Part III

Division and war
The division of Korea and the rise of two Koreas, 1945–1948

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When Emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s surrender in World War II on August 15, 1945, there was euphoria among Koreans both in and outside the Korean peninsula. As they rejoiced in their liberation from 36 years of Japanese colonial rule, they expected speedy restoration of independence to Korea as a sovereign state. However, what soon greeted them was not immediate independence but the partition of the peninsula into two halves at the 38th parallel by the occupying troops of the Soviet Union and the United States. Although these foreign troops were welcomed as liberators, Koreans grew increasingly unhappy as time went on and it became clear that immediate restoration of independence was not forthcoming and that the partition of the peninsula was becoming more permanent.

The story of how the Korean peninsula was partitioned at the 38th parallel is a classic example of Great Power politics, reminiscent of the partition of the Americas since the voyages by Columbus, the partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 and the partition of the ex-Ottoman territories after World War I by the European colonial powers. In these cases, “understandings” were reached, either officially or in secret agreements, among the European colonial powers, and the European powers arbitrarily redrew the boundaries of these lands to suit their own interests often in ways that did not reflect the existing political, ethnic, tribal, cultural or linguistic loyalties and solidarities. The opinions of the native Americans, Africans, Arabs and other peoples, whose lands were being divided up by the European colonial powers, were not consulted.

Therefore, although the masses of Koreans rejoiced on August 15, 1945, those Korean leaders who understood the realities of international power politics and the geopolitical balance of power in Northeast Asia had much to worry about Korea’s future after Japan’s defeat. Kim Ku, a prominent leader of the exiled Korean nationalist independence activists in China, later recorded in his memoirs that the news of the Japanese surrender came not as a cause for jubilation but rather as an occasion for utmost concern and disappointment. Leaders such as Kim Ku knew that Japan’s defeat was achieved by the military might of the Allied Powers and that the Koreans themselves contributed little militarily to the Allied victory. In the case of Kim, Kim and his Korean Provisional Government in exile in China had been covertly working with the United States Office of Strategic Services to prepare operations by KPG’s military units in Japanese-occupied Korea. The sudden surrender of Japan came before KPG could play this military role...
in defeating Japan. The Korean leaders such as Kim were worried, therefore, that the fate of Korea was now in the hands of the foreign powers that defeated Japan, not in the hands of the Koreans. Their worst fear was that Korea would once again become a playground for Great Power intrigue and rivalries and that the Koreans would be denied full restoration of sovereignty.

True to the fears of these Korean leaders, the future of Korea in late 1945 was precarious indeed. The only officially announced wartime international agreement among the Allied leaders concerning Korea’s future upon Japan’s defeat was the so-called Cairo Declaration, a joint statement issued in 1943 by the leaders of the United States, Britain and nationalist China and later endorsed by the Soviet Union, which proclaimed Korea’s independence in due course. The Korean leaders welcomed this promise of independence but opposed the phrase “in due course,” as they wanted immediate independence. Indeed, the understanding reached among the wartime Allied leaders which underlay the “in due course” provision was that the Koreans were not ready for self-rule and that they needed a period of tutelage by the Allied Powers, who would administer an international trusteeship over Korea until such time as when the Koreans would be deemed capable of self-government.

The concept of trusteeship as contemplated by the Allied leaders during World War II was itself based on the prior precedent of the League of Nations mandates, which was devised by the Western Powers as a transitional governance mechanism for the non-Western colonies of those Powers that were defeated in World War I, namely, imperial Germany and the Ottoman Empire. Examples of the League of Nations mandates that were implemented after World War I include Lebanon and Syria, both administered by France, and German Southwest Africa (presently Namibia), which was controlled by the Union of South Africa. Underlying both the League of Nations mandate system and the trusteeship idea was the assumption that the people living in the territories that would be subject to these governance mechanisms were not ready for self-rule and would need a period of tutelage in the arts of self-governance before being granted full independence.

