

A Comparison of Two Cold War Conflicts: The Korean War vs. The Vietnam War.

Introduction

In this essay, I will compare the similarities and differences between two major Cold War conflicts: the Korean War (1950–53) and the Vietnam War (1945–75).

I will be arguing that the United States had clear justification and legitimacy for intervening in Korea, but that its involvement in Vietnam lacked both legal legitimacy and moral justification.

Theories and Concepts

The theories and concepts I will use to supplement my arguments will be the political ideologies that influenced each side, such as the Domino Theory¹ which was developed by the United States. I will also be applying the Just War Theory² to compare actions and reasoning in both conflicts, and whether they can be judged as justified or not. Finally, I will use Galtung's cultural violence³ Concept to assess whether the conflicts revealed different or similar levels of violence and what beliefs or prejudices contributed to the support or deepening of that violence.

Background to the Korean War

In 1910, Japan annexed Korea as a colony; this was similar to the French colonial conquests in Indochina, which included Vietnam. Following the end of the War, the lack of colonial or native government to oversee the country pushed the United States and Soviet Union to divide the country along the 38th parallel for 'administrative purposes'⁴. This division also occurred in Vietnam, but for different reasons. The Soviet Union occupied the North, whilst the South was under United States control.

¹ Robert Jervis, 'The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 24.4 (1980), pp. 563–92 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/173775>>.

² Chris Rahman, 'The Oxford Handbook of War', in *Political Studies Review*, no. 3, preprint, 2013, xi, pp. 101-109

³ Johan Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 27.3 (1990), pp. 291–305 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/423472>>.

⁴ 'Korean War', *Britannica* (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 20 June 2025) [accessed 17 November 2025].

The United Nations had adopted the creation of an independent South Korea in early 1948, and the Republic of Korea was formed in August 1948 under its first leader, Syngman Rhee.

Numerous reasons have been proposed for the conflict's onset. Simmons wrote that:

Probably a contributory factor in P'yongyang's decision to invade was a desire to disarm [Syngman] Rhee's military machine before, as seemed likely to happen in the near future - it became too powerful to contend with⁵.

The North Koreans, with this in mind, consulted with the Soviet Union. The decision to cross the 38th Parallel and invade the South was made with the approval of Josef Stalin, and on the 25th June 1950, the North invaded.

Background to the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War can similarly be traced back to the end of the Second World War, when nationalists and communists fought the French over their colonial rule. With the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 and the signing of the Geneva Accords in July 1954, Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel⁶. North Vietnam, as in North Korea, was controlled by a communist regime, whilst in the South, the French passed control to the former emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai⁷. The North, fighting a guerrilla-style war with the South, wanted a united country free of foreign interference, just as the Koreans did. The United States, though, continued to support the South, as it had done in Korea.

In August 1964, the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident⁸ Occurred, which led to the United States passing the Southeast Asia resolution, giving President Lyndon Johnson the authority 'to take all necessary steps, including the use of force'⁹.

⁵ Robert R Simmons, 'The Strained Alliance', *The American Political Science Review* (New York, USA), 71.3 (1977), pp. 1063–65, doi:10.1017/S0003055400274455.

⁶ George C Herring, 'The Cold War and Vietnam', *OAH Magazine of History*, 18.5 (2004), pp. 18–21 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163717>>.

⁷ Gordon Kerr, *A Short History of the Vietnam War*, ed. by Nick Rennison (Oldcastle Books Ltd, 2015).

⁸ Erich Martel, 'Gulf of Tonkin', *OAH Magazine of History*, 7.2 (1992), pp. 36–39 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/25162875>>.

⁹ Martel, Gulf of Tonkin.p.37

The first substantial deployment of American Infantry troops landed in Da Nang in March 1965.

