

What was the Korean Peninsula like before it split into two countries? How did Japan rule Korea from 1910 to 1945, and how do many Koreans feel about Japan as a result? How did Korea become divided, and how did the United States and the Soviet Union play into that? What happened during the Korean War?

Who is Kim Il sung and how did he create a personality cult that is still alive today in North Korea? We will learn the answers to these questions and more in today's episode, part one of North Korea 101, or the last 100 ish years in North Korea. Welcome to Wiser World, a podcast for busy people who need a refresher on all things world.

Here we explore different regions of the globe, giving you the facts and context you need to think historically about current events. I truly believe that the more we learn about the world, The more we embrace our shared humanity. I'm your host Allie Roper. Thanks for being here.

Hey, it's nice to be back with another installment in this series of the last 100 years history in a few high profile countries I think we need to know more about. Last time we covered Taiwan and today we are going to do North Korea. Also, if you haven't signed up for my email list yet, go to my website, wiserworldpodcast.com.

com. It's right there. Easy peasy. I send emails when new episodes come out, as well as resources and announcements that you won't get anywhere else. Just make sure to check your spam or promotions folder in your email for that welcome email, since it often ends up there. All right, let's do this. Let's talk about North Korea, North Korea 101.

Let's go scratch the surface. So North Korea has got to be one of the most fascinating countries to study. largely because information is relatively limited. It is the last communist regime of its kind. It's become something of a hermit kingdom, very shut off from the modern world. It's become a bit of a fascination for many, and I think for good reason.

It's pretty crazy. There have been roughly 300, 000 people who have defected or another word is just escaped from North Korea since 1953. Most of them have moved to China or Russia. South Korea has accepted some as well. There are quite a lot of books telling the stories of North Korean defectors. You might have read some of them.

And we used a few of them in our research, but I think you have to be a little bit careful. Sometimes information can be stretched or sensationalized. And so we've tried to. Keep that in mind as we've done our research and have a variety of things we've corroborated with our sources. Let's jump back in time and let's learn in this episode how North Korea became this very mysterious place in the world.

The notion of a separate North Korea and South Korea has really only been a thing since 1945. And before that, it was just one peninsula called Korea. It's roughly the same size and latitude in the world as the state of Utah here in the United States. It hangs off the northeastern edge of China, so almost the entire upper border of North Korea is with China.

We'll talk about why that's important in a minute. A very small amount of the It's also quite close to Japan. It's only about an hour's flight from Korea to Japan. And due to its geography, Korea was more divided culturally, historically, in an East West fashion, meaning China on the West, Japan on the East, ever than by North or South.

The North, or the Korean peninsula, is really beautiful. It has a lot of coastline, obviously being a peninsula, and it has beautiful mountains and streams, peaks, valleys, forests. It can get very cold in Korea and many people don't know that. There are so many mountains that only one fifth of the land can be farmed and the north part, which we'll talk about today, has the most forests and mountains.

I'll be showing you some pictures of the Korean peninsula on my social media on TikTok and Instagram in the coming weeks because we'll be sharing some visuals and maps to help you get more of an idea. of this amazing place. So before 1945, Korea was just Korea. No north, no south. To learn how it became divided, we have to go back a little in time.

Korea was once a land that was ruled, like most East Asian countries, by a family dynasty. The Choson dynasty. It's spelled a couple of different ways, but C H O S U N dynasty ruled Korea from 1392 until the early 1900s. That's over five centuries of rule, and it's one of the longest lasting rules in world history.

Chinese emperors treated Korea for centuries, kind of like a vassal state, meaning that it approved any dealings that they had with foreign countries. Different East Asian countries tried to rule Korea over the years, as Korea was seen by many as kind of backwards. It was very much a feudal farming country.

Most Koreans didn't know how to read or write. However, the unique culture of Korea was very strong, and during that last dynasty, Korean pride in their culture. was absolutely a thing. And just as we've talked about in past episodes, Japan, very close to Korea, was quite imperialistic in the mid 1800s until the mid 1900s.