In line with this view that the Koreans were not capable of immediate self-rule, the Allied Powers during World War II, including the US, did not officially recognize any Korean group that claimed to represent the Korean people as the legitimate government of Korea. There were numerous Korean organizations of varying ideological and political persuasions that were agitating for Korean independence during the Japanese colonial rule over Korea (1910–1945), and many of these groups, including the aforementioned Korean Provisional Government, were based overseas given the harsh Japanese colonial rule in Korea, which effectively suppressed pro-independence movements within the peninsula especially after the March First Independence Movement in 1919, a peaceful nationwide grassroots demonstration that proclaimed Korean independence. However, later disunity among these various Korean groups that struggled for independence from Japan was a contributing factor in this Allied policy of non-recognition, as the Allied governments came to view the Korean independence movement as fragmented and considered no one group as broadly representative of the Korean people.

When the surrender of the Japanese seemed imminent in the last days of World War II in August 1945, the United States was preoccupied with the future of Japan, a soon-to-be defeated Great Power, and the US policy was focused on ensuring that postwar Japan would become an ally of the United States and never again a threat. Korea, a colonial dependency of Japan, was at best an afterthought as a policy priority in the minds of the top US officials charged with planning the future postwar world order. If Korea possessed a strategic value, it was thought of mainly as an outpost for the future defense of US-occupied Japan. For the Soviet Union, whose entry into the war against Japan in August 1945 decisively contributed to Japan’s surrender, its leaders were also concerned with preventing a future Japan that would be hostile to the USSR.
After all, Japan had been an imperial rival of Russia, having won the Russo-Japanese War (1905), invaded the Russian Far East in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and threatened the security of the USSR as an ally of Nazi Germany. However, despite its efforts to secure a role in the postwar occupation of Japan, the USSR was denied any meaningful role there by the United States, which was determined to keep Japan in the capitalist world order and forestall a rise of communism there amid conditions of war-devastation and popular disaffection. Having been denied a role in postwar Japan, the Soviets apparently attached more importance than did the Americans to the postwar future of Korea, given the fact that the Korean peninsula was used by Japan in recent history as a platform for attacks on the Russian Far East and thus possessed an important strategic value.

Therefore, when the US officials faced the question of what to do about Korea in the last days of World War II as Japan’s surrender seemed imminent, they apparently had no idea beyond a vague awareness of the wartime Allied agreement that the peninsula would be liberated from Japanese rule but would be subject to Allied occupation until such time as when the Koreans would be deemed capable of self-government. Given this, the officials in Washington, D.C., responsible for US policies towards East Asia could manage no better than to hurriedly entrust two colonels with the task of devising a formula acceptable to the Soviets for the Allied military occupation of the peninsula, which would, among other things, accept the surrender of the Japanese troops and maintain law and order until a further Allied agreement on the future of the peninsula could be worked out. When Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel took out a map of the Korean peninsula and studied it on the night of August 14, 1945, they knew that the Soviet troops were already advancing south in northern parts of the peninsula and that the US forces were not in a position to arrive in Korea anytime soon. Under time pressure to propose a formula before the Soviets occupied all of the peninsula and probably thinking that the US was militarily not in a position to ask the Soviets to withdraw their troops completely from the peninsula, they proposed the 38th parallel to the Soviets because it would divide the peninsula into roughly two equal-sized halves and leave Seoul, the capital, in the proposed US zone of occupation. The opinions of the Korean people were not consulted in this process, and neither did it seem to dawn on these two colonels that they could be fatally undermining the future of the Korean people by proposing a partition of the peninsula that could become permanent.

