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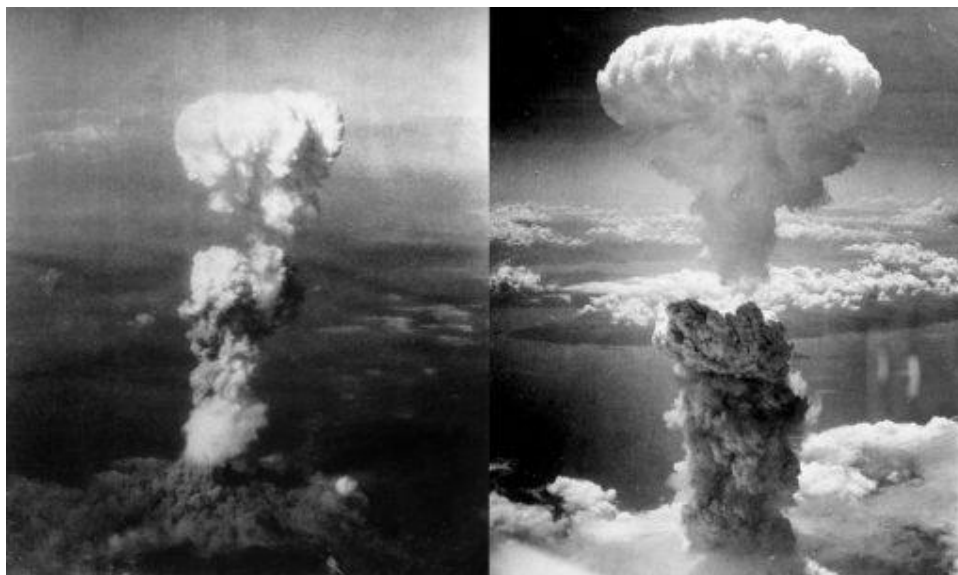
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زبانهای اروپایی

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August 12-22, 1945: Washington Starts the Korean and Vietnam Wars



Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

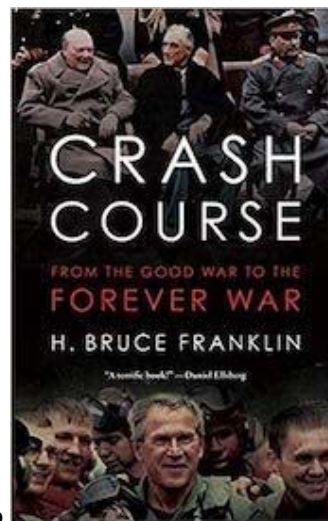
August 14, 1945. The day Japan surrendered. I was eleven year old. I was crammed in the back of a pickup packed with other boys and girls, all yelling our hearts out as loud as we could to be heard over the cacophony of honking horns and howling air raid sirens. We were part of an impromptu motorcade weaving through the evening streets of our Flatbush neighborhood in Brooklyn. Everywhere we went—past the sidewalk fruit and vegetable stands, the storefront A&P exuding the smell of freshly ground coffee, the fish market and the kosher delicatessen along Avenue J, the small row houses and big apartment houses on the side streets, along Coney Island Avenue, with its rows of small stores dotted with small restaurants and soda fountains, where the electric trolley cars

were clanging their bells nonstop—more and more cheering people poured onto the sidewalks, waving American flags and homemade signs, hugging, dancing. We kids in the truck were all screaming, “Peace! Peace! The war is over!” We believed this was the end of not just this war but of war itself, that we were all going to live the rest of our lives in a prosperous and victorious nation, on a peaceful planet.

Little did we know that our government, in the two weeks spanning our joyous day, was building the highway into two calamitous wars and a future of unending war. Nor did we know that this would be the last victory celebration of our lifetime.

On August 8, the Soviet Union (just as it promised at Potsdam) launched the largest land battle of the entire war against Japan. In Manchuria, they were joined by tens of thousands of Korean guerrillas, who had been fighting the Japanese invaders since 1932. Within a few days, Soviet forces destroyed the huge Japanese army on the Asia mainland. Six hundred thousand Japanese soldiers and hundreds of Japanese generals surrendered. Eighty thousand were killed, along with thirty thousand Soviet soldiers. Soviet troops and Korean partisans poured across Korea’s northern border with the USSR, pursuing the retreating Japanese forces and pro-Japanese Korean units.

Japan’s occupation of Korea was about to end. It had been brutal. During World War II,



hundreds of thousands of Koreans were forced to work in Japanese mines and factories, and countless numbers perished under the U.S. bombing, including ten thousand or more who died in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Tens of thousands of Korean girls and young women had been forced to become “comfort women,” sex slaves for the Japanese army.

The fate of Korea had not previously been discussed by Washington and Moscow. The nearest U.S. forces were six hundred miles away in Okinawa and would be unable to get there for about a month. Frantic, the U.S. War Department (today called the Defense Department), decided to act, and to act fast.