It wanted an empire, and Korea was one of the areas that it wanted. There was a lot of drama leading up to Japan making Korea one of its colonies, including wars between Japan and Russia, Japan and China. But I'm going to keep it really simple, and I just want you to know that in 1905, So not that long ago, a little over 100 years ago, Japan virtually annexed Korea and made, it was made official in 1910 with the Japan Korea treaty.

And the emperor of Korea was forced to concede the whole territory to the emperor of Japan, and Korea became a Japanese colony. The signing of this treaty is very sad from the Korean perspective. The Korean government officials did not want to sign it. There were a lot of threats involved. Many people actually killed themselves to show resistance because this kind of thing, respect and honor are a big deal in Korean culture.

And so this was a huge deal. And the exiled Korean government made its way to China. and Japan took over Korea. So how did the Japanese treat the nation of Korea during its colonial rule, which lasted until the end of World War II in 1945? So roughly 35 to 40 years, Japan ruled Korea. This is a very important time in the history of Korea.

We learned in the Taiwan episodes that Japan was known For being an intense authoritarian rulers and yet many of the Taiwanese who live during this time actually view the Japanese relatively positively. Not so with Korea. In most of the sources that we studied, we learned that most Koreans are pretty salty about the Japanese.

And I want to tell you a little bit about why. So the Japanese saw themselves as superior to the Koreans, kind of like they were modernizing a backwater region. And many Koreans had very little experience with the outside world during this time in history. And so many Koreans were sent to Japan. To do labor in both China and Japan during the Japanese rule since Japan took over the northern part of China in 1931.

And so they would send Koreans to do labor. In fact, Koreans were used so much for labor, making rail systems and mining, heavy industries, and the exploitation stories are are pretty awful. They were really exploited Korea for lumber, rice, fish, coal, cotton, and they took almost all of it to Japan. They tried to turn Korea into a little Japan, essentially, and they worked to assimilate Koreans culturally and politically.

kind of trying to wipe out their language, their history and culture. They cut off the long braids that many Korean men wore by tradition. And they shut down Korean newspapers, censored them heavily. Koreans had to take on Japanese names. And this was especially a big deal since Korean names are a connection to their ancestors and erasing the name.

Kind of felt like erasing the past. Many Koreans actually would would rather kill themselves before changing their names. And some people did that. Or they would maintain their Korean names in the secret humiliation. And obviously, there were some Koreans who cooperated with Japan, and they were rewarded.

But generally, not a great situation for the Koreans under the Japanese. When Japan took over, it From a higher level historical level, it did set to work immediately modernizing Korea. It worked on infrastructure like railway lines and roads and harbors, communication networks, markets. They worked a ton on a health campaign, like public hygiene, introducing modern medicine, building hospitals, and the Korean population did grow during their rule.

They changed the way that land. You know, rights were worked, more efficient land use, increased rice production, doing a lot of things that the past dynasty had not been able to do. The southern part, and this is important to remember, the southern part was more agrarian or more farmland. The north was more industrialized.

They also revamped education during their time. Um, primary rule in. Enrollment had previously been 1 percent in 1910, but by 1943, it was 47%, making it for a far more educated populace, still not amazing, but definitely more educated. They replaced the traditional schools that the Koreans had been using to teach only Japanese.

So, many older Koreans today still speak Japanese or learned it as their first language. In fact, the Korean language was banned for part of the Japanese occupation. Can you imagine? Wow. I mean, just imagine some other country taking over and banning your native language. I just think that would be massively destabilizing.

The standard of living improved for the average Korean generally during the Japanese rule, and they left the land with more modern infrastructure that future governments have used. Even then though, again, Many Koreans were still living in stick and mud kind of homes, even during the Japanese rule and beyond World War Two, which builds up for many years, you know, beginning in 1939 meant that many Koreans were forced to move to Japan for labor, and millions of Koreans at home were required to work for the Japanese war effort in 1944.

So this is toward the end of World War Two. All Korean males were forced to enlist in the Japanese army, and many Korean women were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese soldiers, and they were called comfort women. You might have heard about that. The super fascinating tidbit to me was that this Korean government in exile, remember how they went to China and were in exile?

