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From Liberation to Division of the Korean Peninsula



The liberation of Korea from the Japanese colonial rule on August 15, 1945 was the dawn of an epoch in which the old established colonial order would collapse and be replaced by a new structure. It was to be a time of all-out contests between various political and social forces regarding the precise extent of the abandonment of colonial mores and feudal legacies, and the detailed characteristics of the nation-state in the new order. Immediately after the cessation of colonial rule, the process of post-colonial state formation gave way to a progressive state led by left wing forces which, generally speaking, based their agendas on the interests and the aspirations of the Korean people. However, the American Military Government (AMG) was the external power imposed on Korea after liberation, and it became an instrument for pressing on Korea policies which served the interests of the United States. The AMG violently repressed and then totally destroyed the nascent state being formed by Koreans and replaced it with the 'cold war, division-defined, anti-communist' model alluded to above. Following this failure to establish a unified nation-state, Koreans watched the domestic contests taking place between diverse internal factions combining with interventions by foreign forces, and culminating in civil war.

This process was not straightforward. It involved violent political and social confrontations nation-wide, and the forced



dissolution of the 'people's committees', the 'September General Strike' and the 'October People's Struggle', in 1946; the 'Cheju Island April 3 Struggle' of 1948, the 'Yeosu-Suncheon Incident' in October of the same year and, finally, the Korean War. The process was violent because it represented a 'great ideological reversal' in the period immediately following national liberation; that is, a radical shift away from the political hegemony of the dominant left wing forces to that led by anti-communist, right wing forces. It was during this period that the organizations and the political and economic capacities of the working class, and other popular elements, which had been growing since liberation, were destroyed. Also eradicated were the left wing opposition alliance that had been formed after liberation and the 'anti-division' nationalist opposition alliance that opposed the establishment of two governments on the Korean peninsula.

The Korean War, which resulted in more than five million human casualties and the devastation of almost the entire territory, had its roots in this short 'liberation period' between 1945 and 1950. It was, in effect, the culmination, the fusion, and the explosion of most of the socio-political conflicts and contradictions that characterized the circumstance of two separate systems attempting to exist in what had so recently been one country. In Korea, the direct experience of such a war made it possible to utilize the ideology of anti-communism as a hegemonic tool for mobilizing passive popular consensus; a mechanism for inculcating the politics of fear. This, in turn, rendered it possible for the institutions of the Republic of Korea to reiterate constantly the powerfully emotive concepts of anti-

communism and national security as ostensibly indisputable grounds for political legitimacy.

Since the Korean War came to an end by armistice¹, it was almost inevitable that a politically and ideologically asymmetric structure, biased towards the extreme right wing, would develop in Korea. It became an institutionalized construct whose salient features were based upon the consolidation of the cold war ethos, the raft of implications stemming from the physical division of the peninsula, and an anti-communist imperative so extreme that every member of society was required to exercise a mechanism of anti-communist self-censorship. In other words, the particular experience of the civil war was converted into an individualistic, internalized, pseudo-consensus dominated by the notion of 'anti-communism for security' which became the defining characteristic of social relations and conduct for both individuals and groups. This was tantamount to the construction of an anti-communist regimented society. The historical and structural conditions created by the imposition of this right wing dogma functioned as a most effective mechanism for rationalizing state violence and dictatorial rule; furthermore, its influence long constituted a serious obstacle to democratization and democracy movement politics in Korea.

The First Period of Democratization

¹ As opposed to capitulation, surrender, or the signing of a formal peace treaty. Thus, in terms of international law, a state of war still technically exists between North and South Korea.