

To what extent was the American decision to call elections in South Korea in 1948 responsible for the division of Korea?



Image from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Division

Name: Justin Yu

Candidate Number: 003257-0157

School: Island School

Word Count: 2191 (including headings)

## Table of Contents

Section 1.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Source A.....	3
Source B.....	4
Section 2.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Main Body.....	5
Conclusion.....	9
Section 3.....	11
Bibliography.....	13
Appendix.....	14

## **Section 1**

### **Introduction**

My research question is to what extent was the American decision to call elections in South Korea in 1948 responsible for the division of Korea? This question pertains to the elections that for the first time established a UN-recognised government in South Korea. The first source is from a New York Times article written in 1948. It is of relevance due to its clear portrayal of the Orthodox perspective, complaining of a lack of Soviet cooperation. The second source communicates the Revisionist viewpoint of James Matray. The source is critical of American policy in Korea, and it suggests that the election was an act of impatience.

### **Source A<sup>1</sup>**

Originating from a major American publication during a time when Orthodox views were dominant, the writers of this article were biased towards the US and against the USSR. However, since the New York Times was not an arm of the US government, the article cannot be dismissed simply as government propaganda. The purpose of the article is to inform, however the writer is clearly trying to communicate a harsh interpretation of the USSR's actions. This opinion reduces the reliability of the source, as it means that the writer is likely to have omitted information that did not agree with his standpoint, but is also valuable in that it provides insight into the popular narrative at the time. In terms of content, the article puts a very opinionated spin on a factual event, the Soviet bloc's

---

<sup>1</sup> "The U.N in Korea," *The New York Times*, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1948, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/01/18/96585119.html?pageNumber=110>

abstention and its refusal to cooperate with elections. This is of value as it suggests that the Soviet Union was going against world opinion and therefore serving its own interests. However, while the source does consider the stances of other voting nations, it did not consider the wishes of the Korean people in this matter.

### **Source B**<sup>2</sup>

This source is written by an American historian who has spent much of his academic career studying modern Korea and has consistently taken a Revisionist stance. This stance might have affected Matray's writing of this journal, meaning he could have started writing it with the sole purpose of communicating a Revisionist viewpoint, and thus could suffer from a bias. This has value as well as limitations in that as a Revisionist, Matray would have found information to challenge the existing perceptions of the US's role in Korea, thereby ensuring that some facts, which otherwise would have been ignored, are given a spotlight. In terms of content, Matray argues that Truman's impatience led to a decision to abandon Korea, describing how Truman decided to "abandon" attempts to build a "moderate" Korean coalition. This implies that the holding of the election was rushed and not decided with the welfare of Korea in mind. This provides an alternative interpretation of the elections from the Orthodox perspective. This journal also has value due to its focus on American occupation policy, specifically the actions of General Hodge.

---

<sup>2</sup> James I. Matray, "Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945-1948," *Korean Studies*, vol. 19 (1995): 28.

## **Section 2**

### **Introduction**

The clearest example of an event which marked the start of a divided Korea is the elections in the South of Korea which established a separate Korean government in the South due to a Northern boycott. There are three main conflicting viewpoints on the significance of this. The Determinist view suggests that ideological divisions within Korea made a division inevitable, implying that the American decision was not of significance. Orthodox historians, however, would argue that Soviet policies were what forced the US's hand and limited the elections, with the elections themselves not being inherently damaging. Finally, the Revisionist perspective argues that it was the elections and either American self-interest or impatience that were key to the division. My thesis is that the Revisionist perspective is the most applicable in this case, meaning that American responsibility was crucial in the division of Korea.

### **Main Body**

The first question to consider is whether the ideological gulf in Korea was so great as to make division inevitable. The Determinist view argues the affirmative. Jongsuk Chay, a Korean historian, claims that Korea in 1948 was so divided between right and left that cooperation between these polar opposites was impossible.<sup>3</sup> He even describes a split within these factions, with the left splitting into different groups. The Determinist argument which this appears to support is appealing in that it seems reasonable to

---

<sup>3</sup> Jongsuk Chay, *Unequal Partners in Peace and War: The Republic of Korea and the United States 1948-1953* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 54.

assume that the chaos of post-war Korea was what led to the division of that country. This argument suggests that US-initiated elections constituted a *fait accompli*, only making official an already inevitable division, but neglects the existence of moderate Korean politicians such as Kim Ku and Kim Kyusik, who could appeal to a broad political spectrum.