Ideologies

With their containment policy and the Domino Theory, the U.S. feared the spread of communism. This belief shaped U.S. policy in Korea and Vietnam by as Schlesinger argued, 'justifying intervention'¹⁰ in places they thought were at risk. Since both Norths were communist and backed by the Soviet Union and China, aid and military support given to the South seemed, in my opinion, understandable. With the authoritarian nature of communist regimes, this increased U.S. fears about what might happen if communism were allowed to spread further. At the same time, Northern leaders had declared their aim of fighting for a united country and removing foreign interference. The Soviets and Chinese supported these goals but also wanted to spread communist ideology. Together, these ideological beliefs formed the justifications given by the U.S. for involvement in both Korea and Vietnam, shaping policy more through fear of communist expansion than through the specific political realities in either country.

Jus ad Bellum

Jus ad bellum, which governs when it is permissible to initiate or engage in war, was distinct in both Korea and Vietnam. These principles include having a just cause, a legitimate authority to use force, and a right intention behind the action. This framework is essential to understanding my main argument: that the United States' intervention in Korea meets the criteria for a just war far more convincingly than in Vietnam.

In the Korean conflict, the justification can be seen as fairly clear-cut; the communist North had invaded the South, and this was clearly an act of aggression which needed a response, fulfilling the requirement of Just Cause. The United Nations Security Council functioned as the legitimate authority and, on 27th June 1950, passed a resolution to: 'render such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel armed attack'¹¹. Because this came from the United Nations, the United States' involvement in supporting South Korea was legitimised and demonstrated a clear intention to restore peace, thereby providing strong justification for

¹⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, *Origins of the Cold War*, (New York, Foreign Affairs, 1967), pp. 22–52.

¹¹ Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p.56.

its actions. The just cause for intervention in Vietnam, however, was far less straightforward. The principles of Jus ad bellum were more complex to justify than in the Korean conflict. The North did not invade the South in the way the North Koreans had done, though they were conducting a guerrilla-style campaign.

I believe the absence of a United Nations resolution undermined the legitimacy that the United States had been granted in Korea.

The United States partly based their involvement in Vietnam on honouring its SEATO treaty¹², which ironically did not call for military intervention,

Michael Walzer said:

‘When the U.S. did intervene militarily in Vietnam, then, it acted not to fulfil commitments to another state, but to pursue policies of its own contrivance’¹³.

Events like the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident¹⁴, which was heavily disputed, only strengthened my agreement with Walzer that the U.S. contrived to intervene in Vietnam without a legal basis.

Applying Walzer's ‘Self-Help Test’¹⁵ To U.S. intervention in Vietnam, I would argue, reinforces their intervention as indefensible. The South Vietnamese people were already engaged in their own political and military struggle; their fate should have been determined internally rather than by U.S. intervention. Therefore, when comparing both conflicts through the lens of jus ad bellum, the United States’ actions in Korea appear legally and morally justifiable. In contrast, its intervention in Vietnam fails to meet the same standards.

¹² Gordon Kerr, *A Short History of the Vietnam War*, (Oldcastle Books Ltd, 2015) p.33.

¹³ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, (Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015) p.99.

¹⁴ Erich Martel, ‘Gulf of Tonkin’, *OAH Magazine of History*, 7.2 (1992), pp. 36–39

¹⁵ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 5th ed. (Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015), p.87

Cultural Violence

In both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the three types of violence, direct, structural and cultural factors played significant roles in exacerbating both conflicts and shaping how they ended. Direct violence was the easiest form to see. In both wars, massive bombing campaigns, intense fighting, and attacks on villages caused massive civilian deaths. Tragic events like the My Lai massacre¹⁶ In Vietnam and the No Gun Ri massacre¹⁷ In Korea, it showed how civilian populations were often caught up in the conflict. The indiscriminate use of napalm in both conflicts, as well as the use of chemicals like Agent Orange in Vietnam¹⁸ caused severe health problems on both sides and environmental damage that lasted for decades.

