CHAPTER 7

A Nation Divided, 1945–1990

The division of Korea into two states is one of the more serious legacies of the colonial period. It was, of course, the direct result of the manner in which the USSR and the USA chose to disarm and expel the Japanese from the peninsula, but the need to disarm the Japanese only arose in the first place because of Japan’s colonial possession of Korea. The manner of the division itself can be characterised as artificial and arbitrary, unrelated to the actual conditions on the peninsula. But we must be careful not to infer from this accurate observation that there was not a natural ideological division among the Korean people, no other basis for their participation in the Cold War and no active complicity in the division by Koreans. None of these common extrapolations is accurate. Nor was it the intention of either the USSR or the USA that the curtain fall on a divided Korea. Such a denouement was a tragedy, first and foremost for the people on the peninsula, and led to another tragedy, a highly destructive war that left an enduring legacy of hostility and bitterness.

The conclusion of World War II in favour of the allied forces created a new political framework for the peninsula that both opened the way for Koreans to form an independent nation-state and fatefully frustrated their attempts to do so. The drama that was played out over the next eight years up to the armistice that halted active military combat in the Korean War of 1951–1953 was not a one-way story of outside imposition of two hostile systems on the peninsula. For the new framework was not a finished order but one in whose shaping the Koreans took an active part; it was one in which the hopes and aspirations of no interested party were satisfied, but which nevertheless grew out of their attempts to fulfil them. Korean and foreign interests became intertwined and opportunities were seized wherever they presented themselves. Very quickly, the peninsula became something of a focal point in the developing post-world-war international political order.

Although the experience of war hardened the divided states in their pursuit of the ideological opposites that marked the Cold War era, they nevertheless competed for legitimacy on much the same terms. The three main pillars on which legitimacy in both states rested were economic development, military prowess and their respective official interpretations of history. Each state sought to gain both international recognition and the support of the Korean people on both sides of the divide by achieving superiority in these areas.
In the north, although there were a number of political and military purges, reports of public executions and some accounts of political prison camps, there emerged no evidence of any organised political or economic dissent of any consequence. No Czesław Milosz wrote a *Captive Mind*, nor did any samizdat or underground literature movement operate that we know of. South Korea, by contrast, was marked by dissenting views, movements and activities of real consequence in all areas: religion, education, literature, labour and industry, and direct political action. While the political target of South Korean dissent was for the most part the anti-communism, anti-democratic behaviour, and after 1961 the military composition of the regimes, culturally the dissent was directed against the thoroughgoing economic conception of society that drove the aspirations not only of the political and industrial leaders but also of the bulk of the populace itself.

This chapter will confine itself to examining the road to permanent division, the Korean War of 1950 to 1953, the official political and economic forms of north and south and the question of the nature of communism and democracy in the respective states.

The Road to Permanent Division

During the Sino-Japanese and Pacific wars from 1937 to 1945, Korean diaspora groups divided over whether to identify with communist or non-communist nations and groups. The Provisional Government under the right-wing nationalist Kim Ku moved from Shanghai to Chungking during this period and maintained close relations with the Chinese National Government, the Kuomintang. Rhee Syngman consolidated his position among compatriots in Europe and the USA as an indefatigable opponent of both the Japanese and the communists. An Ch'angho had succumbed to illness in a prison hospital in Seoul in 1937, bereaving Koreans of a highly principled and esteemed leader who together with Yŏ Unhyŏng might have exercised a firm but moderating influence on the factional manoeuvring. Many Korean exile groups in Manchuria and northern China forged alliances with communist groups. Thus developed the Russian Faction, the Yenan Faction under Kim Tubong, and the Domestic Faction under Pak Hŏnyŏng and Kim Il Sung. The problems for communist groups operating inside Japan were immense during the war, and so no faction with ties to Japan as such emerged in 1945.

Members of these factions and of the Provisional Government returned to Korea after August 1945 and strove to gain control over the ideological rivalry