They actually volunteered to fight the Japanese with the Chinese nationalists or the communists. If you remember that from the China episodes, they joined efforts to fight the Japanese with the Chinese. And the Soviet Union secretly sponsored this. Now this force, this group of Koreans living in China who in exile, interestingly enough, they would eventually become the core.

of the North Korean military after World War II during the Korean War. So we have Koreans kind of living all over East Asia. We have them living as exiled from the government in China. We have them fighting the Japanese there. We have Koreans in China working for the Japanese by force in northern China.

We have millions of Koreans living in Japan as laborers. And we have some living in cooperating or not cooperating underneath the Japanese rule. And By the time Japan surrendered at the end of World War II after dropping, the dropping of the atomic bombs, Korea looked very different in 1945 than it did in 1905.

During World War II, when the Allied world leaders were considering what to do with Japan, or with Japanese colonies, they got together in Cairo, and Chiang Kai shek, who was representing China at the time, spoke up for Korea, saying that he hoped it would become a, quote, free and independent nation after the war.

President Roosevelt from the United States, however, thought that the Koreans would need to stay under kind of a trusteeship for 20 to 30 years until they were, quote, considered fit enough to govern themselves, end of quote. Interesting. So World War Two ends, Japanese soldiers and all the Japanese living in Korea.

Leave abruptly because the Japanese lost World War two and the Koreans are so happy about this There are stories of the Koreans running from you through the streets Congratulating each other cheering many Koreans saw this as they were once again in control of their own destiny They could reclaim their country from the last 35 40 years of Japanese control Many of the Koreans living in Japan who had been laborers They went back to Korea and they were pretty much Considerably better off than the ones who had been in Korea the whole time, and they managed to bring some personal wealth with them, which was not completely taken away, even after the Korean War, and we'll talk about that in part two, a little bit back in Washington, D.

C. It seems like nobody really knew about this obscure little Japanese colony called Korea. Even Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, confessed he had never heard of the place. But, they knew that with Japan withdrawing so quickly, there would be a dangerous power vacuum. The Americans were very concerned that the Soviet Union was going to use Korea as a staging ground to maybe go after Japan.

Especially since Soviet troops were right on the border of Korea. So two young American officers were charged 30 minutes, guys, 30 minutes, to figure out what to do with Korea. And from the book, Nothing to Envy by Barbara Demick, a great book, she puts it like this. I think it's a great quote, quote, The officers, one of whom was Dean Rusk, later to become Secretary of State, wanted to keep the capital, Seoul, in the U.

S. sector. So the two army officers looked for a convenient way to divide the peninsula. They slapped a line across the map at the 38th parallel. The line bore little relationship to anything in Korean history or geography. Nothing about it suggests that there's a natural place to carve it into. End of quote.

So basically, the divide of North and South Korea was entirely a foreign creation. Quote, cooked up in Washington and stamped on the Koreans without any input from them. Koreans were infuriated to be partitioned in the same way as the Germans. After all, they had not been aggressors in World War II, Koreans at the time described themselves with a self deprecating expression saying they were shrimp among whales, crushed between the rivalries of the superpowers.

The Soviet Union was just as irresponsible because they agreed to it. The North got 50, 000 miles of mountainous territory containing much of the heavy industry left by the Japanese, including the main hydroelectric power stations. The South was smaller, but had twice the population and the most productive rice fields.

The division weakened the country and left it in the mercy of these huge powers. Another quote for you. Neither superpower, so the U. S. and Soviet Union, was willing to cede ground to allow for an independent Korea. End of quote. So we see that they were not actually freed by the Japanese defeat, but kind of given a spoils of war to the two greatest victors, the USSR and the USA.

North of the 38th parallel went to the Soviets, South to the Americans, and in 1948, the U. S. backed Syngman Rhee. He created the Republic of Korea, or South Korea. Syngman Rhee was a conservative who had a PhD from Princeton, had been educated in the United States, and he was about 70 years old. In the North, the Soviet Union backed an anti Japanese resistance fighter to be their leader, the leader of North Korea.