The structural violence element in both conflicts arose from the division of both countries. After World War II, Korea was divided for administrative reasons because it lacked a government following the defeat of its colonial ruler, Japan. Vietnam, on the other hand, was divided after the Geneva Accords, which followed its long struggle against French colonial rule. In both cases, the division of both countries created conditions that harmed civilians, families were separated, and people were forced to choose sides. The Cold War politics and ideologies also exacerbated matters, turning both conflicts into part of a larger global struggle between communism and democracy.

The cultural violence in each conflict was remarkably similar. The use of anti-communist ideology, such as the domino theory, gave both conflicts moral cover and a sense of legitimacy.

This mindset did not merely guide decisions; it made harsh actions appear necessary to prevent a greater threat. Racialised propaganda, particularly during the Vietnam War, also played a significant role.

Koreans were depicted as infamous, cowards, not masculine, speaking broken English, and having buckteeth. Korean War comics usually failed to question existing racial stereotypes and go beyond the 'good guys versus bad guys' trope. The persistence of certain racial caricatures would cement the stereotyped image of the 'gook',

¹⁶ Kent A Russell, 'My Lai Massacre: The Need for an International Investigation', *California Law Review*, 58.3 (1970), pp. 703–29, doi:10.2307/3479613.

¹⁷ RICHARD PYLE, 'NO GUN RI', *Naval War College Review*, 57.2 (2004), pp. 165–68 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26394108>>.

¹⁸ Leo Uych, 'Agent Orange, the Vietnam War, and Lasting Health Effects', *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 95 (1991), p. 211, doi:10.2307/3431126.

an image that would be recuperated during the Vietnam War to describe the new enemy¹⁹

Portraying the enemy in this way, even in comic books, made it easier to justify the brutality employed, even when civilians suffered the most from their actions. This shows that cultural violence was not just in the background but that it supported and strengthened the direct and structural violence already taking place; the effects of these structures are still visible today.

In Korea, the 1953 armistice did not officially end the war. The border between North and South Korea remains highly militarised, many families are still separated, and there is no official peace treaty, meaning the threat of conflict has never entirely disappeared. The suffering caused by the division persists.

The outcome for Vietnam vastly differed from Korea;. At the same time, there was an armistice in the Korean conflict that still left the country divided and suffering from long-term structural violence, Vietnam's conflict concluded decisively. North Vietnam achieved victory in 1975, leading to the reunification of the country under communist rule, but the end of fighting did not erase the suffering. The impacts of direct violence — such as heavy bombing, intense combat, and the use of chemicals like Agent Orange — left profound physical scars on both communities and the environment. These damages were worsened by the structural violence accumulated over years of division and Cold War intervention, which placed civilians in impossible positions. Many were forced to choose sides, aware that any decision could lead to punishment or even death. Even after victory and reunification, Vietnam continued to face hardship, enduring severe economic struggles, widespread health issues, and the pressure of communist indoctrination programmes.

These different forms of violence, combined with the contrasting political legitimacy of each intervention, reinforce my argument that U.S. involvement in Korea had a more substantial justification than its far more controversial and largely unsupported involvement in Vietnam.

¹⁹ Mattia Arioli, 'A (Not so) Forgotten War: The Korean Conflict as a Turning Point in the History of the War Comics Genre', *Iperstoria*, no. 19 (2022), doi:10.13136/2281-4582/2022.i19.1154.

Conclusion

Overall, although both conflicts were fought during the Cold War and had the same ideological pressures of Communism and Democracy, the United States' intervention in Korea, in my opinion, met the legal and moral standards of a just war. At the same time, its involvement in Vietnam did not.

The Korean War had apparent UN legitimacy in response to a direct act of aggression. In contrast, Vietnam relied on disputed incidents, such as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and on political fears outlined by the domino Theory, rather than on actual, legitimate, or moral justification.

The cultural violence present in both conflicts, seen through racial stereotypes, the division of both countries, the intense bombing campaigns and the use of chemical weapons, intensified the harm done. Still, it was especially damaging in Vietnam, where it helped sustain an intervention that lacked legal and moral legitimacy.

These contrasts reinforce my argument that only the Korean intervention can be considered anywhere near justified.

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