On the night of August 10–11, 1945, Army Colonels Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel were ordered by the War Department to draw a line across Korea, a nation with a two-thousand-year history. They were given thirty minutes to complete the task. Neither of the two young men, each born a year before Japan annexed Korea in 1910, was familiar with Korea's history or even its geography, other than what they could glean from a small outdated National Geographic map.^[1] The colonels chose the 38th parallel north latitude, simply because that put the capital city of Seoul under U.S. control. Their decision was forwarded to President Truman, who proposed to Premier Stalin that Japanese forces south of the line would be instructed to surrender to U.S. forces; those to the north were to surrender to the Soviets. Stalin made no objection, although Soviet forces could easily have occupied all of Korea weeks before American forces could arrive.^[2] Neither Washington nor Moscow consulted the Korean people about this decision.

Except for Seoul, most of southern Korea was agricultural, and most of the people were peasants working for a small class of large landowners. When the American military finally did arrive on September 8, they discovered two competing infrastructures in their occupation zone. One was a police state created by the Japanese occupiers, designed to protect the wealth and power of the large landowners and the mercantile elite in the cities and towns. The other consisted of hundreds of "People's Committees" throughout the land, all part of the "Korean People's Republic" proclaimed in Seoul just prior to the U.S. arrival. Guess which side the United States chose. Thus very quickly the Japanese military occupation was replaced by a strikingly similar American one.

All that was missing was a puppet government. This gap was filled a month after the U.S. Army began its occupation. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the predecessor of the CIA) anointed Syngman Rhee, who had been living in the United States for thirty-five years, as the head of government. A military plane flew Rhee from Washington to a secret meeting with General Douglas MacArthur in Tokyo, and MacArthur's private plane, The Bataan, then whisked Rhee to his new capital of Seoul. In the ensuing three years of overt U.S. military occupation, Rhee's Japanese- and now American-trained police waged a remorseless campaign to eradicate all dissidents suspected of being

Communists or having communist leanings, including land reformers and those seeking independence from the United States.^[3]

In March 1948, during the third year of the occupation, the year-old Central Intelligence Agency, along with the intelligence divisions of the Departments of State, Navy, Air Force, and Army, prepared an eye-opening secret report: "The Current Situation in Korea." This document recognized a fundamental class conflict between the overwhelming majority of poor people in the south and a "numerically small class which virtually monopolizes the native wealth and education of the country," a "class that could not have acquired and maintained its favored position under Japanese rule" without "collaboration" with the occupiers. Seeking a ruler untainted by this collaboration left only such "imported expatriate politicians" as Syngman Rhee, "demagogues bent on autocratic rule." The report recognized a "reservoir of popular resentment against the police," who are "ruthlessly brutal in suppressing disorder." It predicted that "Extreme Rightist Rhee" would sweep forthcoming elections held under the auspices of the U.N. because of "the demagogic appeal of the Extreme Right" and because "the Left will boycott the elections." Then "Soviet propaganda would be provided with a substantial basis in fact for charging the regime with being 'corrupt, reactionary, and oppressive.'" As for northern Korea, the CIA analysis acknowledged that "there is no reliable evidence of any serious disaffection" because of "the characteristically shrewd Soviet recognition of the basic needs of the native population (land reform, political participation, education, etc.)."

The report concluded that it is "unlikely that any government erected in South Korea under UN auspices could long survive the withdrawal of US forces unless it were to receive continuing and extensive US economic, technical, and military aid."^[4] The CIA was quite right. From the election of Rhee until the outbreak of the full-scale Korean War in June 1950, civil war raged in South Korea. Major rebellions were put down only with the assistance of the U.S. military, and over a hundred thousand South Korean civilians were killed, many tortured to death.^[5]

Soviet forces withdrew from North Korea in 1948, leaving behind a government led by Kim Il Sung, a Communist who had spent much of his life as an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader in Manchuria. The southern government in Seoul and the northern government in Pyongyang have always agreed, then and now, on one thing: Korea is one nation, not two. Each has always claimed, then and now, that it is the legitimate government of

Korea. Leading up to the events of June 1950, Seoul and Pyongyang each initiated attempts to reunify the nation—on its own terms, of course. The southern government's attempts were crippled by several problems. As the CIA report made clear, it lacked a viable economy independent of massive U.S. aid. Historically, it had been dependent on the north for coal, industrial products, and, crucially, electric power generated by power plants on the Yalu River. In February 1950, the U.S. Congress enacted the Korean Aid Bill, mandating that all U.S. aid would cease “in the event of the formation in the Republic of Korea of a coalition government which includes one or more members of the Communist Party or of the party now in control of the government of North Korea.” The United States thus nullified any possibility of near-term peaceful unification. Then in May, South Korea's first somewhat free election was a disastrous defeat for Rhee's government, leaving him with only forty-five seats in the 210-seat Assembly, but not stopping his threats to invade North Korea.^[6]

Armed conflict across the 38th parallel between the equal-size armies of the two governments had been going on intermittently since 1949. There is still conflicting evidence about which one started the fighting before dawn on June 25, but the issue is unimportant. The North Korean army was in a position to drive across the foreign-imposed and arbitrary dividing line of the 38th parallel, taking advantage of the illegitimacy and unpopularity of the Rhee government, which helps explain the immediate collapse of the South Korean army.