And his name was Kim Il sung, and he was much younger, he was in his 30s. And he quickly declared his state the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, North Korea. I find it very funny how communists often use words like Democratic and Republic in their names.

They're not, they're neither of those things. Kim was largely picked by Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union. As he hoped that he, this, this Kim Il sung would tow Stalin's communist lines. And he ended up doing that and much more and his regime actually outlived even the Soviet Union. Okay, so we see these two sides forming.

The North is being backed by the Soviets and the Chinese communists, who at the time were led by Mao Zedong. He just won his own civil war. And we have South Korea, which is backed by the United States and a UN coalition of 15 nations such as Britain, Australia, Canada, France. The Koreans themselves were splintered into more than a dozen rival factions, many with communist sympathies, because many of the rice farmers had heard rumors that the communists up north, with Kim Il sung, would give them free land.

But many Koreans didn't really have strong political opinions either way. The literacy rate, again, was not incredibly high, even after the Japanese rule, and many just wanted to take care of their families and farm. But many of the Koreans relocated themselves based on their ideologies. So leftists and communist sympathizers moved north and conservatives and landowners moved down south.

And ethnic Koreans who had been born in Japan because they've been sent there to work, their parents have been sent there to work, forced to help with the Japanese war effort, They separated themselves as well. Some of them went back to South Korea, but many went to North Korea since the North Korean propaganda showed images of these rosy cheeked children playing in the fields and brand new farm equipment, hauling harvests in this miraculous new country led by Kim Il sung.

And many people were very convinced by this. Now we can see propaganda a little more clearly, but this is, This is back a very long time ago, and they were very convinced with both

sides claiming to be the legitimate government of Korea, it seems like war was pretty inevitable in January of 1950. Kim Il Sung proposed the idea of war to Stalin and Stalin went along with it because he didn't really think that the USA would get involved.

And 25th, so six months later, 1950. Kim Il sung's troops stormed across the border with Soviet supplied tanks, and they quickly captured Seoul, the capital of South Korea, almost took over the entire South. But under the, under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur, U. S. troops came in and quickly reversed the gains, pushing them back and recapturing Seoul.

And as the U. S. troops headed north into Pyongyang, which is the capital of North Korea, Chinese communist forces entered the war. and push them back. A little side note here. A big reason why North Korea didn't fall to the UN forces was because of Chinese involvement. Over 80, 000 Chinese troops were killed in the Korean War.

This is all the very beginning of the Korean War. This push, this push back and two more years of fighting really only produced frustration and a stalemate. As one book put it, Quote, by the time an armistice was signed on July 27th, 1953, nearly three million people were dead and the peninsula lay in ruins.

The border remained more or less along the 38th parallel, even by the dubious standards of 20th century warfare, it was a futile and unsatisfying war. End of quote. Sadly, many South Korean prisoners of war got stuck in North Korea after the war and were never able to come back. In fact, many South Koreans today have family that are living in North Korea.

So yes, an armistice was signed at the end of those three years of war. But some say that the Korean War never really ended. Did it? Did it not? The DMZ or Demilitarized Zone was restored to the 38th parallel. And now this region, this DMZ between the North and South Korea countries acts as kind of a buffer zone.

It's 155 miles long. It's about two and a half miles. Thick, and it's just this thicket of concertina wire and tank traps, trenches, embankments, moats, artillery pieces, landmines. It's still the place where the most incidents between North and South Korea still occur. There have been violent outbreaks resulting in several North Korean or several Korean deaths along the border and the DMZ is one big reason people don't escape North Korea into South Korea, but rather into China.

There's a joint security area, a JSA, near the western end of this DMZ zone. Leaders from the North and South still meet there when they have to and it's heavily guarded on both sides. So North Korea goes on to create a country that is now quite wealthy and highly modern by today's standards. North Korea, on the other hand, begins to chart a completely different path.

They are still essentially in a standoff today, these two nations. So now that we have the separation of North and South Korea, we're going to dive into North Korea from 1953 on and why this nation is important to know about. As one author put it, quote, North Korea is the

quintessential rogue regime. The term rogue state is referred only for the most incorrigible in the international system.