However, this view is challenged by other historians who argue that it was one of the superpowers who caused this division, and had the power to solve it. James Matray focuses on the failings of Lieutenant General Hodge, the military governor of Korea. One such failing that Matray identifies is how Hodge polarised Korean politics through his favouring of the Korean right-wing.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the ideological division mentioned by Chay was not, in fact, inevitable, but was rather the result of a deliberate superpower policy to favour one side over the other. In addition, this Revisionist perspective is not incompatible with Chay's description. Chay does not delve into the reasons for the stated ideological division, while Revisionist and Orthodox historians identify the US and USSR respectively as artificially creating this division.

There have been cases made for both Revisionist and Orthodox perspective with regard to this question. Orthodox historians blame the USSR for the failure of negotiations to reunify Korea, leading to a Northern boycott of the 1948 elections. Carl Berger describes how the Americans were hopeful for an agreement only to have "this hope shattered when the Soviet delegation suddenly reverted to its old position", rejecting negotiation with the Korean rightists.<sup>5</sup> Berger wrote this in 1957, a time in which

---

<sup>4</sup> Matray, "Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945-1948," 29.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Berger, *The Korea Knot: A Military-Political History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 72-73.

Orthodox views were the most dominant in the West. This source places the blame squarely on the Soviet negotiators, whose apparent stubbornness prevented a deal, at the expense of Korean unity. But the fact that Berger was unable to benefit from the same hindsight as modern historians means that he may not have had access to information that could have convinced him to pursue a Revisionist rather than Orthodox approach.

Matray instead takes the Revisionist stance, blaming Hodge for this failure. He argues that it was his lifting of a ban against protests against the US-Soviet Moscow Agreement, which the Soviets were keen to maintain, that had led to this breakdown in negotiations.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the US negotiating team would later display a lack of interest in continued negotiations with the USSR. 7 months before elections were held, the American negotiators stated that “the issue was now in the hands of the United Nations” and suggested that the negotiators should remain confined to their headquarters.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that both the Soviets and the Americans were guilty of avoiding negotiations, negotiations which could have potentially led to a postponement of elections, or even the holding of nationwide elections. Jinwung Kim, another Korean historian, supports this idea of Soviet and American inaction being equally responsible for the division, arguing that “Without the close cooperation of the occupying powers, [the Koreans] efforts were doomed to fail”.<sup>8</sup> Thus it appears that both the Revisionist and Orthodox views are well-supported in this case, both by historians and by evidence from the time.

---

<sup>6</sup> Matray, “Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945-1948,” 29.

<sup>7</sup> Johnston, Richard J. H., “U.S. asks Russians to go.” *The New York Times*, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1947, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/10/18/104347887.html?pageNumber=2>

<sup>8</sup> Jinwung Kim, *A History of Korea: From “Land of the Morning Calm” to States in Conflict* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 382.

This suggests that a Korean division was by no means inevitable, refuting the Determinist argument.

While the superpower responsibility in perpetuating Korean divisions is clear, there still remains the question of whether it was the American decision to call elections or the Soviet decision to boycott them that was of more consequence. Revisionists argue that American self-interest and impatience led to the hasty elections in 1948. Matray describes the American administration as “impatient” and sees the elections as an abandonment of attempts to reach a Korean compromise.<sup>9</sup> Another argument, made by the Soviets, was that the US was seeking to separate Korea through illegitimate elections and set up a puppet state. Of course, the Soviets had much to lose from allowing American elections in their zone. The Southern population was twice the size of the North, and Soviet-backed candidates would inevitably lose.<sup>10</sup> Hodge strongly rejected the Soviet argument in 1947 claiming that “certain elements” were trying to create the impression that America was against Korean reunification.<sup>11</sup> It is much more likely that the Truman administration was passing the baton on to the UN as a means of extracting itself from Korea, rather than to deliberately cause a division. Only months after Hodge delivered a gloomy report to Truman on the political situation in Korea, the US asked the UN to organise elections. Thus it was American impatience and irresponsibility that led to the elections and the subsequent division.

While the Americans appeared disinterested in Korea, the USSR, with a historical preoccupation with Korea, was more willing to play the long game in Korea. Orthodox

---

<sup>9</sup> Matray, “Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945-1948,” 28.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Olsen, *Korea, the Divided Nation* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2012), 70

<sup>11</sup> Political Advisor in Korea (Langdon) to Secretary of State, January 5th 1947, FRUS 1947, vol 6, p. 597.



historians, as did many in the US at the time, believed that the Soviets' self-interest prevented the elections' success. The New York Times decried the lack of Soviet cooperation as an attempt to set up a puppet state in the North, an argument remarkably similar to the Soviet-made argument about the elections.<sup>12</sup> Orthodox historians argue that the Northern zone's military strength made a political resolution unnecessary for the USSR, as an unfavourable situation could easily be rectified by a Southward invasion. Even at this point, many saw an invasion as a possibility. Kim Ku, a prominent liberal figure in Korea, predicted such an eventuality.<sup>13</sup> The counter-argument to this is that the Americans displayed little interest in negotiation, and were not prepared to invest much into reunifying Korea. Chay argues that the superpowers could have negotiated a global buffer zone between them, with a neutral Korea as part of that buffer.<sup>14</sup> This suggestion is not completely unrealistic, as Austria and Iran both avoided division in return for neutrality. In addition, Berger admits that American foreign policy elsewhere may have contributed to the Soviet's uncooperative attitude.<sup>15</sup>