Somewhat to the surprise of the US officials, the Soviets accepted this proposal. There are possible reasons as to why the Soviets accepted this US proposal of the division along the 38th parallel, one being that it reminded them of an old turn-of-the-century spheres of influence discussion between imperial Japan and czarist Russia to divide up the peninsula between themselves also at the 38th parallel. In this fashion, therefore, the peninsula was partitioned without the consent of the Korean people and definitely against their will. Although there were disagreements among the Koreans, it was clear that no Korean wanted their country to be arbitrarily divided in this manner, dealing a crippling blow to the organic unity of their country and economy, not to mention physically separating family members living on both sides of the dividing line and inviting the strong likelihood of a civil war to reunite the peninsula.

The situation on the Korean peninsula in late 1945 became the following: the occupation forces of the Soviet Union that arrived in August and of the United States that arrived in September accepted the surrender of the Japanese and carried out their respective occupation policies in their zones of administration, while various Koreans groups of differing ideological and political orientations jockeyed for leadership and legitimacy among the Korean masses whom they purported to represent. These Korean groups and their leaders differed not only in terms of their ideological or general political orientations but also in terms such as their relationships with the occupation authorities and with one another. Some of these groups and leaders spent
the bulk of the Japanese colonial years living inside Korea (such as Yŏ Un-hyŏng, a moderate leftist, and Song Chin-u, Kim Song-su and Cho Man-sik, right-wing nationalists), while some spent those years in exile overseas, including the United States (such as Syngman Rhee [Yi Sung-man], a right-wing nationalist) and China (such as Kim Ku, a right-wing nationalist, Kim Kyu-sik, a moderate rightist, and Kim Il Sung, a leftist anti-Japanese partisan leader). Unfortunately for the future of Korea, these various Korean groups and their leaders could not form a united front vis-à-vis the foreign occupation powers.

What drove these Korean groups and leaders even further apart was the decision reached at the Conference of Allied Foreign Ministers in Moscow in December 1945, which placed Korea under a United Nations Trusteeship for a period of up to five years. While almost all Korean groups initially opposed this decision, most leftist groups later changed their position in favor of it, and thereafter the rift between the left and the right in Korea grew irreparably large, as violence among the Koreans escalated, poisoning intra-Korean cooperation. It was in this atmosphere of escalating tensions between the left and the right in Korea and also between the USSR and the Anglo-American powers in the rising global Cold War that the US-USSR Joint Commissions in Korea were convened in 1946–1947 in order to carry out the trusteeship plan as announced at the Moscow Conference of Allied Foreign Ministers. A key element of the US-USSR Joint Commissions was the effort to form a left-right coalition among the Korean leaders as the nucleus of a future united Korean government that would work with the Allied trustee powers under the proposed UN Trusteeship. However, this effort failed, as the Americans and the Soviets could not agree on the composition of such a coalition body and their occupation policies in their respective zones of administration grew only more divergent as time went on.4

In the Soviet-occupied northern Korea, a radical transformation took place as a Soviet-style socialist regime and society was built there with sweeping changes such as land reform and nationalization of key industries. Kim Il Sung (Kim Il-sŏng), who returned to northern Korea in 1945 as an officer in the Soviet occupation forces, rose to power under Soviet support and managed to consolidate his power over rivals such as the nationalist leader Cho Man-sik, who was placed under house arrest in early 1946 for his strong opposition to the Moscow trusteeship decision. In the US-occupied southern Korea, the American military government made much less sweeping changes than those that were taking place in the north, and a main focus of the occupation became the preservation of the status quo against leftist agitation and subversion. As time wore on, Syngman Rhee managed to prevail over other leaders such as Yŏ Un-hyŏng, Song Chin-u, and Kim Ku (all of whom were assassinated).

With the failure of the US-USSR Joint Commissions to implement the trusteeship, what followed next was the policy of the United States to refer the Korean question to the United Nations General Assembly while simultaneously making preparations for a separate South Korean state as a fallback option in case the U.N. also failed to resolve the problem. The United Nations, then under the sway of the United States and her allies, proceeded to set up the U.N. Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK), which was charged with the task, among others, of observing the implementation of elections in both zones of occupation in Korea for the creation of a unified Korean government. This effort to refer the Korean question to the U.N., however, met the resolute opposition of the USSR, which protested against what it regarded as the illegal transfer of the Korean question onto the U.N. agenda and instead called for the simultaneous withdrawal of US and Soviet troops from Korea.