Rogue states engage in rash behavior, subjugate their populations, are hostile to the ideologies and interests of the free world, and most troublingly, troublingly breach established international rules in many areas. End of quote. North Korea, under the leadership of Kim Il sung, had created a constitution that was established in 1948 prior to the Korean War.

Technically, it had three branches of government, just like we do here in the United States, but they all stand under the authority of the executive branch. So no checks and balances. Everything goes through the Supreme Leader of North Korea. We're going to talk about his personality cult a lot, but it's important to know that Kim Il sung Ruled North Korea until his death in 1994.

That's a very long time He was the ruler of North Korea and let's talk a little bit about how he was raised and how he came into power He was born in 1912 and his father was his grandfather was actually a Protestant managed minister when he was 7 his family moved to Manchuria Northern China to escape the Japanese who by then had ruled over Korea for roughly 10 to 15 years His mother was very anti Japanese and he studied communism in China as a teenager and was a member of an underground Marxist organization.

He ended up joining the CCP, or the Chinese Communist Party, and was part of an anti Japanese guerrilla groups that would fight off the Japanese and And who the Japanese at that time were moving in to Manchuria, which they did end up taking over in 1931. So Kim Il sung was educated in Chinese at a local school and spent the next 20 years of his life in service of either the Chinese.

or the Soviet Communist Party. In the 1930s, Kim Il sung is said to live at Mount Paektu, which is the highest mountain in North Korea and is an extinct volcano. And many sources say that he lived something of a Robin Hood like existence, meaning that he led hit and run raids on the Japanese, kidnapping fresh recruits from young men in the villages to work for the communists.

And Mount Paektu has been revered in Korean culture, has this mythical reference surrounding So this added to his future almost religious cult that he eventually created. During World War II, he escaped to the Soviet Union where the Soviets trained communist guerrilla fighters, and he fought on the Soviet side during World War II.

And this was the first time that he had been back in Korea, fighting with the Soviets, after living in Manchuria for 26 years. In many ways, he was more Chinese than Korean at this stage of the game. He even changed his name. In 1941 or 1942, Kim and his first wife gave birth to his eldest son, Kim Jong il, who ends up taking power in the 1990s.

We'll talk about him a lot next. Later on, they told people that his son was born at Mount Paektu. Many think he was actually born in a Soviet military camp, and he did actually grow up speaking

Russian. and was educated with Russian children until at least the age of 12. So a lot of their stories, we don't know how true they are.

Back to Kim Il sung though, in 1945, at the end of World War II, he became the first secretary of the Bureau of the Korean Communist Party and he created the Korean People's Army. He recruited guerrillas and soldiers who had fought the Japanese. Again, this is at the end of World War II when those two young American officers are over in Washington drawing up the 38th parallel.

And Stalin, as I mentioned earlier, kind of handpicks Kim, thinking he will be a puppet for Soviet forces who were wanting to occupy North Korea. Kim was an interesting pick considering that many other Korean communists were better qualified, and he was only 33, he was poorly educated, and he was really unknown in Korea.

The NKVD, which is the Soviet spy agency of the past, they kind of created him in a way. They had to coach him on speaking in Korean since he needed quite a lot of help speaking Korean. Immediately as Syngman Rhee is working in the South, he Kim starts nationalizing things up in the North, starting in 1947, half of the farmland and heavy industry becomes nationalized, meaning that the government took over its management.

Since the country was so fresh after the intense and hated Japanese rule, and the people were relatively uneducated in many senses, Kim Il sung capitalizes on this, and he begins a total propaganda campaign showing the wonders of communism. He begins calling himself the Great Leader, and he tells everyone that he kicked out The Japanese.

He erected statues of himself. The first one was actually erected in 1949. And you have to remember that he was under Stalin's wing. By 1949, his North Korea was a fully fledged Stalinist dictatorship. It had labor camps, and purges, and arbitrary arrests. and public executions and a personality cult, which we learned about in the Russia episodes.

