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Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea

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Soviet Occupation Policies in North Korea, East Germany, and Austria: Similarities and Differences

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The paper compares Soviet occupation policies in North Korea (1945–1948), East Germany (1945–1953), and Austria (1945–1955) to explain why Korea's post-liberation path of state formation turned out more similar to that of Germany than that of Austria. It points out that the institutions and economic objectives of Soviet occupation were largely similar in the three countries. Despite their evident preference for the local Communist activists, and especially for the Communist leaders repatriated from the USSR, the Soviet military authorities initially strove to build a coalition with the non-Communist East German, Austrian, and North Korean parties. Still, their policies yielded considerably different results in the three countries. In Germany and Korea, the military occupation zones were gradually transformed into rival state structures, whereas in Austria, their continued existence until 1955 did not preclude the emergence of a multilaterally recognized nationwide government and the holding of all-national elections as early as October-November 1945. This contrast may appear fairly paradoxical, because in 1943–1945, the Allied powers had effectively placed Austria and Korea into the same category (i.e., Axis-occupied countries whose independence should be

restored after the end of the war, but which lacked Allied-recognized governments-in-exile), thus distinguishing them from Germany, an enemy power. It seems that the factors which enabled Austria to avoid the fate of political division were the following:

The Soviet attempt to set up a provisional coalition government headed by Karl Renner, a veteran Social Democratic politician, created a very special situation. Since Vienna, the capital of Austria, was under exclusive Soviet occupation at that time, the Soviets strove to extend the authority of the Renner government to the Western-occupied zones, too, instead of confining it to the Soviet zone. Their interest in persuading the Western powers to recognize the Renner government enabled the U.S. and Britain to set conditions (e.g., a four-power agreement on the joint occupation of Vienna), which in turn created a favorable environment for holding free, democratic elections. To Moscow's chagrin, the elections of November 1945 were won by the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), with the Austrian Communist Party receiving a mere 5% of the votes, but by then it was no longer possible to tamper with the Austrian political system in such a way that the Soviets did in the East European countries.

In contrast, Seoul, the capital of Korea, was under exclusive U.S. occupation from September 1945, and thus the Soviets were not only unable to create an all-Korean provisional government akin to Renner's but actually feared the prospect that a U.S.-affiliated, conservative Korean government might be established in Seoul, with an authority extended to the entire country. Under such circumstances, they sought to ensure that the composition of the would-be all-Korean government would reflect their political preferences (i.e., it should be dominated by the leftist Korean parties), and if this could not be achieved, then a separate state structure should be set up in the northern zone. That is, they tried to shape the composition of the Korean government through bilateral talks with the U.S. occupation authorities instead of allowing the holding of free elections (as was done in Austria). Their obstructive attitude may have been influenced by the unfavorable results of the recent Austrian elections, but it was rooted primarily in their conflict with the non-Communist Korean nationalists over the Moscow Agreement (December

1945). While Renner and other non-Communist Austrian politicians sought to achieve their aims by adopting an at least outwardly cooperative attitude toward the Allies, and implicitly accepting the temporary curtailment of Austrian sovereignty, the non-Communist Korean nationalists openly rejected the trusteeship that the Allies planned to impose on Korea. Their defiant attitude induced the Soviet military authorities to take forceful measures against them in the North, and to refuse to accept their presence among the politicians who were to represent the South in the would-be all-Korean government. While Austria had a deeply rooted, ideologically coherent, election-oriented multi-party system since the late 19th century, the post-1945 Korean parties lacked experience in electoral competition, and they were less inclined to make compromises than Austria's two main post-1945 parties, the People's Party and the Social Democrats.

At the same time, North Korea's path gradually diverged from East Germany's, as well. Due to Korea's limited strategic significance and its status as a non-enemy country, the occupying powers were more willing to withdraw their troops from there than from Germany, but by doing so, they unintentionally increased the risk of a military conflict between the two Korean states. In Germany, where both the USSR and the Western powers stationed strong military forces on a long-term basis, an armed clash between the two German states was likely to engulf the superpowers, but in Korea, Stalin could reasonably expect that the USSR, having refrained from signing a security treaty with Pyongyang, would be able to avoid entrapment even if Kim Il Sung's invasion of the ROK were to encounter unexpected obstacles. Furthermore, the political rift between North and South Korea was deeper than that between West and East Germany. While the West and East German authorities definitely regarded each other as illegitimate, they did not present themselves as the single lawful government of the entire country (including the territory under the control of the rival government) as forcefully as their Korean counterparts did. While South Korea's first constitution declared that the authority of the ROK government covered the entire peninsula, North Korea's first national legislative elections (August 1948) were said to have been

secretly carried out in South Korea, too, resulting in the peculiar situation that the majority of Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) members nominally represented the southern half of the nation. In 1948–1949, West Germany's Communist Party (KPD) duly participated in the provincial and national elections, whereas the South Korean Workers' Party (SKWP) called for a boycott of the country's Constitutional Assembly elections (May 1948), and even tried to disrupt them by violent means.

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