Consequently, meeting the Soviet refusal to allow the entry of the UNTCOK into northern Korea, the U.N. proceeded to observe the implementation of elections in the US-occupied southern Korea only. In response, an important bloc of Korean leaders in southern Korea,
including not only leftists but also rightists such as Kim Ku and Kim Kyu-sik, sought to enter into talks with the leaders of northern Korea in order to prevent the impending permanent division of their country. They attended a conference in Pyongyang in April 1948, where they met with northern Korean leaders such as Kim II Sung and issued statements opposing the separate southern elections and voicing support for the creation of a unified Korean government after withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea.

This effort by the Korean leaders, however, proved ineffective in preventing the elections for the National Assembly in southern Korea, which took place in May 1945 and led to the election of Syngman Rhee as the first president of the Republic of Korea, which was proclaimed in August 1948. The USSR and the northern Koreans then went ahead with their own elections for the Supreme People’s Assembly of Korea, which took place in September 1948 and led to the establishment of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea under the leadership of Kim II Sung. In retrospect, this emergence of the two rival states in the Korean peninsula seemingly became all but inevitable when the only framework for a unified Korean state that was agreed upon by the US and the USSR—namely, the transition to such a state under the proposed U.N. Trusteeship—failed in its implementation amid discord between the US and the USSR and between the various Korean groups themselves against the background of the rising global Cold War.

The division of Korea after World War II, which led to the rise of the two rival Korean states in 1948 and the tragic outcome of the ensuing Korean War (1950–1953), was therefore a complex process that needs to be examined from a variety of angles, including international politics, domestic politics within the Korean peninsula and relationships among the various Korean groups in the context of World War II, postwar decolonization worldwide and the rise of the Cold War confrontations. While there have been numerous scholarly works in the English language on the Korean War and US-Korean relations in general, there has been a paucity of scholarship focused on examining Korea’s division in 1945–1948. Among the works that do deal with Korea in this period in one form or another, one observes a pattern similar to that discernible in works addressing other areas of early Cold War history: “traditionalists” of the 1950s–1970s who blame the USSR for the failure of Allied cooperation after World War II and for starting the Cold War; the “revisionists” of the 1970s–1990s who point to American “imperialists” as the culprits for starting the Cold War; and the “post-revisionists” since the 1990s, some of whose works can be characterized as “traditionalists plus archives.” Representative of the “traditionalists” or “Cold Warriors” is the monumental two-volume work by Scalapino and Lee (1972); seminal among the “revisionists” is the two-volume work by Cumings (1981, 1990); and examples of “post-revisionism” include Weathersby (1993).

