Korea: The Thirty-eighth Parallel

On August 9, 1945, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, and soon afterwards the Soviet Red Army crossed into Manchuria and Korea. The United States, whose armed forces were hundreds of miles away from Korea, had to draw up a military demarcation line across the Korean peninsula to prevent the Russians from overrunning the entire region. On August 11, the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee ordered two former Rhodes scholars, Colonels Dean Rusk and Charles H. Bonesteel III, to determine a line within thirty minutes. They recommended the thirty-eighth parallel as a division between U.S. and Soviet occupation zones. By the time American troops entered Korea on September 8, the Russians were already entrenched along the thirty-eighth parallel. This line had been intended merely as a temporary military line to expedite the disarming of the Japanese troops in Korea. On August 14, Japan surrendered and Japanese rule in Korea ended; however, Korea found itself bisected and a focal point of intense rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The following excerpt provides a detailed account of who actually drew the line and why.

Questions:

1. How do you assess the behind-the-scenes decision for the containing of the Soviet advance in the Korean peninsula? Was the decision to divide Korea at the thirty-eighth parallel a wise one? Would another approach have been feasible?
2. How did the decision to divide Korea shape the course of Korean history and influence the cold war?


At Potsdam, the chief of the Russian General Staff told General Marshall that Russia would attack Korea after declaring war on Japan. He asked whether the Americans could operate against Korean shores in co-ordination with this offensive. General Marshall told him that the United States planned no amphibious operation against Korea until Japan had been brought under control and Japanese strength in South Korea was destroyed. Although the Chiefs of Staff developed ideas concerning the partition of Korea, Manchuria, and the Sea of Japan into U.S. and USSR zones, these had no connection with the later decisions that partitioned Korea into northern and southern areas.

Russian entry into the war against Japan on 9 August, and signs of imminent Japanese collapse on 10 August 1945 changed U.S. Army planning from defeating Japan to accepting its surrender. Military planners in the War Department Operations Division began to outline surrender procedures in General Order No. 1, which General MacArthur would transmit to the Japanese Government after its surrender. The first paragraph of the order specified the nations and commands that were to accept the surrender of Japanese forces throughout the Far East.

The Policy Section of the Strategy and Policy Group in the Operations Division drafted the initial version of the order.

Under pressure to produce a paper as quickly as possible, members of the Policy Section began work late at night on 10 August. They discussed possible surrender zones, the allocation of American, British, Chinese, and Russian occupation troops to accept the surrender in the zones most convenient to them, the means of actually taking the surrender of the widely
scattered Japanese military forces, and the position of Russia in the Far East. They quickly decided to include both provisions for splitting up the entire Far East for the surrender and definitions of the geographical limits of those zones.

The Chief of the Policy Section, Col. Charles H. Bonesteel, had thirty minutes in which to dictate Paragraph 1 to a secretary, for the Joint Staff Planners and the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee were impatiently awaiting the result of his work. Colonel Bonesteel [along with Colonel Dean Rusk] thus somewhat hastily decided who would accept the Japanese surrender. His thoughts, with very slight revision, we incorporated into the final directive.

Bonesteel’s prime consideration was to establish a surrender line as far north as he thought the Soviets would accept. He knew that Russian troops could reach the southern tip of Korea before American troops could arrive. He knew also that the Russians were on the verge of moving into Korea, or were already there. The nearest American troops to Korea were on Okinawa, 600 miles away. His problem therefore was to compose a surrender arrangement which, while acceptable to the Russians, would at the same time prevent them from seizing all of Korea. If they refused to confine their advance to North Korea, the United States would be unable to stop them.

At first Bonesteel had thought of surrender zones conforming to the provincial boundary lines. But the only map he had in his office, which was a small National Geographic map, a 1942 Gilbert Grosvenor Edition of “Asia and Adjacent Areas,” was hardly adequate for this sort of distinction. The 38th Parallel, he noted, cut Korea approximately through the middle. If this line was agreeable to President Truman and to Generalissimo Stalin, it would place Seoul and a nearby prisoner of war camp in American hands. It would also leave enough land to be apportioned to the Chinese and British if some sort of quadripartite administration became necessary. Thus he decided to use the 38th Parallel as a hypothetical line dividing the zones within which Japanese forces in Korea would surrender to appointed American and Russian authorities.

When Bonesteel’s draft paper reached the Joint Planners in the predawn hours of 11 August, Admiral M.B. Gardner suggested moving the surrender line north to the 39th Parallel, a recommendation that the planners believed the Navy Secretary, James C. Forrestal, favored. Gardner pointed out that the 39th Parallel would place Dairen in the military zone to be occupied by the Americans. General Lincoln however, felt that the Russians would hardly accept a surrender line that barred them from Dairen and other parts of the Liaotung Peninsula; besides, American units would have great difficulty reaching the Manchurian port ahead of the Russians. Calling Assistant Secretary of State James Dunn, Lincoln ascertained that his opinion was shared. Mr. Dunn believed that Korea was more important politically to the United States than Dairen, and he felt this to be the view of Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. As a result, the 38th Parallel remained in the draft when the Joint Planners handed the general order to the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee.

While General Lincoln was shepherding the document through the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee on 11 and 12 August, the Russians invaded Korea, landing on the northeast coast near Rashin. Russian troops then poured out of the maritime provinces of Siberia, down the Korean peninsula, and into the Kaesong-Ch’unch’on area above Seoul, where they looted much equipment, including locomotives and rolling stock. Reports of the Russian troop movements reaching Washington underscored the need for concurrence in the proposed general order. Otherwise, the Russian advance would render academic the American acceptance of the Japanese surrender in southern Korea. At the same time, swift Russian troop movements into key areas of southern
Manchuria eliminated the possibility of including Dairen in the American surrender zone.

Between 11 and 14 August, the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee and the Joint Chiefs of Staff discussed the wording of the surrender instrument. Meanwhile, General MacArthur informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he would adhere to three priorities for the use of the forces under his command. After the Japanese surrender, the occupation of Japan would come first, Korea second, China third.

In Washington, the War Department Operations Division rephrased General Order No. 1 to the satisfaction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the heads of the State, War, and Navy Departments. On 15 August 1945, clean copies of the draft order were sent to Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy’s White House office. Within a few hours President Truman gave his approval, directing at the same time that General Order No. 1 be sent also to the capitals of Great Britain and the USSR with requests for concurrence by the heads of those states.

Among the items it specified, General Order No. 1 stated that Japanese forces north of the 38th Parallel in Korea would surrender to the Russian commander, while those south of the parallel would surrender to the commanding general of the U.S. expeditionary forces. As Washington waited for the Moscow reaction to President Truman’s message, there was a short period of suspense. Russian troops had entered Korea three days before the President accepted the draft of General Order No. 1. If the Russians failed to accept the proposal, and if Russian troops occupied Seoul, General Lincoln suggested that American occupation forces move into Pusan.

Stalin replied to President Truman on 16 August 1945. He said nothing specifically about the 38th Parallel but offered no objection to the substance of the President’s message.