who have survived traumatic conflicts, often live their Korean War pasts in silence. Speaking about the war can reignite unresolved ideological differences in the community and also reopen deep, personal wounds. The silence of survivors, however, does not mean they have forgotten. War leaves indelible scars and creates legacies that transcend time and generations. It has hidden impacts on family and community life. These residues are all the more true for Koreans because the Korean War is still not over, ideological divisions remain, and tensions between the United States (now home to many Korean Americans) and North Korea have intensified.

Telling the stories of war is painful and risky and, thus, many Korean Americans continue to live with their war legacies in silence. In the absence of survivor voices and historical texts that cover the human experience of the Korean War, second generation Korean Americans and the American public-at-large have forgotten the war. We fail to recognize its continued influence on community life and its role in current international affairs.

What would it mean to remember?

Is it necessary to speak about the war? What would it mean if Koreans and other survivors of war shared their stories? What would it mean if we learned and talked more about the Korean War and other traumatic political conflicts? Here are answers to these questions from two of the people interviewed for Still Present Past:

“Why dwell on the past? For me, it is not the past. The fear and terror of this time period have carried forward into my dad's life. It is visible. It's carried forward to my sisters' lives, my life, as a hole, a silence, and in order to move forward into my own life and everything that it means in the present and everything that it can mean in the future, I really feel that I have to release the past from this prison of silence.”

-Orson Moon

“If more Koreans talked about their experiences, put everyone together and then talk about it and wishing none of these same things happened in the future, no matter where, that could be a really good political weapon to stop doing it. It's not just one country, you know, it just human beings. We should stop killing. That could really be one voice, one strong voice.”

-Song Park

Could remembering and speaking about the past help Korean Americans and others who have experienced war heal unresolved sorrows that exist within themselves, their families, and their communities? Could it help mobilize people to end the painful tensions and division that still remain on the Korean peninsula and in other conflicted parts of the world? On the other hand, can remembering and speaking out sometimes not be helpful? When and under what conditions? Think about these questions when you attend the exhibit

Study Questions

1. Why is the Korean War called “the forgotten war”?
2. What impact did the Korean War have on Korea? On Korean Americans? On the United States in general?
3. Why is it difficult to speak about historical events like the Korean War?
4. Often there are many different versions of the same historical event. Are some true and others false? How should we read these multiple histories?
5. How are history and memory related? How are they similar to but also different from each other?
6. What are your answers to the questions in the last paragraph of the reading?

ACTIVITY 3: Exhibit Terms and Discussion Questions

Exhibit Terms

Multimedia (exhibit)

Conceptual art

Installation art

Performance art

Archival photographs

Oral history

Definitions of Specific Art Terms

Multimedia- Making use of more than one medium (artists materials). Examples: A sculpture that combines wood and plaster, an installation that combines found objects and video projections)

Multimedia exhibit - An exhibit that includes pieces using many different media and/or pieces that are constructed from more than one medium.

Conceptual Art - An art form in which ideas and/or questions embodied by a piece are more central to the work than its formal aspects (such as its medium, composition or form).

Installation art - An art form that incorporates any media to create a visceral and/or conceptual experience for the viewer in a particular environment.

Performance Art - A multimedia art form that combines visual, dramatic and often audio elements.

Archival photographs – Documentary photographs used in *SPP* to visually capture important historical moments.

Oral history – A recording of historical moments, experiences, and recollections, often done through interviews with individuals, to compliment more traditional historical resources. In *SPP*, oral histories are interwoven with art installations. Important recollections are also presented as brief, excerpted quotations.

Discussion Questions

1. What is art? What purpose does it serve?
2. What different kinds of art are there? What are installation, performance and multimedia art? Maybe you don't need this question since people will be answering it by defining the terms.
3. Should art have a message?
4. Can art express a collective vision as well as the individual artist's inspiration?
5. What is oral history? What might oral histories tell us that we don't learn from other sources?

ACTIVITY 4: Missing Pieces

Goals:

1. To think about the way social traumas have affected you and your family.
2. To talk with family members about the past.
3. To prepare to view and contribute to the installation called, "*Our Puzzle*."
4. To design a personal puzzle piece that tells a story/stories from your past that you can add to the exhibit installation, "*Our Puzzle*."

INTRODUCTION:

"Until I heard these stories, my own life was sort of like a puzzle with entire sections missing... When I first heard these stories a lot of things fell into place and I felt as if a weight had been lifted from me..."

The second generation Korean American who spoke these words was talking about his experience learning about his family's experiences during the war. Uncovering history in this way helped him better understand his family members and, in turn, himself.

Many immigrant families have painful experiences in their pasts related to traumatic community, national and international events. Sometimes, the effects of these encounters can last for generations creating legacies for children that are difficult to understand.

Think about these questions:

1. Are there stories of war, separation, or other significant events that are important to you and your family?
2. What are some of these stories
3. Try to learn more about these experiences from your parents and other relatives. What do they tell you?
4. How do you think your family's experiences may have affected them?
5. How have your family's experiences affected you?

Based on your answers to these questions, design your own puzzle piece or pieces. (See the following page for the puzzle shape and dimensions.) Your puzzle piece(s) might illustrate a story from you family's past, something you don't know about your family's past, or questions you would like to ask your elders. You could also express the ways in which that past is still present in your and your family's lives. You may use words, pictures or both. Try not to be self-conscious and have fun. Be creative. If you are unsure of a fact or detail, use your imagination or try to depict your lack of certainty. At the exhibit you will be able to recreate your puzzle piece(s) and add it(them) to the installation "*Our Puzzle*".

ACTIVITY 5: Bridging Divisions

Goals

1. To think about the experience of immigrants to the United States.
2. To think about social and personal divisions and about overcoming divisions
3. To prepare to view and contribute to the installation "*The Bridge of Return.*"

War, displacement, ideological conflict, immigration, and separation from family and friends have created divisions within the Korean American community, within Korean American families and even within individual Korean Americans. This experience is familiar to many immigrants and others who have experience painful social and political traumas during their lifetimes. In fact, every community, family, and individual has divisions they wish to overcome.

Think about the following questions:

1. Think about possible divisions that may exist within your family. How might they be related to historical events?
2. Who do you think of as your community? Are there divisions within your community? What do you think are some of the reasons for the divisions that may exist? How might they be related to historical events?

3. Do you feel divisions within yourself? Where might they come from?

It takes effort and courage to overcome divisions. Which one(s) do you want to overcome the most? At the exhibit, use "*The Bridge of Return*" to help you do this.