However, on the issue of the Korean division in 1945–1948, a lack of conceptual clarity exists in these scholarly works. Although the traditionalists and the revisionists differ sharply as to which side they blame for the Korean division, they have tended to assume that the division itself was inevitable and have not examined in depth the possibilities for alternatives to the division. In particular, scholars have paid insufficient attention to the issue of the trusteeship, namely, the wartime decision by Allied leaders to place Korea under a four-power trusteeship after Japan’s defeat and the subsequent agreement to implement this trusteeship reached at the Moscow Conference of Allied Foreign Ministers in December 1945. No work examined in detail how this trusteeship issue was central to causing both the military partition of Korea at the 38th parallel in August 1945 and the permanent division of Korea into the two Koreas in August–September 1948. Lee (2005) is a relatively recent work that helps to fill this gap in the scholarly literature.
Among the few works that address Soviet policy towards Korea in this period, the consensus view was that Stalin was intent on creating a Soviet satellite state in northern Korea and that he never took the trusteeship seriously, utilizing it at best as a propaganda ploy. Lee (2005), however, argues that this view obscures and oversimplifies what was a fluid and uncertain situation obtaining in Korea and the world during 1945–1948. Lee also argues that this view fails to capture the continent nature as well as the complexity and self-contradiction inherent in Soviet policy towards Korea and elsewhere in the early postwar years. According to Lee (2005), a work based on multi-lingual research including newly available archival materials from Moscow, Stalin apparently faced two basic alternatives in August 1945: Sovietizing northern Korea, which would create a buffer state in northern Korea presumably buttressing Soviet security but which would also lead the US and Japan to turn southern Korea into an outpost of a US-Japan security alliance directed against the USSR; or working with the Western powers to implement the trusteeship or some other mechanism for creating a unified independent Korea, which would be neutral or friendly in its foreign policy orientation to the USSR. Lee suggests that Stalin in 1945–1948 was at best ambivalent about either of these choices and that his preference, if he had one, was actually for the latter, given that a unified independent Korea on the USSR’s border would likely be more susceptible to dictates from Moscow than from Washington. Such a unified Korea, even if originally established as a capitalist state with a neutral foreign policy, would have been very susceptible to communist subversion and likely to have turned leftist.

Therefore, Lee (2005) makes the prima facie case that, similar to how Stalin apparently approached the German problem after World War II, the Soviet dictator apparently pursued seemingly contradictory policies for a Korean settlement, at least in the initial stage of the Soviet occupation of Korea, and that he apparently never entirely gave up on the possibility of reaching an accommodation with the United States in Korea even after the failure of the Moscow agreement until the very eve of the establishment of South Korea in August 1948. Lee suggests the possibility that Stalin took the Korean trusteeship plan seriously, at least more seriously than did the Americans, and that the trusteeship was actually Stalin’s preferred policy for a Korean settlement. Based on a consideration of both international and domestic factors, Lee (2005) attempts to answer the question of why such alternative settlements for Korea’s future were not adopted and why the Korean nation-building effort in 1945–1948 failed, leading not to peaceful reunification but instead to war.

In terms of future agenda for research on Korea’s division after World War II, the following observations, among others, may be made. First is that, as already alluded, there is a dire lack of scholarship in any language devoted to this issue, especially in comparison to the larger body of scholarship on the Korean War or the much larger body of works that examine other cases of national division and partition, such as Germany’s division after World War II. This calls for more research on the Korean division, especially by scholars based in the English-speaking world. Second is that there is a need for more works that place the Korean division in a broader comparative context, making an effort to draw comparisons with simultaneous developments elsewhere in the world (Japan, Vietnam, Germany, Austria, Finland, etc.) and with prior examples drawn from world history. Third is related to the second, namely the need for works that overcome the limitations of conventional national history and diplomatic history. Too often, scholars specializing in a national history have focused their energies on examining developments internal to a nation or a people while paying insufficient attention to broader international forces or at worst engaging in a nationalistic bifurcation of “us” vs. “the foreign” as a driving force in a national history. On the other hand, Western scholars of diplomatic history involving non-Western peoples have sometimes focused their energies on the broader international forces and Great Power politics while paying insufficient attention or according insufficient agency to the
domestic actors and developments inside the non-Western countries they address. This situation calls for more balanced and nuanced works that rectify and transcend these limitations of conventional national history and diplomatic history.

Fourth is related to the third but going further, namely the need for works that are in line with a current trend in historical scholarship towards “international” or “transnational” history and “global history,” that is, works that make an effort to address broader themes and forces in global history, such as global economy, geography and factor endowments and transnational interactions including trade and migrations, as well as empire and decolonization, war and peace and nationalism and nation-building. In the case of the Korean division, more research is thus needed that examines, for example, the division as a case study in worldwide decolonization, Third World nationalism and nation-building and the rising Cold War worldwide. Also welcome is more research that focuses on issues such as the economic and social dimension of the division (for example, Korea’s economic and strategic value to the Great Powers, including the US and USSR with their respective capitalist and socialist world orders; the cost of the division in terms of damage to the integrated Korean national economy, the loss of lives and materials arising from the subsequent Korean War; the human tragedy of family members separated by the division and the subsequent fratricide of the Korean War; etc.). Finally, there is an overall need for more multi-lingual, multi-archival scholarship that utilizes new evidence from Russia, Eastern Europe, Japan, China, the United States, Korea and elsewhere. If and when North Korea opens up and archival and other materials from there become available to researchers, this will be a boon for scholarship.