## **Conclusion**

We have seen how the Determinist argument is poorly supported compared to the Revisionist and Orthodox arguments. Thus the blame appears to lie with both superpowers, America for not being invested enough in Korea's future, the Soviets for allowing self-interest to override its responsibility to the Korean people. However, in the case of the 1948 elections, the fault lies with the US for failing to couple its action with

---

<sup>12</sup> "The U.N in Korea," January 18<sup>th</sup> 1948

<sup>13</sup> "Record of Conversation between Kim Gu and Liu Yuwan," July 11, 1948, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Syngman Rhee Institute. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119630>

<sup>14</sup> Chay, *Unequal Partners in Peace and War*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Berger, *The Korea Knot*, 73

negotiation to ensure Soviet cooperation. The Orthodox argument does not hold water in this case as it was the US which precipitated elections, therefore it bore the responsibility for ensuring their success. The lack of a substantial effort on the part of the US to bring the Soviets on-side, and the irresponsibility of having elections in the first place, were the two most significant factors that led to the failure of nationwide elections and thus the failure to reunite the two Koreas.

### **Section 3**

During my investigation, I accessed a large variety of resources in order to research my topic. These resources included the New York Times archive. Newspaper archives such as this are useful as they give historians indications of how events were seen at the time in which they took place, and what the general public would have been able to access. However, these archives are limited in that they do not provide a wider context for the events described and do not alert historians to any factual inaccuracies.

The reliability of sources such as these can be verified by looking at other sources from different perspectives that are concerned with the same event. In addition, contextual factors, such as any ulterior motives that the creators of a source might have, could also be identified as potentially reducing the reliability of a source. During my investigation I found such an example in a statement given by the US military governor of Korea.

Selection bias was not a personal issue in my investigation, due to the fact that I had no clear opinion before I began my research and thus did not seek out sources that would confirm a predetermined bias. However, in many cases historians are inclined towards a particular view. This can be problematic if historians only look for sources that validate said view, but such problems can be avoided if historians ensure to at least acknowledge a wide range of opinions. In this way, their readers should be at least aware of conflicting opinions.

The role of the historian is to provide interpretations of the past that are as accurate and grounded in reality as possible, so as to understand the reasons behind important historical events and provide lessons for the future. In this historians face challenges in

that they will always face pressure from certain groups, such as governments, to present a certain interpretation, even if this interpretation is not backed up by the majority of reliable sources. This issue is not as prevalent in countries with strong democratic institutions but is especially true in countries where nationalism is dominant.

## Bibliography

### Books

- Berger, Carl. *The Korea Knot: A Military-Political History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957.
- Chay, Jongsuk. *Unequal Partners in Peace and War: The Republic of Korea and the United States 1948-1953*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002.
- Kim, Jinwung. *A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Olsen, Edward. *Korea, the Divided Nation*. Westport: Praeger Security International, 2012.

### Journal Articles

- Matray, James I.. "Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945-1948." *Korean Studies*, vol. 19 (1995): 17-38.

### Documents

- Political Advisor in Korea (Langdon) to Secretary of State. January 5th 1947, FRUS 1947, vol 6, 597.
- "Record of Conversation between Kim Gu and Liu Yuwan." July 11, 1948, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Syngman Rhee Institute.  
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119630>

### Newspaper Articles

- Johnston, Richard J. H.. "U.S. asks Russians to go." *The New York Times*, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1947,  
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/10/18/104347887.html?pageNumber=2>
- "The U.N in Korea." *The New York Times*, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1948,  
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/01/18/96585119.html?pageNumber=110>

## Appendix

Source A:

It is a humiliating position, however, for a commission appointed by an overwhelming vote of forty-six to none (the Soviet bloc abstaining) to have to approach one nation of a world organization, with hat in hand, to request permission to carry out a mandate so nearly unanimous...Yet one great Power - up to now - has said "No; we refuse to play ball under any rules except our own."...The apparent aim then was to delay a decision until a puppet government could be established in its zone. It is difficult to see how the Soviet can justify its present position.

Source B:

...the general briefed the president on the economic distress and political turmoil in the American zone. Hodge's report combined with growing pressure for US withdrawal to convince an impatient administration that the time had come to abandon further attempts to build a viable moderate political coalition in Southern Korea.