During the Korean War, the North Korean army actually massacred civilians on their side who belonged to higher classes, were Christians or who resisted in any way. This also should sound very familiar to Mao Zedong with China. Thousands of people fled to the South during the Korean War because Kim Il sung's rule was so brutal and many ended up being separated again.

They couldn't make the journey. It was obviously very dangerous to be traveling during a war. And this is why many South Koreans have relatives in the North. So far on this podcast, we have looked at the cults of personality for Mao Zedong in China, and also for Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Ledin in Russia.

But personally, I think the Kim cults of personality is next level. He began indoctrination almost immediately. And by playing up his role in fighting against the Japanese, Kim became a god,

literally, like the god of North Korea. Very quickly, all good things in North Korea began to be attributed to him, regardless of if he had anything to do with it.

His birthday became the most celebrated national holiday. Myths popped up around his birthday, like this mythical beginning at Mount Paektu. It's pretty certain he was really born in like a normal Korean city, but no, he's born at Mount Paektu now. His absolutism became the doctrine of North Korea. In fact, the principles of being a member of the Communist Party were, and I quote, recognize the authority of comrade Kim Il sung.

Accept unconditionally the teachings of the chairman and regard them as a yardstick for making all decisions. And when making reports, discussing a topic, giving a lecture, or quoting from documents, one has to refer to the chairman's teachings and never speak or write about something inconsistent with the chairman's views.

End of quote. Absolutism was at the core of the cult and it was all revolving around Kim Il sung. Then, even though we know that Kim was the first attacker in the Korean War, he spreads the word that the Americans were the ones who attacked first. And not knowing anything else and not being able to get reliable information from the outside, many ordinary North Koreans believed him or were too afraid to ask again.

This is a Stalinist regime at the time. And this wasn't the time of the internet. Many people were just surviving day to day, week to week. He begins purging and wiping out people who fight against him as the supreme ruler. And as we've learned from Stalin and Mao, purging is one way to gain collective power.

It kills off the people who question you and it scares everyone else into total fear until many start believing the lie. His personality cults, as we'll learn about more in the next episode especially, was so extreme that it Even defectors have a hard time speaking badly about Kim Il sung. It's so indoctrinated into them in every facet of their society that for many, it can be a difficult thing to shake.

All right, so I think that we know a little bit now about Korea until 1953, the rise of Kim Il sung and his personality cults, and in part two, we're going to cover more about how this affected the lives of ordinary people. And a couple of you have asked for a short summary at the end of every episode to kind of wrap things up, help you solidify this stuff into your mind, so I'm going to do that for you here.

All right, so fast summary on part one of Korea 101. Korea had a dynasty for thousands of years prior to being colonized by the Japanese. It was just one place, no north, no south, at this point. In 1910, Japan officially takes over Korea. It becomes a colony of Japan. Life under the Japanese is pretty brutal.

Koreans become a more modernized and literate society. Healthcare goes up. But the Japanese do their best to decimate Korean culture. And to this day, many Koreans are not very fond of the

Japanese. For this reason. During this time, Kim Il sung is living in Manchuria. He's fighting the Japanese. He's learning communism.

He's becoming a friend to the Soviets. At the end of World War II, 1945, the Japanese have to leave Korea. Koreans are so excited. They want to create their own thing. But the Americans and Soviets divide Korea along the 38th parallel. Kim Il sung leads out in the north, becomes a, or begins a campaign for personal power.

He creates a that we will dive deeply into. in the next episode. There you go. There's the summary. I have a short takeaway for this episode and I think that it's just how interconnected things are. Countries are far more interconnected than I think we often like to admit and the Soviet Union and the United States played enormous roles in the history of Korea as did the Japanese.

In my newsletter that I'm going to send out I'm going to share some resources for you to help you dive a little bit deeper into the Japanese colonization as well as influence from other countries in Korea. But I'm going to leave it for that newsletter. Anyway, I hope that this episode has given you a better background in Korea.

And I'm very excited for part two, where we dive deep into this hermit kingdom that is North Korea today. It's heavy, but it is absolutely fascinating. And I hope that you listen to it and let's go out and make the world a little wiser.