
The communists of North Korea and radicals on the left in general have long denounced the political, though not the initial military, division of Korea as a self-serving decision cooked up in Washington. Those on the radical right have attacked Joseph Stalin for creating an equally perverse impasse leading to the country’s vivisection. Those Korean “leaders” who vitiated the situation by instigating chaotic and deadly internecine feuds, are often sanitized by their partisans either as heroic defenders of various brands of righteous patriotism or as helpless victims or pawns of foreign machinations.

To his credit, James Lee transcends all sectarian views and offers a comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of the events relating to Korea from 1945 to 1948, and he does all this in a rapidly unfolding Asian and global context. His blend of international diplomatic history and domestic Korean political history leaves one with the solid conclusion that no single-factor narrative can do justice to the truth of that period; a synthesis of all forces in dynamic interaction, a “holistic” understanding, alone can put a closure—if one still can use that term—to it.

Relying on both primary and secondary sources, notably newly accessible Soviet archives, Lee meticulously goes over major wartime conferences and decisions among the Allied powers concerning the future shape of Korea. The country was to be freed like other Japanese colonies after Tokyo’s defeat, but a paternalistic FDR favoured a flexible period of “trusteeship” (“guardianship” as the Russians put it) involving the US, Britain, China and the Soviet Union to prepare the peninsula for independence in “due course.” This expression was fraught with serious misunderstanding, for to most Koreans it meant something akin to “soon after Japan’s defeat.” The anti-colonial sympathies of FDR, the anti-imperialist stances of Moscow and its determination to prevent Korea from being misused as a springboard for any future aggression against the Soviet Union, made Stalin wholeheartedly embrace the concept of a time-bound trusteeship. On this issue, in fact, FDR and Stalin were closer to each other than FDR and Churchill during the war.

The death of FDR in early 1945, the succession of the more rigidly anti-communist Harry Truman to the US presidency, the initial rejection of the trusteeship idea by almost all leading Korean voices as deeply insulting to their dignity and honour, the right-wing sympathies of General John R. Hodge, (the chief US military administrator of Korea south of the 38th parallel after Japan’s defeat and surrender), the rapid emergence of the pro-trusteeship stance of the Korean communists under Soviet prodding, and the strident rhetoric and violent actions of the Korean rightists against left-wing and other Koreans questioning their platform, quickly made short shrift of any
possibility for keeping Korea intact.

The prospects for a unified Korea were destroyed when, under US domination, a UN Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK), composed of Australian, Canadian, and Indian members, uneasily approved the creation of an independent state in Korea after supervising elections in the southern parts, with the North closed off by a discomfited Soviet Union. In this connection, the author could have benefited from studying the writings of Mo Yunsuk (Marion Moh) and K.P.S. Menon, the Indian chairman of UNTCOK. In his book *Many Worlds* (OUP, 1965), Menon barely disguises his warm relations with this beloved Korean poet. She also happened to be a booster—“agent” in the eyes of others—of Syngman Rhee, a rightists’ rightist if you will, who eventually came to head the new Republic of Korea in the south on 15 August 1948. It would have been interesting to see from Lee’s perspective how much UNTCOK was swayed by the very close personal relationship between Menon and Mo.

All this, according to Lee’s careful analysis, was not inevitable. Stalin knew his country’s weaknesses as a result of the war, made deeper by the American use of atomic weapons in Japan, and wanted to avoid any deadly confrontation with the rising Anglo–American bloc in Korea. He might have settled for a unified democratic–capitalist Korea on its border but with a foreign policy friendly to the Soviet Union, à la Finland, or with a unified Korea akin to a neutral Austria. He was less an ironclad ideologue or diabolical schemer on Korea than a cautious, pragmatic deal maker.

Yet Stalin was smart enough to prepare for all contingencies, thus he had begun to create all the paraphernalia of a state in northern Korea early in 1946. It was only a matter of putting the system into the “drive” gear once a southern state had been set up. In this way, he could also persuasively claim that his hand was forced by the intransigence of the US and its right-wing henchmen in the south.

Except for a tendency to be repetitive at times, this book is an illuminating addition to scholarship on modern Korean history.

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