Beyond the broader research agenda as outlined above, the following specific sub-areas, among others, call for more research. First is the need for more multi-archival research on the wartime Allied planning, including behind-the-scenes Allied deliberations, regarding Korea’s postwar future and, in particular, concerning the trusteeship issue, especially why and how the trusteeship idea was applied towards Korea. In addition to unearthing any new evidence from the United States, more evidence from the British, Russian, and Chinese archives would contribute to a more complete understanding of the respective Allied positions, including the US position, on this issue. Second is a fuller examination of how and why the “in due course” phrase was included in the Cairo Declaration on the postwar future of Korea, including the question of who was the “real author” of this phrase. Again, more evidence from the British, Russian and Chinese archives, as well as a more in-depth look at the evolution of the US position papers on this issue from the initial draft proposal to the final version approved by Franklin Roosevelt, would contribute to a more complete understanding of the respective Allied positions, including the US position. Third is a comprehensive analysis based on more evidence of how the United States came to propose the 38th parallel as the dividing line and why the Soviets accepted. At present, the standard account of this event is based on the recollections of Dean Rusk, a direct participant in the event, as preserved in the US government records and in his own published memoir. Researchers would benefit from access to more first-hand evidence from the US side and also any direct evidence from the Russian side that can shed light on this bargain struck between the United States and the USSR.

Fourth is the need for more research on how the United States and the USSR, during 1945–1948, related to the various Korean leaders, including right-wing nationalists like Kim Ku and left-wing leaders like Kim Il Sung, and how the relationships between the US and Soviet occupation authorities and these Korean leaders helped shape the course of events in postwar Korea. Fifth is an in-depth analysis of the interactions during 1945–1948 between the US-occupied south and the Soviet-occupied north, such as trails of migrants, spies, political and religious refugees and official delegations of political figures, as well as flows of goods,
commodities and raw materials including electricity. Sixth is more research on the return or repatriation of ethnic Koreans to the Korean peninsula from the overseas Korean diaspora after World War II, including those who had been relocated to various parts of the Japanese empire as soldiers, forced laborers and “comfort women” (i.e. those forced into sexual slavery). The return of large numbers of these ethnic Koreans to Korea after World War II, whether from China, Japan, Russia, the United States or elsewhere, had a big impact on the developments in the Korean peninsula leading to the national division and the subsequent Korean War. As is the case in the first three sub-areas of research outlined in the previous paragraph, progress in these sub-areas of research outlined in this paragraph will depend in part on the availability of new evidence, archival and otherwise.

Notes

1 This assessment is based on the official US documents that are heretofore accessible to researchers. No effort is made here to speculate on the possibility of a “secret understanding” reached between the US and the USSR prior to Japan’s surrender concerning the future of the Korean peninsula. The existence of any such behind-the-scenes agreement, even if real, is not supported by these official documents, which, by their nature, document official deliberations and actions of the policymakers.

2 There is some uncertainty about the exact date of this event, as an alternative account of this same event states it took place the night of August 10–11, 1945. The account of this event narrated here is largely based on the recollections of Dean Rusk as preserved in the official US documents and also included in his published memoirs.


4 For a fuller discussion of the failure of the US and the USSR to cooperate in Korea in 1946–1948, including the failure of the effort to form a left-right coalition among the Korean leaders, see Lee (ibid.), pp. 86–126, 147–154.

References


