

Lesson Plan: A Brief History of North Korea

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Featured resources

[KQED's The Lowdown: A Brief History of North Korea](#)

[The Daily Conversation: The History of North Korea](#) (3:48)

[Vox: What Made North Korea So Bizarre](#) (2:36)

Opening quick write prompt:

What do you know about the nation of North Korea? What is one thing you would like to know more about?

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objective

- Students will analyze the history of North Korea in light of current tensions in the region.
- Students will evaluate the factors that led to North Korea's current government.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What historical factors have influenced the totalitarian government in North Korea? In what ways does North Korea's government threaten its own people and the rest of the world?

Nearly 70 years ago, the Korean peninsula, once a unified nation, split into two distinct states. In the resulting Korean War (1950 – 1953), millions of people were killed. But the peninsula remained divided, separated by a cease-fire line known as the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). In the decades that followed, North Korea became an increasingly isolated, totalitarian state. Despite today being one of the poorest nations on earth, North Korea has developed a huge military and a nuclear arsenal, and has repeatedly threatened to attack the United States. This lesson explores the history of the Korean peninsula and how North Korea became the rogue state it is today.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).



Pro-military propaganda in North Korea/Wikimedia

Word	Simple definition
Cult of personality (n.)	A situation in which a public figure, such as a political leader, is deliberately presented to people as someone who should be adored or loved
Demarcation (n.)	The limits, edges or boundaries of something
Gulag (n.)	A prison labor camp
Regime (adj.)	A form of government, one that's usually repressive
Totalitarian(adj.)	Ruling with complete and unopposed power

Direct instruction and guided practice

- Discuss the quick-write prompt to gauge what students already know about North Korea. Ask students what they would like to learn more about. Make a list of student questions.
- One of the things students may want to learn more about is how the North Korean government became a totalitarian state that isolates its people from the rest of the world.
- As a class or in small groups, students watch [The Daily Conversation video](#) (Note: Use a platform like [EdPuzzle](#) or [PlayPosit](#) to insert questions directly into the video. Find strategies for how to make classroom videos interactive [HERE](#).)
 - **At 0:30**, stop the video and make sure students understand what the Soviet Union is and why it matters that they took control of North Korea after World War II.
 - **Stop at 0:57 and ask:** Who fought in or supported the Korean War in the 1950s? (North and South Korea, USA and China)
 - **Stop at 1:45** and define “cult of personality.” (See above)
 - **Stop at 2:01 and ask:** What was a consequence of North Korea’s isolation from the rest of the world? (Deadly famine, 3.5 million people died)
 - **Stop at 2:50 and ask:** How does North Korea’s “military first” policy affect North Koreans? (Huge military, lots of resources go into the military) How does it affect other countries like the United States? (Nuclear threat, food aid, etc.)
 - **Stop at 3:11** and explain the image, taken at night, that shows the difference in technology between North Korea and South Korea (and China to the north)
 - **Stop at the end of the video and ask:** What reasons does this video give for why China is supporting North Korea? (mutual security pact, North Korea makes China look less extreme)

- **Transition to independent practice:** Answer any questions about the video then ask: What are the key factors that have contributed to North Korea becoming the totalitarian state it is today?
- Explain that students will be further exploring these and other factors as well as the consequences of North Korea's policies. Refer also to the list of student questions from the quick-write and encourage them to answer their own question, too. (If students have posed questions that likely won't be answered, let them know before they begin reading.)

Independent practice

- In small groups or individually, students read [The Lowdown post](#) then watch [the Vox video](#).
- Remind students that while reading and watching the video, they should consider the following questions along with their own from the quick-write:
 - What factors led to the current totalitarian regime in North Korea?
 - What are the consequences of that regime for the North Korea people?
 - What are the consequences of that regime for the rest of the world?

Assessment/Reflection

- As a class, students respond to the following questions in a discussion or in writing:
 - What makes the North Korea unlike any other country in the world?
 - The Vox video ends with the claim that the North Korean people are the true victims of the North Korean government? Do you agree? Explain using evidence.
 - President Barack Obama practiced a policy of "strategic patience" with North Korea, while the Trump administration has taken a more confrontational stance. Given what you've learned about the North Korean government, how do you think other countries should deal with North Korea?

[Circle chats](#), small-group discussions and [think-pair-share](#) provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension/Homework

Write/speak locally: Students turn their views on the situation in North Korea, the plight of the North Korean people or U.S. policy toward North Korea into a letter, short speech or presentation, then research ways to make their voice heard in their community. (Example: Speaking during the public comment section of a city council meeting, posting on an online forum, etc.) For a list of how to contact local officials in your area, check out [KQED Learning's Local Election Toolkit](#).

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.