But this was not the narrative we Americans heard. For us, the “beginning” of the war was framed as a repeat of the beginning of our World War II narrative: an unprovoked surprise attack by treacherous Asians. Washington still insists the 38th Parallel, that line chosen by two young U.S. colonels, is an international border between two independent nations. It refuses to agree with North Korea that a state of war between the U.S. and North Korea no longer exists.

On the same day as our celebration of V-J Day, eight thousand miles away another people were celebrating the surrender of Japan quite differently. August 14 was the first day of the August Revolution, when the Vietnamese people rose up and in less than three weeks swept away Japanese and French control and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

On September 2, Ho Chi Minh read Vietnam's Declaration of Independence to half a million Vietnamese people jam-packed before him in Hanoi, the old capital of a new

nation that had been fighting for its independence for more than two thousand years. “‘All men are created equal,’” he began. “‘They are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable Rights; among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.”^[7] Suddenly two warplanes appeared overhead. The crowd gazed up. They saw two of those weird-looking P-38 Lightning fighter-bombers. When they recognized the U.S. insignia on the planes, those half million people, acting like a single being, let out an earthshaking cheer. Just as we kids in the truck believed in America’s peaceful future, the Vietnamese believed that we Americans were their friends and allies, that we would be the champions of their freedom and independence from colonialism.

Little did they know that ten days earlier, on August 22, French president Charles de Gaulle had flown to Washington, where the Truman administration had agreed to finance, arm, transport, and sponsor a French invasion designed to overthrow the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and restore French colonial rule. This would be a joint French-American project. The United States would not only supply the weapons and the financing. It would also turn over to the French tens of thousands of Nazi troops, including Waffen-SS units, many of whom would be forced into the French Foreign Legion to be shock troops for invasion. A dozen U.S. troopships would be diverted from bringing GIs home from Europe to carrying the French invasion army—equipped with American weapons, tanks, warplanes, and jeeps—to Vietnam.^[8] This was arguably the beginning of America’s Vietnam War. It was also, as it turns out, the beginning of the American people’s movement against that war.

British troops that had been sent to Saigon to disarm the remaining Japanese forces had instead rearmed the Japanese, who had already been disarmed by the Vietnamese. Soon the Japanese joined the British and remnants of the French colonial forces to wage war against the newly declared independent nation of Vietnam. What was left of the Japanese air force, together with the British RAF, bombed and strafed any concentrations of armed Vietnamese they could find.^[9] Japanese troops were deployed to control the Saigon waterfront and port facilities.

So when the U.S. troopships carrying the French invasion army arrived in Saigon in the late fall of 1945, they were met by uniformed and armed Japanese soldiers, who saluted them on the docks and commanded machine guns on towers overlooking the U.S. ships.

The sailors manning the American flotilla were profoundly shocked and outraged. Every single enlisted crewman on these ships signed petitions to Congress and the president condemning the U.S. government for participating in “imperialist policies” designed “to subjugate the native population of Vietnam.”^[10]

Much of the essay is excerpted from Franklin’s book Crash Course: From the Good War to the Forever War.

Notes.

1/ <NTX> James F. Schnabel, *United States Army in the Korean War: Policy and Direction; The First Year* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1972), 8–11; Dean Rusk as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 124. Rusk remembers the date of the line drawing as August 14, but here as in many places in this book, his memory is faulty. ↑

2/ Schnabel, *United States Army in the Korean War*. ↑

3/ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011), 104–107. This widely available paperback is essential reading with a fine updated introduction to Cumings’s prodigious scholarship and cogent analysis, which have fundamentally changed our (and certainly my) knowledge and understanding of the history of Korea and the Korean War. ↑

4/ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Current Situation in Korea,” ORE 15-48, March 18, 1948. The nine-page report can be downloaded from the CIA’s online library at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258335.pdf. ↑

5/ See the excellent and well-documented account in Cumings, *The Korean War*, 110–146. ↑

6/ I. F. Stone, *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, Second Modern Reader Paper Edition, 1971), 18. Originally published in 1952 after being rejected by twenty-eight publishers at the height of the Red Scare, Stone’s volume, with its priceless information and piercing analysis, remains an essential read for anyone interested in the political history of the Korean War even though subsequent scholarship has of course contradicted some of his surmises. ↑

7/ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, 4 vols. (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960–1962), 3:17–21. ↑

8/ Michel Gillen, “Roots of Opposition: The Critical Response to U.S. Indochina Policy, 1945–1954” (unpublished dissertation, New York University, 1991), 106–107. ↑

9/ Archimedes L. A. Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 325. ↑

10/ Gillen, "Roots of Opposition," 117–122. ↑

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